

# Chapter 1

## Emotions

*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Long ago, something taught you that feelings aren't safe. You learned that grief, rage, frustration, stress, loneliness, and guilt were your enemies. Maybe you started to believe that they had superpowers, like the power to completely overwhelm you or the power to make you destroy all that you love. Maybe these feelings seemed to have the ability to knock you off your feet for good so that you can't live your life. Maybe it seemed that once the feelings got you in their grasp, you could never tell what you might do. Maybe you learned that you would never be okay unless you found a way *not* to feel.

So, naturally, you went looking for a solution. Maybe you've spent your life shadowboxing, always ready to throw a counterpunch against a feeling that tries to rise up inside of you. Maybe you've thrown other things at your feelings: a drink, a drug, a gallon of ice cream.

It's as if you've made a little contract with yourself:

*I, \_\_\_\_\_, will do whatever it takes not to feel my feelings. I am sure that emotions are the most dangerous things in the world. To win the war against my feelings, I am willing to live a life that is limited. I will never be my whole self. I will avoid my feelings by \_\_\_\_\_ (drinking, using, sleeping, having sex, gambling, cutting, eating, watching television, and so on) as much as possible; the more, the better.*

*Feeling my feelings will surely kill me. So I will give up most of my life rather than let my feelings exist.*

## The “No Feeling” Contract

In signing this contract, you have also made a deal with your addiction. You’ve said:

- *I will let my addiction dominate me, control me, rule my life.*
- *I will let my addiction take everything from me.*
- *I will give up on my dreams.*
- *I will give up on being the person I want to be.*
- *I will give up real happiness, real love, and good health.*
- *I will let my addiction destroy me.*

*Just don’t make me feel. Promise?* Why would anyone make a deal like this? Maybe you didn’t know what you were really signing up for when you started. You probably didn’t read the fine print. Most addictive behaviors don’t start off bringing the awful consequences and pain that they do later on. As one addict put it, “Long before it was a problem, it was my solution.” Your addictive behaviors probably started as a “solution” for you, too.

Does this sound strange? Maybe you are thinking, *How was my addiction a solution to my problems? It couldn’t bring back the people or things I lost. It definitely didn’t solve my financial problems. And if anything, it made my relationships even harder!*

Certainly, drinking alcohol, overeating, using drugs, or doing other addictive behaviors did not solve your immediate problems. Life is full of hard times, tragedies, and losses, and not one of them goes away when you get drunk. But the truth is, you aren’t trying to solve your *actual* problems with your addictive behaviors. The problems you are trying to solve are your *emotions*. You are looking for a way to escape them, bury them, hide from them, or try to turn them into something else. Your addiction let you do this for a while. It’s your temporary solution to the problem of feeling.

## Loss and Emotion

Throughout this book, you will be thinking about loss. Looking at the losses that have happened in your life will help you see why you do your addictive behavior, and give you more power in your fight for recovery. But why, specifically, are we looking at loss? Because loss, by its very nature, brings up emotions. When you are experiencing loss, and throughout your life as you cope with old losses, you may feel angry, sad, stressed, or fearful. You may feel helpless, lonely, or betrayed. Sometimes you may even feel relieved, detached, or numb. It’s likely that you will experience a whole range of feelings: sometimes three at once, sometimes twelve in the course of one day. At times, feelings will seem to hit like a tidal wave, knocking you to the ground from behind. At other

times they may seem like a dog nipping at your heels hour after hour, desperate to get your attention. At other times, these feelings may be tiny fleas that leave you squirming and itching all over.

One of the primary aims of this book is to help you to *accept* and *tolerate* your feelings. Notice that we didn't say *change* your feelings. Trying to change, decrease, control, or avoid feelings is part of what led to the addictive behavior you are trying to stop. Once you have worked through this book, you will probably feel less angry, stressed, hurt, hopeless, and afraid. Some of these feelings may even go away. But the most important point is that your feelings do not have to change for you to be okay. You are already okay.

This may sound like a radical idea. We can understand that. As we will explain later, you have learned a lot of things about feelings that aren't true. Part of the work ahead of you will be to unlearn the lessons that have been leading you astray. Keep an open mind; changing your mind will change your life!

## *Embracing the Dog*

A moment ago, we noted one way you might experience emotion: as a dog nipping at your heels. Let's explore that a little further so you can better understand how you may be responding to emotions in your life.

Picture your emotions as this dog: a mangy mutt you have no interest in adopting but who has somehow set up residence in your life. You have tried everything to get rid of this pesky beast. Why wouldn't you? There he is, day after day, under your desk at work, pulling at your pant leg, jumping up on you in the grocery store, distracting you when you are trying to drive. He doesn't smell great, either. You ask a coworker to take him off your hands. She politely says no, that she already has a few dogs of her own. You try locking this dog out of your house or keeping him in the garage. You even try leaving him at the park—not just any park, the one all the way across town—but there he is on the doorstep when you get home. He just sits there, waiting for you.

There are mornings when you wake up certain that this dog isn't going to bother you today, but within a few hours, he turns up, barking outside your shower door or pawing at you on your lunch break. Every day, you are getting more frustrated, more and more convinced that until you get rid of this dog, you'll be living in hell. You think, *I won't be able to stand another day of this*. You think, *If this dog doesn't leave me alone soon, I'm going to go crazy*.

It never occurs to you to *embrace* the dog. He is here to stay, after all. He is a part of your life, like it or not. You may not have invited him into your world, but he sure isn't leaving it. Can you accept that? Can you accept this dog?

Now imagine that you take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and take a good, long look at this dog. He isn't *scary*, really—more irritating than anything else. He just seems so *needy*, always scrambling for attention. Something in you begins to surrender. You give up. You shrug your shoulders, bend down, and pet the dog.

