

breathing or another activity that decreases your emotional or physical sensations as a result of sharply focusing your attention in a positive way.

- Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness—deliberately encountering a situation that you normally would avoid *and* that is beneficial for you.

- Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness should never be used for dangerous or highly addictive behaviors—use regular Regulate or Regulate & Refocus instead.
- Gratitude lists are an excellent way to Refocus.
- Use the fifteen-minute rule whenever possible.

After working with the first three steps for a few weeks (though some people may jump right in, which is okay if you have enough insight and awareness from prior training or therapy), you likely will be ready to start tackling specific behaviors that you want to change (with Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness) and begin Step 4, where you start Revaluing your experiences:

Revaluing means clearly seeing the thoughts, urges, impulses, and desires for what they are—simply sensations caused by deceptive brain messages that are not true and that have little to no value.

- Progressive mindfulness is the ability to use your Wise Advocate to gain deeper levels of mindful awareness

through experience.

- As your capacity to use progressive mindfulness improves, you will be able to view the bothersome, yet useless false thoughts, impulses, desires, cravings, urges, fears, worries, and thinking errors as nothing more than deceptive brain messages.

## **MAKING THE BRAIN WORK FOR YOU— KEY CONCEPTS**

- Habits are hard to break because they are so strongly wired into your brain because of Hebb's law and the quantum Zeno effect.
- You can break the cycle of deceptive brain messages with focused attention, veto power, and Self-Directed Neuroplasticity (i.e., the Four Steps).
- The key parts of the brain involved in propagating and maintaining deceptive brain messages include the:
  - Drive Center—involved in hunger, thirst, sex, and other basic bodily drives
  - Reward Center—involved in pleasure and obtaining rewards
  - Uh Oh Center—involved in telling you something is wrong; alarm center
  - Habit Center—involved in automatic responses (thoughts and actions)
  - Self-Referencing Center

—focuses on information related to you; can cause you to take things too personally at times

- The Assessment Center is involved in rational decision-making and voluntary emotion management and supports the Wise Advocate. It is the part of the brain that is enhanced and recruited more often when you use the Four Steps on a continual basis.

## **Developing Your Plan**

To begin changing your brain-based habits in a more deliberate way, you will want to devise a list or game plan. In chapter 2, we asked you to write down what things you want to stop doing and the activities you would prefer to be doing instead. Look at that list now. Is there anything else that you want to add? For example, when you completed that list, you had not learned about thinking errors, the importance of emotional bonds, or social pain. Now that you know all the ways your brain can hijack you, reformulate your list and include actions, both physical and mental, that you would like to change in the table on page 342.

## **WHAT ARE YOU DOING THAT YOU WANT TO STOP?**

(e.g., eating carbs when I am stressed out; using alcohol to calm myself after I get into an argument with someone; calling my ex-boyfriend whenever I feel lonely; never doing things for myself, but putting others first; not saying what I think or need; striving for perfection all the time; trying to get the 5 A's from people rather than providing them for myself)

## **WHAT ARE YOU NOT DOING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO DO?**

(e.g., eating more healthily; exercising more often; spending more time with friends; meditating to learn how to notice my thoughts and soothe myself; doing more things for myself each day; telling people what I think or need; noticing when I am catastrophizing, and using the Four Steps to deal with it)

With this list in mind, think about which things will be easier to change and which will be harder. Rank them in order in the table below from 1 (the easiest to change) to 10 (the most difficult to change).

## **THINGS I WANT TO CHANGE WITH THE FOUR STEPS**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Obviously, you could start using the Four Steps on anything you want to change, but beginning with something that is easier (#1 on the list above) is your best bet—even if it is not the most pressing or important. Why? It's essential that you learn how to use the Four Steps and have some early successes with applying the method before you tackle more intense sensations or entrenched habits that are strongly wired into your brain. For instance, if you start with something too difficult or that evokes a lot of distress and unsettling emotional sensations, you may feel overwhelmed and not learn how to use the Four Steps

effectively. Therefore, start with something small that does not require you to use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness. With time and repeated use of the Four Steps, you will be able to incorporate Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plans into your life and tackle almost any difficulty you have.

