

- Physical and emotional sensations, including cravings
- Habitual patterns of action or inaction

Once you become adept at the process of Relabeling, you will delve into the content and find ways to counteract and refute the deceptive brain messages with Step 2: Reframe. But first you need to learn how to become aware of your thoughts without becoming ensnared in them. Let's turn to a universal problem we all face—being lost in the activity of repeatedly thinking.

Lost in Thought

As you completed the awareness exercises focusing on your bodily sensations, movements, and breath, you likely noticed the running commentary going on in your head. If you really noticed it, you were probably amazed by the fact that your brain is going nonstop and that you are thinking about something almost all of the time. When you become more aware of your constant thinking, you realize that this experience is your default mode—run by your Self-Referencing Center. Although it has become the “norm,” constantly thinking takes you away from being aware of other parts of your experience and from being mindful.

Why is being lost in thought a problem? It keeps you from doing what you want and need to do in life. As Gunaratana explains:

Our *habit* of getting stuck in thought is years old, and that habit will hang on in the most tenacious manner . . . conscious thought pastes things over our experience, loads us down with concepts and ideas, immerses us in a churning vortex of plans and worries, fears and fantasies.²²

Our patients agree that being unable to step outside of your thoughts is a huge obstacle when you are trying to be mindful and use Step 1: Relabel. They describe the process in different ways, but they all agree on what happens: They end up losing time and have trouble harnessing the power of their attention when their thoughts are running rampant. Many of them refer to this process of overthinking and overanalyzing as “spinning” and use that word to Relabel what is happening. For example, Liz, a sixty-five-year-old woman who had a successful career as a human rights activist and who began to worry whether she, as she says, “would end up in a nursing home at eighty-five with no one to care

for me,” often got stuck in repetitive thoughts about her future and asked herself all kinds of questions for which there was no answer, such as: Would she be alone? Where would she live? How would she support herself? What would she do all day? Would she have her memory? It got to the point, Liz says, where “I would just sit there spinning in a circle, going over and over it. I would get caught up in the spinning and there was no way out until I was able to start Relabeling it as ‘spinning.’ That’s when I was able to break the cycle and move on.”

John, who often gets stuck in repeating cycles of thoughts, describes the process in a similar way: “Your mind is going a million miles an hour when you indulge the deceptive brain messages and it’s hard to switch gears. That’s why Relabel is so helpful. For example, sometimes I start thinking about something other than work, like Alicia. I get a bit sidetracked—I think over and over about it. Then, I realize what I am doing. That’s when I Relabel it. I say to myself, ‘You’re ruminating, you’re mind-wandering.’ Then I try to Refocus by going back to work, but if that isn’t effective, I just concentrate on my breathing for a minute or two. It centers me and helps me regain the ability to focus my mind. It seems to help.”

Abby, who worries a lot, knows all too well what they are talking about. She often would get caught in loops in which “my brain would go to the worst-case scenario over and over. Then, it would find another scenario to worry about. No matter how I tried to solve the problem, my brain would just find something else to worry about. For example, I know I do a lot of *thinking through* . . . I will go over and over the same material. I will think to myself, ‘Well if I do this, X will happen. But maybe if I do that, then Y will happen.’ I go through all the pros and cons of this, the pros and cons of that. I’ll just go over them and over and over. There was no end in sight!”

Sarah, who replays conversations with people in her head, overanalyzes her actions, and often wonders if she’s upset or angered anyone, experiences similar thoughts. As she recalls, “I mull things over. Lots of ‘what-ifs’ go through my mind. I just keep asking myself, ‘What if I do this? What if I do that?’ I think of all these far-reaching scenarios that are so unlikely to happen, but if there’s even a remote possibility it might happen, I worry about it.” Both Sarah and Abby have found that if they simply Relabel the whole process as “what-ifs,” “thinking,” or “worrying,” the cycle is broken and they can bring their attention back to what *they* want to focus on.

From their stories, it may seem like it’s a piece of cake to notice when you are lost in thought. Not so, says Steve. Learning how to notice the endless stream of thoughts was very difficult for him because “instead of doing a behavior where

an observer could watch me check and say, ‘Oh, he’s checking, he’s coming back to check again and again,’ this was all happening inside my brain. No one can point it out to me and no one knows what I am thinking. Even worse, these kinds of thoughts obviously can be hidden from one’s own self. You just don’t see it as an activity, like checking or drinking. You keep thinking it’s a valid and necessary process you are going through. And why wouldn’t you? You’ve been doing it your whole life. It’s like you have a blind spot there because you think it’s natural, normal, and helpful.” As Steve was able to start seeing the process of being lost in thought as an *activity*, one that was clearly not helping him, he was able to Relabel it and move on.

Now that you understand what being lost in thought is all about, try the following exercise, designed simply to help you notice what your brain is doing all day long.

EXERCISE #4: INCREASING AWARENESS OF YOUR THOUGHTS

Sit somewhere quietly for five minutes—make sure there are no distractions. Turn off your cell phone, shut down your computer, put any reading materials away. Just like with the other exercises, find a place where you can be alone and not bothered. This is a time for you to notice your thoughts and not force any particular topic or issue to come up. It’s often easier to do this exercise with your eyes closed.