The strangest thing happens. He calms down. He stops nipping at you, stops pulling at your pant leg, and rolls over. Mystified, you stroke his belly for a minute and then make him a small bowl of food. He eats, finds a place near where you are sitting, curls up, and falls asleep.

This goes on for months. The dog is always near you; he never fully leaves you alone. A couple of times a day, you have to feed him and show him some affection. If you don't, he goes back to his old ways. He starts nipping and snarling, and driving you nuts. But as long as you notice him when he needs to be noticed, he isn't that much of a bother. He's always there, but not so much of a nuisance—just a part of life.

Think of all the time you might have wasted battling that dog, maybe days, weeks, or even months! You waste just as much time and energy trying to get rid of your emotions. Just like that dog, they are here to stay. They are a part of your life.

## Exercise 1.1 Journal Questions

1. Does this metaphor fit for you: your emotions as a pesky dog that you are avoiding?
2. If not, take some time to brainstorm and come up with an image that makes sense for you. Write about it in as much detail as you can. Be creative! Seeing your emotions in new ways will change your relationship to them.
3. If the metaphor does fit for you, how do you picture your dog? Is he a Chihuahua, a Great Dane, a pit bull? How aggressive does he get when he needs your attention?
4. When you try to ignore your dog, where is he most likely to turn up? While you are working, driving, eating? When you are alone, or with others? Does he wake you up at night and make it hard for you to sleep?
5. Have you ever tried embracing your dog? What is the result when you give him some attention?

## *Your Dog and Your Addiction*

After you've had a loss, whether it was a recent event or a loss from years ago that you've never dealt with, you may find yourself with a whole truckload of dogs to deal with. You may try to ignore those feelings, even as they become more and more bold at demanding your attention. When you try to avoid, ignore, or dismiss your natural emotions that come up, you do more of the things that bring short-term relief. You may seek refuge in things like gambling, drinking, abusing prescription pills, having sex on impulse, or overeating. These and other addictions give you short-term relief

by letting you ignore your emotions, but the long-term results are terrible. Over time, you fall into the clutches of addiction and are flooded with even more negative emotions, such as fear, disgust, loneliness, or helplessness. Your addiction turns that one dog into a wolf pack, snarling at your door. Believing that you can't stand these feelings either, you retreat even further into the things you are addicted to. Little by little, you disappear from your own life.

Could the answer to getting you back on the right path be as simple as embracing the dog?

- **Jim's Story**

Jim suffers a spinal-cord injury that leaves him in a wheelchair at age forty-two. His loss of mobility and sudden need for more support from his wife leave him feeling frustrated, vulnerable, and afraid.

As a child, Jim was left in charge of his three younger siblings because his mother abused drugs and alcohol. He learned not to ask for help from his mother, which would only have led her to reject or abuse him.

Since being injured, Jim finds himself pulling away from his wife. He has started watching pornography on the Internet; it is soothing to pay attention to that computer screen, rather than risk his wife seeing the pain and struggle inside of him. Jim's pornography use increases rapidly, finally moving up to six or more hours each day.

Feeling baffled, rejected, and alone, Jim's wife insists that they go to couple's counseling. In this setting, their therapist begins to unravel the false messages Jim learned as a child about feelings of need, pain, and fear.

Jim starts to notice an urge to look at pornography whenever feelings rise up within him. It's that "No Feeling" contract he signed, in which he agreed to give up his life for addiction just to avoid his emotions. Being aware of this gives Jim the chance to make other choices, ones that can lead him out of the cage of addiction.

## Unraveling Your False Beliefs about Emotions

If you or someone you know thought this book might help you, it's likely that your "solution" to your emotions has become a problem. That can be a scary, painful, and embarrassing thing to realize. Hang in there. There's a road out of addiction, and you are taking the first step. An important part of the work ahead is for you to understand how you relate to emotions and for you to change any harmful ways that you relate to them.

Think about it: what was it that made you choose to give up everything for your addiction, even as it stopped being your solution and became the greatest source of problems in your life?

Let's look at some of your *false beliefs* about emotions that have led you to avoid them at the expense of your life.

## Exercise 1.2 Identifying Your False Beliefs about Emotions

Here are some of the false beliefs about emotions that may be misleading you. Take a look at the list and see if any of these ideas has influenced you. Check the ones that sound familiar, and then add any others that come to mind.

- \_\_\_ *If I let myself grieve, I will be sad forever.*
- \_\_\_ *If I let myself be sad, I will become depressed and suicidal.*
- \_\_\_ *I won't be able to stand losing this good thing. I have to get rid of it now.*
- \_\_\_ *If I tell others how I feel, they will use it against me.*
- \_\_\_ *If I tell others how I feel, they will think I am weak.*
- \_\_\_ *Mood swings come and go with no warning.*
- \_\_\_ *If I take the time to feel this feeling, it will mean putting my entire life on hold.*
- \_\_\_ *Other people don't feel this way. There must be something wrong with me.*
- \_\_\_ *Only an immature person would get so emotional.*
- \_\_\_ *Anxiety is not a natural response; I have to get rid of it.*
- \_\_\_ *A good, strong, healthy person would not feel this way.*
- \_\_\_ *If someone else is having a different emotional reaction than I am, my emotional reaction is wrong.*
- \_\_\_ *If I let myself feel this pain, it will kill me.*
- \_\_\_ *A strong person is fearless.*
- \_\_\_ *Letting myself feel bad would mean falling to pieces, being a total mess, or wallowing in self-pity.*
- \_\_\_ *Good people don't get angry.*
- \_\_\_ *Being an adult means not getting carried away by emotion; I'm supposed to be rational!*
- \_\_\_ *If I had better self-esteem, I wouldn't be nervous.*
- \_\_\_ *Having emotions means I'm a "drama queen."*
- \_\_\_ *If I feel this emotion, I will lose all self-control.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Emotions like anger, hurt, and fear are destructive and dangerous.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Feelings can come out of nowhere.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I'm stupid for feeling this way. I should just suck it up!*

\_\_\_\_\_ Others: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## *Taking a Closer Look*

Let's explore some of these false beliefs in more detail.