In short, don't do everything at once, and allow yourself to see the progress you're making by journaling your successes and writing out gratitude lists.

## **Pay Attention to Your True Self**

Along with using the Four Steps to increase your awareness and insight of what is happening in your brain and body, you need to develop and enhance your sense of self with your Wise Advocate and the 5 A's. Doing so will help counteract your brain's natural tendency to ignore, minimize, or neglect your true self or use thinking errors to keep you stuck and unable to stand up for yourself. It will also help you see yourself the way your Wise Advocate does: a good person worthy of living a fulfilling and rewarding life.

To improve your ability to see yourself from the perspective of your true self, try to *incorporate* and *believe* your Wise Advocate's view of you. For example, whenever a thinking error or negative thought about you arises, imagine how your Wise Advocate would respond and try to really take in that message. Allow yourself to consider the possibility that you genuinely are trying your best and are making progress. Remind yourself that it's natural and healthy for you to allow your true emotions to break through that wall of deceptive brain messages that likely has been dominating your life. Acknowledge that the Wise Advocate, that healthy side of you that is strongly aligned with your true self, would advocate for you to allow all of your true feelings, including grief, mobilizing forms of anger, and healthy stress or anxiety, to emerge. Similarly, remember that it is natural and normal to seek out the 5 A's from important people in your life—it's part of what fulfills you and brings meaning to your life. Simultaneously, acknowledge that in most cases you should provide yourself with Attention, Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, and Allowing so that you remain independent and relate to people in healthy ways.

The definition of respecting your true self and using the Four Steps to its fullest extent is to achieve the following:

- Constructively deal with your true emotions in a way that allows your true self to be honored and represented
- Skillfully deal with deceptive brain messages by allowing the false thoughts, urges, impulses, desires, and sensations to be present, without focusing attention on or overidentifying with them<sup>32</sup>

When you are able to achieve these goals while incorporating and internalizing the view of a loving, caring being who knows how you think and feel but who acts in your best interest into your sense of self, you will be firmly on your way to acting in healthy, wholesome ways that result in lasting changes to your brain and your life.

Best wishes on your journey and in your life. May you be well.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, we want to thank all the people who allowed their stories to be used in this book. Your willingness to share your life and perspective in such a generous way will help many more than you could ever know. We also thank our tireless research assistant and colleague, Poorang Aurasteh, for completing most of the case interviews in this book and enthusiastically helping us with our UCLA Four Step education group.

As with most endeavors, this book is the result of many talented people working together. We begin by thanking two extraordinary people who had the vision and ability to get the project started and see it through to completion. Susan Rabiner, our agent, and Rachel Holtzman, our editor at Avery, were driving forces behind this book. We cannot thank you enough for believing in our ideas and being passionate advocates of our work. We also thank Travers Johnson, assistant editor; Megan Newman, vice president and editorial director of Avery; and William Shinker, president and publisher of Gotham Books/Avery.

In terms of content, we thank Henry P. Stapp, Ph.D., David D. Burns, M.D., Peter G. Levine, and Donald D. Price, Ph.D., for offering their time, knowledge, and pioneering ideas. We also thank the researchers and authors we mention in the book for their groundbreaking work. Finally, we are appreciative of the support from our colleagues at UCLA, including Peter Whybrow, M.D., and everyone at the Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC): Diana Winston, Marvin Belzer, Ph.D., Daniel Siegel, M.D., and Susan Smalley, Ph.D.

