

my life. I was depressed because I wasn't manifesting anything I wanted in my life. I wasn't moving forward and saw everyone else as a problem. I was jumping from one thought to another." His relationship with his wife was on the rocks and his daughters were angry with him. It took a terrible toll on him, as he describes, "The drinking and deceptive brain messages really tried to uproot my relationships. I can never get that time back, but I can change how I act moving forward." Remembering what happens when he drinks or ignores his true feelings helps Steve continue forward with the Four Steps whenever he is tired or wants to give up.

Ed had a similar realization to Steve's. He, too, avoided important things, such as auditions and interacting with anyone he thought might reject him (e.g., a potential employer or date). As he recalls, "I would avoid doing a lot of different things. In other words, when the deceptive brain messages became very intense, I became very afraid, almost paralyzed. I remember times when I wouldn't even want to come out of the house because I knew I would be running into all these things in a minute's time that would cause me anxiety. It only takes a second to get triggered." So he would avoid people, places, and opportunities in a desperate attempt to ensure that his Uh Oh Center did not fire and that he would remain calm. Over time, these unhealthy habits got hardwired into his brain.

This avoidant behavior came at the steep price of loneliness and lost opportunities until Ed began to realize just how limited his life had become. Somewhere along the way, he says, "I made the decision not to dwell in it, not to fall for the trick. If I were to obey the deceptive brain messages, then I would really be sad and I would really be down. I told myself I can't afford to do that." He realized that he had the ability to help himself by not letting the deceptive brain messages take over. As he explains, "I just started to look at reality in the way that it is. I have the control to let me down or not." Seeing that he had this power helped Ed persevere and overcome his unhealthy habits.

This idea of having the power to make choices was critical to many of our patients, especially Abby who often was plagued by indecision. As she struggled with overthinking and repetitive worrying, she came to this conclusion: "I want to make choices in life and be able to live with those choices. Accept that I made choices. Refusing to make choices is making a choice. And, if I don't make any choices in life, I will let the monster win." Although it was initially scary to do so, Abby now makes decisions quickly and does not waste time second-guessing herself, thanks to her work with the Four Steps.

Learning to see clearly the damaging effects of following deceptive brain messages was crucial in our patients' evolutions. When they finally saw what their deceptive brain messages were doing to them, they were able to make a

commitment to themselves and to put forth a sustained effort to use the Four Steps every day. This commitment was based on their sincere striving to be free from the negative effects of these deceptive brain messages and a burgeoning belief that they were the people their Wise Advocate told them they were.

THE TOLL OF DECEPTIVE BRAIN MESSAGES

Whenever our patients were in doubt or felt defeated by their deceptive brain messages, they would remind themselves of the true facts about deceptive brain messages. Armed with this knowledge, they could strengthen their resolve to see the deceptive brain messages for what they were, dismiss their faulty logic, and instead act in healthy ways on their behalf. Some of those insights are listed below. When you're feeling tired or want to give in, remind yourself that deceptive brain messages can:

- Suck up your time
- Take over your life
- Exhaust you
- Cause you to lose time or other opportunities
- Restrict your life and activities
- Cause you to avoid people, places, or events you enjoy
- Cause discord in your relationships
- Make you miss out on important relationships
- Obscure your reality so that you think the negative messages are true
- Keep you from following the path of your true self
- Keep you trapped and serving others
- Cause you to indulge cravings/urges/desires that lead to unhealthy habits

Assessing the Impact of Deceptive Brain Messages on Your Life

In chapter 2, you defined your meaningful goals and made a list of the things

you currently are avoiding (but want to do) and the things you do not want to do (but are). Your next step is to do what our patients did—clearly see how deceptive brain messages and their associated unhealthy habits are hurting you. What happens to you when you follow your brain’s false messages? Take a few moments to think of opportunities you’ve missed, people/places/events you’ve avoided, relationships that have been negatively impacted, and other consequences of paying allegiance to deceptive brain messages. Write them down below. We’ve included a few examples from our patients to help you get started.

Deceptive Brain Messages Tell Me X, So I think . . .	This Makes Me Miss Out on . . .
That she is leaving, so I look for reassurance, including overchecking e-mail	Getting my work done, hanging out with my friends, exercising
Everyone else is right, so I repeatedly analyze conversations with people and try to guess how I should act/what I should do	Actually living in the moment and having a conversation with the person in front of me. I am not enjoying it—I am in my head the whole time!
I am not worthy of love—I likely will be rejected, so I do not ask women out on dates or go to auditions	Opportunities to meet new people, network, build my career

Deceptive Brain Messages Tell Me X, So I Think . . .	This Makes Me Miss Out on . . .
That everyone is needy and pathetic, so I get annoyed and drink to escape	Spending time with my family, seeing the positive parts of the people in my life and that they are capable, taking care of myself properly without using drugs or alcohol
That nobody cares about me, so I become exhausted and hide from the world	Going out with friends (dinners, parties), going hiking, being social, feeling connected
That he doesn't care about me or my feelings, so I start fights and argue with him even though I want him to care	Discord in our friendship—not the supportive and loving relationship I want with him

With this awareness of how deceptive brain messages impact you and your life, you're ready to move forward. The only thing left to do is think of ways to empower and inspire yourself when the deceptive brain messages strike. As you saw above, our patients took the first step when they decided that *no matter how true the deceptive brain messages felt, they were false*. The truth, they realized, is that they were worth the time, effort, and investment—and so are you.