*If I let myself grieve, I will be sad forever.* This particular false belief about emotion has perhaps caused more pain than any other. Loss is a part of every human life. No one is immune to loss. In fact, for most of us, losses are scattered across every chapter of our life stories. You will read about this in greater detail later in the book, but for starters, let's address this idea, this false belief, that grieving will somehow go on forever.

You may have heard people say something like: "Well, I *can't* fall apart right now; I have kids to take care of." That may be true, but what makes us think that giving ourselves the time and space to experience a loss will cause us to "fall apart"? In truth, you are more likely to "fall apart" when you try to stuff your natural emotions into a closet. You are also much more likely to reach for your addictive behavior to try to keep that closet door shut.

The idea that you will be in a never-ending state of grief is reinforced when you do not let yourself mourn. This is because the feelings in that closet are likely to sneak out. Remember that pesky dog? The feelings try to force you to face them time and time again until you really do.

**The truth.** Grief is a natural, healthy, and important part of healing. If you let yourself experience it, it will pass in good time.

*I won't be able to tolerate losing this good thing; I have to get rid of it now.* Many people create situations in which they can never have the things they want most. Why on earth do people do this? Because

they are so afraid that they will not be able to handle the way it would feel to lose those things they love. This simple fear can lead to more isolation, and less and less joy in your life. If you have fallen for this belief, you may not even realize it. You may actually toss aside or deny yourself some of the best gifts that show up on your doorstep: a wonderful, healthy relationship with someone great, an exciting new job, even moments of self-care, like a much-needed coffee break. You may be avoiding the greatest pleasures in life because you think it would be best that way. You are convinced that losing these good things would be too hard.

**The truth.** You can tolerate your feelings! Loss is a normal part of life. The real tragedy is denying yourself the joy that is part of life too.

*Other people don't feel this way; there must be something wrong with me; a strong person is fearless; good people don't get angry.* Thoughts like these send you the message that feelings are unnatural. They make you believe that you are somehow flawed for experiencing emotion. Being alive, being human, means experiencing the full range of human emotions. Trying to discount the less pleasant emotions or expecting yourself not to have them does nothing but increase your frustration and decrease your sense of self-worth.

**The truth.** Emotions are healthy and natural. It is our attempts to stop feeling that are unnatural and lead us to unhealthy and addictive behaviors!

*Feelings can come out of nowhere.* As we will see later, feelings don't come out of nowhere; this is a myth that never holds true. Still, it can certainly seem true! It may seem to you that you are minding your own business and these emotions come along like a pack of thugs to steal your day. It may seem that your mood swings any way it chooses, and there you are, clinging helplessly to the pendulum, hanging on for dear life. But the truth is, your emotion is coming from somewhere: it's coming from your mind. As you move further into this chapter and later ones, you will learn to notice and observe what your mind is up to. You will soon be able to predict your moods and trace your emotions back to their source. This will help you understand your experience, so that you are not left feeling hijacked by intense and unpredictable emotions.

**The truth.** Emotions do come from somewhere; they come from your mind. You can learn to connect thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Remember, you don't need to blame anyone for the false beliefs you learned about feelings. Chances are your parents, grandparents, siblings, and neighbors were all told the very same lies. Maybe your parents told you that feelings made you weak because they, too, thought feelings would harm you. They thought it would be best to teach you not to feel. Or maybe they tried to teach you to have only "nice feelings," leaving out the trickier ones like anger, rage, sadness, loneliness, and anxiety. It's no surprise that you believed these messages about feelings and that you signed that



“No Feeling” contract and gave your life away. Now you are unraveling those false beliefs. This is the first step on your journey to reclaim your life.

## Emotion Dodging

At this point, it is beneficial to get a better understanding of the *ways* you have been trying not to feel certain emotions. Some of these methods may be related to your addictive behaviors. Others may seem pretty harmless; the trouble arises only when you use them again and again to hide from your feelings. Remember, locking that pesky barking dog in the garage may work for a while, but the only way to find permanent peace is to accept him as a part of your life.

## Exercise 1.3 Emotion-Dodging Methods

Look at some of the ways people try to control or get away from their feelings. Have you ever used any of these methods to dodge a feeling? Write a check mark next to any you have tried.

- ☐ Watching too much TV
- ☐ Smoking cigarettes
- ☐ Turning off your phone or staying away from friends
- ☐ Exercising too much
- ☐ Eating too much
- ☐ Gambling
- ☐ Worrying over and over again about something you can't control
- ☐ Drinking alcohol
- ☐ Using drugs
- ☐ Using medications in ways your doctor did not prescribe
- ☐ Cutting or harming yourself in other ways
- ☐ Storming out to avoid a conversation
- ☐ Lying about how you feel
- ☐ Skipping work
- ☐ Sleeping too much
- ☐ Staying in bed
- ☐ Complaining too much to others
- ☐ Placing blame
- ☐ Telling yourself, *Suck it up* or *It's no big deal*
- ☐ Shopping when you have no money
- ☐ Others: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Next, let's look at an example to help you pinpoint ways that people dodge emotions and what the results might be.

- **Jerry's Story**

Jerry, a thirty-three-year-old construction worker, was married once before, to his high-school sweetheart, who divorced him after his reckless driving during an argument caused them to get into a serious car crash. Jerry has been married to his current wife for three years, and the couple is expecting their first child in a few months. Jerry recently lost his job and lost a good friend, when he and the friend got into a fight at a job site.

Jerry comes to treatment with some very clear goals in mind. "I get so mad sometimes," he says. "I start to shake inside, actually shake, like having a tremor. My wife is scared of me." He looks away from the counselor sitting across from him and stares at the wall instead. "I need to be less angry," he decides.

