

she admitted, she was unwittingly hoping that Refocusing would help her feel better, calmer. Unfortunately, all this unrealistic expectation did was frustrate her more and make her feel like the Four Steps weren't working.

As we explained to Abby, the way to deal with the *inaccurate expectation* that she *should* feel better (two thinking errors) was to endeavor to *never try to make the uncomfortable sensations or feelings go away*. Remember, we told her: *When dealing with deceptive brain messages, it's not what you think or how you feel that matters, it's what you do that counts!* You are not trying to make the feelings go away—ever—and your goal in Refocusing is to *direct your attention* toward a healthy, wholesome activity *while* the thoughts, impulses, urges, and sensations are present. The goal is not to try to distract yourself, but to engage your attention in a constructive activity so that your brain rewires in a healthy, adaptive way via the quantum Zeno effect. This is the only true and reliable way to really change the uncomfortable sensations and feelings, but it takes time. The key point to remember is that trying to make the feelings go away in the short term (or strongly overidentifying with them) only makes things worse in the long term because *focusing your attention on the uncomfortable feelings and sensations further entrenches the unhealthy responses and more strongly wires them into your brain*.

We summarized for Abby that her difficulties in Refocusing were rooted in three missteps: (a) she was still repetitively thinking about things, such as Katie's future, when she talked with friends, went for a walk, or Refocused on another activity; (b) she was trying to make her feelings go away; and (c) she was not continuing to Refocus *her attention* every time the deceptive brain messages or pull to overanalyze struck. To fix the problem, Abby needed to do these three things instead:

1. Choose a Refocus activity that would strongly engage her attention and did not involve talking or thinking about Katie (or discussing other deceptive brain messages).
2. Continue Relabeling and Reframing her deceptive brain messages whenever they came up.
3. Never attempt to make the uncomfortable sensations go away.

Ways to Refocus

When you begin working with the Four Steps, Refocusing in one of the ways we described above (what we call regular Refocus) likely will be the best. That said, we have learned from countless hours of working with patients that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for everyone, especially if you are avoiding specific situations, people, or events. That's why we developed variations on Step 3 that are designed to assist with problems such as being repetitively lost in thought or avoiding situations. Regardless of which form of Refocus you choose, the same rules apply—your goal is to sharply focus your attention on healthy, constructive activities while the deceptive thoughts, urges, impulses, desires, and cravings are present. Here are three versions of Refocus you can try, depending on what you are dealing with:

1. Refocus: Engage in a different activity without distracting yourself from the sensations, thoughts, urges, impulses, or desires (what you learned above).
2. Regulate & Refocus: Focus on your breathing or another activity that, as a side effect, decreases your physical or emotional sensations (i.e., do not engage in the activity with the sole purpose or intent of calming yourself down—it's about Refocusing, not just calming).
3. Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness: Continue in an activity that triggered your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations, or face a situation that you normally would avoid and that is beneficial for you.

In general, it's much easier to start with regular Refocus or Regulate & Refocus because when Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is done properly, it tends to significantly intensify deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations at first. For this reason, we consider it an advanced practice. You've already learned about regular Refocus, so now let's look at how Regulate & Refocus can help with anxiety, uncomfortable physical sensations, and overthinking.

Regulate & Refocus—Especially Helpful with Anxiety and Overthinking

What is Regulate? It's a form of Refocusing that emphasizes ways to calm down your body's intense physiological reactions to stress or upsetting situations.

Specifically, it encourages self-care and learning how to Refocus your attention when no other constructive activity is available. In reality, Regulate activities are no different from other forms of Refocusing—they all are attempting to get you to sharply focus your attention in ways that are beneficial to you. The reason we specifically point them out is that they have been scientifically shown or demonstrated clinically to calm your nervous system and decrease the uncomfortable sensations that often accompany deceptive brain messages. *This happens, though, as a side effect or by-product of focusing your attention properly—feeling better or calmer from Refocusing, as Abby learned, should never be your goal.* Rather, your purpose in Refocusing is to retrain your attention in constructive ways that rewire your brain. The end result of following the Four Steps is improved mental health, but this result should not become an intense *desire* as you use the Four Steps. As we’ve mentioned previously, intense desires for immediate (short-term) results definitely tend to get in the way of sustained, long-term progress.

