

- Faulty Comparisons
- False Expectations

How would the situation be different if you removed those thinking errors and viewed the situation from the perspective of your Wise Advocate?

To consolidate your knowledge of thinking errors and how they affect you, review the following table of Sarah's thinking errors and then complete the blank table on your own. Note: As we discussed above, you may not use all of these thinking errors, but try to come up with at least one example for each category (if needed, use the same one for overlapping thought processes, such as having a specific false expectation that includes a "should" statement). Remember, the goal is to help you see that these thinking errors occur frequently and that more than one can be in play at the same time.

**TAKING STOCK OF WHERE THINKING ERRORS OCCUR IN MY
LIFE: EXAMPLE FROM SARAH**

Thinking Error	Example(s) and Where They Occur (or with Whom)	Result
All-or-nothing	I must be perfect at all times with everyone in my life, especially my boss.	I place high standards on myself and am never satisfied.
Catastrophizing	If I make a mistake, my boss will fire me.	I worry constantly that something bad will happen, which is exhausting.
Discounting the positive	I made a mistake on the presentation and it sucked, which means I suck.	Depression, frustration—I'm never good enough.
Emotional reasoning	I am anxious and feel horrible, so something must be wrong.	Hopelessness and helplessness, despair—will I ever feel differently?
Mind reading	My friend tensed up when I said I missed seeing her, so she must be mad at me or not want to hang out with me anymore.	I will do whatever I can to fix the situation, or maybe I will avoid her so that I don't have to feel this bad again.
"Should" statements	I should be able to do all this work and help my friend tonight.	I push myself too hard and disappoint myself and my friend when I can't come through.
Faulty comparisons	Everyone else at work seems to be doing fine. What's wrong with me?	I feel inadequate and push myself harder, rather than see that everyone is struggling a little but doing just fine—including me!
False expectations	If my mom really loves me, she'll call this weekend—and I really want her to call because I am feeling low and sad right now.	She doesn't call and I conclude that she does not care about me as much as I want her to and that I really am all alone. I get upset and angry at her, but later find out she was waiting for me to call her.

TAKING STOCK OF WHERE THINKING ERRORS OCCUR IN YOUR LIFE

Thinking Error	Example(s) and Where They Occur (or with Whom)	Result
All-or-nothing		
Catastrophizing		
Discounting the positive		
Emotional reasoning		
Mind reading		
"Should" statements		
Faulty comparisons		
False expectations		

The Wise Advocate

Now that you are well versed in thinking errors, you are ready to learn more about the Wise Advocate and how to take full advantage of it whenever a deceptive brain message strikes.

What is the Wise Advocate? As we mentioned previously, it is an ally that can help you see the truth even when you strongly doubt that the deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, or habitual responses are false and harmful to you. It does this by giving you the ability to step outside what your deceptive brain messages are telling you and examine them from a rational, calm perspective—like a seasoned judge deciding a case. And, as we mentioned in

chapter 6, its goal is to advocate for you to ensure that your true needs are met and true emotions are expressed in a loving, healthy way.

WISE ADVOCATE

The aspect of your attentive mind that knows what you are thinking, can see the deceptive brain messages for what they are and where they came from, understands how you feel (physically, emotionally), and is aware of how destructive and unhealthy your patterned, automatic responses have been for you.

The Wise Advocate wants the best for you (such as you receiving and giving the 5 A's), so it encourages you to value your true self and make decisions in a rational way based on what is in your overall best interest in the long term.

The best way to think of the Wise Advocate, Liz says, “is to imagine a loving figure, someone who cares about you and wants the best for you. This person is only going to make decisions that are in your best interest and will see the falseness of the deceptive brain messages. There’s no way a loving figure like that would let you believe those negative things your brain is telling you—no way.” For example, Liz thinks about her grandmother, whereas Ed wonders how his best friend would respond. Similarly, many of our religious patients have found that using God or Jesus as the Wise Advocate can be beneficial and comforting. We’ve even seen young children effectively imagine their pet dog as the Wise Advocate. The key is that the *Wise Advocate is a being whom you genuinely believe loves and cares for you.*

The main point to keep in mind is that regardless of the person being imagined, the Wise Advocate chosen must be a moral agent who is acting in your best interest based on your genuine desire to achieve specific goals and embody certain values. As we often say, *the Wise Advocate does not sympathize with bad behavior*, such as lying, stealing, cheating, or harming another person. More significant, even if the Wise Advocate can sympathize with the motives or desires for wanting to engage in a bad behavior, he or she will never condone the *actual doing* of the behavior. In this way, the Wise Advocate can be thought of as a helper that encourages rational, wholesome, and adaptive behaviors—in a phrase, it is the good friend within.

That said, we recognize that there are times when doing something to help yourself conflicts with what another person wants or needs. Often, people will expect unreasonable things from us that we cannot accommodate. These are the instances where the Wise Advocate is crucial because this is when your deceptive brain messages will creep in and tell you that to be “a good person” you must sacrifice your needs for someone else (unless, of course, you have signed on to put another person’s needs before your own, such as being a parent, mentor/teacher, judge, or other role where this kind of self-sacrifice while performing your duties is the norm). Barring those exceptions, do not make the mistake of thinking you have to act in others’ best interests before your own. Rather, use the Wise Advocate in these moments to figure out whether your intended action is aligned with your true self or whether you are basing your choices on desire, impulse, craving, anxiety, a sense you “should” do something, or another uncomfortable sensation or thought. Remember: The Wise Advocate wants you to act in a constructive, balanced way, which requires that you don’t act like a victim, but rather in a manner that is consistent with your true goals and values. Even more to the point, the Wise Advocate never wants you to be either manipulated or a manipulator.

In John’s case, he often put other people first and wanted to make sure they were satisfied before he was, which is why he had been living such a limited life. Rather than saying he wanted to play basketball with his friends when Alicia would ask if he wanted to go to dinner, he would cancel his plans. As he admits, “I just couldn’t disappoint her, ever.” When John started using his Wise Advocate, “everything changed,” he says. “I used the image of my grandpa—he was a very active guy who loved his family, but who also had his own interests. When I started looking at it from his perspective, I could see that doing things that I enjoyed wasn’t hurting Alicia. My grandma never got upset that he spent time with me or other people and they had a good relationship. Looking at my actions from the perspective of the Wise Advocate made me realize I could have my own interests and still have Alicia in my life. That it was just the deceptive brain message telling me that I couldn’t or that I would hurt her immensely if I did something for myself.”

Similarly, Sarah sees the Wise Advocate as a counselor and friend. As she explains, “There’s this calming quality inside me telling me to be patient and reminding me that there’s this great picture that I am missing because I am focusing on the problems. I have great attributes and there’s so much more to me.” She uses this force to remind herself that “I have no choice about the urge to talk to people perfectly or get that right feeling of ‘I got it,’ but I do have a choice of attitude, of how I view my interactions with people. This helps me

Relabel my anxious sensations as they come up and Reframe the entire thing as ‘perfectionism’ or a problem in the brain. Then, I can Refocus on something important to me.”

For Ed, the Wise Advocate reminds him “that one mistake doesn’t invalidate an entire project and that this uncomfortable sensation I have when I am auditioning is something that will pass. It’s not true, there is no danger, but my brain is making me think there is.” So, rather than stewing in his thinking errors, Ed uses the Wise Advocate to tell himself, “I know that this is one of those deceptive-brain-message feelings and it will go away within an hour or one day, but definitely, it will go away. Don’t act on it. Refocus on learning your lines or connecting with the people in front of you.”

Abby, who worries about doing the “right” thing, realized with the help of the Wise Advocate, “I didn’t need to figure it all out—I didn’t need to own or take responsibility for everything. All I can do is tell people what I think and how I feel about them and then let them make their own decisions. I can’t protect my kids from every possible harm. And, if I did, they would never learn anything on their own. It’s actually best for me to give them my advice and perspective, but then to let go and let them decide what’s best for them on their own. Then, I need to do the same for myself! That’s what the Wise Advocate has taught me.”

Encouragingly, the more you use the Wise Advocate, the stronger it becomes. Even more heartening, regularly using your Wise Advocate literally rewires your brain to become your ally. As Steve explains, “Rather than figuring it all out on my own, I turn to the people in my life whom I love and trust and I really listen to them now, to what they say and to their opinions about things. I take what they say and then look at myself so that I can honestly evaluate things in myself accurately, impartially. I take all that data and use it to strengthen my own Wise Advocate. It strengthens my ability to have rational faith when I am trying to be impartial with myself, these deceptive thoughts and urges, to respond in habitual ways.”

With these stories in mind, use the following exercise to determine how your Wise Advocate would respond to your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and habitual, unhealthy behaviors.

STRENGTHING YOUR WISE ADVOCATE

EXERCISE: In the table below, write down some of your deceptive brain messages and what they tell you to do. Then, write down how

the Wise Advocate would view the situation instead. If it is difficult for you to objectively respond, think about what a loving, caring figure would say if you honestly told him what you thought, how you reacted to the deceptive brain messages, how strongly you believed in the uncomfortable sensations, and so on. We have provided you with some examples to help you get started.

Deceptive Brain Message and Intended Action	Wise Advocate Response (e.g., Loving Figure)
I feel like crap. I had a horrible day, I am so stressed out. I need a drink.	You are trying to escape the pain. The drink is a temporary distraction, nothing more. Don't drink—go do something healthy instead.
Playing blackjack feels so good! The rush is amazing. So what that I am down \$400—I'll make it up on the next few hands.	You are actually \$10,000 in debt from playing this game. It is masking your sadness and grief. Walk away from the table and spend time with your family.
Jane is mad at me. I could see it in her body language. I'm so anxious now. I need to fix this somehow. I just need to figure it out, what happened. What if I . . .	You are anxious for no reason. You do not know she is upset with you and are engaging in "what-ifs." Stop the thinking errors and ask her directly if she's upset with you.
Joe was so rude and after everything I've done for him! I should receive better treatment than this. I'm never helping him out again.	Your anger is clouding your ability to hear what he said. He was in a rush because his friend was just in an accident and he did thank you. You're filtering his words through your expectations and not seeing the truth. Take all the information in before you make a decision to ostracize him.

I am so exhausted and drained. I just don't think I can go to the party tonight. Plus, I won't know anyone and likely won't have any fun. I'll just stay home.	You have been isolating yourself for weeks and are depressed. Your brain is telling you that you are tired and can't do things. And, you're fortune-telling and using emotional reasoning. Go to the party with an open mind—you may meet some really nice people and your depression probably will improve a little.

Our patients have used the Wise Advocate to think about a situation in one of the following ways:

- I look at how someone else deals with the same issue in a healthy way and try to emulate what they do. I ask myself, how would somebody else react to this?
- I ask myself how people who really love me would think about the

situation and what they would advise me to do.

- I ask myself: Why am I about to go do this? Is it because I am listening to a deceptive brain message or because I am following my true self?
- If the situation is going on right now and other people are involved, I look at them, at how they actually are reacting. Most often, the other people are not reacting as strongly as I am and I bet they are not having the same uncomfortable sensations I am. This “reality check” helps me Relabel and Reframe the situation.
- Sometimes, I do not really know what’s happening or why I am reacting the way I am, but I know that it’s out of proportion to the event. In those cases, I use the Wise Advocate and Reframe it as a “restless, irritable feeling” and just try to move on.

Repeatedly using the Four Steps and incorporating the Wise Advocate into your decisions (especially in how you focus your attention), you will more strongly believe that you are worthy of the 5 A’s (Attention, Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Allowing) and living a life that reflects your true self. In fact, the more you strengthen your Wise Advocate, the more you will be able to instantaneously see deceptive brain messages for what they really are and truly understand that the uncomfortable sensations are nothing more than the *feeling of a deceptive brain message*—and certainly not something that must be acted upon. This ability to see the deceptive brain messages as they truly are, without any misconception or misperception, is the ultimate goal of the Four Steps and is the essence of Step 4: Revalue and progressive mindfulness. To get there, you need to learn ways to strengthen the Wise Advocate so that you can effectively put a wedge between the deceptive brain messages and your true self. One such technique is Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept.

Strengthening Your Wise Advocate: Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept

In our previous work, we taught people to anticipate and accept that the deceptive brain messages would arise and cause uncomfortable sensations. Unfortunately, many people misunderstood what we meant by *anticipate*, which

led them to engage in habitual patterns of scanning their environments and overthinking. Rather than understanding that *anticipate* meant “to recognize” (via Relabel and increasing levels of mindfulness) when deceptive brain messages or uncomfortable sensations have surfaced, they thought it meant to mentally prepare for the onslaught of negative sensations and deceptive thoughts they knew inevitably would come. When used in this way, “anticipating” quickly becomes a form of overthinking or overanalyzing and results in worsening, not helping, the maladaptive brain circuits and habits.

Therefore, instead of passively anticipating, we want you to learn how to actively use Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept as an assertive, intensive way of applying and synergizing the first two steps:

RECOGNIZE, DISMISS, AND ACCEPT

- Recognize the deceptive brain message or uncomfortable sensation (Relabel).
- Dismiss the faulty logic or strong pull to act on the sensations (Reframe).
- Accept that deceptive thoughts, urges, impulses, and sensations will arise, but that you do not have to act on them.

A wonderful example of Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept comes from Liz and her worries about her future. She described having considerable anxiety whenever she would wonder if she will end up, as she fears, “alone in a nursing home with no one to take care of me.” Whenever Liz would engage in this fortune-telling and catastrophic thinking, she says, “I constantly had this thing in my head. It would pounce on me like a tiger and I would get so anxious.” When the sensations became strong, Liz recalls, “I would worry that the feelings would never go away and that there was no way out.” She would become desperate and feel helpless. “I couldn’t concentrate and my work and relationships suffered. My only escape was to shop because for a while it would lift away all the pain I was feeling.”

When we taught Liz how to Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept, she exclaimed, “Oh, so what you’re saying is that I need to *recognize* the deceptive brain messages, *dismiss* the faulty logic/realize the thoughts are not true and have no meaning with the Wise Advocate as my guide, and then *accept* that the feeling

will be there [and though it does not readily go away, it doesn't have to control how I think and act]. My goal isn't to get rid of the feeling, but to work around it and continue on with my life. By doing this, my brain will change and the sensations won't be as strong in the future!"

We agreed with Liz's assessment and summarized how to use the Four Steps for her in this way:

The deceptive thought sucks you in. What you need to do at that point is use Step 1 and *Relabel* the thought as a deceptive brain message and the anxiety as fear that you will be alone. You then allow the thought to be there and do not try to alter it in any way. The reason you allow the thought to be there is that it is just coming from your brain and is a false message. You use Step 2: *Reframe* to say, "This thought—this is just the brain sending false messages. It's not me, it's just the brain." You also *Reframe* the thinking error as fortune-telling and catastrophic thinking. You then *Refocus* (Step 3) on a health activity. Finally, you use Step 4: *Revalue* to see that this is all a thinking error with no validity.

In other words, you listen to your Wise Advocate when it tells you this is a false interpretation of the sensations and thoughts you are having. You have been interpreting the sensations as having a meaning that you are going to end up alone, that somehow this thought is a fact and will come true. This is false and can be categorized as a negative prediction (e.g., fortune-telling) or catastrophic thinking. The feeling does not mean you will be alone, and if you listen to your Wise Advocate, you know it will tell you the same thing. You are a good person and have many loving family members and friends. You are never really alone and must not indulge the deceptive, harmful brain messages trying to tell you otherwise. You will get better by accepting that the feeling will be there but that it is a false message with no real meaning.

From Liz's example, it's clear that *Recognize*, *Dismiss*, and *Accept* is essentially a summary of the first two steps in an alternate form. *Recognize* is most analogous to *Relabel*, while *Dismiss* is much like *Reframing*.²⁷ In this way, you can think of *Recognize*, *Dismiss*, and *Accept* as a shortcut when dealing with your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and unhealthy habits. Additionally, using *Recognize*, *Dismiss*, and *Accept* as outlined above is *an intensive exercise for building up and empowering the Wise Advocate* because

it helps you quickly assess the deceptive brain messages and engage the perspective of the Wise Advocate to counter them in a healthy, loving way.

Acceptance

As you can probably see by now, acceptance is one of the most important aspects of the Four Steps. Although it is definitely difficult to accept that the deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and gnawing urges to engage in unhealthy habits are unavoidably present, it is critical that you do so. These feelings certainly are bothersome and even painful. However, accepting them for what they really are (bad brain messages!) and *not* engaging in futile efforts to make them go away (i.e., unhealthy habits and actions) is vital to overcoming them. The key point is this: Accept that these bothersome feelings are *not* who you truly are. They are deceptive brain messages, nothing more or less, and you can think of them as occurring as part of a “bad brain day.”

Without this kind of acceptance, you will be stuck in a futile and endless loop, trying to make the deceptive brain messages, sensations, and habits go away, rather than charting a new course for yourself based on your true goals and values.

True acceptance means letting go of the false expectation that you can somehow make these deceptive thoughts, impulses, urges, desires, and sensations disappear and just go away. It also means letting go of expectations related to yourself and other people that are not aligned with your true self. Rather than clinging to and desiring specific outcomes, accept that things may not work out the way you want right now and keep moving forward toward your goals and values.

As Sarah explains, “Acceptance is huge and it’s about accepting all the deceptive brain messages as a whole. You need to accept that you have them. You’re not trying to be in denial or fight them anymore. Rather than focusing on the problems, I have to accept that I am doing the best I can today. I’m going to take myself, along with this brain problem, and I am going to go to my job, the gym, et cetera. Wherever I am going, it’s going to be there, but I’m not going to stop living my life. And, when I am having a hard time accepting the way things are, then I have to accept that, too. I’m doing the best I can.”

Steve reminds himself that he cannot control everything. He uses the deeply

insightful analogy of trying to stop the ocean waves to bring into perspective that acceptance is, as he says, “all I’ve got.” As he explains, “I tell myself, ‘These thoughts and sensations, I have no control over them. *They are not me and I have no more control over these deceptive brain messages and sensations than I have over being able to stop those waves in the ocean.*’” Interestingly, one well-known psychologist speaks of “surfing the urge” (i.e., not responding to the urges) as a way of managing the terribly uncomfortable feelings of deceptive brain messages. When seen from this perspective, Steve’s insightful image really makes the relevance of that phrase come to life.

Like Steve, Abby often reminds herself that she can’t control what others do, especially when dealing with her kids. As she explains, “What I need to accept is that there are things in life I cannot control. I cannot control that people will die or make bad choices. I can’t control the fact that these things will happen someday. I can’t change the rules and I can’t control other people at all, but I have to let them try to take care of themselves. When they need me, they will come to me. I remind myself that I am trying to control the uncontrollable, which is impossible. So accept that I can’t control these things, but that I can give people my input and hope they make decisions that are beneficial to them.”

Accepting can also mean grieving the time you lost following your deceptive brain messages and vowing to make changes as you go forward. As Liz explains, “I need to get to an acceptance that I will not get the last thirty-five years back. I won’t, but it doesn’t mean I have to keep listening to the negative messages and lose more years of my life.” Similarly, John tries to turn the seriousness of his deceptive brain messages into a positive in this way: “For someone who had these deceptive brain messages, as serious a case as I had, the fact that I achieved so much is incredible. I have come so far and am grateful that I was able to start seeing and dealing with these false messages. I am getting my life back!”