Jerry goes on to explain that he has been working hard to control his emotions, and for a while now, he has "succeeded" at controlling his anger. Success for Jerry means not yelling, cursing, or verbally intimidating his wife, and not breaking anything or causing damage to their house. Jerry achieves this in two ways: by avoiding his wife as much as he can, sometimes hardly speaking to her at all and never about anything that might frustrate him, and by smoking large amounts of marijuana daily.

In Jerry's work in therapy, it soon becomes clear that his biggest fear is of getting angry. He will do just about anything to prevent this. In his experience, feeling anger means acting out, getting out of control. It simply isn't safe. He is sure his anger will destroy the thing that matters most to him: his relationship with his wife. "If it keeps happening, I know she'll leave me," he says. "I have to smoke weed to stay calm. I'm thinking about getting a medical marijuana card. It's just better if I'm numb."

When Jerry reports that he *has* to smoke marijuana to be numb instead of angry, what is he really saying? He is repeating the messages he has always heard about feelings: that his only choices are to be knocked to his knees by his own feelings or find a way to "succeed" at not feeling them at all.

Remember, life brings emotions no matter what. Along with joys and pleasures, life includes pain and struggle (whether we like it or not). Hiding from these feelings and experiences, or trying to ignore or control them only increases our pain and unease in the long run. Jerry's attempts to dodge emotions are doomed to fail in the long run, due to the simple fact that his attempts aim to *get rid of* his feelings, rather than accept and deal with them. Once Jerry learns to notice his frustration, he can use it as a guide and begin to address what's really bothering him in a calm way.

## Exercise 1.4 Consequences of Emotion Dodging

Now it's your turn to take a good look at the ways that you have been dodging emotions and what the results of those methods might be.

Look back at the list of "Emotion-Dodging Methods" (see the previous exercise) to see which ones you have been using in your own life. It's likely that you have used several, but for now, choose the five most common methods you use. Write each of your five methods in the following spaces, and after them, write any consequences to using these methods that you can think of. Start with your favorite emotion-dodging method. But first, think about Jerry's example for guidance.

### Jerry's Emotion-Dodging Strategies and Consequences

Jerry's emotion-dodging strategies: smoking pot, avoiding difficult conversations, avoiding my wife  
(perceived trigger of emotion)

Jerry's consequences: loss of money (spent on drugs), not applying for certain jobs due to drug testing, decreased motivation to do social activities, distance from wife, lack of relationship with her, fear of not being a good dad to my child

### Your Emotion-Dodging Strategies and Consequences

1. Your emotion-dodging strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible consequences: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Your emotion-dodging strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible consequences: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Your emotion-dodging strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible consequences: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Your emotion-dodging strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible consequences: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Your emotion-dodging strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Possible consequences: \_\_\_\_\_

# Getting to Know Your Feelings

Remember, the reason you started using these strategies was that you thought dodging your feelings was the solution. The false beliefs you learned about emotions made you think you had to avoid, decrease, or get rid of them.

Part of the trouble here is that you likely don't know what you are dealing with. Most of us have been avoiding our feelings for so long that we may not be able to tell *what* we are feeling at all. You may not know what's normal in the world of feeling, like grief, and when you may need outside help—maybe therapy or other treatments—like for depression. It isn't surprising that emotions are not familiar to you. Think about the following analogy.

Imagine that you have a neighbor who has lived next door to you for thirty years. After thirty years of living so close to one another, you would assume that you and he would have some kind of relationship. But you are not even sure what his name is! You don't know what he does for work or even if he has children. How can this be?

Well, at some point early on, you heard a rumor about him. You heard that he was a dangerous criminal, a heartless killer. It isn't true; he's a heck of a guy. But nobody told you that. In fact, all the neighbors got the same misinformation that you got. For thirty years, you have avoided this man at all costs, pretending not to hear him call out, "Good morning," from across the lawn; keeping your head down when he pulls into his driveway; never meeting his eye. Come to think of it, you're not even sure what this guy looks like.

It may seem ridiculous to be so out of touch with your emotions that you can't even give them a name, but if you think about this example, it's not surprising. No matter how long you have lived with your feelings, if you have never looked them in the eye and shaken hands, if you have run to your addictive behavior at the very sight of them, your feelings may very well be strangers to you.

The following pages will help you get to know your feelings. Remember to take it easy on yourself; don't worry if you have trouble identifying what you are feeling at first. Like everything in this workbook (and in life!), this is a process. It's all about being *willing* to learn and practice your new skills.

## *Common Emotions*

Think about the following list of common emotions. There are several more, of course, but this is a good starting place. Use this list as a reference whenever you have trouble identifying the emotion you are feeling. The list may help you name the emotion. When you are really in doubt, go back to the basics: afraid, sad, glad, mad, or ashamed. Most of the following emotions fall into one of those categories. Having at least a general sense of whether what you feel is fear, sadness, happiness, anger, or shame will give you a good initial guide.

Table 1.1 List of Common Emotions

| <b>Afraid</b> | <b>Sad</b>    | <b>Glad</b>  | <b>Mad</b>     | <b>Ashamed</b> |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| anxious       | blue          | appreciative | annoyed        | degraded       |
| frightened    | brokenhearted | content      | betrayed       | devalued       |
| horrified     | closed off    | delighted    | bitter         | embarrassed    |
| nervous       | depressed     | elated       | enraged        | frozen         |
| numb          | disappointed  | excited      | frustrated     | guilty         |
| paralyzed     | discouraged   | grateful     | furious        | hopeless       |
| scared        | empty         | honored      | hateful        | humiliated     |
| shaky         | heavyhearted  | joyful       | indignant      | judged         |
| shocked       | hopeless      | moved        | irritated      | regretful      |
| shy           | hurt          | proud        | jealous        | remorseful     |
| startled      | lonely        | relaxed      | out of control | ridiculed      |
| suspicious    | remorseful    | relieved     | resentful      | used           |
| terrified     | tearful       | serene       | stunned        | worthless      |
| worried       | uncertain     | thrilled     | vengeful       | wounded        |

## Exercise 1.5 Learning about Your Feelings

As we said before, sometimes all your emotions really need is some attention. In this simple exercise, we ask you to bring your *full attention* to the emotion you are feeling in a certain moment. This is your chance to really get to know your feelings. Remember, you're not running from your emotions anymore, so why not turn around and shake hands?

This is not about the mind or whatever is flying around in there; now is the time to pay attention to the *physical sensation* of the emotion you are feeling now. Your thoughts are interpretations. Don't interpret! There's no need. Your only job here is to *notice*. Your job is to *observe*.

Start by finding a comfortable place to sit. Sitting upright is best, but you can lie down if you need to. Try to find a quiet place with few distractions. When you are ready to get started, close your eyes. You are taking a journey into your body. Imagine that you are a scientist, looking for as much detailed data as you can find.

As you move into your body, ask yourself these questions:

1. *Where is the feeling? What parts of my body are holding the feeling?*
2. *What size is the feeling?*
3. *Where are its edges?*
4. *What color is the feeling? Does it change color as I pay attention to it, or does it stay the same?*
5. *Is the feeling heavy? Is it light?*
6. *Is the feeling hard or soft? Is it rough or smooth? If I could touch this feeling with my hand, what would I notice?*
7. *Do I know what the feeling is? Can I identify it? (Give it a name: Red Glare, Chest Pincher, and so on—whatever is a fit for you.)*

Keep exploring the feeling in this way for at least five minutes. When you feel that you have reached a level of comfort with and understanding of this feeling, open your eyes. Slowly bring your attention back to the room you are in and your position in the room. Shake your arms and legs lightly. This is a good time to use your journal to write about the experience.

As you do this exercise again and again, introducing yourself to different emotions and getting to know them, you may want to record the experience so that you can remember it. This will let you compare the sensations of different feelings. For example, is anger held in the same place in your body as sadness? Or is it somewhere else? It will be especially helpful to keep track of the names you give to the various feelings. That way, if the name Chest Pincher keeps popping up, you can keep track of the times this emotion seems to arise.

## Exercise 1.6 How Would You Feel?

This exercise is designed to help you identify the feelings that might come up in different situations. It may seem pretty simple, but it's worthwhile. Remember, the more you interact with your emotions, the less they are strangers. And the less your emotions are strangers to you, the more likely you are to engage with them freely, instead of dodging them the way you used to do.

For each of the following situations, identify an emotion that could arise. Write it in the blank space next to the situation. If you think of more than one emotion, choose the one that you think you would be most likely to feel. Use the "List of Common Emotions" (table 1.1) to give you some suggestions when you need them.

1. *The person I love is in love with someone else.* \_\_\_\_\_
2. *I find five dollars in a pocket of my jeans.* \_\_\_\_\_
3. *I forgot my mother's birthday.* \_\_\_\_\_
4. *I am lost in a bad neighborhood.* \_\_\_\_\_
5. *I see a full moon.* \_\_\_\_\_
6. *My dog is hit by a car.* \_\_\_\_\_
7. *I am waiting for a call from someone special.* \_\_\_\_\_
8. *My favorite team wins the Super Bowl.* \_\_\_\_\_
9. *I finish a project at work.* \_\_\_\_\_
10. *My car breaks down.* \_\_\_\_\_
11. *I am on a plane to Paris.* \_\_\_\_\_
12. *I am on a plane to visit my family.* \_\_\_\_\_
13. *I can't find my car keys.* \_\_\_\_\_
14. *My closest friend is moving away.* \_\_\_\_\_
15. *I wake up from a bad dream in the middle of the night.* \_\_\_\_\_



## Exercise 1.7 Connecting Emotions to Life Situations

Using this worksheet, identify times in your past when you felt each of these emotions. Doing this will help you connect emotions with specific situations. You don't need to choose examples of times when your emotions were intense. For now, keep it simple. For example, you may have felt sad when you ripped your favorite shirt or angry when someone cut ahead of you in line.

A time I felt **angry** was:

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A time I felt **sad** was:

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A time I felt **happy** was:

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A time I felt **scared** was:

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A time I felt **ashamed** was:

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Good job connecting your emotions to life situations. You will need this skill as we forge ahead in making other important connections.

Review the introduction on page 1 for your first visit with the Gomez family.

## A Visit with the Gomez Family

Tony faces a lot of challenges as he works through this chapter. So much talk about emotions seems silly to him, even worthless at times. Tony's years in the navy didn't include much talk about feelings, after all. And he has gotten by just fine, hasn't he? Other times it just feels overwhelming for him to look at all this stuff. *The past is the past*, he tells himself. *Why sit around thinking about it?* At one point Tony shoves his workbook in a drawer. *Maybe I overreacted*, he thinks. *Maybe my drinking isn't that bad*. Still, Tony can't help but notice that the things he has read make sense. It's hard to argue with good logic. He knows in his gut that he isn't drinking away his nights and risking his job and his family because it feels good. This hasn't felt good in a very long time. He is hiding. He is running from his feelings and hiding in his addictive behavior, just as the book says. He signed the "No Feeling" contract without reading the fine print. That's a tough thing to swallow. But it helps a lot to see the list of false beliefs about emotions.

Tony especially identifies with the false belief that letting himself feel things would mean that he was wallowing in self-pity, something he was raised never to do. He can also see how his family and his time in the military taught him that strong people don't feel scared or hurt—or if they do, they sure don't show it! But it makes a lot of sense to Tony that seeing things that way has led to *emotion dodging*, particularly the urge to drink that is taking over his life. Tony takes his workbook out of the drawer and slowly begins to give emotions a chance.

Carmen feels a bit more comfortable dealing with emotions, but she begins to notice that she is not quite as familiar with her feelings as she thought. This becomes very clear when she looks at the list of emotion-dodging methods. She knows that her compulsive online shopping is a problem; that's why she picked up the workbook in the first place. What she didn't notice was the half a dozen other ways she avoids her feelings. Carmen starts to see how whenever she tries not to shop, she overeats or watches TV for hours on end. She has been avoiding her friends, even turning off her phone for days, since A. J.'s death. Hardest of all to notice is how this emotion dodging also causes her to dodge something she never wanted to avoid: her relationship with her daughter, Tina.

Thinking about all of this is painful. In fact, Carmen's online shopping increases dramatically for a little while as she grapples with what she is learning in the book. What she finds most helpful is picturing her emotions as a pesky mutt that just won't go away. She decides to embrace her dog by drawing a picture of him in her journal and giving him a name. When feelings come up that she wants to dodge, she takes a deep breath and imagines petting that dog. She thinks about giving her feeling of sadness some attention. It is pretty surprising how quickly Carmen notices a difference. Paying attention to the sadness doesn't make the feeling worse; it makes it pass faster! Experimenting in this way gives Carmen the hope she needs to keep working through the book, and she looks forward to seeing even more progress in the future.

## Conclusion

Like Carmen and Tony, you have likely had some ups and downs while doing the work in this chapter. Maybe there have been times when you wanted to quit or when your addiction got worse. You may have lost faith at that point or thought, *This won't work for me*. All of that is *normal*. This is a process, and you are only at the beginning. You are on your way to lasting change and recovery; keep up the good work!



## Chapter 2

# Thoughts

*We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts, we make our world.*

—The Buddha

Now that you have a better sense of what emotions look like and when certain feelings are most likely to arise, it's time to start considering your thoughts. Remember that two of the common false beliefs about emotions are *Feelings can come out of nowhere* and *Mood swings come and go with no warning*. If you believe either of those things, you probably feel really helpless and uncomfortable when faced with feelings. Your emotions seem hard to predict. They seem to arrive out of the blue, and there you are, a boat in the storm, just waiting for the wind to die down again.

The truth is (thank goodness) that your emotions are not that unpredictable. Your emotions are intricately connected to your *thoughts*.

## How Thoughts Connect to Emotions

The connection between feelings and thoughts was first explained by Aaron Beck (1976), a psychiatrist known for founding cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Since then, CBT has helped countless people to cope with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, alcohol and drug problems, and more. Understanding this connection will make a difference in your life, too.

Here's what usually happens:

1. A situation arises.
2. You have a *thought*.
3. The thought stirs up an *emotion*.
4. Your emotion triggers *more and more thoughts*, which trigger *stronger and stronger emotions*.
5. Your *behavior* follows these thoughts and emotions. You act in ways that bring about similar situations, which then reinforce your negative thoughts, and the cycle repeats itself.

The trouble usually begins around step 2. In looking back at difficult situations in your life, you may be able to identify step 1, the trigger: *A man cut me off on the highway*, and step 3, the emotion: *I'm furious*. But how well can you pinpoint what happened in between: at step 2? After the trigger and before the emotion—sometimes so fast you don't even register it—there was a thought. In fact, there were probably several: *That guy is a jerk. He thinks he owns the road. He thinks he's better than I am. I don't have to put up with this. It isn't fair.*

Most of the time, you are probably unaware of what your mind is really up to, so when an emotion arises, you can't see the chain of events that led to it. Later on, you will learn skills for observing your mind. But for now, let's begin with an example. (The examples in this workbook may not fit you completely. Everyone's experiences are different. However, there will probably be some similarities. Try to focus on the ways you *can* relate, rather than look for ways to see yourself as different.)

- Sandra's Story

Sandra has no plans for the weekend. On Friday night she is exhausted from the workweek and content just to eat some dinner, drink a bottle of wine, and go to bed. Saturday morning she sleeps in a bit and later has time to run some errands. It's all going well until she has the thought that she has been alone all day on Saturday. She begins to feel lonely.

So, here it is: an emotion. Perhaps Sandra has learned some of the strategies you are learning, and can accept and tolerate this emotion for what it is. But let's assume she's stuck in the usual, unhelpful pattern many people are caught in. What happens then?

In response to the emotion, Sandra's mind kicks in and tries to be helpful. It tries to explain why she is feeling what she is feeling (in this case, lonely) by throwing thought upon thought into the situation. Here are just a few of the many thoughts that begin to churn in Sandra's mind:

- *Everyone else is out doing something fun.*
- *Why don't I have any friends? What's wrong with me?*

- *If I had just done things differently...*
- *I must be too boring or unattractive.*
- *Everyone else has someone to spend time with right now, and I am alone. Again, what is wrong with me?*
- *Nobody likes me. That kid from fourth grade was right; I am a loser.*
- *I can't spend every weekend like this for the rest of my life. Who could live that way? I'll be miserable all the time!*
- *There's no point in calling anyone; they won't want to spend time with me. I don't need to feel rejected on top of everything else!*

By this point, Sandra has concluded that she is feeling lonely right now, and she will be lonely forever. And because of the meanings her mind has attached to this feeling of loneliness, Sandra will likely take actions that might cause her belief to become more and more of a reality.

You will learn more about Sandra and the actions that keep this negative spiral going when we focus on behaviors in chapter 3. For now, let's look further into what Sandra's mind is up to.

## Repeat-Offender Thoughts

The irony is that when Sandra's mind kicks in to address her loneliness, it is really doing its best to make things better for Sandra. It determines that there's a problem, and it systematically seeks answers. It wants to figure out what's "wrong" with Sandra so she can fix it.

The trouble is, of course, that Sandra's mind may be looking in the entirely wrong direction. Her mind has limited the source of the "problem" to herself, specifically to what she perceives as her flaws. Because she has likely thought these very same thoughts a thousand times before, the pathways in her mind are already connected in a way that heads right for those thoughts in any new situation. They are her "go-to" thoughts. And because her mind already has these thoughts to head for, it has stopped looking for any new, realistic, alternative thoughts. It has stopped looking at the big picture. It has become locked into a rigid, narrow way of viewing things.

All of us have deeply ingrained views that make up our *core beliefs* about ourselves, about our relationships, and about the world around us. These core beliefs can be positive. If most of yours are positive, it's likely that you have a natural feeling of peace and comfort in the world. You learned that the world is usually a safe, happy place in which people can be trusted and you are valued and loved. People whose core beliefs are positive have a sense that everything is okay. Their thoughts reflect this positive viewpoint too:

*It'll turn out all right. I can handle this. Maybe he didn't mean that the way it sounded; I should give him the benefit of the doubt and ask him.*

For many people, however, core beliefs tend to be negative. These negative core beliefs come with repetitive negative thoughts, which we refer to as *repeat offenders*. Often hidden or disguised, these thoughts underlie many of the thoughts that go through your mind during the day. If you have a sudden change in mood, it's likely that one of your repeat offenders is at work. You may not even notice your repeat offender thoughts until your emotions let you know that these thoughts are there.

## *How Repeat-Offender Thoughts Are Born*

These repeat-offender thoughts have probably been with you since childhood, when you were learning how the world works and what your place in it would be. You believed certain messages and kept them locked in place, even as they kept hurting you. It's as if you did not know where to find the key to unlock these repeat offenders and let them go.

To help you understand this concept, think about the following examples.

- **Janet's Story**

Janet has been told all her life that good girls never complain. She has learned to smile brightly no matter what she feels inside. Ever since her parents divorced when she was ten years old, Janet has worked hard to contain the heartache that came over her. Her repeat offenders include *You are too ungrateful; you should be happy* and *Don't bother anyone; deal with it yourself and do it quietly*.

While being grateful and taking care of yourself are wonderful qualities, when taken to these extremes they are destructive and devastating. No human being can be happy or grateful *all* the time. Janet's attempts to be that way have led her to secretly cut herself on the inside of her thighs, where no one can see. She also has begun abusing painkillers like Vicodin (hydrocodone bitartrate and acetaminophen) and OxyContin (oxycodone) to try to numb the feelings she tells herself she shouldn't have. Janet harms herself to avoid revealing to anyone that she feels pain.

- **Doug's Story**

Doug's father left the family when Doug was four years old. When Doug was six, he and his mother and brother moved to a new city, and his mother remarried. Doug's stepfather was violent and verbally abusive. He often told Doug that he had better be good at



football, because all he had was “brawn and no brains.” Doug’s older brother was praised as the “brains” of the family.

Doug’s main repeat offender is *I’m stupid*, but whenever he is around other people, it becomes *I’m not as smart as they are*. This insecurity around groups of people really contributes to Doug’s cocaine addiction. He starts using drugs to fit in and to distract himself from the thoughts that make him feel so bad about himself.

- Sarah’s Story

Sarah is the youngest of five children. She remembers her family being happy and healthy. When Sarah was eight, her uncle was killed in a convenience-store robbery. From then on, she has been terrified of dying. No one in the family wanted to upset Sarah’s father, who took the loss especially hard, so they didn’t talk about her uncle’s death or show the emotions surrounding their grief. Sarah learned that death was a frightening, unnatural event that had turned her whole family into zombies. She became a nervous child who withdrew more and more. Sarah developed compulsions to relieve some of her anxious feelings.

In adulthood, Sarah’s secret food addiction is one way she tries to cope with her obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Sarah’s repeat offenders include *The world is not a safe place*, *Don’t talk about how you feel*, and *I am not okay*.

## *Breaking Away from Repeat-Offender Thoughts*

As you will begin to notice, these messages (and the core beliefs that came out of them) are unrealistic and skewed. Your views about yourself and the world, interpreted through your eyes when you were a child, are cloudy. Yet they became set in stone and followed you into adulthood.

Finding your own repeat offenders will help you to notice when they are at work. Once you know your repeat offenders are there, you can break free from them and find a new, more balanced, and more realistic perspective.

## Exercise 2.1 Identifying Your Repeat-Offender Thoughts

Consider the following list of common repeat offenders. Check any that make sense for you. Then, add any others that come to mind.

1. *I am not smart enough.* \_\_\_\_\_
2. *I can't do it.* \_\_\_\_\_
3. *It's not fair.* \_\_\_\_\_
4. *I am not safe.* \_\_\_\_\_
5. *I never get what I want.* \_\_\_\_\_
6. *I'm not good enough.* \_\_\_\_\_
7. *I will fail.* \_\_\_\_\_
8. *They won't like me.* \_\_\_\_\_
9. *I won't like them.* \_\_\_\_\_
10. *I am better than they are.* \_\_\_\_\_
11. *I am not as good as they are.* \_\_\_\_\_
12. *It won't work out.* \_\_\_\_\_
13. *This isn't how it's supposed to be.* \_\_\_\_\_
14. *I'm not attractive enough.* \_\_\_\_\_
15. *I can't handle this.* \_\_\_\_\_
16. *I am going to be alone forever.* \_\_\_\_\_
17. *It's all my fault.* \_\_\_\_\_
18. *It's all their fault.* \_\_\_\_\_
19. *I'm not supposed to feel this way.* \_\_\_\_\_
20. *No one cares about me.* \_\_\_\_\_
21. *I am too damaged to be loved.* \_\_\_\_\_

22. *I can't have the good things other people have.* \_\_\_\_\_

23. Others: \_\_\_\_\_

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### WHO SAYS?