You will learn more about their journeys and how to use the Four Steps to your advantage in the pages that follow. To help you along the way, our patients shared these catchphrases they used that inspired or motivated them when they were feeling down or defeated. Use one of theirs or come up with some of your

own.

- Only I have the power to let myself down.¹⁷
- I don't have unlimited time to flail around in the universe.
- I don't really want to give up ever . . . if I give up, what else do I have?
- Reality is better than the fiction in my head.
- I'd rather feel the uncomfortable sensations for a while (by not giving in to the false messages) and have my sanity.
- What am I doing today to improve my life?
- These thoughts and sensations are not real—do not give in to them.
- Do not feed the monster.
- Remember what it is like to give in—you lose time, energy, and relationships.
- With respect to deceptive brain messages, it's not what you think or feel, it's what you do that counts.¹⁸
- These deceptive brain messages have no power—they are false.

EXERCISE: Write down what you will say to inspire and motivate you to keep going when you feel like giving up or believe the deceptive brain messages are true:

THE FOUR STEPS

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

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

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

and bothering you.

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

Tips for Beginning Your Journey with the Four Steps

Through their work with the Four Steps, our patients made many pivotal insights—ones we think are important to share with you. The first and most critical is that the thoughts and sensations are overwhelming and difficult to confront, especially at the beginning. What our patients stress over and over is that living with the uncertainty—the doubt of whether following the Four Steps will help you—and refusing to act in your previous ways is scary, but not a reason to quit or give up hope. Here are their tips, insights, and words of encouragement as you start using the Four Steps.

ALLOW THE SENSATIONS TO BE PRESENT, BUT DO NOT ACT ON THEM

This is probably the hardest thing to do when you start using the Four Steps. When you refuse to give in to the content of your deceptive brain messages by not performing the action your brain is telling you to do, your Uh Oh Center fires even more intensely, which makes you feel extremely uncomfortable. You want to do virtually anything to get rid of those sensations, both physical and emotional, and know that simply following your deceptive brain messages will accomplish that task in the short term. The problem, as we all must learn the hard way over time, is that doing so will only fuel the negative messages and further entrench the maladaptive circuits ever more powerfully into your brain. Said another way, short-term relief rapidly causes more pain and suffering, not less.

Although it was difficult to live with the uncertainty of whether or not following the Four Steps would help her, Abby vowed to allow the emotional

and physical sensations associated with deceptive brain messages to be present but *not to act on them*. Doing so was difficult. As she remembers, “It was intense and painful when I did not give in. I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin at times. But I sat with it and did not act on those false sensations.” Abby knew there was no other way. She says she “had to endure the pain of these uncomfortable sensations to get to the other side.” What she saw with time was that she *did* improve. “The relief comes in small packages,” she says. “It doesn’t happen all at once. It’s not a light switch. It happens gradually over time—you may not even notice all of the changes until much later when you reflect back, but it does happen.”

Similarly, Steve explains the way his deceptive brain messages assailed him: “It’s a sensation that is very bad and you really want to get rid of it—that’s why you do those [unhealthy actions] again and again. It’s an unending cycle. So, the first thing would be to live with the uncertainty, the fear, and the pain that the deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations leave you with.” Rather than fighting them or denying their existence, he recommends that you “stay with the intense feelings until you are able to look at them more objectively, from another perspective—then the deceptive brain messages and sensations are less damaging or upsetting.”

We will talk more about how to deal with the uncomfortable sensations in the next chapter, where we discuss Step 1: Relabel.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

A key to success, all of our patients agree, is wholesome *repetition*—literally just continuing to complete the Four Steps over and over while not acting on the deceptive brain messages. Over time, it becomes second nature because the “habit” of turning to the Four Steps to effectively deal with erroneous messages becomes ingrained in your brain. In essence, using the Four Steps to deal with stress or upsetting situations *becomes* your new, healthy response and replaces the unhealthy habits you have been using.

Kara agrees: “Practice makes perfect. Just follow the steps, follow the four R’s, and you will notice results. It worked for me—you notice some kind of result pretty much right away. Once you’ve done your first Refocus, there’s a sense of achievement, and if you just keep at it, it will become gradually easier. Be patient—feeling like you’ve had a success spurs you on to keep going.”