## **REBECCA GLADDING**

I greatly appreciate my family and friends for their unending support during the writing process and in life in general. Thanks to Darlene Ricker, one of the most amazing writing coaches around. Among her many talents, she had an uncanny ability to help me consistently erase my writer's block and keep me moving forward even when I had no idea where I was headed. I am also indebted to Karin de Weille for helping me find my creative/ narrative voice and for

assisting in revising chapter 1. To Jennifer Draper, M.D., Keith White, Dana Levy, M.D., Wendy Simon, M.D., Kristen Heiden, Kerry Regan, Donald, Connie, and Curtis Gladding, Melinda Merker, Halary Patch, RN, Iljie Fitzgerald, M.D., Michael Takamura, M.D., Alvin Chan, Shani Delaney, M.D., Jonathan Volk, M.D., Bryan and Vanessa Turner, Luata Bray, LMPc, Stacy Duhon, Alice Rudnick, M.D., and Karen Stone: I couldn't have done this without all of you. Similarly, thanks to my amazing colleagues at UCLA, including the exceptionally talented and hardworking psychiatry residents and everyone in the Adult Eating Disorders Program, particularly Michael Strober, Ph.D., Cynthia Pikus, Ph.D., Maureen Lynch, RN, MSN, and the entire nursing and therapeutic staff, and to the most supportive colleagues imaginable at the University of Washington.

To all of my patients over the years, your willingness to share your life history and emotions taught me more than any textbook ever could. Thank you for allowing me to know you.

Thanks to Jeffrey Schwartz, M.D., for the unsurpassed education you have given me—I have learned so much from you. Thanks also to all of my teachers and mentors over the years, including Phillip Cogen, M.D., Michael Gitlin, M.D., Thomas Strouse, M.D., and John S. Luo, M.D., at UCLA, Lowell Tong, M.D., at UCSF, Karina Uldall, M.D., and Paul Ciechanowski, M.D., at the University of Washington, T. Glen Lawson at Bates College, and Trudy Goodman of InsightLA. You have helped me become the person, clinician, and ardent educator I am today. Finally, thanks to Peet's Coffee in Brentwood, which provided me with a wonderfully relaxing place to write the majority of this book, and especially Warren, who always greeted me with a smile and a perfectly made Americano.

## **JEFFREY SCHWARTZ**

I would like to thank El Shaddai—the Source of it All, Billy Abraham for telling me about the Jesus Prayer, and the Paraclete for being helper, comforter, advocate, counselor, encourager, strengthener, friend. I would also like to thank my parents for their decades of hard labor—the unpayable debt that made it all possible, and Gary, for being an inspiration. Thanks to Mr. Jeffrey Stern for years of dedicated support. And thanks to Becky Gladding, without whom this book would not exist, and those who have provided support through twenty-five



years at UCLA.

We are eternally grateful and indebted to everyone who has helped us along the way, including anyone we did not specifically mention. Thank you all for your help, expertise, and support.

## RECOMMENDED READING

If you want to learn more about what you read in *You Are Not Your Brain*, you might find these books, most of which we specifically cited and used in the text, interesting and helpful.

*The Brain That Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge, M.D.

*Feeling Good* by David D. Burns, M.D.

*Fully Present* by Susan L. Smalley, Ph.D., and Diana Winston

*How to Be an Adult in Relationships* by David Richo, Ph.D.

*Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, M.D., Ph.D.

*A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* by Bob Stahl, Ph.D., and Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D.

*Mindfulness in Plain English* by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

*The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson, M.D., with Miriam Z. Klipper

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Unhealthy behavior: assessment of damage from; brain biology underlying; in cycle of deceptive brain messages;

Unhealthy behavior (*cont.*): evaluating interference from; extent of damage from; focusing of attention toward; mindful engagement in; refocusing from; replacement with healthy behavior; selectivity in efforts against; wiring of, into brain. *See also* Repetitive behavior

University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA): labeling study at; OCD study at; social pain study at