Using the breath awareness exercise to guide you, focus on your breath while simultaneously noticing *when* thoughts come up. Do not focus on bodily sensations, pain, emotional sensations, or other phenomena. Focus only on the fact that thoughts arise. When they do, quietly (in your mind, not aloud) say to yourself, “Thinking,” then go back to your breathing anchor (e.g., air coming in and out of your nostrils).

As with the other exercises, do not try to control or change the thoughts, simply notice them. Most important, *do not judge the thoughts*. Simply let them bubble up with an attitude of curiosity and acceptance. Be open to whatever arises.

A variation on this exercise is to write down one or two words related to each thought that arises in those five minutes or to simply journal for five minutes about whatever comes up—again, without

judging or trying to direct the content. You are not trying to solve a problem or figure anything out—you are simply *allowing and providing the space* for the thoughts to present themselves.

The goal of this exercise is for you to see how many thoughts you have in a very short period of time and how disconnected, repetitive, inconsequential, or even inappropriate many of them are. The more times you do this exercise, the more you will see that it is relatively easy to start noticing your thoughts if you pay attention to noticing them.

As you are able, extend the length of time you sit and notice your thoughts—this will help train your mind to naturally increase your awareness of thoughts as they arise throughout your day (and not just when you are deliberately trying to pay attention to them).

This exercise is an important one because it sets the stage for you to start noticing your deceptive brain messages whenever they arise. As we've mentioned before, you can't change what you can't see. Therefore, after you have become more adept at noticing your bodily sensations from the previous exercises, take a few days to try to notice when you are lost in thought. The best way to do this is to continue using exercise #3 or #4, which are both forms of meditation, for up to thirty minutes a day. This is the ultimate way to increase your awareness—it is that mental gym we were talking about before.

As you become more proficient at being aware of when you are thinking, then you can start noticing the content of your thoughts. For now, we want you to notice the *process* of thinking and leave the *content* to Step 2: Reframe.

Overpowered by Sensations—Craving, Impulses, Pain, Anxiety, and So On

Becoming aware of your thoughts is vital, but they are not the whole story. Remember, deceptive brain messages are not only defined as thoughts, but also as *impulses, and desires* that take you away from your true self. Now that you have an idea of what thoughts can arise, you need to be as familiar with your physical and emotional sensations because they can be as distracting and

overpowering as the thoughts.

The easiest sensation to start with is anxiety because it is something we all experience at some point in our lives. When people think about anxiety, they usually conjure up images of someone having a panic attack, such as the heart beating faster, sweating, and becoming short of breath. While those absolutely are symptoms of anxiety, the range of physical symptoms is much broader, and we think it's important for you to be able to recognize the different ways anxiety can manifest beyond the traditional symptoms.

Why is this important? As we mentioned in chapter 6, you likely have been ignoring, minimizing, or neglecting your true emotions. When you do this, anxiety rises in your body and acts as a signal, alerting you to the fact that you are somehow dismissing your true self. If you are not aware of how anxiety can express itself in your body, then you will not be able to recognize all the times when you are ignoring, neglecting, or minimizing your true emotions and needs. This will lead you to continue using the same unhelpful, automatic responses and coping strategies that have become deeply ingrained in your brain.

To break those patterns, you need to know the range of anxiety symptoms you can experience and how to start recognizing them. One way to think about and categorize anxiety is based on how your brain reacts to perceived stress and threats in your environment. For example, if you are stressed but are not in any real danger, your muscles likely will tense up in some way, but your body will not respond further. However, if your brain perceives a threat and concludes that you might be in danger, it will initiate the fight-or-flight response. Conversely, if the perceived danger is very high or your system is overloaded, your body may prepare to shut down physically and your thoughts may become clouded to the point that you are confused and unable to think straight. The symptoms of each of these brain-body responses vary, as we have indicated in the table below, and sometimes more than one type of anxiety reaction can be present (e.g., muscle tension *plus* fight-or-flight, thinking problems *plus* shutdown, and so on).

TYPES OF ANXIETY REACTIONS RELATED TO DECEPTIVE BRAIN MESSAGES

Muscle Tension in Your:	Fight-or-Flight	Shutdown	Thinking/ Perceptual Problems
Face, jaw	Shortness of breath/rapid breathing	Slower breathing	Difficulty thinking
Throat, including voice cracking or weakness	Wheezing	Slower heart rate	Slowed thinking
Neck	Increased heart rate	Light-headedness	Losing track of thoughts
Shoulders	Heart pounding	Dizziness	Confusion
Arms, hands	Heart racing	Fainting	Disorientation
Chest, including sighing respirations	Dry mouth	Nausea/vomiting	Changes in clarity of vision or hearing
Back	Cold hands/skin	Diarrhea or constipation	Tunnel vision
Legs	Shivering	Need to urinate	Ear ringing
Feet	Shaking	Fatigue	
	Sweating	Tearing eyes	
	Dilated pupils	Heartburn	
		Stomach pain (increased acid)	

Understanding the range of anxiety symptoms—and that you can experience symptoms from different categories at the same time—is critical when you are trying to Relabel your uncomfortable sensations. For example, Abby told us that when she is really anxious, her body reacts in the following ways: “I become very tense, my brain is foggy, and I can’t see the other person clearly. Sometimes I am dizzy and disoriented, too. When this happens, I Relabel the entire thing as ‘brain fog.’” Similarly, when Liz was at her worst, worrying often about whether she would end up in a nursing home alone with no one to care for her, she described the following: “Every morning I was waking up with a gut-wrenching anxiety. I was really scared about the future and I could tell in my body that I was waking up with a knot in my stomach. I recognized these as the uncomfortable sensations related to deceptive brain messages that I was afraid I would be alone. I knew it was irrational, so I Relabeled it as such. I said to myself, ‘Irrational’ and ‘Stomach churning,’ which helped a lot.”