Two great Regulate activities you already know are focusing on your breathing and meditating. They are particularly powerful Regulate activities because they capture your attention in a very specific way that helps if you tend to overanalyze, overthink, and get lost in thought. From her experiences of going down the “what-if” path ad nauseam, Abby knows that Regulate is a powerful and valuable way to Refocus. As she explains, “I’m really kind of a novice, but I have seen that meditation is a very effective way of strengthening my Wise Advocate. I find the more I do it, just like the more I apply the Four Steps, the better I get at it and the more awareness I get. It does help me a lot, meditation—I feel calm, more insightful. I’m able to Relabel faster and Reframe my thinking errors; I can see them so much clearer now. Meditation definitely is a useful tool and maybe is one of the most useful tools there is for strengthening your Wise Advocate—for example, when these thoughts would start coming in, I had a sense that they were garbage and could Refocus on something that was good for me.”

In addition to helping you see more clearly, Regulating your breathing can also help you center yourself when you experience acute anxiety, such as a panic attack, or other intense physical sensations. The most effective way to Regulate if you are hyperventilating is to use a variation of the breathing exercise we taught you in chapter 8, where you breathe in on a 4 count and out on an 8 count *through your nose*. Why? Breathing in for 4 and out for 8 elongates and smooths normal breathing patterns, and naturally calms in a way that other kinds of activities cannot. Just as significant, breathing through your nose ensures that you will not overbreathe or hyperventilate (thus setting off more uncomfortable

sensations, such as shortness of breath, that you may incorrectly associate with another anxiety attack). In short, breathing in for 4 and out for 8 is a simple, reliable way to replicate and achieve the calming effects of traditional forms of breathing meditation when you are hyperventilating. When you are not having trouble with your breathing patterns, it is best either to note your breath or to use a 4-IN, 4-OUT breathing cycle.

Sarah agrees that Regulate & Refocus is beneficial, especially for anxiety attacks. At the beginning of her work with the Four Steps, she found that focusing on her breathing helped immeasurably when the uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations emerged. As she explains, “I shifted my attention to my breathing and tried to take slow, deep breaths through my nose. The [4-IN, 8-OUT] thing helped a lot. As I Refocused in this way, I also reminded myself [via the Wise Advocate] that everything was going to be okay. I shifted my attention to reassuring thoughts like ‘It’s fine, you’ve been through this before, you don’t have to worry about this.’ I reassured myself [without intensely desiring for the uncomfortable feelings and sensations to go away] with the knowledge that it’s going to be okay. This is going to pass, just like the other [anxiety attacks] did.”

While you should not cling to a desire to be calmed or comforted by any Regulate or Refocus activity, you likely will find that focusing on your breath does indeed calm down your nervous system and body, something Dr. Herbert Benson of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital has convincingly shown in his studies of the Relaxation Response.

Relaxation Response is a term Dr. Benson coined that refers to any method or technique that results in decreased blood pressure, heart rate, or breathing rate—activities that are associated with a state of physiological rest, as opposed to the amped-up responses seen in the fight-or-flight response. Scores of techniques that have been used for millennia can elicit a Relaxation Response, including many forms of yoga, meditation, repetitive prayer, breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and Qigong.

What’s most significant about the Relaxation Response is that it has been shown through many studies to have powerful effects on stress-related disorders and to decrease the number of stress-related genes that are activated and used. *This means that if you incorporate a Relaxation Response technique into the Four Steps, you may actually change the way your body and brain react to stress in positive and beneficial ways.*

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE : WAYS TO REGULATE & REFOCUS

- Any method or technique that results in decreased heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate or in more relaxed muscles (i.e., less muscle tension)
- Methods can include (but are not limited to):
 - Yoga, Qigong
 - Meditation
 - Repetitive prayers or mantras
 - Breathing techniques
 - Muscle relaxation
 - Guided imagery
- Relaxation Response is composed of two parts:
 - Repeating a calming word, sound, phrase/prayer, or muscular activity for ten to twenty minutes in a manner linked to awareness of in-and-out breathing
 - Passively disregarding everyday thoughts that come into your head and trying to focus on repeating the calming action during that time period
- The Relaxation Response can influence how much certain genes associated with stress are expressed. In particular, when people practiced the Relaxation Response for eight weeks, their bodies decreased the number of stress-related proteins and chemical messengers that were made—meaning that the Relaxation Response may actually reverse some of the negative effects of stress.

In other words, you might be able to reverse some of the negative effects of stress in your daily life by consistently practicing the Four Steps with meditation or another form of Relaxation Response as your Refocus activity.