Although it seems straightforward, Steve makes this important point: “I think a lot of people think the Four Steps are simplistic—they think, ‘Hey, if I just do

these four things, I'll be cured.' It's effective and it's a great treatment, but it's not easy. It takes practice." Steve likens the Four Steps to the Twelve Steps in Alcoholics Anonymous. "You have to keep going through them, working them. It's a continuous program. You're going to have to apply and work through the Four Steps over and over." As you do this, he says, "you can apply the Four Steps to many situations. The more you do it, the better and better you'll get at it. To think it's going to be easy and that you're magically going to be able to do it without putting in the work is setting yourself up for failure and disappointment because it's challenging." That said, he encourages people to make the commitment to themselves and the Four Steps: "The more I just opened myself up and tried it, I saw that it worked."

JOURNAL YOUR SUCCESSES

To help you realize you truly are making progress, Steve gives this advice to people who are new to the Four Steps: "Write down the successes that you have early on because it encourages you to keep going. It's not always easy, but over the long haul, it does make a big difference and you will see how much progress you've made." The main point to keep in mind is that you want to focus on the things you have accomplished, no matter how small or inconsequential they seem to you. Do not minimize, ignore, or neglect even the most seemingly minuscule achievement. Rather, use the 5 A's and celebrate your successes.

DO NOT TACKLE ALL DECEPTIVE BRAIN MESSAGES OR HABITS AT ONCE

One point Kara often makes is that you should not try to be a "superhero" and take on too many changes at once. "It can be overwhelming and make you feel like you are failing, even when you are making progress." Abby agrees with this and says she found great comfort and relief in knowing that she did not have to change all of her habits at once or go cold turkey. Knowing that she could, for a while, keep going with some of her habits, as long as she did so mindfully, helped. As she explains, "It's way too much pressure if you think you have to change everything at the same time. Telling me I could keep doing some of the behaviors was almost like a relief." She offers this advice if you maintain a few of your habits at first: "You have to do it mindfully. If you're engaging in an unhealthy habit, the least you can do is tell yourself you are doing it and admit to

yourself, ‘That’s what I am doing.’ That’s helped me a lot.” This is using Step 1: Relabel to its fullest, meaning that you’re mindful and aware of your actions all the time—something we will discuss in depth in the next chapter.

FOCUS ON PAYING ATTENTION

When Ed started working with the Four Steps, he says one of the biggest difficulties he faced was learning how to pay attention. As he explains, “At [the beginning], the deceptive brain messages are very strong and dominate a lot of your attention. It’s very real to you.” He and most of our patients recommend simply beginning the journey by learning how to pay attention to your deceptive thoughts, impulses, sensations, and actions—and to Relabel them as such. At the same time, they strongly suggest that you be gentle with yourself and not beat yourself up for any thought or desire that runs through your brain. As Sarah knows all too well, “You have so much shame for having these symptoms. It’s important to be kind toward yourself. It’s about moving forward. It’s about forgiving yourself and knowing that you are a good person despite whatever your brain is throwing at you.”

DON’T PROCRASTINATE! IT’S WHAT YOU *DO* THAT COUNTS

A problem that many of our patients face is using procrastination as a way to avoid using the Four Steps. For example, their brains come up with reasons *not* to follow the Four Steps, such as being too busy or too tired. Alternatively, their brains flood them with the distracting thoughts that they aimlessly follow. Similarly, many people’s deceptive brain messages tell them they have to do the Four Steps *perfectly* or not do them at all. This is a cardinal example of the “perfect” being the enemy, even the assassin, of the good. All you really want is to put forth a *serious effort* to use the Four Steps every day. You are never trying to achieve perfection; rather, a serious effort not to act on the negative messages truly is good enough.

Remember, you cannot control the initial thoughts that come into your head or the uncomfortable sensations you experience. That’s why we strongly emphasize and repeat as often as possible: *When dealing with deceptive brain messages, it’s not what you think or feel that matters, it’s what you DO that counts!* As Abby explains, “You just can’t control them and there’s no use in trying—it’s like a hamster on its wheel . . . you go nowhere.” Ed agrees and often tells people,

“Just do the darn thing! Don’t focus on the negative consequences your brain is trying to tell you [are inevitable]. Those messages are false and must be discredited whenever they arise.”

While it sounds easy enough, John acknowledges that it’s hard work and that inertia and habit can be big obstacles. He found that when he started to use the Four Steps, his brain would come up with some other thing that he had to do *before* he did the Four Steps. “I would follow the deceptive thoughts wherever they wanted to take me. I was so caught up in how I felt [i.e., the emotional and physical sensations] that I could not see anything else. I had to just assume for a while that *everything* that made me feel uneasy or question myself was a deceptive brain message.” When he did this, he was able to “take a breath and think for a minute.” This space between the thought/urge/impulse/uncomfortable sensation and action allowed John to consult his Wise Advocate to make informed decisions based on his true goals in life.

Of course, as we mentioned before, when you are dealing with your true emotions, goals, and interests, your thoughts, feelings, and actions *all* matter. It’s only when you are dealing with deceptive brain messages that your false, unhelpful thoughts and feelings—which are not representative of you or how you want to be in the world—do not matter.

WHEN IN DOUBT, USE RATIONAL FAITH

Another tip all our patients agreed on is this: A key to overcoming deceptive brain messages is to use the Four Steps even when you experience considerable doubt and to believe that you will get better the more you use the Four Steps. With this ability to believe in yourself and to persevere when you are feeling overwhelmed, you will be using rational faith:

RATIONAL FAITH

Believing in what you know to be true when doubt enters your mind.

Rational faith helped many of our patients keep moving forward when their deceptive brain messages made them feel like they were about to do the wrong thing. As Abby explains, “*Don’t have blind faith, have rational faith.*” The

difference between them is this: Blind faith gives the power (and credit) for making changes in your life to some other entity, not the real you. Rational faith, in contrast, encourages you to believe that by trusting in the process, focusing on your true goals, and expending effort by following the Four Steps, you will achieve positive results that get you closer to those true goals.

Steve agrees that rational faith is important, especially at the beginning of using the Four Steps when the deceptive thoughts, impulses, cravings, and uncomfortable sensations are the strongest. When he started using the Four Steps, he recalls, “it was hard for me to believe that just by following the Four Steps I could get another perspective and not believe the deceptive brain messages as strongly.” He describes it as being “like a leap of faith” because the more significant results and changes do not come until later in the process. As he remembers, “I think it takes a little bit of patience because of the very intense feelings. I think [really knowing that the Four Steps work] is only learned by experience.” In this way, rational faith is a leap, but it is a leap that takes you *toward* your true goals and values.

The Four Steps Work

What is it that you will learn from experience? That the Four Steps really do help you separate your sense of self from the deceptive brain messages and that by doing the hard work required, you will see results. As Steve stresses repeatedly, “The whole point is that you begin doing the work before you make the separation. The separation [between your true self and the deceptive brain messages] is made with time—the Four Steps are brilliant for that. The Four Steps are a wedge you can put between your brain’s [false] reality and the more clearheaded or mindful view of your Wise Advocate.”

He uses this analogy to describe the process of how the Four Steps make a difference in your brain and life:

In the old days there were the Fuller Brush men. They used to come sell brushes at your door and they were there every month. They’d give free samples and they’d almost literally get their foot in the door that way—no one could really close the door on a Fuller Brush man. The same thing happens with the Four Steps—

the principle of getting a little room in there, getting my toe in the door between the automatic, thoughtless reaction [and the] deceptive brain message. To try to work on expanding more and more time in between, to not start automatically reacting. Over time, and it does take some time, you begin to get this sense that you indeed are not your emotions and you are not your feelings and you are not even your thoughts. And then you have to practice these things. You have to practice having a different reaction to something. You have to change the way you react to these feelings instead of automatically assuming they are true and doing something with them.

John agrees, saying, “It won’t happen immediately. I would say it’s normal not to see results at first. For anybody who is just barely beginning to understand the Four Steps, the separation can be really hard—to see the false reality of deceptive brain messages, to separate from them and look at them objectively.”

Abby also found it difficult at first to make the separation: “It takes some time because first you have to understand what you are going through; you’ve got to be educated about what the deceptive brain messages are all about and then you start experiencing them and looking at that problem.” That struggle to see the false reality, which the deceptive brain messages have created in you, is hard. With time, she says, “you realize that the deceptive brain messages have no power.” And the more you apply the Four Steps and begin to see the deceptive brain messages from that more educated and empowered perspective, she says, “they diminish in importance completely.”

When you refuse to give in to those deceptive brain messages and instead use the Four Steps, miraculous things begin to happen. As John remembers, “I was losing five hours a day to checking e-mail and thinking about Alicia. I had no life. When I started working with the Four Steps, I immediately got life back. By using the Four Steps, instead of spending five hours on those activities, I was spending thirty minutes checking e-mail or worrying about my relationship. I got four and a half hours back right away when I refused to give in to the deceptive brain messages and Refocus on something healthy instead.”

We hope these words of wisdom will help as you start using the Four Steps and that you will come back to this section whenever you are feeling frustrated or defeated. As our patients repeatedly emphasize, there is hope and things do get better.

Summary

To review, here are a few things to remind yourself of as you begin tackling your deceptive brain messages:

- At the beginning, you may feel overwhelmed, but try as hard as you can not to give in to the deceptive brain messages or unhealthy habits.
- Live with the uncertainty and stay with the sensations—do not try to change them.
- Repetition and practice further your progress the most.
- Just do it—don't let your brain procrastinate or make excuses.
- Journal your successes—it encourages you and shows you the progress you've made.
- Be gentle with yourself.
- Do things gradually—do not try to change all your habits or behaviors at once.
- If you engage in an unhealthy habit, at least be aware of it and acknowledge what you are doing.
- If all else fails, work on increasing your awareness of your deceptive brain messages and habits—pay attention to what is happening in your brain and body.
- Be patient—feeling like you've had a success spurs you on to keep going.