Sarah also deals with anxiety, usually panic attacks. When she has the symptoms of panic, such as a rapid heartbeat or sweating, her brain “felt like it was screaming, telling me, ‘Oh my God, there’s a huge emergency!’ And I would perpetuate the false message by thinking, ‘Help, help, I’m gonna die!’ It’s a horrible feeling,” she says, “but eventually I realized it wasn’t true.” As she learned the Four Steps, she began to Relabel those experiences as “anxiety” or “panic.” Often, she would simply note the sensation she was having, such as saying to herself, “Rapid heartbeat.” As she became more adept at using the Four Steps, she would become more precise and tell herself, “Hey, this is my

anxiety that's making my heart beat faster and making my palms sweat, but it is not something I have to act on or believe is signaling a real emergency.”

Likewise, when John was feeling anxious and was on the verge of checking e-mail, he says, “I would get panicky.” His response? “I would Relabel those sensations as a ‘false body message’ and say to myself, ‘The body is sending you this ridiculously unnecessary, excessive response. Notice that, but don’t give in to it.’”

Anxiety is not the only way the body can respond. As Sarah knows all too well, the body can also shut down from depression. For instance, whenever she was depressed her physical sensations included feeling “deenergized, lethargic or weak—of being deflated. That’s when I would want to go hide in bed or fall asleep,” she says. “When I got that feeling, which is physical and mental, I’d Relabel it as ‘This is my deenergizing depression’ or ‘The depression is why I don’t have any energy or my muscles are weak.’”

Similarly, when Steve was drinking and emotionally distant from his family, he would feel guilty and ashamed. Rather than empowering him to quit drinking, all these sensations did was ensure that he would stay further away from his family and not talk with them about how he felt. As he realized this, he says, “I would feel hopeless and overwhelmed. With the Four Steps, I recognized that those experiences were coming from my deceptive brain messages and bad habits. I would say to myself, ‘This is an emotional sensation that is outside of me, it’s not me, but I can do something about it.’ Then, I would Relabel it as depression or guilt or shame and Refocus on another activity, like playing a game with my daughter or working out.”

John also dealt with depression at times. “It was like walking a path in the darkness,” he says. “I would have this depressive dialogue with myself and feel exhausted. I would start craving starches, like pasta, and sweets. When I was unaware, I would eat everything in sight and it made me feel better [for a few minutes], but I gained weight.” His solution was to start calling these cravings for sweets and starches deceptive brain messages and to Relabel them as “craving” or “false message.”

Other symptoms of depression, both physical and emotional, include the following:

- Headaches
- Pain, including back pain, joint pain, and muscle pain
- Muscle aches
- Exhaustion and fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping (falling asleep, staying asleep, waking frequently,

waking up too early in the morning)

- Digestive problems (nausea, diarrhea, constipation)
- Change in appetite or weight
- Increased craving for carbohydrates or other “comfort” foods
- Hopelessness, helplessness
- Sadness, feeling down, depressed, low mood
- Feeling like life isn’t worth living or the world would be better if you were not here

Two important notes:

1. If you have any suicidal thoughts, see a mental health professional immediately. If you have any plans to harm yourself, do not hesitate to call your doctor or go to the nearest emergency room. You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).
2. If you have new, worsening, or severe physical symptoms, see your doctor to rule out an underlying medical problem. Although we are trying to show you the links between emotional states and physical symptoms, sometimes there is a real medical problem. Since many medical problems start out with some of these same physical sensations, if you are at all concerned or have new, worsening, or severe symptoms, have them evaluated by your doctor before calling them physical sensations or using the Four Steps with them.

Finally, no discussion of physical or emotional sensations would be complete without mentioning cravings, desires, longings, and impulses. Obviously, craving comes up most clearly in the case of addictions, but it can also occur with anxiety (such as stress eating) or with depression (such as craving carbohydrates). Therefore, you need to be on the lookout for cravings, desires, and longings, such as the highs you feel when you use alcohol or drugs, play video games, eat, or start new relationships. While they make you feel better in the short term, engaging in these actions and seeking the pleasure they bring can cause you long-term problems and continued bad brain wiring.

EXERCISE: Take a moment now to assess your deceptive brain messages and how they affect you. In the space below, write down all the different ways your body and brain respond when you are stressed out, anxious, depressed, feel hopeless, or are craving something.

Making Mental Notes

Becoming aware of what their bodies were doing and ascribing those sensations to their deceptive brain messages helped our patients properly Relabel their experiences. The best way to do this, they agree, was by making mental notes.

What are mental notes? They are a shorthand way of Relabeling something quickly that ensures you will not get ensnared in the process of thinking. In essence, they are one-or two-word statements that encapsulate what is going on in that moment. For example, when you completed the thought awareness exercise #4 and said to yourself “thinking” whenever a thought arose, that was making a mental note. Similarly, when Liz used the word *spinning*, and Abby and Sarah said to themselves “thinking,” “what-ifs,” and “worrying,” they were making mental notes.

Obviously, there are endless possibilities and options for making mental notes. The key is that they need to be short and simple. Most important, and this bears repeating, the word chosen does not have to be the *perfect* word, just one that sums up the experience so that you can pull yourself out of the repetitive process of being lost in thought or obsessively focused on your uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations. As always, with mental notes (and Relabeling), don’t worry too much about the words you use. *It’s the process of observing that counts.*

What are other examples of mental notes? We asked our patients how they use mental notes to Relabel when deceptive brain messages strike. Here’s a list of their favorite phrases, divided up loosely into the following three categories:

EXAMPLES OF MENTAL NOTES

Thoughts and Actions	Physical Sensations	Emotional Sensations
Deceptive brain message	Sweaty palms	Depression
Ruminating	Anxiety	Anxiety
Thinking	Heart racing	Helplessness
Worrying	Stomach churning	Nervousness
Mind wandering	Upset stomach	Scared
Procrastination	Feeling sick	Anger
Something is wrong	Ears ringing	Feeling down
Trigger	Dizziness	Pain
Sabotaging	Fatigue	Low mood
Mental cloud	Light-headedness	Shame
Irrational	De-energized	Guilt
Learning experience	Lethargy	Fear
Perfection	Urge	
Avoidance	Impulse	
Uncertainty	Craving	

Clearly, the list could go on and on. The point is that you need to find some way to make a fast mental note of what is happening inside your body and brain so that you can then choose what to do about it.

Take a moment to write down some mental notes that might be helpful for you to use when a deceptive brain message strikes. Remember, the goal is for it to be short and sweet. It does not have to accurately describe the situation, but it needs to be somewhere in the ballpark. Therefore, pick a few labels now that you can use to help you notice the thoughts, impulses, sensations, and actions but that will ensure you do not get caught up in the content of those erroneous and deceptive messages.

EXERCISE: Mental notes I can use when I encounter a deceptive brain message, uncomfortable sensation, or maladaptive habit include the following:

THE BIOLOGICAL POWER OF RELABELING

In chapter 5, we mentioned that Step 1 was capable of recruiting the Assessment Center to help calm the Uh Oh Center and activate the helpful aspects of the Self-Referencing Center. How do we know this

is true? From the very intriguing work done at UCLA by Matthew Lieberman, Ph.D., and his colleagues. In their experiments, they placed people in a brain scanner and asked them to look at pictures of people's faces.

What Lieberman and colleagues found was that *labeling* the observed emotion with a word—basically what you do when you make mental notes and Relabel—resulted in increased brain activity in the Assessment Center while simultaneously decreasing activity in the Uh Oh Center. In a follow-up study, they found that people who were more mindful were more effective at recruiting the Assessment Center and enhancing its ability to calm the Uh Oh Center.

This means that something special happens in your brain when you actively Relabel your emotional (and physical) sensations—when you call them what they are. The very act of putting a label on those emotional sensations activates your Assessment Center, which then quiets down its noisy, easily upset neighbor, the Uh Oh Center. That's why, from a biological perspective, learning how to Relabel your experiences and use mental notes is so important. It actually helps you manage your emotional sensations to some extent. We will discuss this more in chapter 11 when we discuss Step 3: Refocus and how to use mental notes in a special way to calm your Uh Oh Center.

For now, the thing to remember is that Lieberman's research and that of other mindfulness investigators shows that very act of Relabeling and becoming aware of your deceptive thoughts, sensations, and actions *helps you create distance* between the false messages and your true self. With repeated practice, you get to the point where you Revalue the entire experience and can easily say, "Oh, that's a deceptive brain message. It's not me and I am not going to give it the time of day. It has no value or meaning, so I am not going to listen to it, but instead will move on and do something that matters to me."

From these descriptions, the process of Relabeling probably seems rather clear and simple. In one way it is, but in other ways, noticing your deceptive brain messages can create new challenges. Our patients know this well and highlighted several things you should be aware of as you start turning your attention toward noticing your deceptive brain messages.

The Deceptive Brain Messages Can Seem to Get Worse When You Start Relabeling

One of the problems with becoming more aware of your experiences is that you start noticing things that were not even on your radar before. For example, if you were never aware of how popular white minivans are and then your friend points it out to you, you will start seeing white minivans everywhere. It's as if a screen has been lifted or a new door has been opened and now you can see something that you previously overlooked. The same thing happens when you start learning how to notice your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and habits. What had seemed like intermittent or sparse events in the past become hard to ignore.

For example, Abby describes feeling “like once I started looking, everything seemed like it was a deceptive brain message or unhealthy habit. It was like an octopus with all of its tentacles tangled together. I could not make heads or tails of anything. It became very frustrating and depressing—it was almost paralyzing. I wasn't sure what was true and what was false.” To deal with this, she says, “I just assumed everything was a deceptive brain message and labeled my actions. When I was thinking, analyzing, feeling anxious, and so on, I noted it and moved on.” That was how she started the process until she was able to strengthen her Wise Advocate enough to help her sort out what was a deceptive brain message and what was based on her true interests and goals.

Sarah agrees, especially when you are dealing with panic attacks or depression. As she explains, “The whole thing—these thoughts, sensations, and habits—is a package. The body and the brain thing are going on all at once. The scared and terrified thoughts that you're having in your brain are very much tied up into the reaction your body is having. And which one is leading which is a little hard to tell. But it's all the same process: Relabel it, then you can move on.” When you do this, you pull your brain out of the endless loop of thoughts and can begin to make different choices. As Steve said, it's about putting a wedge between the deceptive brain messages and your responses—giving yourself time to fully evaluate what is happening with the Four Steps so you can act differently.

Steve's recommendation is to use an Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step

adage to help you out when the thoughts, impulses, or sensations feel like they are getting out of hand. As he explains, “Just like alcoholics learn to say, ‘Don’t take that first drink,’ I learned to say, ‘Don’t take that first thought’ because it spirals from there, gains a hold, and makes it difficult to stop and realize what your brain is doing.”

The sensations can also seem to get more uncomfortable when you do not give in to them. As Abby knows, you need to endure the distress “to get to the other side. Even when they are really bad,” she says, “you have to sit with the pain and distress, that’s what I learned with the Four Steps and it works.” When Steve tried to allow the uncomfortable cravings for alcohol to be there, but not drink, he would “just stay with it and tell myself it’s natural to have these cravings, my body has been getting them fulfilled for years. But that doesn’t mean I have to act on it. I can choose not to give in to those cravings or anxiety or whatever arises and place my attention somewhere else instead.”

If You Can’t Identify the Thoughts, Then Start with the Physical Sensations

Several of our patients told us it was hard in the beginning to be aware of their thoughts and pick out which ones were deceptive brain messages. To help them, we recommended they start by noticing their physical and emotional sensations because those tend to remain consistent. Over the years, we have found that deceptive brain messages tend to evoke the same physical and emotional sensations in any one person, such as always getting an upset stomach, having headaches, or feeling fatigued. For example, when Sarah experienced deceptive brain messages, she almost always experienced a “deenergizing depression” or panic-like symptoms. Liz, on the other hand, would wake up with “gut-wrenching anxiety” and Abby often had “brain fog.”

The point is that most people have a specific pattern of sensations they experience whenever their brains are telling them to do something that is not in accordance with their true self. Therefore, if you are having trouble identifying which thoughts are false messages at the beginning or your Wise Advocate is not yet strong enough to help you out, make an effort to identify those specific physical and emotional sensations you experience whenever something feels wrong. To remember them, write down your pattern of responses in the space

below.

When I experience deceptive brain messages, my specific pattern of physical and emotional sensations includes:

Being able to realize what those sensations are will be one of your biggest allies as you work with the Four Steps. Why? Often, you are not aware of what situations or people trigger your deceptive brain messages because you have been blind to them for some reason, just as with the white minivan example. When you let your physical sensations (and emotional ones, to some extent) guide you, you will identify more places where deceptive brain messages are present—places you never knew existed.

Kara agrees: “The hardest step is the Relabeling because you have to be able to see it in yourself before you can address it. Rather than try to parse out the thoughts, the sensations in my body are an obvious clue. I just have to notice them because when a deceptive brain message strikes, eventually it will be in my body.”

Dealing with Avoidance

In many ways, anxiety and cravings are easier to identify than avoidance because they cause you to *act* in some way in an attempt to relieve your distress or cause you to feel better momentarily. You can literally see when you are grabbing the bottle, heading to the fridge, or opening your Web browser. Similarly, if you engage in repetitive acts to decrease anxiety, you can more easily see them as well, or others can point them out to you. What makes avoidance much harder to identify is that you are now looking for the *absence of action*, which often is difficult to pick out.

How do you deal with this? Look at what you are giving up or what you are not doing because you are trying to avoid the uncomfortable sensations or negative thoughts. In fact, using the inventory you developed in chapter 2 of what things you are doing now (but wish you weren’t) and what things you wish you were doing (but are not) should help a lot. This is the most effective way

we've found to help people identify when they are avoiding important aspects of their lives. Making lists and checking them from time to time, or asking someone to remind you, is the best way to recognize when you are avoiding something.

Ed knows this all too well: His career was on hold for many years because he would not pick up a phone to call his agent or go to auditions. "One huge avoidance," he says, "was not putting myself out there where I might get rejected in the office of some casting person or agent. It was a big problem for me. I put all kinds of things off and said, 'Well, later. Later I can do that when I am feeling better or stronger.' The problem was, I kept waiting for a feeling that never came because I kept listening to those darn deceptive brain messages."

Wanting a specific feeling to come around or wishing that certain ones would go away is a common scenario we see. The problem with this approach is that emotional and physical sensations, like desire, change all the time—that's the nature of the brain and how it responds to the environment. This means that basing your actions on how you feel will result in lots of starts and stops, missed opportunities and frustration. This is why we repeatedly tell people, *with respect to deceptive brain messages, it's not what you think or feel, it's what you do that counts.*

Another problem we often see is people getting caught in the "if only" syndrome—*if only* I had a better place to live, a partner, a good job, more money . . . then I'd be happy. When people use this kind of reasoning, they put their lives on hold while they wait around for that unrealistic event to take place.²³ For example, Ed often thought to himself, "If only I can get the right agent to represent me, then my career will take off." Staying in this thought process—which was the result of a deceptive brain message—and waiting for his "feelings" to change only ensured that he would keep avoiding auditions indefinitely.

We will tackle the issue of how to deal with avoidance when we discuss Refocus in chapter 11. The point for now is to start becoming aware of the situations, events, and people you avoid and Relabeling them "avoidance" or another mental note that works for you. Once you are able to see what you avoid, you can start changing your behaviors.

If in Doubt, Ask Yourself: What Am I Doing and Why?

The goal of this chapter was to give you a good sense of what Relabeling is and how you can use mental notes to your advantage. As we mentioned before, the Relabel step was designed to help you increase your *awareness* of your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and habitual actions. Your goal is to be aware of the *process and actions* related to deceptive brain messages, such as thinking, remembering, planning, moving, and avoiding, not the *content*. In the next chapter, we will help you learn how to Reframe your deceptive brain messages and begin to see more clearly that they are false.

Although we have endeavored to make deceptive brain messages clear, we know that the process of deciding whether something is false or not is extremely difficult, especially when you are lost in thought or your brain is spinning. Therefore, if you are in doubt, we recommend you ask yourself this question: Why am I about to do X? If the answer is because that action is aligned with your true goals and interests, then it is a helpful action and you should proceed. However, if the answer includes some variation of “because I should” (or “should not,” in the case of avoidance), has any element of guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, or irrational fear, or is designed to alleviate distress coming from your Uh Oh Center, then you likely are dealing with a deceptive brain message and need to use Step 2: Reframe, along with the Wise Advocate, to determine what to do next.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE ACTING OR AVOIDING

1. Is this action I am about to do helping or hurting me?
2. Is it aligned with my true goals and values?
3. Am I avoiding something right now?
4. Am I about to go do something based on craving?
5. What is motivating me to do this?
6. Why am I about to do this?

Summary

- Mindfulness is an activity, not merely a state of mind, and must be practiced.
- Awareness and focus both are important aspects of mindfulness, but they are not synonymous.
- When dealing with deceptive brain messages, it's not how you think or what you feel that matters, it's what you do that counts—therefore, judge your actions, not your initial thoughts, impulses, desires, or sensations.
- Relabel means identifying your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and habitual actions as they arise in real time—call them what they are.
- It is easy to get lost in thought—use your increasing powers of awareness and mental notes to bring you back into the present moment.
- Learn your pattern of physical and emotional sensations and be on the lookout for them as a way to identify your deceptive brain messages and triggers.
- Don't be discouraged if the deceptive brain message or sensations become more apparent or overwhelming once you start Relabeling them—this is natural and to be expected.
- Don't wait around for a specific feeling or event to occur—start using the Four Steps now.
- When in doubt, make mental notes and ask yourself: What am I doing and why?

CHAPTER 9

Changing Your Relationship to Deceptive Brain Messages with Step 2: Reframe

For Liz, the sixty-five-year-old human rights activist, retiring was difficult and not what she imagined. Throughout her life, she had been a leader, traveling the world and making friends everywhere she went. As she explained to us, “I thought retirement would be grand and fun, but once I retired, I started worrying about my future.” Although she could rationalize away her repetitive thinking and worrying as “a normal part of the process of getting older,” she could not shake the gut-wrenching anxiety she woke up with every morning.

While it was upsetting to wake up this way, she assumed that focusing on her worrisome thoughts was appropriate and beneficial. “I actually thought I was helping myself,” she says, “that going through every scenario, trying to figure out every possible outcome would help me manage my future. If I knew what to expect and how to respond, I would never be caught off guard or make a mistake.” In fact, what had seemed like a productive use of her time was quite laborious and fruitless. Rather than helping, Liz’s constant focus on her worries caused her to see possible danger and solitude lurking around every corner, which only strengthened her Uh Oh Center’s alarm and fueled her fears further.

Once she saw that indulging the repetitive thoughts intensified her anxiety, Liz understood that worrying about her future was not helping her in the slightest. With time and the ability to Reframe these deceptive brain messages as *thinking errors* and the result of her bad brain wiring (not her!), Liz could understand *why* the thoughts, sensations, and urges were bothering her so much and began to *change* her relationship with these deceptive brain messages.

As she explains, with Step 2: Reframe, she finally could see that “the fiction in my brain was worse than whatever was actually going to happen. I was spinning my wheels and exhausting myself but I could not see it until I understood the errors my brain was making. Once I did, then I could stand up to the deceptive brain messages and say, ‘No! The truth is that I will be able to take

care of myself and that no matter what happens in my future, if I end up in a nursing home or not, alone or with lots of people around me, I can handle myself and find ways to make life meaningful.’”

What Liz so beautifully described is using Step 2 to learn how to see that the repetitive thought patterns were detrimental while simultaneously dispelling the notion that these thoughts must be true simply because they entered her consciousness. In other words, she began to embrace our adage *Don't believe everything you think!* In this chapter and the next, you will learn how to Reframe your experiences, just as Liz did, so that they no longer hold power over you or masquerade as the truth.

STEP 2: REFRAME

To 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!).

It Feels So Real, It Must Be a True Part of Me

Why did Liz have such trouble seeing that her deceptive brain messages and repetitive thinking were detrimental? Typically, this inability to identify the deceptive thoughts and repetitive thinking patterns as unhelpful or destructive occurs when they are tightly linked with your Self-Referencing Center. As you know, when the unhelpful aspects of the Self-Referencing Center are overactive, it inhibits or even blocks your ability to clearly see that the thoughts, desires, cravings, impulses, and urges are false and unhelpful. Instead, the deceptive brain messages seem like a part of you and absolutely true, especially when they appear to be linked to reasonable and presumably helpful actions, like repetitively “planning” (i.e., overanalyzing) your future. When you are in this mind-set, there appears to be no reason to change your behaviors or challenge the thoughts entering your head. As a result, you are stuck in the perpetual, highly deceptive belief that everything you think and feel is true. We refer to this scenario as the “*part of me*” mode because you are blinded from the truth with such brain-based falsehoods as “Why change a thing? Nothing is wrong and there are no problems here.”

In psychological terms, this inability to see that the unhelpful brain messages are deceptive and incorrect—to be in the “part of me” mind-set—is referred to as “ego-syntonic.” *Syntonic* comes from the Greek word *syntonos*, meaning attuned, and *ego* refers to the self. Therefore, when your sense of self is attuned with your thoughts, impulses, desires, cravings, and urges, you are operating in an ego-syntonic manner. When you are in this mode, you believe that the deceptive brain messages *are who you are and that they are correct or true*.

The opposite of this term, *ego-dystonic*, is derived from the Latin prefix *dys*, meaning “bad.” In this case, *dystonic* implies being badly attuned, poorly aligned, or not consistent with your sense of self. When you operate in this mode, you have some sense that the deceptive brain messages are not a part of you, even though they feel so strong and true. You can more easily see the deceptive brain messages as *false foreign invaders*.

FALSE FOREIGN INVADERS OR AN ACCURATE

DEPICTION OF YOU?

“Part of me” mode (ego-syntonic)—These thoughts, impulses, cravings, desires, urges, and sensations are real and true! They are a part of me and I’m good with that. They reflect how I see myself and are acceptable to me. There’s no reason to change what I am doing.

False foreign invader (ego-dystonic)—These thoughts, impulses, cravings, desires, urges, and sensations are uncomfortable and I do not like them. They are not part of me and they do not reflect how I see myself, but they *feel* real and true. I need to change something.

To get a sense of what it’s like to *realize* you are dealing with false foreign invaders and begin to change your relationship to them, let’s meet George, a forty-seven-year-old man with obsessive-compulsive traits who has recurring thoughts that if he does not check certain things at the right time, something bad will happen to someone he cares about. George’s deceptive thoughts and impulses started in college and became so bad that he had to drop out of classes for awhile. As he remembers, “I started getting these weird thoughts. I remember the first one: If I did not put something a certain way, someone in my family would die. It’s a pretty traumatic thought. I had never had it before and I thought, ‘Jeez, what’s going on here?’ This would continue and the sensations and anxiety would get pretty intense until I actually went ahead and moved the object the way [my brain was telling me] I was supposed to.”

Even at that early stage, George had some sense that the deceptive thoughts were false and inaccurate, but the sensations were so strong and overwhelming that he felt compelled to keep following the mandates of his deceptive brain messages. He knew there was no real correlation between his arranging objects or checking things repeatedly and his family’s safety, but he found the only way to get rid of the horrible sensations was to check or reposition things. It affected many aspects of his life, as he recalls: “When I went out of my bathroom, I had to check a couple times—the light, the heater, the fan—to make sure they were all off. Same thing with starting the car in the morning—I always have to check the lights (are they off or on?), make sure the brake’s off, just double-check on things like that because my brain kept telling me if I don’t do this, something bad will happen to someone. My brother might die.”

As George entered the workforce, the content of his thoughts changed slightly,

but the sensations remained just as strong. He had a growing sense that the deceptive brain messages were false and that the feared outcomes wouldn't come true, but he couldn't resist the impulses to check or arrange until he learned how to Relabel those deceptive brain messages with the Four Steps and see them as *false foreign invaders*. Having this insight and knowledge made it easier for him to start putting a wedge between his deceptive brain messages and automatically engaging in the unhealthy habits of checking and rearranging.

Once George became adept at using the Four Steps, Relabeling became relatively straightforward because the bizarre thoughts and unbearably uncomfortable sensations did not feel like a part of him anymore. He could rapidly Relabel them as false messages and Reframe them as part of his maladaptive brain wiring, as he explains in this example:

There's a drawer at work where I keep my pen. After I get the pen out and I shut the drawer, I have this recurring obsessive thought. It's that my brother is going to die. So when I would go to shut it, I would open and shut it again a couple times, if I am not catching myself. If I catch myself, then I Relabel it. I say to myself, "That's an obsessive thought," and I Reframe it as a *biological problem*, a *chemical imbalance*. [It's not me, it's just my brain!] Once I do that, it's not easy, but I'm able to shut the drawer and Refocus by continuing with my work so I don't go back and keep opening and shutting the drawer.

Moving from “Part of Me” Mode Toward Awareness and Truth

Compare George’s story to Sarah’s experience of feeling like her thoughts and feelings were a true and accurate part of her. Whenever Sarah would become depressed, her deceiving brain would tell her she was not deserving of love or affection. As the negative thoughts took over, Sarah would try to Relabel her depressive thoughts and urges to physically isolate herself, but she had trouble seeing that the deceptive brain messages were not true. The thoughts and sensations were overwhelming and took hold in a most tenacious manner. Instead of being able to see that these emotional and physical sensations—including negative ideas and feelings, headaches, body pains, and malaise—were the direct result of deceptive brain messages, she viewed them as a true representation of who she was. In her head, the negative body sensations and thoughts went hand in hand with how she saw herself, which prevented her from seeing them as false. As she explains, “The deceptive brain messages truly felt like they were part of me and what I deserved to experience because I was such a loser. Why would I challenge something that was me and what I thought I deserved? When you really think you’re worthless and that life is hopeless, you can’t see any other options or perspectives. I thought this was how life is and would be.”

For Sarah to start changing her perspective, she had to learn to recognize the signs of depression so that she could start seeing that those negative thoughts and sensations were part of a brain-based condition that was not representative of who she was. As she explains, “Once I learned what depression was, I could Relabel the tiredness, body aches, and negative thoughts *as depression* and not a part of me.” Sarah would then Reframe her symptoms in a variety of ways: “I could say to myself, ‘Okay, these feelings aren’t really me, this is some kind of problem with serotonin or who knows what in my brain.’ Or, I could say, ‘Oh, okay, so that’s why I’m feeling like I hate myself. That’s what depression is. Well, that’s what I’m feeling and you know what, that makes a lot of sense.’” Reframing her depression in these ways helped, she says, “because now at least I knew why I felt that way. Now I can see that it’s just the depression, not me.”

Similarly, when Steve could only see the people in his life as needy and alcohol as his friendly release, he was not able to Relabel those deceptive thoughts and uncomfortable sensations. As long as he continued to believe that

drinking was an effective way to manage stress and that the people in his life were helpless, he would not be able to address his addiction to alcohol or his avoidance of his family members. “I spent a lot of time believing those deceptive messages,” he says, “and it got me nowhere. I wasted time and missed out on all kinds of opportunities with my family. I wish I could have seen the negative thoughts sooner, but I am glad I can see them now.”

How can you start making distinctions between helpful, productive thoughts and behaviors and deceptive or unhealthy ones? Just like George, Sarah, Steve, and Liz, you start by acknowledging that there is a part of you that knows, at some level, that the deceptive brain messages you experience are false. The problem right now is that the good and true part of you—the healthy part—is not that strong or well defined. Although it wants to help you, you continually crush it down by minimizing or neglecting the truth. Said another way, you ignore the faulty logic of your brain and take the deceptive brain messages as proof of who you are and what you deserve. You live your life distanced from the truth and are stuck responding in unhealthy and unhelpful ways.

To change your relationship to those deceptive brain messages, you need to use Step 2: Reframe to help you separate the deceptive thought patterns and habits from your healthy thoughts and behaviors—those based on your true self. As you are able to do this, you will see how false and erroneous those deceptive brain messages truly are.

In this chapter and the next, we will teach you three fundamental ways of Reframing your deceptive brain messages: (a) by attributing them to your bad brain wiring or biology with the phrase “It’s not me, it’s just my brain!” (b) by realizing “I’m feeling rejected—this is social pain,” and (c) by recognizing the patterns of inaccurate thinking you engage in, known as thinking errors. These methods of Reframing will help you begin to view the deceptive brain messages as nothing more than faulty brain thinking or wiring. To begin, let’s look at the science that explains *why* deceptive brain messages associated with social situations feel so strong and overpowering and how Reframing can help.

Social Bonds Matter: The Science of Social Pain

Why is it that you feel pain whenever your needs are being neglected, ignored, dismissed, devalued, minimized, overindulged, or hyperfocused on? Researchers

at UCLA, led by Naomi Eisenberger, Ph.D., wanted answers to these kinds of questions, so they studied what happens in your brain when you are socially excluded. In one such experiment, they asked participants to play a virtual ball-tossing game with two other people while in a brain scanner. The participants were told that their goal was to keep passing the ball around to the other two players (who actually were computer simulations controlled by the researchers)—in essence, to adhere to basic social norms by politely sharing the ball with their counterparts. Unbeknownst to them, the goal of this experiment was to break that social contract and see what happened in the participants' brains. When the inevitable moment occurred and the two other “players” stopped throwing the ball to the person in the scanner, that person reported feeling excluded. In those moments, the person's Uh Oh Center started firing—thus indicating that social exclusion had “registered.”

What is most interesting about these findings is that the part of the Uh Oh Center that started firing is the *same area* that is activated whenever the body experiences the distressing aspects of physical pain. This means that *the same part of the brain that processes the emotions related to physical pains also deals similarly with social pains*—and it explains *why* the uncomfortable sensations associated with deceptive brain messages feel so strong and true: The Uh Oh Center intensely fires in both situations. In a very real way, your body experiences the pain of social distress in the same way as the pain of physical distress because the same area in the brain generates the feelings and sensations.

When you think about it, these findings make perfect sense from an emotional attachment and bonding point of view. For us to survive and thrive in the world, we need more than physical security. We need the 5 A's (Attention, Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Allowing) to enable us to feel safe, secure, and confident. Without that sense of social safety and acceptance, we feel threatened and alone, and this causes the Uh Oh Center to fire. In this way, social connectedness is as important to humans as physical safety because *social pain and exclusion can be as dangerous as physical pain* (especially when we are children). This is why our brains perceive it in the exact same way and our bodies feel it so intensely.

Taking Things Personally