Finally, as Ed knows, acceptance means asking for help and acknowledging that the brain is sometimes working against your true goals and values. As he describes, “I try to just accept it and acknowledge that I needed help . . . this is in my brain, I don’t know why it is in my brain, but I just need to accept it. I try to take the Zen approach and just let the deceptive brain messages and sensations go by.” We sometimes call this “working around” the deceptive brain messages because you are not trying to change them, but allow them to be present while you continue on with your day.

TRUE ACCEPTANCE VERSUS FALSE ACCEPTANCE

TRUE ACCEPTANCE INCLUDES

- Accepting that the deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations will come, but that you do not have to act on them and you should not engage in futile efforts to try to make them go away.
- Knowing that the deceptive brain messages are not representative of you or your true self—they are false, foreign invaders.
- Acknowledging and grieving the time you lost while following the deceptive brain messages' commands, all the while remembering that things can change going forward.
- Listening to your Wise Advocate.

FALSE ACCEPTANCE INCLUDES

- Giving up by knowingly letting the deceptive brain messages take over and saying, "This is just how it is." This kind of false acceptance usually happens when you are feeling demoralized or exhausted.
- Believing that you are to blame or at fault for having these deceptive brain messages.

Reframing Your Deceptive Brain Messages

Throughout this chapter and the previous one, we have provided you with many ways to answer the question: *Why do these thoughts, impulses, desires, urges, and sensations bother me so much?* As you know, you can Reframe these experiences as being a part of your bad brain wiring or you can attribute them to thinking errors. Regardless of how you Reframe, your goal is to use the Wise Advocate to help you see the false nature of your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations so that you can make new choices based on your true goals and values. And, to strengthen your Wise Advocate, you can use the shorthand approach of Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept, as many of our patients successfully have.

We'll leave this chapter with this summary quote from Sarah, who describes how she uses the Four Steps at work.

I know when I am upset or anxious, so now I say to myself, "These are unpleasant feelings I am getting" and I Relabel them that way. I'm aware of the unpleasant feelings and that they are being caused by what is going on right now. Once I Relabel, I ask myself, "So, why am I getting these unpleasant feelings? Well, because I want to be perceived as doing a good job, but, hey, I probably AM doing a good job. I'm just getting this feeling nevertheless." I Reframe it to a concern that I have that isn't valid and I try to reorient myself by asking, "If this happened to another person, how would I be evaluating this?" That's where the Wise Advocate comes in and helps me separate the malfunction in my thinking from the reality of whatever I am doing. A lot of times I will be hypercritical of myself or be anxious about little things with my job. Or things will be said constructively and I may be concerned and take it more critically than was intended. So I can Reframe those things to thinking errors and my desire to do a good job. With the Wise Advocate's help, I then can Refocus on my work, knowing that the sensations and thoughts are false, and use rational faith to believe I am a good person who really is performing well.

Summary

- You can Reframe in many ways, including:
 - It's not me, it's *just* my brain.
 - I'm feeling rejected—this is social pain.
 - These are thinking errors.
 - Seeking the 5 A's from another, rather than providing it to yourself.
- Thinking errors result from deceptive brain messages. In addition to causing you to ignore, deny, and neglect your true emotions, they can result in the following unhelpful and inaccurate thought processes:

- All-or-nothing/black-or-white thinking
- Catastrophizing/fortune-telling
- Discounting the positive
- Emotional reasoning
- Mind reading
- “Should” statements
- Faulty comparisons
- False expectations
- The Wise Advocate is your ally and can be anyone or anything that helps you recruit your healthy side to act in your genuine best interest.
- Recognize, Dismiss, and Accept is another way you can quickly assess your deceptive brain messages so that you can Refocus on a healthy activity. It also strengthens your Wise Advocate.
- Acceptance includes acknowledging that the deceptive brain messages and sensations will arise, but that you do not have to act on them. Rather, you can let them be present while continuing on with your day.
- Listen to your Wise Advocate.

CHAPTER 11

The Power Is in the Focus

Step 3: Refocus

After Abby had been using the Four Steps for about a month, she realized that something was off. Perplexed, she came to us and said, “No matter what I do, I keep getting caught up in these upsetting thoughts: Will my husband’s high cholesterol, increased stress, and lack of exercise give him a heart attack? Will my son get injured playing football and never make it to college? Will my career be in jeopardy because of the bad economy? It’s just so frustrating because I know there’s nothing I can do about these ‘what-ifs,’ that there are no definitive answers, yet no matter how I Refocus, I can’t get them out of my head!” When we asked her to elaborate, she described how she was using the Four Steps with her most recent difficulty related to her daughter.

“It all started a few weeks back,” Abby told us, when she learned that a former babysitter, Stacy, had been placed on probation by her college for marijuana possession. “The minute I found out,” Abby remembers, “I immediately started worrying.” What was the problem? Abby’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Katie, had idolized Stacy and always thought highly of her, adopting Stacy’s mannerisms, dress, and even some of her activities. Abby’s brain took these two pieces of information and merged them together. That’s when Abby’s thoughts began to spin out of control: Does Katie now want to smoke pot as well? Would she think it’s “cool” because Stacy did it? Does Katie understand the dangers of marijuana and how it can damage her brain? What if Katie did try

it and she got arrested? Her life could be ruined! Then what would happen? Would she never get a college degree? Abby's brain was unrelenting and seesawed from those worries about what might happen to what Abby could do to prevent such feared consequences. The ensuing anxiety was unbearable and the "what-ifs" ran the gamut: What if I searched her room every day? Read her diary? Made her take drug tests? Took her out of all her extracurricular activities and only allowed supervised visits to the movies or the mall? And so on.

Although Abby could Relabel her anxiety and distress and accurately Reframe her deceptive thoughts as the thinking errors "catastrophizing" and "what-ifs," she did not completely understand what the Refocus step was trying to achieve. Throughout this chapter, we will teach you the basics of Step 3: Refocus and demonstrate how to use the various forms of Refocusing through some of our patients' stories. For example, we will explore how Refocus can help with:

- Steve's urges to drink
- Ed's avoidance of auditions
- Abby's overthinking
- Sarah's panic attacks and depression

With this background, you will be able to figure out what the best ways are for you to Refocus whenever your deceptive brain messages strike.

STEP 3: REFOCUS

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

What Is the Purpose of Step 3: Refocus? How Does It Help?

As Abby's story demonstrates, your attention can easily be grabbed by all kinds of unhealthy thoughts, impulses, desires, urges, and sensations that cause you to become stuck in repetitive cycles of overthinking, overchecking, drinking excessively, overeating, or other unhealthy behaviors. Step 3 is meant to be the

antidote for such destructive uses of your attention and is designed to help you rewire your brain in ways that decrease the power and influence of the maladaptive brain circuits while strengthening healthy, adaptive ones associated with wholesome, constructive behaviors.

The premise behind Step 3 is that you can change how your brain is wired based on the collective forces you learned in chapter 3: Hebb's law ("neurons that fire together wire together"), neuroplasticity (brain functions and circuits can change), and the quantum Zeno effect (*attention* stabilizes brain circuits so they can fire together and wire together). More than anything, Refocus gives you the confidence—through experience—to see that you *can* continue on with your day despite whatever deceptive thoughts, impulses, desires, urges, and sensations you experience. As important, it teaches you that you do have choices, no matter how you are feeling, and that you can act in ways that positively impact your life.

Even more significant, Refocus strengthens your Wise Advocate so that you feel empowered to make healthy choices on your own behalf. Refocusing is the most powerful way to change your brain, and the act of Refocusing with the Wise Advocate in mind strengthens your belief in your true self (i.e., that you have the right to follow the path of your true emotions, interests, and needs in a balanced, healthy way).

As John explains, Refocusing helped him considerably with his repetitive concerns that Alicia might be upset with or possibly leave him. The deceptive brain messages "were so intense," John says, "but my Wise Advocate was growing stronger, telling me that everything in my relationship was fine and that I needed to learn how to focus more energy on myself. What I eventually realized is that when you have a deceptive brain message, there's this energy and you have to do something with it. Whether it's anxiety, a thinking error, whatever, doesn't matter. No matter what, that energy is there. So, you can channel it in productive or unhealthy ways—it's ultimately up to you. What you learn with the Four Steps is that when you Refocus [rather than give in to the deceptive brain message], you process that energy in a healthier way. It's the same energy, but now you are doing something different with it that empowers you and makes the deceptive brain message less overwhelming or strong."

Ed agrees with how Refocusing has helped him continue on with his day despite uncomfortable sensations and strong desires to avoid certain situations. For instance, whenever he wanted to go to an audition or ask a woman out, he would become flooded with deceptive thoughts that he was not good enough and needed to avoid the situation. Refocusing helped Ed realize the following: "If I were to avoid going to an audition, that would be running away and letting the

deceptive brain messages win. Instead, I need to keep going because there are certain things that I need to get done and I'm not going to get booked for a job by staying in my house. I can't stay in bed or stay still. I need to keep on moving and do some activity. Even if I can't go to an audition right then, I could still call up my agent, look for upcoming auditions, or something else because I have to go on. I can't stay stuck and in avoidance."

Refocusing: The Basics

How do you Refocus? After you Relabel your deceptive brain messages with mental notes and Reframe them, you need to *actively place your attention* on something of your choosing that is healthy, constructive, and beneficial for you—even while (and *despite* the fact that) the deceptive thoughts, impulses, urges, sensations, and cravings are present and screaming for you to act on their maladaptive behalf. Although this sounds obvious and easy to do, as Liz knows, it's anything but that: "It seems so simple, and in some ways it is, but in others it really isn't. It's not about putting your body somewhere else [though no doubt that sometimes helps!], it's about working to make sure that your *mind* and *attention* are focused on something good for you."

What does Liz mean? You've actually experienced it yourself when you completed the breathing and thought awareness exercises in chapter 8. Every time you made a mental note of when your attention wandered and then brought your focus back to your breath, you were Refocusing. That's why we emphasized these exercises and recommended that you practice them every day—doing so is the ultimate training ground for Refocusing and learning how to clearly see that your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations are *false* and do not need to be followed.

To help you hone your Refocusing skills, here are a few of the tips and recommendations that will help you on your way.

NOTICE WHERE YOUR ATTENTION IS FOCUSED

In chapter 8, we spent considerable time teaching you about mindfulness, being lost in thought, and how to train your mind to Refocus your attention on your

breath whenever your thoughts begin to wander. Aside from assisting you in Relabeling and Reframing, being able to notice when your attention is drifting away and proactively doing something to bring your attention back to the object you have chosen is vital for Step 3. This act of Refocusing on healthy, adaptive activities is what changes your brain in positive ways. As we mentioned in Part One, the Habit Center is easily “trained” by your repetitive actions and does not know healthy from unhealthy—it simply responds to how you behave and where you focus your attention—and adapts accordingly. Therefore, *how you act and what you focus on shapes your brain in powerful ways.*

For example, consistently depriving the brain of an unhealthy substance or action that “feels good” results in weakening those brain circuits and eventually extinguishing those cravings (as long as you continue to abstain or, in the case of food, only consume the item once in a while). If you’ve ever consistently overindulged in ice cream, but then stopped eating it for a while, you know what we are talking about. The less ice cream you eat, the less you crave it. Eventually, if enough time passes, your craving for ice cream becomes sporadic and no longer holds the power over you it once did. But, if you resume eating ice cream on a semi-regular basis, your brain will start strongly craving it again. The key for such cravings, when possible, is not to indulge them or to have the item only when you’re not actually craving whatever it is (so that the unhelpful association among craving, getting the item, and feeling better is not revived).²⁸

This means that being aware of when your brain is trying to take you down an automatic and well-worn path, like eating ice cream without your full awareness, is so important. The same holds true for any repetitive behavior you engage in, from checking to overanalyzing to drinking alcohol. Relabeling, Reframing, and Refocusing once is not enough and letting your body “go through the motions” without being mindful and aware of what you are doing takes you down a familiar yet dangerous and unhealthy path. The answer to dealing with the insidious way your brain works is to continue to Relabel and Reframe whenever those thoughts, urges, desires, cravings, and impulses strike—even if you are in the middle of Refocusing—and to choose Refocus activities that capture your attention in healthy, beneficial ways. Therefore, notice where your attention is focused as much as possible and especially when you are Refocusing.

REFOCUS ACTIVITIES—MAKE A LIST

One of the most helpful things you can do when you begin Refocusing is to make a list of potential Refocus activities you could use *before* a deceptive brain

message actually surfaces. The unfortunate reality is that once the deceptive thoughts, desires, impulses, and sensations emerge, it's difficult to start thinking up ways to Refocus your attention in that moment. Therefore, we strongly suggest you make a list of different ways you can constructively Refocus your attention when you are not in the midst of dealing with a deceptive brain message.

Our patients' activities spanned from going for a walk to tossing cards into a hat to exercising to spending time with friends to working. You can literally choose any constructive, helpful behavior that engages your mind and holds your attention. Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Go for a walk—focus on your feet striking the ground (e.g., mindful walking).
- Go for a walk—notice the scenery and environment (e.g., feel the wind on your skin; notice the color of the trees, the grass, the birds).
- Exercise alone or with others (something with strategy is better).
 - Lift weights.
 - Go for a run, swim, hike, bike.
 - Play basketball, tennis, soccer, *etc.*
 - Stretch.
 - Class: yoga, spinning, Pilates, *etc.*
- Play a game like Sudoku, solitaire, a crossword puzzle, *etc.*
- Read.
- If you are at work, Refocus on what you need to accomplish that day.
- Watch a wholesome or educational TV show or movie.
- Spend time with someone (friend, coworker, family member).
- Spend time with your pet.
- Write/blog.
- Call someone.
- Cook a healthy meal.
- Pursue a hobby you enjoy (knitting, train models, *etc.*).
- Learn a new skill, sport, or game.

One of the key points is that choosing an activity that requires strategy or interests you tends to be the most engaging and helpful, especially when you are just starting out with the Refocus step. Involving strategy in your Refocus is particularly beneficial because it causes the Habit Center to work constructively to wire the new routines you are learning into the brain, which deprives the maladaptive circuits of the attention they need to stay strong.

As Steve recommends, “The best Refocus is something that is enjoyable. For example, I might go out and play soccer with my son, maybe watch a TV show that I like, listen to some music, something that’s fun.” The same advice holds true for depression, as Sarah found out. “The only Refocusing that was helping me was exercising,” she recalls. “This is what depressed people are supposed to do, they’re supposed to go out and do pleasurable things when they are feeling low,” so exercise or spending time with people, she says, is usually best.