MENTAL NOTES CAN HELP YOU REGULATE

As we mentioned in chapter 8, mental notes are a powerful way of accurately, effectively, and efficiently Relabeling your deceptive brain messages. An important effect of Relabeling, much like what Lieberman found in his experiment, is that using a word to label an emotion can calm your Uh Oh Center's alarm. Granted, you should never make a mental note with the exclusive goal of just trying to make yourself feel better, but if you practice this skill regularly, you will find that it does indeed result in beneficial changes.

To see what we mean, let's look at the following example: Say you are driving down the freeway and someone cuts you off. If you are like many people, you might become angry, even enraged, over this event. If you did become angry, typically you would then get lost in a series of thoughts about the driver, how rude he was, that he had no right, and so on, rather than simply noting what is happening inside you. As you go down this negative-thought cascade, you fuel the deceptive brain messages further and personalize the interaction in a way that is detrimental to you.

Instead, if you made the mental note "anger" when this happened, you would have described your immediate reaction without getting too involved in any thought process about it. If you then kept mindfully repeating the word you chose, you would find that your bodily sensations and experience of the event change to something that is more neutral. This happens because you decrease the overthinking associated with the angry deceptive brain messages and instead view them from the perspective of the Wise Advocate. For example, the Wise Advocate may look at the situation and say, "Yes, you were angered because you were scared. You thought you might be injured by the reckless maneuver he made, but stewing about it doesn't help you at all. It just makes you angrier and more upset. Instead, focus on your driving and keeping yourself safe—don't waste your energy on that guy. Don't allow him to make his problem your problem."

Try it. The next time you are angry, simply make the mental note "anger . . . anger . . . anger" slowly and watch what happens inside your body. Usually within five to thirty seconds, your physical sensations change and you no longer feel the sensations of anger (again, as long as you are *not* just trying to make the sensations go away, but literally are focusing your attention on making the mental

notes of your experience).

Why does this happen? When you are no longer caught up in the thoughts, you've taken the fuel away from the proverbial fire. By focusing on the process, rather than allowing your thoughts to run wild, you are starving the brain of the one thing it needs to keep those uncomfortable sensations and deceptive thoughts flowing: your attention!

The trick with mental notes—and it is an important one—is that *you cannot focus on wanting or intensely desiring a specific outcome or result*. You must simply note what is happening and see how your experience changes.

Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness

As we mentioned earlier, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is a more advanced form of Refocusing because it asks you to deliberately confront or deal with something that causes deceptive brain messages or uncomfortable sensations to arise—which often intensifies them at first. Therefore, we recommend that you start with regular Refocusing or Regulating & Refocusing before you attempt Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness. Once you have a good sense of how to use regular Refocus and Regulate & Refocus, you can begin using Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to enter into situations that cause you distress and evoke deceptive brain messages.

What is Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness? It is a technique that asks you to enter into or remain in a situation that activates your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations so that you learn how to work around the distress you experience. By doing so, you learn how to remain in that situation (and with those sensations) longer and strengthen your Wise Advocate. For example, if you experience a rapid heartbeat and shortness of breath whenever you enter an elevator, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness would suggest that you gradually face your fear of elevators. This could mean first walking near elevators, then walking on and off an elevator, then taking the elevator one floor, then several floors, and so on *while allowing the sensations to be present* and using Regulate (e.g., if hyperventilating, breathe in for 4, out for 8; if not, use the 4-IN, 4-OUT pattern) as your object of Refocus. (Note: Regulate is often used in

these instances because inside an elevator there are very few constructive, healthy objects for your attention and we do not want you to focus on the elevator itself or your distress.)

If you are familiar with a specific cognitive-behavioral therapy technique known as exposure and response prevention, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness may seem similar. In some of the mechanics, it is—you are entering situations that distress you. However, the important distinction lies in what you do once you are in that distressing situation. The major difference between the two approaches is that exposure and response prevention asks you to enter a situation and then sit with—but do nothing about—your uncomfortable sensations. You do not focus your attention on a healthy behavior or attempt to regulate your sensations in any way. The presumption of exposure and response prevention is that your brain is no different from an animal's and that to change your behavior, all you need to do is experience incredibly intense spikes in your anxiety or distress level and then allow them to come down on their own—thus “teaching” your body and brain to no longer associate that specific situation with a threat or danger. When exposure and response prevention is done in that way, all your brain learns to do is calm down your Uh Oh Center and not associate *that* upsetting situation with danger, but it does not strengthen your Wise Advocate.

In contrast, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness encourages you to first face situations you currently are avoiding or to continue in an activity that causes you distress and *then focus your attention on constructive, healthy activities while you are in that situation*. This process results in your brain rewiring itself in ways that are beneficial to you and that adaptively retrain your Habit Center to work toward your true goals and values. Most important, it strengthens your Wise Advocate so you can apply what you learned about the falseness of your deceptive brain messages in this situation to other places in life where deceptive brain messages arise.

REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS

1. Place yourself in a situation that causes your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations to emerge, or remain in a situation that has already evoked your deceptive brain messages.
2. Allow the deceptive sensations, thoughts, urges, impulses,

desires, and cravings to be present but do not act on them.

3. Instead, Refocus on another healthy, constructive behavior while you remain in the distressing or upsetting (but nondangerous or nonthreatening) situation.

4. If you cannot find a constructive object or activity for your attention, use Regulate & Refocus to turn your awareness to your breathing (e.g., by using the 4-IN, 8-OUT method for short periods of hyperventilation and the 4-IN, 4-OUT method for all other situations).

5. Continue with your life and daily activities without avoiding (as much as possible).

Kara describes Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness in this way: “The purpose of Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is to really go through an event and live with the anxiety—getting into that dark area and getting to know it a little more, sort of like living with it and stretching your ability to be in that space for a little longer each time.” She says that Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is “really helpful because you basically are exposing yourself to the very thing you are anxious about or that is triggering your obsession or your craving and sitting with that, the discomfort, and watching it pass. With the Wise Advocate, you are watching the transient nature of it and that it’s not really you. If you sit and observe it and don’t buy into it and are mindful, you see how it detaches after a while. You can see it for what it is and it’s not really you.” As this process continues, your Wise Advocate strengthens and you start making healthier choices in many aspects of your life—not just the one situation you currently are encountering. In this way, Kara says, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is useful because it helps you get “to the point where whatever you are avoiding becomes more of a common thing, less scary or upsetting, which makes it easier to encounter and do. In reality, I think it can be applied to many things in life.”

WHAT CAN REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS HELP WITH?

- Anything you avoid
- Anything you want to be doing, but are not

- Anything you are afraid to do, but know would be good for you
- Learning how to deal with uncomfortable physical sensations
- Ensuring that you do not miss out on parts of your life because of the deceptive brain messages or uncomfortable sensations
- Learning how to take care of yourself in relationships by managing and regulating feelings of rejection or social pain
- Dealing with perfectionism by deliberately making small mistakes

NEVER USE REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS FOR HIGHLY ADDICTIVE AND DANGEROUS BEHAVIORS SUCH AS DRINKING ALCOHOL, TAKING DRUGS, OR GAMBLING.

Although Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is highly effective, one point that we must make absolutely clear is that you should *never use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness for highly addictive and dangerous activities*, including those related to alcohol, drugs, sex, or gambling addictions. Instead, use regular Refocus or Regulate & Refocus. Why? The biological forces are just too strong and overpowering and the stakes are too high in such situations. That's why the conventional wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous and related traditions has always been to never take a drink or go into a situation that will make you crave alcohol (which is why Steve only used regular Refocus and Regulate & Refocus, but never Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to deal with his cravings for alcohol).

With that important caveat, let's see how Ed used Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness with his performance anxiety and avoidance of auditions.

Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness and Avoidance

Avoidance is one of the most destructive behaviors you can engage in because of how much it limits your life and how easily you can rationalize away your lack

of action with myriad thinking errors. For instance, you can readily tell yourself, “Oh, I don’t really need to do X,” or “I can do it another time.” The problem with this approach, of course, is that your choices are being made on the basis of your deceptive brain messages rather than your Wise Advocate and true self. When that happens, it is difficult to observe and be mindful of what is occurring and you become stuck. That’s what happened to Ed, who stopped going to auditions. As he let his deceptive brain messages take hold and dictate his life, he developed an almost immobilizing fear of and anxiety related to performing. Sadly, because he did not challenge or notice his deceptive brain messages for some time, his anxiety generalized to the point that he could no longer even go to an acting class or call his agent.

When he began telling us about his difficulties, we suggested that Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness would be helpful to him because it would teach his brain that the negative thoughts, fears, and social pain related to auditioning were false and that he could succeed on the stage. This would happen, we told him, as his Wise Advocate grew stronger and he had more experiences of confronting the deceptive brain messages with the Four Steps and seeing how inaccurate they were.

To start the process, Ed inventoried his deceptive brain messages and identified his true goals (using the tables provided in the previous chapters). We then asked him to write down the situations that triggered his fear and distressed him the most. While he was doing this, we encouraged him to specifically think of any performance-related activity, event, person, or place he avoided or that he encountered reluctantly because of his significant distress. Here is an example of his initial list:

ED’S INITIAL LIST OF SITUATIONS HE AVOIDS OR THAT DISTRESS HIM

Calling my agent
Going to an acting class
Going to an audition
Telling someone their performance was not that great
Reading a review of my work
Talking to a casting agent
Asking for feedback on my performance

After Ed compiled the list above, we asked him to rate his fear and distress of those situations on a scale of 0 to 100, using figure 11.1 as a guideline:

Distress and avoidance scale



Figure 11.1. Distress and Avoidance Scale

As Ed assigned distress and avoidance ratings to each of the events or actions on his list, we instructed him to be specific about what aspects of each situation distressed him and to separate out the different components of an activity so that he could see how *what he did/the role he served* in an activity affected how distressed he might become. For example, if he was anxious being in an acting class, was it the actual performance that was distressing? Watching others? Critiquing others? Receiving critiques? Similarly, for other activities, what were the most distressing aspects for him? The actual performance? Being evaluated? Concern that he would not be accepted? Fear of making mistakes and being ostracized? And so on.

Here's an example of how Ed rated his distress with those parameters in mind:

ED'S LEVEL OF DISTRESS RELATED TO AUDITIONING AND PERFORMING

Activity	Distress and Avoidance Level
Reading a review of his performance while the musical is still running	100
Performing in the musical	90
Auditioning for a musical	85
Calling a casting agent	70
Calling his agent	60
Reading a script for a musical he may audition for	50
Participating in a singing or acting class	50 (watching) 60 (critiquing others) 70 (performing) 85–100 (receiving critique about his performance)
Reading other people's reviews in the same performance/musical	30
Talking to a friend about a recent performance	30
Looking at the <i>Playbill</i> of a performance he is in	15

As you can see from the chart above, Ed rated the following items below 50: reading others' reviews, talking to friends, or looking at the *Playbill*. These low ratings meant that they likely were not things he often avoids. He could engage in those activities at least 50 percent of the time and they were not limiting his life, so Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness was not needed in these cases. In contrast, the items he rated at 50 and above were the activities he had been avoiding and these were the ones we wanted him to target with Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness.

We helped Ed develop a list of situations that he could deliberately encounter with the express purpose of increasing his distress and evoking deceptive brain messages. He made a list of the activities associated with distress ratings from 50 to 100 (in order from least distressing to most distressing)—this became his Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan. Weekly, he attempted to enter into a new situation on the list (starting at the top of his list and working down) and remain in the situation long enough for his distress level to spike to its maximum and then slowly decrease over time. When his level of distress was less than 50 percent of its maximum for that situation on that day, Ed could then leave the situation or remain in it if he was enjoying it or found the activity interesting.

The ultimate goal of this and other Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness exercises was to have Ed use the Four Steps with his Wise Advocate as his guide, which helped him see how useless and inaccurate his deceptive brain messages were.

On page 265 is an example of a list similar to the one he followed at approximately one-week intervals (i.e., one list item per week, starting at the top and ending at the bottom).

ED’S REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS LIST

Original Distress Level	Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness Plan
50	Go to an acting class and watch (do not perform or critique)
60	Call my agent and just talk (no agenda)
60	Go to an acting class and provide my opinions/critiques
65	Call my agent and deliberately make a mistake (e.g., mispronounce someone’s name)
70	Participate/perform during the acting class as an extra or supporting player (not the main character)
75	Call a casting agent and ask for basic information
80	Read an old review from two years ago
85	Call a casting agent and express interest in an upcoming audition
90	Audition for a musical
100	Perform in a leading role in acting class and receive critiques—allow the Wise Advocate to take in all the positive as well as constructive comments made.
100	Read the reviews of my performance the next morning while using the Wise Advocate to remind me of how well I performed

As Ed entered each of these situations, he would use his Wise Advocate to notice and Relabel his anxiety and the negative, deceptive thoughts. He would then Reframe them as “false brain messages,” “social pain,” “inaccurate fear of failure and discounting the positive,” and so on. He would then Refocus on the activity at hand, such as watching others perform, and try to remain focused on and interested in that activity. If his thoughts started to wander or if he became caught up in his sensations, he would remind himself to Refocus on the actors who were performing or to focus on his breathing for a minute and then return to

watching the actors. If the deceptive brain messages and sensations became intense and overpowering again (as they often do when you use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness), he would again Relabel and Reframe, then Refocus on the actors or his breathing. What he would not do is leave the situation when his distress levels were high (50 or higher). Instead, he would repeat the cycle of Relabel-Reframe-Refocus until his distress level decreased by at least 50 percent from its maximal point.

After approximately twelve weeks of using Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness, Ed was able to go to auditions and has since been booking jobs with regularity. As he explains, “Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness helped me because I was avoiding situations that had to do with people . . . I couldn’t get away from people or their potential judgments. So, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness meant to me that I had to be in the situation and keep going and be mindful. I had to accept these feelings as nothing more than deceptive brain messages—not the truth—and continue on. For me, this changed the meaning of the brain messages to something I could handle. Learning how to use the Wise Advocate to help me out, and see how wrong those negative messages about me were, was an incredible asset. Although it’s not fun to put yourself into those distressing situations, it’s a whole lot better than being stuck in your life and not achieving anything.”

We hope this example of Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is helpful to you and increases your understanding of how you can use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness throughout your day. In the next section, we will provide you with the necessary tools to help you evaluate your levels of distress related to things you avoid. However, as we recommended, *it is best for you to learn how to effectively use regular Refocus and Regulate & Refocus FIRST*. Once you have become proficient in those options, then you can begin using Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to your advantage.

Developing Your Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness Plan

Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness can be used effectively in a wide variety of situations where your current behavior (or lack of action) is harming or inhibiting you. This includes panic, anxiety, avoidance, and relationship problems. Given that there are many ways to use Refocus with Progressive

Mindfulness, we have provided you with some helpful general guidelines. In Part Three, we will provide you with examples of other ways you can apply Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness so that you can creatively use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness whenever you need it.

For the purposes of this exercise and these tables, we will use the term *avoidance* to mean anything you are averse to doing out of fear or distress (but would like to engage in) or anything you would like to be doing but are not (e.g., changing your eating patterns or changing how you act in relationships).

To begin developing your plan, think of situations that you avoid and write them down in the table below. When possible, specify what makes the situation easier or harder to deal with and examine your role or expected contribution to see if that affects your distress level. Add those qualifiers to your list to make it more complete.

THINGS THAT I AVOID OR CAUSE ME DISTRESS (INCLUDE SPECIFIERS)

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

Now, rate each activity (with qualifiers) according to how much distress engaging in the activity would cause (using the scale of 0 to 100).

LEVEL OF DISTRESS RELATED TO

Activity	Distress and Avoidance Level

Order the activities above based on their distress or avoidance level. Start with items at or near 50. Then, in ascending order, list all of the other activities up to 100. This ranked list, from least distressing at the top of the list to most distressing at the bottom (to be done last), is your Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan.

**MY REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS PLAN—A
RANK-ORDERED LIST, FROM LEAST DISTRESSING TO MOST
DISTRESSING ACTIVITY**

Original Distress Level	Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness Plan
	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.

Complete one list item per week (if possible, but allow yourself more time if needed). Once you start the exercise (i.e., enter the distressing situation), you will notice that your distress level will increase, usually substantially (e.g., from 50 to 80 or 90), and then decrease over time and likely end lower than when you started. Remain in the situation until your distress level has decreased by at least 50 percent from its maximal level (e.g., distress level of 80 becomes 40, 90 becomes 45). Continue to Relabel, Reframe, and Refocus while you remain in the situation/complete the exercise. Repeat the exercise throughout the week until entering the situation no longer bothers you (i.e., your maximal distress

level is less than 50) and you can use the Wise Advocate to see that this situation is not threatening or something to be avoided because the deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations are false.

Gratitude Lists—Refocusing with the 5 A's in Mind

To end this chapter, we want to introduce you to one other way you can Refocus that increases your ability to see the positive achievements and qualities you possess: gratitude lists.

These are short lists you complete every night (or during a Refocus) that emphasize the positive aspects of your life—what you did well (though not perfectly) today, what you accomplished, what you are grateful for, what you appreciate, and so on. As Sarah describes, “Gratitude lists are about acknowledging what is right about me and getting away from the ‘I am a sick person’ dialogue. The gratitude helps me focus on who I really am and what I have in my life that is healthy and is good. Everybody has something like that. We all have gifts that we can look at.”