CHAPTER 8

You Can't Change What You Can't See

The Power of Awareness and Step 1: Relabel

Ed had always thought of himself as a pretty observant guy. After all, he was a performer. He was in touch with his feelings and had an exceptional ability to study people, know what they were thinking, and surmise what they were feeling. He could see life from many angles and had a broad perspective on the world and how it works. Why, then, would he need to learn mindfulness? Isn't mindfulness what he was already doing—observing and looking, knowing things as they are?

Ed continued to think this way, despite his paralyzing fear of rejection, until we pointed out to him that for years he never “saw” his deceptive brain messages. Sure, he could look outward and see what was happening in others, but he could not apply those powers of observation to himself. Instead, he let the deceptive brain messages pass by unnoticed. Eventually, with an education on what deceptive brain messages are and how the Four Steps work, Ed learned how to survey his internal monologue, bodily sensations, and habits with precision guided by mindfulness. It was then that he realized that this inability to see his thoughts as deceptive and false was holding him back in innumerable ways.

Ed describes the process of learning how to be mindful:

I spent a long time paying attention to deceptive brain messages, living with those feelings and those beliefs of myself as being a certain way. That was all I knew. It's just so habitual to ignore

what is happening inside you. To believe what your brain is telling you. When that's your reality, how the hell are you going to know it's a new day? It's almost as if you have to struggle to realize that you *can* recognize a different flower in the bunch of bushes you've been walking by every day. When you finally are mindful, you realize you have never seen the yellow flower in there. And you don't just walk by it assuming it's a red one anymore. You look, you observe. When awareness starts to pop its head up, you have to be able to recognize it and let it happen. That's what mindfulness is—being aware and seeing things as they truly are.

In this analogy, Ed compares his belief that all the flowers are red with assuming that all the deceptive thoughts, urges, and impulses he's had throughout his life are true. When he finally stopped and looked, rather than blindly following what his brain was telling him, he was able to realize that he had been viewing life through a harmful and inaccurate filter that caused him to see life from this one very skewed perspective—that of the deceptive brain messages. The way to deal with this blind spot, he learned, was to increase his awareness so that he could see his experiences with a new pair of eyes—his own. What Ed described so elegantly is the process of becoming aware of what your brain is doing as it is doing it and of truly learning how to see the deceptive brain messages for what they are.

MINDFULNESS OR MINDFUL AWARENESS (AS APPLIED TO DECEPTIVE BRAIN MESSAGES)

THE ABILITY TO SEE WITH FRESH EYES, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WISE ADVOCATE AND YOUR TRUE SELF

1. What the deceptive brain messages are and what they cause you to do.
2. How they are blinding you to all kinds of important information.
3. How they are causing you to experience only one version of life: *a false one*.

In this chapter, we will begin by teaching you about mindfulness, the foundation of the Four Steps. In fact, the core of Step 1: Relabel is designed to teach you how to become more mindful of your deceptive brain messages and habitual actions. When you are able to Relabel effectively, you can instantly see the deceptive brain messages arise in real time and call them what they are. That's the whole goal of Step 1 and it is critical because this ability sets you up to follow the rest of the Four Steps. Obviously, you cannot Reframe the meaning of something (Step 2), Refocus on another activity (Step 3), or Revalue the entire experience as nothing more than the feeling of deceptive brain messages (Step 4) unless you can clearly see what is happening as it is happening and call it what it is. Mindfulness is your gateway to seeing the fallacy of the deceptive brain messages and to making new, healthy choices based on your true self.

So, what is mindfulness? You've probably heard the term before and might even have an idea of what it encompasses. Although it's helpful to have some familiarity with the concept, we want you to keep an open mind as we describe what mindfulness is *as applied to deceptive brain messages*. Why? Depending on the context and tradition, mindfulness can mean different things to different people. This leads to many common misunderstandings about mindfulness that need to be dispelled so that you can understand the Four Steps correctly.

What is absolutely true, no matter the context, is that mindfulness is an *experiential* process. One of the best ways to think of learning mindfulness is that it is a lot like learning how to walk, drive, or play a new sport. Someone can teach you the basics and tell you what to do in a step-by-step fashion, but you will not really "get it" until you try it yourself. That said, you can learn a lot by understanding the principles underlying mindfulness and by following the exercises we have included in the remaining chapters of this book. So, let's look at what mindfulness is and what it isn't so you can start learning how to apply the Four Steps to your particular deceptive brain messages.

Mindfulness Is an Activity, Not Merely a State of Mind

Most people think of mindfulness as a state of mind, as being analogous to being "in the zone." This is a common misunderstanding that can lead to frustration because mindfulness isn't something you can just switch on like a TV and expect that it will remain in that state indefinitely. A more accurate way of thinking

about mindfulness would be tuning in to a specific TV station because this analogy implies *actively* doing something and it requires you to pay attention.

In fact, the best way to conceptualize mindfulness is as an *activity*, not a state of mind or way of being. Unlike being tired, anxious, or excited, you can't simply be mindful without effort. You don't just fall into mindfulness or suddenly say to yourself, "Oh, I've been being mindful and didn't realize it," in the same way that you can passively be listening to music.

Mindfulness, like any activity, requires effort, vigilance, and willingness, because in each moment of your life you are choosing whether to be mindful or not. And, like most activities where focus and skill are involved, the more you practice, the better your abilities become. In this way, mindfulness literally is a training ground for your mind—a mental gym where you strengthen your powers of observation and awareness so that you become more proficient at seeing what is happening in each moment of your life.

Mindfulness Is Awareness

At its core, mindfulness is about awareness—being fully knowledgeable that something is happening right now, in this very moment. In this way, mindfulness is not concerned with the act itself, but with the awareness that something is transpiring. For example, if you are being mindful right now, as you read these words, you are *aware* that you are reading. You are not engrossed in the details of each word, but you are aware of the process of reading as it happens.

Similarly, if you are experiencing a deceptive brain message right now but you are focusing only on the content, then you are thinking, not being mindful. However, if you are aware that you are thinking or that you are experiencing a deceptive brain message, then that's mindfulness. A wonderful example Henepola Gunaratana provides is the following:

If you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is memory. When you become aware that you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is mindfulness. If you then conceptualize the process and say to yourself, "Oh, I am remembering," that is thinking.^{[19](#)}

When properly understood, mindfulness teaches you how to be in contact with

your actual experience. For example, if you are sitting in the sun and you feel the warmth touching your skin and are clearly aware of that sensation, then you are being mindful. Similarly, if while you are eating something you take the time to really notice what the food tastes like, how it feels in your mouth, whether it is sweet or salty, how the taste changes over time, and so on, you also are being mindful.

Your goal as you learn how to Relabel is to be aware of the *proces*—of what your brain and body are doing in each moment of time. Do not concern yourself with the content or reasons right now, just the process of what is happening. To help you with this endeavor, we developed the following exercises to help you become aware of what your body is doing without your knowledge or conscious consent.[²⁰](#)

INCREASING AWARENESS OF YOUR BODY

EXERCISE #1: AWARENESS OF MOVEMENT

While you are engaged in another activity (such as reading, working, watching TV), try to pay attention to every movement you make for five to ten minutes. Try to notice everything you do. Here are examples of activities or movements you may not be aware of but do habitually:

- Crossing/uncrossing your legs
- Scratching your skin
- Moving your clothing around
- Changing your body position
- Tapping repetitively
- Moving things around in your environment
- Stretching
- Sniffing
- Clearing your throat

INCREASING AWARENESS OF YOUR BODY

EXERCISE #2: AWARENESS OF SENSATIONS

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. Literally sequester yourself in a place where no one will disturb you and nothing is likely to grab your attention. It's often easier to do this with your eyes closed, but eyes open are fine, too.

With no goals or objectives, simply sit somewhere and notice what *bodily sensations* come up. Do not focus on thoughts, emotional sensations, or other phenomena, such as what you are hearing. Focus only on the sensations you experience in your body, such as tingling, itching, pressure, pain, discomfort, lightness, energy, warmth, cold, fullness, and dryness. Do not try to influence the sensations in any way.

Most important, *do not try to change the sensations or ascribe meaning to them*. Simply let them bubble up with an attitude of curiosity and acceptance. Be open to whatever arises.

When you are done, try to remember what physical sensations arose in that time period and whether you were able to simply notice them or if you got caught up in them. For example, did you ascribe meaning to them? If your stomach was gurgling, did you think to yourself, “Oh, I must be hungry,” or did you simply notice the gurgling itself? If you felt an itch, did you scratch it? If you experienced pain, did you say to yourself, “I wonder if something's wrong” and think further about it?

Becoming aware of your movements, sensations, impulses, and automatic tendencies to think about and to ascribe meaning to your sensations with exercises like these is the first step in increasing your awareness. As we have mentioned before, you cannot change what you are not aware of and you cannot make choices about things you do not know exist. Until you are aware of your impulses, you simply act. So, your goal is to become more aware in each moment of your day. From our experience, noticing what happens in your body is a great place to start.

For the next day or two, try to notice whenever you move or have a physical sensation. Just notice what pops up and do not try to change it or give it meaning. Remember, the goal of mindfulness is not super awareness of everything, but the *ability* to be increasingly more aware of what is happening as it happens. It's about being “awake” to your experiences and capable of noticing

life as it transpires.

Awareness and Focus Are Not the Same Thing, but They Are Related

Another common misconception is that *awareness* is just another word for *focusing*. From the exercises you just completed, you might have a sense that awareness is different from focusing, though they are related. Focusing is an activity in which you consciously direct your attention. Awareness, on the other hand, is being fully knowledgeable of whatever is happening right now, in this very moment. Both are important and necessary for mindfulness and rewiring your brain.

With deceptive brain messages, focusing on them without awareness of what they really are is what has gotten you into trouble. Whenever you focus on and give in to deceptive brain messages, without simultaneously realizing what they are, you are allowing your attention to be grabbed. You are not being mindful and are not aware of what is happening. For example, if someone just rejected your idea, you might be thinking, “Well, it was a good idea. I have no clue what’s wrong with him. Why can’t he see that this would really work? I bet if I showed him the other spreadsheet, the one with the detailed breakdown, then he’d get it and want to know more . . .” and so on. When you are in this “mode,” you are absorbed in and focused on the content. However, if you are able to take a step back and say, “Wow, I am lost in thought; I’m following these deceptive brain messages,” then you are aware of what is happening and are being mindful.

Although they are both rooted in mindfulness, this difference between awareness and focus when you are dealing with deceptive brain messages is so important that we made them two distinct steps. When you closely look at them and understand what they each are trying to achieve, you see that Step 1: Relabel is centered on increasing *awareness* of your deceptive brain messages—in other words, knowing when one is present. In contrast, Step 3: Refocus is concerned with how you *direct* and *focus* your attention (and thereby change your brain).

To help you experience this firsthand, try exercise #3. This exercise teaches you how to focus on your breath as an object of meditation. Of all the mindfulness exercises available, this is the most common and popular for people

to try. It is a great way to train your mind to remain in the present moment and is a great entry point into traditional meditation.

ENHANCING YOUR FOCUS AND AWARENESS

EXERCISE #3: AWARENESS OF BREATH

To help you see how focus and awareness are related, we are going to ask you to make your breathing the object of your attention in this exercise. Learning how to focus on your breath is beneficial because it gives you an *anchor*, something to come back to, whenever your mind wanders.

Similar to the bodily sensations exercise, sit somewhere quietly for at least five minutes—make sure there are no distractions. Turn off your cell phone, shut down your computer, and go somewhere no one will disturb you and nothing is likely to grab your attention. It's easiest to complete this exercise with your eyes closed.

With no goals or objectives, simply notice your breath as it goes in and out of your body. Place your attention on the inner rim of your nostrils, where you can feel the subtle movement of air as you breathe in and out. As with the other exercises, do not focus on thoughts, emotional sensations, or other phenomena. Focus only on your breath and do not try to influence your breathing patterns in any way.

If you notice that your attention is wandering away from your breath, note what is happening and then go back to your anchor, your breath. For example, if you start thinking about what you are going to have for dinner, how you are going to fit in exercising today, or running through a list of things to do before the day is done, note this by saying to yourself “thinking,” “planning,” or just “wandering,” and then go back to your breath.

Many people find this exercise is easier with counting. One of the most effective ways is to count each in-breath and out-breath separately up to 10. For example, count the in-breath (inhalation) as “1,” the out-breath (exhalation) as “2,” the next in-breath as “3,” and so on up to the out-breath of “10.” Then repeat this exercise until you are able to maintain awareness of your breath without counting.

If you are able to be aware of your breath the entire time, you will be able to count up to 10 in one pass. Don't be surprised or

disheartened if this is not the case. When you are just starting out, this ability to count up to 10 (and only up to 10) in one fell swoop is a rare event. In many cases, especially early on, you likely will find that you forgot what number you were on or find that you are on 14 (i.e., you forgot to stop at 10) before you notice that your attention has wandered.

Obviously, the longer you are able to sit with this exercise, the more adept your mind will be at noticing when your attention has wandered. If possible, make a plan to notice your breathing for up to thirty minutes each day—doing so will definitely hone your ability to recognize when your attention has wandered and enhance your powers of observation.

Mindfulness Includes Seeing That the Deceptive Brain Messages Are False

Throughout our description of mindfulness, we have deliberately kept one word out: reality. Why? It can be a loaded term, depending on the context,^{[21](#)} and it implies that the thoughts, impulses, urges, desires, sensations, and habits you experience are not real in some way. The truth is, they are real—you *are* experiencing them. The problem is that those deceptive brain messages, sensations, and habits are *false* and they take you away from following your true goals and values in life. We want you to see with clear eyes that:

- The content of the deceptive thoughts is not valid or true
- The urges, impulses, and desires do not need to be satisfied
- You have choices beyond the narrow options your deceptive brain messages are presenting to you

Learning how to see that those three statements are correct is the whole point of the Four Steps. Therefore, when we talk about mindfulness as applied to deceptive brain messages, we want you to start seeing that the negative messages, sensations, and habitual patterns are false and that they are not representative of your true self.

We will talk more about this in chapter 9 when we teach you how to Reframe the content of your deceptive brain messages. For now, simply keep in mind that

while the experience of deceptive brain messages is real, their content and directives are false.

Mindfulness Is Nonjudgmental *and* Judgmental at the Same Time

When most people think of mindfulness, the word *nonjudgmental* almost universally comes to mind. When applied in a global way, this is a serious mistake and it is one that we need to make sure you do not make. Why is this so important? When you conceptualize mindfulness as nonjudgmental, it gives the impression that anything goes, that no matter what you do, mindfulness will simply accept whatever happens as perfectly fine and appropriate.

While it is true that some parts of mindfulness require you to suspend judgment so that you can see what is happening, including the ugly and unpleasant aspects of life (e.g., your darker thoughts), there are places where judgment is absolutely necessary. The distinction lies in whether you are looking at and observing your thoughts or whether you are evaluating your choices and actions. Remember what we said before: You cannot control the initial thoughts, impulses, desires, or cravings you have—it is impossible to do so. However, you can and must choose how you will respond if you want to change your life and how your brain works.

Therefore, when you are trying to be aware of your thoughts and impulses (i.e., your deceptive brain messages), you must not judge them. You need to let them bubble up so you can see what is there. Berating or shaming yourself for the deceptive brain messages that arise is counterproductive and takes you away from being mindful. If you see that you are heading in that direction, remind yourself of what Sarah says to herself: “You have so much shame for having these symptoms. It’s important to be gentle with yourself. It’s about moving forward. It doesn’t matter what your deceptive thoughts or feelings are in the end, it’s how you act. You have to have a certain amount of gentleness and acceptance.” This is when nonjudgmental mindfulness comes in and is so important.

The other side of the coin, as we’ve said, is your actions. Here, you want to judge things in a rather aggressive way. Why? Think about what *nonjudgmental* means when taken to its extreme—it implies that it would be okay to hurt someone or to act in a reckless manner purposely. Applied in this way,

mindfulness would simply look at your actions, note them, and accept them as perfectly legitimate. Clearly, this is taking things too far and could be used as an excuse to act in a way that is devoid of values or morals. That's why we spent time explaining that deceptive brain messages are anything that takes you away from your true self—from your sincere striving to achieve things in your life based on your values and goals. Mindfulness, when appropriately understood, does not dispassionately recognize all actions as equally acceptable, and nor should you.

The bottom line is this:

- Do *not* judge your initial thoughts, impulses, cravings, or desires (i.e., your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations). You have no control over their presence and it is not your fault that they are there. Let them be present and notice them *without* acting on them.
- *Do* judge your actions, including mental ones, such as overanalyzing or “perfectionism.” You have control over your actions, including overthinking, and mindfulness does not give you a free pass to act recklessly or in a manner that would hurt you or others. You are responsible for what you do once the deceptive brain messages arise.

Objects of Mindfulness

As you can see from this brief overview, mindfulness is a complex topic because it encompasses your entire life—everything you think, experience, and do. Realizing this can be overwhelming: How can you be mindful of everything? Although the possibilities are endless, the point is to be aware of *some aspect* of your current experience, not everything at once. To help you conceptualize common objects of awareness, we have divided the following table into three parts based on broad categories of experiences you can have and be aware of. Later, we will outline the kinds of experiences frequently related to deceptive brain messages. For now, simply allow yourself time to understand the various kinds of phenomena you can notice if you start looking. As Yogi Berra was known for saying, you can learn a lot just by watching.

SOME OBJECTS OF MINDFULNESS

Physical Sensations	Mental Phenomena/ Emotional Sensations	Activities
Warmth, cold	Happiness	Talking, breathing
Pressure, pain	Empathy	Touching
Light-headedness, dizziness	Love, affection, caring	Feeling
Itching, irritation	Anxiety, fear	Listening, hearing
Dryness, sweatiness	Anger, rage, hatred	Thinking, analyzing, planning
Fullness, emptiness	Shame, guilt	Smelling, tasting
Craving, desire, impulses	Craving, desire, impulses	Exercising, moving
Energy coursing through the body, jitteriness	Sadness, depression	Seeing, watching

From the table above, it's clear that anything your mind can perceive, sense, feel, or think can be an object of mindfulness. This means that all your deceptive brain messages, sensations, and activities can be objects of mindfulness, too. In fact, if you look closely, the categories in the table above are ones frequently found in the cycle of deceptive brain messages we described in figure 1.1 in chapter 1. However, as we mentioned, the goal right now is not to analyze or focus on any particular thought, impulse, or activity, but to learn how to increase your *awareness* of experiences with Step 1: Relabel.

STEP 1: RELABEL

Identify your deceptive brain messages and the uncomfortable sensations: Call them what they really are.

For example, we want you to use your increasing powers of awareness to notice whenever the following arise—without getting lost or engrossed in thoughts about them:

- Deceptive brain messages, including your thoughts, impulses, desires