Therefore, whenever possible, choose a Refocus activity that is enjoyable or involves strategy. That said, if you are already at work or working, you need to learn how to *Refocus on your work* like John did. As he explains, “Until I really understood Refocus, I thought that I had to go do something different—go to another place and get away. I couldn’t do that when I was supposed to be at work, so I felt stuck.” When we told John that Refocusing on your work is an excellent activity because it is constructive and usually can engage your attention effectively, he tried it out and found that he was more productive. Of course, any aspect of your work that you can do at the moment is helpful—it doesn’t have to be something difficult when you are already stressed—anything constructive is good.

Remember, the goal is to choose an activity that will capture your attention in a positive, healthy way—so make sure you have a mental list on hand for whenever deceptive brain messages arise. We included the exercise below to help you do so.

EXERCISE: In the space below, write down various Refocus activities you can use when deceptive brain messages surface. We have provided some categories for you, but come up with anything that *will capture your attention and interest in a healthy, constructive way*. No matter what you choose, be specific about what you will do. Don’t say simply “Read” but specify what you would read, such as “CNN website headlines” or “the new Dan Brown novel.” Whenever possible, include strategy or learning something new (but not too complex or difficult) while Refocusing—this makes your Habit Center kick into overdrive to incorporate the new skill into your brain’s repertoire, thus depriving the maladaptive brain circuits of their essential fuel—your attention!

- Individual or group exercise (gym, swimming, basketball, soccer, walking)
- Play a game (Sudoku, crosswords)

- Read (book, newspaper, website)
- Work (specific project)
- Spend time on your hobby (knitting, model building)
- Watch something (TV, movie, birds, sunset)
- Write (journal, blog, novel)
- Spend time with or call a friend
- Other (e.g., cook a healthy meal)

IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING DISTRACTED

When many people learn that Refocus means to deliberately place your attention somewhere, they mistakenly conclude that Refocus means to distract yourself or somehow avoid situations that cause you anxiety. When properly understood, Refocusing is *not* a form of simply distracting yourself. We are not telling you to run away from your deceptive thoughts or sensations and we do not, under any circumstances, want you to try to “just” get rid of or diminish the deceptive brain messages or sensations in the short term. Rather, we specifically tell you to *let the sensations, thoughts, impulses, desires, urges, and cravings be present while you engage in another activity that is healthy and good for you*. What we are trying to teach you is how to constructively *manage your responses* to the bothersome thoughts, sensations, impulses, desires, and so on. In fact, we developed an intensification of Step 3 called *Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness* to specifically address this misunderstanding and ensure that you know how to confront and deal with situations you typically would avoid.

FIFTEEN-MINUTE RULE

Try to wait at least fifteen minutes (or as long as possible) between when a deceptive brain message or uncomfortable sensation strikes and when you act. If possible, do not act on the thoughts or impulses at all and instead choose to engage in a healthy behavior. When the fifteen minutes is up, try another fifteen minutes.

FIFTEEN-MINUTE RULE AND MINDFUL CHECKING

Another helpful guideline is the fifteen-minute rule, which probably is similar to how your parents dealt with you as a child when you announced you wanted a snack immediately after dinner. In essence, the rule simply asks you to wait fifteen minutes between the time you experience a deceptive thought, impulse, urge, desire, or sensation and when you act. The idea is to put as much time as possible between your deceptive brain message and the automatic habit to immediately respond in an unhealthy way. Obviously, if you can resist the urge entirely, all the better. However, if you find that you cannot withstand the strong sensations, your second-best response is to wait as long as possible and then *mindfully* engage in whatever activity your deceptive brain message is demanding of you. For example, if John could not hold out for fifteen minutes to resist the urge to check if Alicia e-mailed him, he would check while saying to himself mindfully, “I am checking. I am afraid she is going to leave me and I am looking for reassurance. Even though I gave in this time, that’s okay. I just need to be aware of what I’m doing and try not to give in next time.” The key here is to be honest with yourself—if it is checking, Relabel it as checking, and resolve to try to wait longer the next time. That said, it is important to have compassion for yourself and patience—to call things what they truly are and be honest with yourself while actively accepting that you are doing the best you can and encouraging yourself to wait longer the next time.

Dealing with Repetitive Thoughts When You Refocus

When Abby began learning how to Refocus, she chose spending time with friends as one of her Refocus activities. Unfortunately, because she did not fully understand how to Refocus, she did not realize that excessively talking about what was distressing her, like Katie’s potential use of marijuana, was the wrong approach. Rather than helping her brain focus on something constructive (like discussing the latest movie she saw, good places to go to dinner, or what to do this weekend), Abby was fueling the deceptive brain messages further whenever she excessively focused on their content. Much of the hard work she had put into Steps 1 and 2 was being washed away, brain-wise, when she let the deceptive brain messages take over her attention so quickly and run the show. Additionally,