And looking at what we do right is something we often neglect, as John so eloquently pointed out when he asked us this question: “Why can’t I obsess on my assets like the way I obsess on my liabilities?” Seeing what you have accomplished helps you counter deceptive brain messages and dismiss unhelpful, damaging thoughts as nothing more than false chatter. In this way gratitude lists are a wonderful tool to help you activate the more constructive parts of your mind, provide yourself with the 5 A’s (Attention, Acceptance, Affection, Appreciation, Allowing), and rewire your brain in positive ways—to see that you are a good person striving to achieve laudable goals.

GRATITUDE LISTS

Each night (or whenever you are Refocusing and cannot find another object for your focus and attention), write down:

- Ten things you are grateful for (e.g., the sun is shining; I Refocused twice today; I have wonderful friends)

- Five things you accomplished today (e.g., I was able to work all day despite the deceptive brain messages bothering me; I called my sister ; I made a healthy dinner)
- Any positive changes you've noticed in your response to your deceptive brain messages (e.g., I did not avoid the market today, and went inside and bought one item)

Summary

In the next chapter, we will bring the Four Steps together by teaching you about Step 4: Revalue. Until then, review and remember these key facts about Step 3: Refocus:

- You already learned how to Refocus when you completed the breathing and thought awareness exercises in chapter 8.
- Refocus is designed to teach you how to place your attention and focus on a healthy, constructive activity while the deceptive brain messages and sensations are present.
- There are many ways to Refocus including:
 - Regular Refocus
 - Regulate & Refocus
 - Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness
 - Gratitude lists
- Never use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness for highly addictive and dangerous activities, like alcohol, drugs, sex addictions, or gambling addictions.
- You should start with regular Refocus or Regulate & Refocus at first, since Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness very likely will make your deceptive sensations, impulses, cravings, desires, and urges more intense at first.

CHAPTER 12

Progressive Mindfulness and Step 4: Revalue

Before Sarah started using the Four Steps, her world was dominated by deceptive brain messages, thinking errors, anxiety, depression, panic, and unhealthy habits like overthinking and repeatedly checking to see if she made mistakes or upset someone. Perfectionism, shame, and guilt ruled her life and dictated her actions. She was miserable and exhausted, but she knew no other way of living. That is, until she started using the Four Steps and learned how to Revalue her experiences. As Sarah began to challenge the faulty logic of her thinking errors, disarm the hysteria coming from her Uh Oh Center, and refuse to comply with the Habit Center's automatic responses, she began to see just how limited and restricted her life had been when she viewed herself and made choices from the perspective of her deceptive brain messages.

She remembers the day when she finally realized that she truly did have *the power to choose*. Her options, she realized, were to listen to her healthy, loving side or the harsh and deceptive brain messages. Since she now could believe her Wise Advocate's assertion that there was nothing wrong with her, she knew that what she needed to do was change how she *viewed* what was happening inside her brain and body. That change in perspective was critical, she says, and only happened the more she used the Four Steps and Revalued her deceptive brain messages.

As she explains, "I tended to see the smaller picture [propagated by deceptive brain messages], like I made a mistake or didn't do something right, rather than see [from the perspective of the Wise Advocate] that I am trying to do the right things in life." When she remained bogged down by the negative and distracting false details, she allowed the deceptive brain messages to "prevent me from believing in my true self, in who I really am." However, when she stepped back and looked from the perspective of her Wise Advocate, she realized, "I'm already there. I am fine and a good person just as I am."

The key, Sarah recognized, was choosing to see life from the perspective of

her loving and compassionate Wise Advocate. With this ability, her healthy side could shine through and help her see the larger picture—that she was worthy of leading a fulfilling and meaningful life and believing in herself. As important, when she stepped back from those distracting and unhelpful negative thoughts and allowed her loving, healthy side to recognize her positive attributes and accomplishments, her view of herself and life shifted in a fundamental way. No longer beholden to her thinking errors or self-doubt, she was liberated. “What I had to do, which is hard—the feelings will try to trick you—is not change anything about me, but change my *attitude, my belief about myself.*”

This idea of shifting your perspective with the Wise Advocate is what the Four Steps and especially Step 4: Revalue are all about. In essence, Revaluing encourages you to recruit and nourish your healthy, loving side on a consistent basis so that you can instantly see and dismiss the logic of the deceptive brain messages and make positive, constructive choices that emanate from your empowered, compassionate Wise Advocate. As Sarah explains, when she got to this point, she was able to say to herself, “I am fine with who I am. It’s coming to terms with who I am and that I’m already okay because I am a moral person. It doesn’t matter in the long run what my deceptive brain messages are or what thoughts and feelings they cause. My true self is who I am—I am a good person.”

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 have little to no value (they are something to dismiss, not focus on).

When things happen in life, as Sarah now knows, you can respond in many ways that may be beneficial or harmful, but you essentially only have two ways of looking at a situation: from the broad view of your healthy, loving side or from the narrow and negative perspective of your deceptive brain messages. Ultimately, the *choice* of how to view events is up to you—and it really is a choice!

That’s why learning to Revalue is so important—it is the final and ultimate step in your journey to clearly see what is happening in each moment of your

life. When you take even the weakest, seemingly tamest deceptive brain messages seriously and address them directly, you not only have the opportunity to Revalue them from the perspective of your Wise Advocate, but also to literally change the way your brain works. By building your capacity to resist the habit of taking things too personally, buying into thinking errors, or automatically responding to deceptive brain messages in an unhealthy manner, you become more adept at taking away their power while simultaneously increasing your level of mindful awareness and ingraining positive automatic responses into your brain. It's no easy task, as Sarah knows, but the more you practice using the Four Steps and allow the healthy side to break through your deceptive thoughts, urges, impulses, desires, and cravings, the easier it becomes.

Gaining Perspective Through Progressive Mindfulness

To develop that grander perspective of the Wise Advocate, however, requires that you realize and accept that you have been living life from a narrow point of view—that of the deceptive brain messages—and that seeing life in this way leads you to discount much of what you have achieved, not recognize how far you've come, not appreciate how monumental it is that you are seeking help and making positive changes in your life. Once you accept that this is what you have been doing, you can make a genuine commitment to change how you view the world and your experiences. When that happens, you are actively Revaluing in ways that are wholesome and beneficial to you.

The key to active Revaluing is learning how to operate from the perspective of your Wise Advocate on a consistent basis so that those positive patterns of thinking and behaving become ingrained in your brain. Remember, the brain cannot differentiate healthy from unhealthy behaviors on its own—it simply responds to the environment and where you actively focus your attention. This means that when you use the Four Steps and your Wise Advocate you are making your brain work to your advantage by teaching the Habit Center to choose new responses that are aligned with your true self.

As this happens, you will be able to *instantly* identify and dismiss deceptive brain messages while simultaneously *knowing* that the uncomfortable sensations are false and that Refocusing your attention on a healthy, constructive activity is your best option. This is the definition of *progressive mindfulness* and what we

hope you achieve the more you use the Four Steps.

PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS

Using your Wise Advocate to gain deeper levels of mindful awareness (through experience) so that you can clearly see the bothersome feelings, urges, fears, worries, cravings, negative ideas, and thinking errors as nothing more than deceptive brain messages.

Progressive mindfulness is important because it is the crux of the Four Steps. In this way, it's a rather advanced application of the Wise Advocate, which is why we waited until Step 4 to introduce it to you. When you are using progressive mindfulness and actively Revaluing, you approach your experiences and feelings as *a direct object of observation*. As you do this, you firmly and assertively label and strive to *directly experience* the sensations as *nothing but* deceptive brain messages.

Now, we know this concept is hard to grasp at first—after all, Step 4 is experiential, just like Step 1: Relabel, which makes it difficult to describe or understand exactly how this process unfolds. That said, the best way to think of Revaluing and progressive mindfulness is that it is an *experience, feeling, or knowledge* that allows you to see what is transpiring in this very moment as it is happening without distracting concepts or deceptive brain messages getting in the way.

In short, learning to Revalue is much like learning how to notice when you are lost in thought—they are both forms of mindfulness. The biggest difference, and it's a huge one, is that Revaluing is designed to help you gain deeper levels of awareness and understanding with more experience (i.e., progressive mindfulness). As such, Revaluing and progressive mindfulness are *the* aim of the Four Steps and your ultimate achievement.

That's why after you make significant progress Relabeling and Reframing, your goal shifts from repeatedly and methodically going through each of the first three steps (e.g., Step 1, then Step 2, then Step 3) to emphasizing Step 4: Revalue. As you enter into the active Revalue stage, you want to move *beyond* a mere cognitive understanding of your deceptive brain messages and instead get to the point of *directly experiencing* the bothersome sensations as *nothing but* a deceptive brain message. When you are able to do this, you no longer will need