Values: and goal-setting; in guidance of Wise Advocate

Veto power

Winston, Diana

Wise Advocate (inner guide): activation with refocusing techniques; assistance

with “should” statements; attuning to; in balancing of relationships; blocking of, by emotional neglect; defining response of; definition of; distinguishing true emotions with; engagement of, in reframing; “fresh eyes” of; guiding of mind’s evaluations by; incapacity of; inducement of healthy behavior by; invoking perspective of; negation of, by false thoughts; obstacles to evaluative function of; overriding of, by perfectionism; perspective on self of; progressive levels of awareness through; recognition of deceptive brain messages by; shifting perspective toward, in revaluing; strengthening of; support from Assessment Center

Work(place): optimizing performance at; refocusing on; unhealthy situations and relationships at

Worst-case-scenario thinking. *See* Catastrophizing

[1](#)

Jeffrey M. Schwartz, Paula W. Stoessel, Lewis R. Baxter, Jr., Karron M. Martin, and Michael E. Phelps, “Systematic Changes in Cerebral Glucose Metabolic Rate After Successful Behavior Modification Treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 53, no. 2 (February 1996): 109–13.

[2](#)

Ibid.

[3](#)

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962/1963), p. 76.

[4](#)

Ibid.

[5](#)

Ibid., p. 66.

[6](#)

This process of desires overshadowing one another leads to what is sometimes called “Monkey Mind” in Buddhism—an inability to stay focused on your goals and instead allowing your attention to wander (or be swayed), like a monkey swinging from tree to tree.

[7](#)

Benjamin Libet, “Do We Have Free Will?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 8–9 (1999): 54.

[8](#)

The amygdala’s connection to the autonomic nervous system (responsible for the fight-or-flight response) causes these physical manifestations of anxiety.

[9](#)

The *orbitofrontal cortex* is also very important in estimating risks and rewards. It works alongside and regulates the Uh Oh Center to some extent. We will discuss the orbitofrontal cortex briefly in chapter 5 when we talk about the relationship between the deceptive brain messages and your sense of self.

[10](#)

When we talk about either the Self-Referencing Center or Assessment Center being “active,” we are referring to relative levels of activation as seen in brain imaging scans. In reality, the Self-Referencing and Assessment centers are working all the time. The key distinction is which one is *more* active at one time—this strongly influences which function the brain is performing.

[11](#)

The importance of attachment and the ability to develop close, healthy bonds



with others was first emphasized by John Bowlby, M.D., and later refined by Mary Ainsworth, Ph.D., and many others.

[12](#)

For simplicity, we refer to all the important people in your childhood as *caregivers*, because in some way they represented people who you expected to keep you safe and comforted as a child. We recognize that the important people in your life could have included grandparents, aunts/uncles, siblings, cousins, teachers, coaches, friends, troop masters, and so on.

[13](#)

In this case, we are using Mom as the example, but as we have said previously, the caregiver can be anyone whom the child cares about and wants to seek safety and comfort from.

[14](#)

Learning to overvalue your emotional responses arises from your caregivers repeatedly responding to your genuine emotions in excessive, almost hysterical ways.

[15](#)

Much of the pioneering work in understanding and emphasizing how people ignore, neglect, dismiss, devalue, and minimize their feelings as a result of their early life experiences comes from clinicians focusing on attachment relationships in experiential psychotherapy. Although little has been written on the subject for general audiences, Josette ten Have-de Labije, Psy.D., Robert Neborsky, M.D., and Robin L. Kay, Ph.D., among others, have been teaching and writing about these patterns of behavior for years for professional audiences.

[16](#)

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1992), p. 33.

[17](#)

Or, as Eleanor Roosevelt famously proclaimed, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

[18](#)

This is an important clarification: With deceptive brain messages, what you *do* matters far more than the false, inaccurate, and destructive thoughts and feelings created by your brain. Of course, when you are dealing with your true emotions, beliefs, and needs (i.e., based on and reflecting your true self), those thoughts and feelings matter *as much* as your actions and should be appropriately and constructively dealt with and tended to.

[19](#)

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom