

- You cannot control the initial thoughts or stop them from coming.
- You cannot block the physical or emotional sensations or stop them from arising.
- The more you pay attention to the deceptive thoughts and uncomfortable sensations (and try to make them go away—which is the primary way you inadvertently focus attention on them), the worse they get:
  - The frequency of the deceptive brain messages increases.
  - The intensity of the uncomfortable sensations increases.
- The more you engage in an unhealthy behavior, the stronger the brain circuits supporting that behavior become. This makes it much harder to break the habit once it forms.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- You can choose how you respond to a deceptive brain message or uncomfortable sensation.
- You can learn to change the meaning of deceptive brain messages and sensations.
- You can learn various techniques to manage your emotions and decrease the intensity of the sensations.
- You can focus your attention on what is important to you, not solely the messages coming from your brain.

Encouragingly, an explosion of scientific research in the past ten years substantiates what John did, how it changed his brain, and why our Four Step program works so well. We will discuss some of these findings in Part Two, when we explain the Four Steps and the skills needed to master them. For now, we simply want you to be familiar with these findings:

- Labeling an emotion (as in Step 1: Relabel) increases the activity of the Assessment Center and quiets the unhelpful aspects of the Self-Referencing Center and the Uh Oh Center's false alarm.
- Reframing a situation (as in Step 2: Reframe)—seeing it from another perspective or in a different context—activates the Assessment Center and further calms down the Uh Oh Center's false alarm.

- Mindfulness—using the Four Steps as you focus your attention on moment-to-moment experiences (staying focused on what is really happening right now, rather than focusing on the dialogue of the Self-Referencing Center)—activates the Assessment Center and the helpful aspects of the Self-Referencing Center.

We will begin Part Two, “The Skills,” with chapter 6, where we will explore where many of our most deeply held deceptive brain messages come from: our experiences in life and especially our childhood.

## Summary

- The Self-Referencing Center can be helpful or unhelpful, depending on how it is activated.
- The Assessment Center works with the Wise Advocate to take in and process all relevant information.
- The Assessment Center supports the Wise Advocate and acts as its executive arm.
- The Wise Advocate is a guide that helps you see the larger picture. It recruits your Assessment Center so that you can learn to dismiss the deceptive brain messages, not take things too personally, and ignore the false alarm coming from your Uh Oh Center.
- Together, the Wise Advocate and the Assessment Center empower you so that you can make decisions that are rational, in your best interest, and aligned with your true self.
- The Four Steps are scientifically grounded, rooted in mindfulness, and teach you how to:
  - Accurately identify your deceptive brain messages, sensations, and habits
  - Reframe the meanings of deceptive brain messages and the alarms coming from the Uh Oh Center
  - Focus your attention on healthy, constructive behaviors
  - Strengthen your Wise Advocate

- When you use the Four Steps on a consistent basis, you literally rewire your brain based on your actions: The brain circuits associated with unhealthy behaviors wither while the circuits supporting healthy habits are strengthened. This occurs as a result of Self-Directed Neuroplasticity, Hebb's law, and the quantum Zeno effect.

# **PART TWO**

## **The Skills**

# CHAPTER 6

## **Ignoring, Minimizing, and Neglecting**

### How Deceptive Brain Messages Distort Your View of Yourself

At the beginning of her work with the Four Steps, Sarah, the bright young public relations specialist, came to us in a very frustrated state and launched into a story about an interaction she had with her boss that she could not get out of her head. They had been working on an important press release and Sarah had done everything right. Her boss had told her the release looked amazing and that she had done a great job. He assured her that the client would be “quite happy” and then mentioned that next time she should try to get the job done earlier so that they did not have to scramble at the last minute to get everything done.

Devastated by his one corrective comment, Sarah felt “deflated,” like all the energy had drained from her body, and she could not hold the positive comments he made about her efforts in her mind. She had worked very hard and even stayed late the day before to make sure everything was done perfectly. Although she did not say anything to him, she knew the reason they were running around at the eleventh hour was that her boss kept making changes up to the very last minute. It wasn’t her fault the press release was going out so late; it was his inability to be clear about what he wanted in the first place that caused the delay.

Despite knowing this, Sarah kept doubting herself, running the events of the day through her head and wondering what she could have done differently. She blamed herself and felt horrible about her work. Rather than giving herself credit for what she did right and accepting that unpredictability can throw a wrench in the best-laid plans, she berated herself and said, sadly, “I felt like a loser yet again.”

When she finished, we asked Sarah why she didn’t thank her boss for the advice and realize that the reason the project was late was because of him. In other words, why did she take his comments so personally? She seemed startled

by this question, almost as if it was coming from left field. “But he’s my boss,” she replied. “I have to do whatever he asks in the way he asks for it. In fact, on the way over here, I realized I should have been able to figure out what he wanted or that I should have picked up on the clues better. Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention well enough; maybe he did tell me what he wanted and I just missed it. Either way, I was the problem—it must be my fault.”

When we pointed out to Sarah that her belief that she needed to be perfect was a deceptive brain message and that she was minimizing her abilities and contributions by wholeheartedly buying into his version of events, she became visibly upset. She said in all seriousness, “I know what my brain is doing, but what I really want to know is *why* do I overanalyze and overthink every interaction I have? Why can’t I just drop it and move on with my life?”

Throughout the years, many patients have asked us this same question: If the deceptive brain messages are false and not me, then where did they come from? Why are they there? All too often, people want to know: Are the deceptive brain messages and unhealthy habits the result of my biology, childhood, environment, bad luck, or something else?

Our response always begins in the same way: Humans are incredibly complicated beings and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Biology and environment interact in complex ways to shape how we think and what we do. That said, we tell people that most deceptive brain messages arise from our incredible ability to absorb information—how we learn and adapt in healthy *and* unhealthy ways—especially in childhood.

To Sarah, this intuitively made sense, but she still couldn’t help wondering where some of her most entrenched deceptive brain messages came from. She knew she often felt like a “loser,” especially when her boss corrected her, but believed she had a good childhood and that her parents were great. “No one yelled at me or beat me, they were around, we lived a comfortable life . . . what is there to complain about?” she asked. She had a good group of friends and did not remember having problems at school. She was active and engaged in life as a child, so “there was no reason I should think like this,” she said.

When we encouraged Sarah to pay attention to the negative comments in her head and put a name, voice, or face to them whenever they arose, a surprising thing happened. She started to remember an incident with her older brother when she was six years old. It was a hot summer day and the family had gone out to get ice cream. Sarah loved mint chocolate chip in a sugar cone and could not wait to have one—it was always a special treat. Once everyone had their ice cream, the family sat at a picnic bench and dug in. Unfortunately, Sarah dropped her cone on the ground by accident. She immediately became embarrassed when

her brother started laughing at her and mocking her. He loudly announced what she had done and told her she was a “useless, pathetic loser.” Not helping matters, her mother responded by telling Sarah that the consequence of not paying attention was that she would have to go without any ice cream that night. Perhaps, her mother mused aloud, this would be a lesson to Sarah that she needs to be more careful—otherwise, she will miss out on things in life and people will not trust her to be responsible or worthy of important tasks.

When Sarah was able to see how something that seemed so inconsequential actually had a significant impact on her, she could properly place her deceptive brain messages in context. With that insight, she was able to understand that the negative thoughts about being a loser likely stemmed from *repeated* seemingly insignificant interactions like those when she was a child and that her reactions to her boss emanated from the same place. Realizing that the way she was treated as a child was still affecting her helped her separate those deceptive and false messages of the past from who she really was—a bright, young professional who was absolutely capable and reliable.

## **We All Have Genuine Needs and True Emotions**

Why would inaccurate messages from the past leave such an impression on Sarah? How did she learn to incorporate these deceptive brain messages into her psyche and adopt them as markers of who she was? The answer, we told her, lies in the fact that we are powerfully shaped and affected by our sincere desire and need to connect with people on an emotional level. Especially as children, we want and need the important people in our lives—the ones who are caring for and protecting us—to genuinely hear, see, understand, and accept us. This is what makes us feel safe and allows us to explore our world from a secure position. This sense of safety and security is what also enables us to share our true emotions and needs as we travel through our lives.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Our first—and most important—bonding relationship was with our caregivers,<sup>[12](#)</sup> those people whom we relied upon to provide virtually everything to us when we could not provide it to ourselves, including comfort, safety, food, shelter, love, and affection. In essence, we sought them out for all of our fundamental physical *and* emotional needs and looked to them to provide us with an emotional safe zone, a place where we felt protected from the dangers of

the world. With this supportive environment in place, we could learn how to express our deepest true emotions and spend the majority of our time learning, growing, and exploring our environment in ways that allowed us to become independent adults capable of navigating the world in healthy, adaptive ways.

In addition to providing us the security to explore and grow (i.e., what children are supposed to be encouraged to do), our caregivers were our first models for how we should treat ourselves and the people around us. From them we learned how love is expressed, what we should and should not do, how we should think about and view ourselves, what we deserve in life, and so on. These messages are what we carry into adulthood and use to define our sense of self—our concept of who we are.

## **Safe Zones Help Us Process True Emotions Constructively**

That emotional safe zone in childhood was critical because it provided you with the necessary training ground to learn how to deal with your true emotions, such as anger, sadness, grief, fear, happiness, and anxiety, in a constructive, loving way. It is in this space that you would have been taught that allowing and expressing (rather than suppressing) your true needs and emotions was a caring, healthy act.

How would you have learned this? From how your caregivers treated you and others in your life (including themselves). If your caregivers were relatively emotionally available and responded to your needs and emotions most of the time, you felt soothed and safe, understood and loved. For example, if you cried when you fell and your mom<sup>13</sup> showed concern and caring for your scared, sad feelings while also not becoming overly dramatic, upset, or alarmed by the event, you would have walked away from that experience calm and comforted—and your Uh Oh Center would have been soothed by your mom's interest, love, caring, and affection.

This loving action by your mom would have taught you that your true needs and emotions were important and would have provided you with examples of how to choose healthy responses to soothe yourself when you are upset or dealing with difficulties. If you had many such experiences, you would have grown up firmly knowing that your true emotions, needs, and interests mattered and that it was safe and acceptable to express them with the important people in



your life. This ability to acknowledge your true emotions and needs—and to interact with people in genuine, honest, and loving ways—would have kept your Uh Oh Center relatively quiet most of the time, unless of course you were in real danger.

## **“GOOD ENOUGH” CARETAKING—THE 50 PERCENT MARK**

Our caregivers did not have to be perfect, but we did need them to respond to our needs, emotions, and interests in a genuine, interested way most of the time—or acknowledge and apologize for the times when they failed to meet our true needs.

Conversely, if our caregivers did not respond to our legitimate cries, overreacted whenever something happened, disregarded or minimized our true fears, smothered us, catastrophized about what might happen, used our needs to control us, or did not show interest in our activities, lives, or emotions, these actions would have led us and our brain to conclude that our genuine thoughts, emotions, interests, and feelings did not matter. It also would have signaled that we were not safe, which would have caused our Uh Oh Center to fire often. This repetitive firing of our Uh Oh Center would have led to chronic distress and anxiety that the brain would have tried to calm with unhealthy habits.

In short, we needed our caregivers to do their best, to be “good enough,” by responding to our needs, concerns, and fears with love, attention, and affection at least about 50 percent of the time. If they were able to do this, we felt safe, our Uh Oh Centers were calm most of the time, and we took away from our childhood healthy ways of coping and responding to stress. If they could not, we left childhood with many deceptive brain messages, a chronically firing Uh Oh Center, and many unhealthy ways of behaving and coping in the world.

## **Most Deceptive Brain Messages Are Learned**

What if the opposite happened when you fell? What if your mom, who was completely overwhelmed and stressed herself, became annoyed with your tears, told you to “suck it up,” dismissingly said it was “no big deal . . . stop being a crybaby,” or devalued, ignored, minimized, or neglected your genuine reaction in some way? What would your kid brain take away from that reaction if it happened once? Would you feel calm, safe, and soothed, or would you begin to equate expressing true emotions and needs with danger? How would you make sense of her reaction? What if this occurred many times throughout your childhood?

This is exactly what happened for Sarah. At key moments, when she needed people to understand and attune to her needs and emotions, she unfortunately received a very different message—that she would be loved and accepted only when she was “perfect” and did not bother anyone with her true emotions or needs. These repeated interactions left Sarah seeing herself as a “burden,” someone who was not worthy of unconditional love, acceptance, and affection.

If you are like Sarah and had many such interactions as a child, you would have become chronically anxious and concluded that the problem was somehow related to you, not the important caregivers in your life. Although Sarah’s mom and brother loved her and truly did want the best for her, they had their own limitations that Sarah’s growing brain simply could not incorporate into her thinking process. She could not see that their inability to be emotionally available, respond to her true needs adequately, or acknowledge or apologize when they had made a misstep had nothing to do with her.

Instead of being able to see that it was not her fault that she was not receiving the care, love, attention, affection, and interest she—and every child—deserved, she received the message that her true emotions and needs did not matter. Her directive in life, so her young brain thought, was to devalue or neglect her true emotions and needs, just as her caregivers did. This is how her deceptive brain messages were born and how Sarah learned to second-guess and demean herself whenever her needs and true emotions emerged or when she thought she was disappointing someone important to her, like her boss.

## **Habitually Ignoring, Minimizing, and Dismissing Your True Needs and Emotions Is Painful**

Another consequence of being chronically ignored, minimized, dismissed, neglected, and devalued, as Sarah knows all too well, is that it causes deep pain and sadness to develop. In response to such treatment and a perceived threat to her safety (i.e., that her caregiver might not be available to her), Sarah's young brain learned to suppress these hurt, sad, and angry feelings related to not having her true needs met. To deal with this dilemma and keep herself "safe," Sarah's brain learned to mask and replace those deeply painful feelings with deceptive brain messages, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and overthinking. This was ostensibly done to ensure that her caregivers did not abandon her.

Although the deceptive brain messages and unhealthy responses kept her from having to deal with that genuinely deep sadness and pain, they also caused her Uh Oh Center to fire often and resulted in her spending most of her time anxious, depressed, or filled with self-doubt. No matter the response, she was stuck, living under the thumb of deceptive brain messages, unable to approach life, and especially her true emotions and needs, from the loving, caring perspective of her Wise Advocate. Instead, she went through life assuming that she was the problem, unable to see herself as a person deserving of love, compassion, understanding, and caring, and firmly believing that her deceptive brain messages were true.

If you are like Sarah, this stifling and unhealthy approach to your true emotions and needs also was fueled and maintained by the deceptive brain messages you learned in childhood. Like everyone, you have a sincere need to be seen, heard, understood, and loved for who you are and you wanted to be able to connect with the important people in your life by being able to express your true emotions and needs to them. Unfortunately, the deceptive brain messages kept you from believing you were worthy of such genuine connections, which led to considerable pain, sadness, and grief that you continue to carry with you to this day.

This means that the more you squelch your true needs and emotions, the more the deceptive brain messages are fueled and the more entrenched they—and their associated responses of anxiety, depression, excessive anger, addictions, unhealthy habits, and miscommunication—will become. That is, unless you do something to change your perspective on those deceptive brain messages, allow your true self, emotions, and needs to arise, and begin to see yourself from the loving, caring view of your Wise Advocate.

## **Your Brain Was Sculpted by How You Learned to Deal with True Emotions and Needs**

In chapter 3, we taught you that the power is in the focus and that repeatedly focusing your attention is what stabilizes brain circuits so that they can wire together. This means that if your caregivers repeatedly focused their attention in loving, caring ways on your genuine needs and emotions, you would have learned to do the same thing. In that scenario, your brain would have learned that tending to and caring about yourself was a priority, which would have caused your brain to wire in ways that would allow you to automatically notice and value your true emotions, needs, and interests from a balanced and loving perspective.

Conversely, if your true needs and emotions were ignored, dismissed, or neglected often, you were given the covert message that you were a problem and that your emotional needs and reactions did not matter. In those cases, you would have learned that you should not tend to your own distress in a balanced way, but rather should either endure it or overvalue it,<sup>14</sup> since this is how your caregivers approached your genuine distress. In essence, you would have been taught that your emotions were either inconsequential or something to be hysterical about. Both of these approaches would have led to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and depression. What's worse, you would have learned that you were *supposed to* live with these sensations of anxiety or depression—that such uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations were *normal and to be expected*. From these lessons, you would have adopted the same unhealthy, maladaptive approaches to your distress (i.e., ignoring, minimizing, and dismissing it), which would have led to fear and insecurity, anxiety and depression, and an endless cycle of attempting to avoid pain and pursue pleasure.<sup>15</sup>

In Sarah's case those intermittent but significant missteps by the important people in her life taught her that she would miss out on opportunities down the road—and possibly be ridiculed for making honest mistakes. As that message took hold, somewhere in her brain, she vowed never to make mistakes again, which resulted in her developing chronic anxiety and the unhelpful habit of always trying to be perfect. Rather than adopting the perspective of her Wise Advocate and concluding that sometimes people will disagree with you, are disappointed in you, or act inappropriately (and it has nothing to do with you), Sarah took the emotional overreactions of her mother and brother literally—as

young brains will do—and she began a lifelong quest to never disappoint people or be made fun of again.

Although it was an unhealthy and unrealistic way of dealing with her distress in the long term, in Sarah's still growing and very literal brain, it made perfect sense. Moreover, there seemed to be evidence that it worked: The more often Sarah was "perfect," the more she was rewarded and accepted. The problem is that Sarah's perfectionism came at a steep price: Being perfect and overthinking situations became Sarah's way of calming and soothing her Uh Oh Center's alarm and dealing with life's stresses.

As you know from the cycle of deceptive brain messages, once her brain associated those actions with momentarily calming the Uh Oh Center, those unhelpful responses got wired into her brain as automatic habits. This meant that in the future her brain would automatically select those same responses (e.g., being "perfect") whenever a similar situation arose. To Sarah's brain, the repeated attention and focus on overanalyzing and monitoring her caregivers calmed her body on a short-term basis, but unfortunately reinforced the idea that these were responses that should be repeated and relied upon.

While this approach of striving to be perfect seemed adaptive when she was young and unable to independently care for herself, it often required Sarah to neglect her own true emotions and not to say what she needed or what she thought. Rather than learning to value herself (and her opinions) and use healthy methods to alleviate her distress, Sarah adopted her caregivers' approach to her, which included often minimizing her own true needs and emotions and viewing herself as a burden.

Sadly, this pattern of suppressing her true emotions and not saying how she felt with important people became Sarah's automatic response. Her brain learned to associate a feeling of danger and anxiety with any situations that were reminiscent of her interactions with her mom and brother or that left her feeling as though she was disappointing someone. This meant that any event or interaction that her brain perceived to be similar (even when it was not) triggered the same uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations inside her body and caused her to act in unhealthy ways, such as overanalyzing, assuming that she was a "loser," or trying to come up with ways to "fix" her behavior in the future.

As Sarah now realizes, this same scenario plays out to this day whenever her boss appears to disapprove of her or correct her actions. Her brain perceives the situation to be as emotionally and socially dangerous as things were when she was a child, which sparks a twinge of that old pain, followed by sharp spikes of anxiety. Her brain responds to that pain and anxiety in its same ways—it ignores, dismisses, and minimizes the pain and instead automatically acts in an unhealthy

way (e.g., overthinking or becoming instantly fatigued and exhausted) in an attempt to alleviate Sarah's distress in the short term.

In the end, these unhealthy coping strategies, based on her deceptive brain messages, caused her chronic distress and made her blind to the fact that she was creating more problems for herself, not fewer. As long as she bought into, and thus paid attention to, the deceptive brain messages—and ignored her true self—she would keep engaging in the same unhealthy patterns repetitively in a hardwired and habitual way. Sadly, as long as she remained unaware of the triggers or associations between her childhood distress and current life situations, nothing would change and her unhealthy strategy of trying to attain perfection would continue to cause problems in all of her relationships.

## **FOUR STEPS HELP YOU RECOGNIZE AND EMPHASIZE YOUR TRUE EMOTIONS**

As discussed above, deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations block you from accessing your true self or expressing your true emotions and needs. When this happens, you ignore, minimize, neglect, dismiss, or devalue your true self and experience uncomfortable sensations that can lead to unhelpful responses, including depression, chronic stress, anxiety, excessive anger, communication problems, stress eating, substance abuse, unhealthy habits, and more.

With the Four Steps, you learn how to break down the associations between unhealthy thoughts and habits so that your loving side, which is aligned with your true self and Wise Advocate, shines through and allows you to respond in beneficial, healthy ways.

## **Deceptive Brain Messages Get Stronger the More You Ignore, Deny, and Neglect Your True Self**

Clearly, habitually dismissing and devaluing your true emotions and needs causes your brain to adopt unhealthy responses and to strongly discount much of

the positive information about you that is coming in. As Sarah's story demonstrates, once your deceptive brain messages formed in childhood and took hold in your brain, you began to see yourself from a distorted perspective that did not reflect who you are or your goals and values in life. These inaccurate views of yourself and the desperate attempts to calm your Uh Oh Center caused you to act in ways that resulted in short-term relief but ultimately wired your brain in unhealthy ways. These strategies, while effective in the short run (such as Sarah overanalyzing important interactions to remain as "perfect" as possible), most often are likely to be detrimental in the long run.

## **What Triggers Your Deceptive Brain Messages?**

How do you begin to change these patterns and teach your brain new ways of seeing you and the world around you? By learning how to become aware of those deceptive brain messages and what triggers them. Only then can you choose to act differently.

To begin to make changes in your life, you need to be able to recognize when a deceptive brain message might get triggered. In chapter 1 you made a list of your deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and unhealthy habits. Go back and review them now. Then think of situations that might trigger those—or similar—deceptive brain messages.

To help get you started, we included some situations that triggered our patients' deceptive brain messages. For example, Ed and Sarah were often triggered by how people perceived and treated them, whereas Abby often was triggered by having to say no or when she stood her ground. Use these examples as a guide to figure out what situations trigger your deceptive brain messages. If you are having trouble, you can start by writing down your list of deceptive brain messages in the table below and then think about and specify what kinds of situations would cause those deceptive brain messages to arise.

Situation (e.g., Person, Place, Event)	Associated Deceptive Brain Messages
Someone is rude or insensitive, or acts entitled	You are not important or deserving of equal treatment.
Saying no to someone/asserting what is best for you	You are harming the other person. You are a bad person/a selfish person.
Communication gone awry/you <i>perceive</i> someone is hurt or upset by what you said	You are the problem. You must take care of others and make them the priority/put them first.
Someone gives you a compliment/you perceive someone likes you	You must do what they ask. You must sacrifice what you want/need to satisfy or please them.

Situation (e.g., Person, Place, Event)	Associated Deceptive Brain Messages

Now that you have identified situations associated with specific deceptive brain messages, add a person or event to that message, as Sarah did with the ice cream incident. Why is this important? It's not to make you feel like a victim or to place blame on anyone—in fact, this is the opposite of what we want you to do. The reality is that you will be destined to repeat what happened in childhood with the current people in your life if you cannot see how false and inaccurate those messages from childhood were. In essence, you will conflate your



reactions to people in your present life with the upsetting actions and messages of people who hurt or upset you in the past. This means that you will not be able to see the person in front of you for who he or she is. Rather, you will distort your perception of that person, much like Sarah did with her boss. You will not be basing your responses or actions on what is true, but on deceptive brain messages that were formed in your past.

For example, John's near-constant e-mail checking and focus on whether Alicia was going to leave him was based on a series of experiences he had as a boy. Growing up in a cash-strapped family, John watched as his parents took on second and sometimes third jobs to make ends meet. This meant they had little time for him and that he had to figure out ways to take care of himself. Although they loved him dearly and he seemed to be doing fine, he did not have an emotional safe zone and frequently felt lonely. To deal with his distress, John joined a soccer team and formed a positive relationship with his coach. As John explains, he was a star player on the team, which caught his coach's attention and garnered him praise and many accolades. He became the favorite, which was demonstrated by Coach regularly inviting him over to his house for dinner with his family. This made John feel special and led him to believe that he found a place where he truly belonged and was safe.

John excelled in school and on the soccer field until a new boy—who was a far better soccer player—moved into town. Immediately, the new boy took over John's exalted position on the team and in Coach's heart. John felt rejected, like he had lost his "home," and he became consumed with Coach. He wanted desperately to have his old life and sense of security back. The problem was that the only way he could get Coach's attention or affection was to do things *for* Coach. So John started managing the team, picking up Coach's dry cleaning, bringing him his favorite foods, and so on. Whenever he did, Coach praised him and things felt right in John's world. He was calm and relaxed in those moments and could focus on school, soccer, or something else of his choosing.

However, those moments of reprieve never lasted long because John's influence on Coach was only as good as his last effort or act. From these experiences, John's brain concluded that he had to continually monitor what Coach wanted or needed—that was how he felt safe and avoided anxiety. Although he did not realize it, John became preoccupied with Coach and his brain took away from these interactions that to receive attention and approval from Coach, John had to give up his life, focus on Coach, and do whatever he could to make Coach happy. This is how John's deceptive brain message that he must care for others at all costs was born.

Sound familiar? This is exactly how John describes acting with Alicia, only

Alicia does not want John to act this way and wishes he would take better care of himself. The truth—that she supports and loves him as he is—is completely lost on John, because he can only see Alicia through the eyes of his deceptive brain messages. In his brain, if he does not cater to her at all times and focus solely on her, she will leave him—and no facts or words will be able to shake that message until he can clearly understand that these damaging messages are not true.

Knowing that his preoccupation with the important people in his life came from a place in the distant past—his coach—helped John see why he acted the way he did with Alicia and others he was emotionally close to. Even more significantly, seeing that deceptive brain messages were ruining his life—and that there was another way—helped him vow to use the Four Steps to make important changes.

Similarly, Ed realized that his deceptive brain message telling him he was of no value came from how his mother acted toward him when he was a child. “She never treated me like I was important, unless I did something that made her look good—and the bar was high,” he said. For example, excelling artistically meant nothing to her, only his academic grades did. As he remembers, “Unless they were A pluses across the board, she would reprimand me and ask why I had not done better.” She never accepted Ed or praised him for his artistic accomplishments, no matter how many parents remarked at how talented Ed was or how they wished they had a son like him. “Nothing was ever good enough to her,” he sadly recalled, “which left me perpetually feeling like a second-class citizen.”

As soon as Ed accepted and internalized that message from his mother—the one telling him he had no inherent value—one of his most deceptive and devastating brain messages was formed. This message plagued him and caused him to avoid many things in life, including auditions and asking women out on dates. He lived a limited life because, at some level, he kept believing that he had no value. That is, until he was able to see, as he explains it, “that this was my mom’s message, not mine. This is not who I am.” Once he realized that for all these years he had been under the thumb of her deceptive message—one that he had incorporated into his sense of self—he felt significant grief for the lost time, but he also experienced incredible relief. Seeing the truth, he was liberated and no longer believed that he was mandated to follow his brain’s erroneous messages. He was able to start “putting myself out there,” as he thinks of it, and create a new life for himself.

Take a moment to review your deceptive brain messages and assign a person or persons to those messages. If you have trouble coming up with messages or assigning a source to them, try to recall situations in your life where your needs

and emotions were ignored or where you could not express how you felt to the people who mattered most to you. Also try to think about times when you were dismissed, neglected, or devalued in some way—when you were not accepted for who you were.

Deceptive Brain Message	Original Source of the Message	Current People Who Unknowingly Stir Up That Message
You have no value or worth.	Ed's mom	Anyone who treats Ed poorly or with disrespect
You are the problem.	Sarah's brother (and parents)	Anyone who gets upset with Sarah or questions her
You need to put me first.	John's coach	Alicia and anyone John sincerely cares about and is afraid of losing

Keep these original sources of your deceptive brain messages in mind as you begin your work with the Four Steps. While it is absolutely not necessary to attribute each deceptive brain message to a specific person or pattern of events, doing so helps you see that *you were not the source of these initial negative thoughts* and helps you create a separation between your true self and the inaccurate, false messages coming from your brain. By seeing them for what they are—false messages that your child brain took as literal and real—you will be able to start countering them whenever they arise.

## **The Antidote to Minimizing and Neglecting Healthy Needs: The 5 A's**

From their stories, what seems clear is that Sarah, Ed, and John learned to minimize and neglect their healthy needs as children. As they incorporated unhealthy coping strategies into their lives, they lost touch with their meaningful goals and values and put themselves and their genuine interests and emotions on the back burner indefinitely.

What they needed to learn instead—and still hadn't in their adult years—was that they should be valued and loved for who they are. How could they develop those beliefs now and what would that look like?

The antidote to those deceptive brain messages, they learned, was using the Four Steps to truly see that those negative brain messages were absolutely false. In truth, they were good people who strove for what we all want—to be loved, valued, and appreciated for who we are and to form healthy, wholesome relationships with other people. Psychologist and mindfulness expert David Richo, Ph.D., has focused on how these healthy connections are formed and what is needed to keep them alive. He describes the “5 A's” as the qualities and gifts we all naturally seek out from the important people in our lives, including family, friends, and especially partners. What are these 5 A's?

- *Attention*—genuine interest in you, what you like and dislike, what inspires and motivates you without being overbearing or intrusive. You experience being heard and noticed.
- *Acceptance*—genuinely embracing your interests, desires, activities, and preferences as they are without trying to alter or change them in any way.
- *Affection*—physical comforting as well as compassion.
- *Appreciation*—encouragement and gratitude for who you are, as you are.
- *Allowing*—it is safe to be yourself and express all that you feel, even if it is not entirely polite or socially acceptable.

What Richo is describing, in essence, are those genuine needs we have that form the basis of secure, healthy relationships. The 5 A's are what we all should

have received most of the time from our caregivers when we were growing up. They are also what we want in our adult relationships today. In his book *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*, Richo compares and contrasts the 5 A's with what happens in unhealthy or unequal relationships. We have expanded his examples to emphasize the fact that the 5 A's are what we needed when we were young to form secure bonds and that what we received instead was often the antithesis of the 5 A's, which are all forms of minimizing or devaluing you and your healthy needs.

The 5 A's: What You Deserved to Receive, but Likely Didn't	Opposite of the 5 A's— What You Likely Experienced
Attention	You were ignored or not listened to; caregivers were unavailable or not willing to hear/see the truth.
Acceptance	You were shamed or otherwise made to believe that you had to conform to what they wanted you to be—you were not loved for who you are or want to be.
Affection	They put themselves first or were abusive; they withheld love and/or comforting gestures.
Appreciation	You were criticized.
Allowing	They controlled or manipulated you; they were demanding.

Adapted from David Richo, *How to Be an Adult in Relationships: The Five Keys to Mindful Loving* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), pp. 1, 26-40, 50, 65.

Obviously, Richo's work points out that most people have been lacking the 5 A's in some way in their lives. Most important, Richo emphasizes that you should only expect to have approximately 25 percent of your needs met by any one other person, especially in romantic relationships. Therefore, *the goal in life is not to seek out validation or acceptance from others, but to cultivate your sense of worth and value from within*—to learn how to provide yourself with the 5 A's most of the time. In fact, dealing with obstacles and learning how to respond constructively to problems and setbacks (i.e., healthy emotion management) allows you to grow and learn healthy ways of caring for yourself. It teaches you how to take a balanced approach to life in which you do not act entitled, but you do not deprive yourself, either. Rather, you keep an open

attitude toward what life brings your way and are able to deal with it. In doing so, you develop deepening insight into yourself and the world around you.

It's no easy task to accomplish this, especially when you've spent most of your life agreeing with the content of your deceptive brain messages. This is why it's so important to use the 5 A's as a guide to remind yourself of what you deserve from the people in your life (and from yourself). The more you allow yourself to believe that you can care for yourself in healthy ways, the easier it will be to dismiss the deceptive brain messages and follow the Four Steps. We will discuss ways to incorporate a version of the 5 A's with gratitude lists in chapter 11, but for now start noticing which of the 5 A's are missing in your life and how you can start providing them to yourself. Doing this will help you reevaluate the content and veracity of your deceptive brain messages so that you can rewire your brain in healthy, adaptive ways.

In the next chapter, we will provide you with many tips and recommendations our patients found helpful as they started using the Four Steps. With this background, you will then learn what each of the Four Steps is and how you can apply them to your particular deceptive brain messages.

# CHAPTER 7

## Moving Forward with the Four Steps

### Tips and Recommendations

With a solid understanding of how deceptive brain messages are generated, both biologically and through events in your childhood, you are now ready to start learning the Four Steps. To help you prepare for your journey, we have filled this chapter with tips and recommendations based on the collective wisdom and experiences of our patients. They have gone through the program and know many of the obstacles you may face, especially in learning mindfulness and staying with the uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations whenever they arise.

Let's begin with a quotation from mindfulness expert and teacher Bhante Henepola Gunaratana. It beautifully encapsulates what deceptive brain messages are, what they do to you, and how they keep you from following the path of your true self:

We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those [thoughts] for reality. We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness. We spend all our energies trying to make ourselves feel better, trying to bury our fears, endlessly seeking security.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

To phrase it another way: We spend a considerable amount of our time engrossed in following deceptive brain messages until we begin to see them for

what they are and value our true emotions and needs.

## **Learning to See How Harmful Your Deceptive Brain Messages Can Be**

The biggest challenge you will face as you start using the Four Steps is in believing that you are worth the time and effort required to challenge the deceptive brain messages and not give in to their commands. This is why we spent so much time teaching you about how your brain automatically ignores, minimizes, dismisses, neglects, and devalues your true needs and emotions and why we taught you about the 5 A's. Up to now, that healthy side of you—the part that believes you are worthy and a good person—has been relatively dormant or severely suppressed by the deceptive brain messages. That's why you have not been able to change your perspective of yourself or your actions: The unhealthy parts of your brain have been in charge.

Many times our patients have asked us, “Well, if the healthy side is what I want to recruit, can't I just think positive and everything will be okay?” Unfortunately, the answer to that question is no, but not for the reasons you might be thinking. The truth is if you really *believed* in those positive parts of you—that you were worth the time and effort—you *could* simply “think positively” and make changes relatively easily. The problem is that you believe more strongly in the deceptive brain messages than you do in your positive qualities. This is because your sense of self is so tightly fused with the deceptive brain messages and it explains why your habits are so hard to break.

That's one of the main reasons we developed the Four Steps: to help you break that unhealthy allegiance to the deceptive brain messages. In fact, once you can see how *false* and destructive the deceptive brain messages are, you naturally will believe more strongly in yourself and your right to follow your true goals and values in life. You will take a firm stand against those false messages and make an enduring commitment to your true self.

Our patients began to change their perspective and believe what their Wise Advocate was telling them by using the Four Steps to increase their awareness of the deceptive brain messages. As they learned how to use the Four Steps, they were able to witness how often the deceptive brain messages surfaced and how much time, effort, and energy they were expending to follow those false



messages. The experience of learning how to Relabel, Reframe, Refocus, and Revalue was eye-opening for them because it allowed them to see that their time could be better spent on other pursuits and in healthier ways. Let's turn to their stories now and hear how they took the first step to change their perspective on the deceptive brain messages.

Abby, who avoids confrontation at home and has trouble making decisions, was constantly worrying about her family and questioning herself. "Literally, it took hours of each day out of my life," she laments. "It was exhausting, but I didn't know any other way of being." As she recalls, "I finally realized that it takes so much effort to think things through over and over—it takes so much time and causes so much pain." And it led to no positive results or forward progress. Instead, giving in to her deceptive brain messages only fueled them. "I realized the deceptive brain messages stay alive inside of me because I give in to the habits, the repetitive thoughts, and the 'what-ifs.' I told myself, if I give in, I am feeding into this monster inside of me. I'm making it stronger each time I do it and making myself weaker." Conceptualizing the deceptive brain messages as a monster—as something that was trying to thwart her and take her away from her true self—is what finally inspired Abby to start making changes. With her resolve to use the Four Steps daily, she was able to "choose to use my energy to do something productive and healthy."

Similarly, John realized that his constant e-mail checking and worrying about Alicia's whereabouts were draining him and taking him away from work, his interests, and a real life. "It used to be terrifying to think of getting rid of the symptoms. This is how I've always lived." With time, he became frustrated by how the thoughts and checking were taking over. Despite that justifiable and healthy annoyance with the deceptive brain messages, he just couldn't muster up the effort to change. Deep down, he wanted to act differently and have quality interactions with Alicia, but he felt considerable resistance. His deceptive brain messages were making him doubt himself and believe that he had to continue his unhelpful behaviors, such as checking e-mail and putting Alicia first, to receive love. "It's kind of scary to do things differently," he said, "but I was so tired of the same behaviors resulting in the same results." Once he saw the choice—to be overrun by deceptive brain messages or take a stand against them for a healthier life—he made a commitment to himself to use the Four Steps every day.

In addition to being exhausting, living under the domination of deceptive brain messages causes you to lose out on other opportunities and time, as Steve realized when he began to look at what his drinking was doing to his life. "I had this moment," he recalls, "where I said, 'Okay, I am willing to change, I cannot live this way anymore.' The deceptive brain messages and drinking were running