When you hear your repeat offenders and really listen, you may notice that they take on the voice, accent, or way of speaking of someone you know or used to know. This could be a parent or grandparent, a sibling, a teacher, a coach, or anyone else who had an influence on you as you grew up. There may be times when you can't connect a *person* to the repeat offender, but you can recall an *event* or something that happened that may have caused you to form a certain core belief. Tracing your repeat offenders back to where they started can be very healing. It takes the power out of them and lets you see them for what they are: lies you accepted as facts a long time ago.

## Exercise 2.2 Where Did Your Repeat-Offender Thoughts Come From?

Use the following space to think about possible sources of your own repeat offenders. Remember, this isn't about blaming others. This is *your* path to healing; it's about gaining understanding for yourself so that you can move forward. Use the list of common repeat offenders from the last exercise if you need help identifying your own, and then write each in the following space. Consider possible ways that you first developed these ideas. You don't have to figure it all out. These are just ideas, whatever comes to mind. There's no right or wrong answer. Just let yourself explore and see what you find.

### Example A

Repeat offender/core belief: *I'm never going to be able to do this job; I know they are going to fire me! I will fail.*

Person or event that may have led to the belief: *I can remember my grandfather telling me when I was ten that I shouldn't bother doing my homework because no one in my family ever graduated anyway; during my first job as a waiter when I was sixteen, the manager fired me one day and never said why.*

### Example B

Repeat offender/core belief: *There's no point in trying to explain to my husband how I feel; people care only about themselves anyway. I just have to handle it on my own.*

Person or event that may have led to the belief: *My mother used to tell us that we could depend only on ourselves, especially after my dad left. She used to say, "You can't think people will be there when you need them; you have to grow up and learn to do things for yourself in this world!"*

### Your Responses

Repeat offender/core belief:

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Person or event that may have led to the belief:

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Repeat offender/core belief:

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Person or event that may have led to the belief:

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Repeat offender/core belief:

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Person or event that may have led to the belief:

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Repeat offender/core belief:

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Person or event that may have led to the belief:

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Repeat offender/core belief:

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Person or event that may have led to the belief:

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## Why Is Your Thinking Misleading?

Earlier we discussed how your repeat-offender thoughts are often—in fact, almost always—inaccurate. This is because they developed when you were a child and your thinking was simple.

A good way to see the difference between children's thinking and the way we think as adults is to look at entertainment. Children's movies always have a *good guy* and a *bad guy*. The bad guy is often dressed in dark colors; he speaks in a sinister tone, and everything he does is selfish and cruel. The good guy, on the other hand, is attractive and engaging. If he makes any mistakes, they are minor and short term, he regrets them very quickly, and he learns from the consequences with the help of friends and family. Any three-year-old can tell you who is the good guy and who is the bad guy in a children's movie. But what about us, as adults?

The adult world is not so clear cut. It's full of gray areas. Our movies depict criminals who love their families, who can be vicious in one scene and tender toward loved ones in another. Take *The Godfather* (Puzo and Ford Coppola 1972), for example. In this film, we can sympathize with Michael Corleone (played by Al Pacino) as a family man, even though he's also a ruthless criminal. One of our most important tasks as we enter adulthood is to develop the ability to

weigh information, look at a situation from many angles, and make a balanced judgment. We can consider many possibilities, including the reasons or motives behind someone's behavior, rather than put everything into a specific category like "good" or "bad."

Unfortunately, your repeat-offender thoughts were created when you still had only a limited understanding of the world. That's why, when you made mistakes, you were "bad." If someone yelled at you, you didn't imagine that the person was having a bad day or acted out of her own fears. You immediately decided that it was because there was something wrong with *you*.

You also listened closely to what the adults in your life were saying. You believed they knew better, maybe even that they knew everything, so what they said must be the truth. This is because you were young; you needed the adults in your life to know everything about the world so that you could trust them to keep you safe. Now, as an adult, you know that nobody gets everything right. But back then, you took what the grown-ups said as gospel. What they taught you, whether it makes sense now or not, likely shapes your repeat-offender thoughts even after all this time.

## Considering the Evidence

We all know the importance of evidence, because the United States justice system was founded on the principle that people are innocent until they have been proven guilty. We consider any evidence that a person might be innocent (is there an alibi?) and take into account many factors when deciding what the punishment should be (is this a first offense?). Without this process, we might make horrible mistakes in judgment. Innocent people may be sent to prison for crimes they did not commit.

You have thoughts running through your mind all day long. Sometimes they are lightweight, easily passing thoughts:

*I like that red shirt.*

*It looks like it might rain.*

Sometimes you grab hold of these thoughts and make them heavier:

*Why can't I afford a shirt like that?*

*Driving in the rain later will be so dangerous.*

And sometimes they become your repeat offenders and really weigh you down:

*I never get what I deserve.*

*I am going to get hurt.*

Learning to consider the evidence will be a powerful skill for you when you have to deal with your repeat offenders and negative core beliefs. This skill will allow you to make the kind of balanced, realistic interpretations that lead to good decision making and a healthy sense of self.

## *Finding Balance in Your Thoughts*

Mistaken thinking can be pretty strong. And, as we said earlier, because your mind has been reaching for the same thoughts over and over for so long, it may be hard for you to start thinking in new, more realistic ways. To help you with this, here are some examples of *balanced evaluations* that you may want to use in the upcoming “Consider the Evidence” worksheet.

- *I’m only human.*
- *Nobody’s perfect; I can understand that they made a mistake.*
- *This is something about myself that I am willing to work on.*
- *That person did hurt me, but it might not have been intentional. I wonder what was going on for him right then.*
- *I am not all good or all bad.*
- *Sometimes things don’t go my way, and that’s frustrating, but I can take it.*
- *Everyone makes mistakes; I can learn from mine and move forward.*
- *It’s good for me to assert myself; I just need to do it in healthy ways.*
- *I can manage this; I have managed hard times before!*
- *No one is 100 percent to blame—not me and not the other person.*
- *I act badly sometimes and do things I regret, but I can always try to remedy the situation.*
- *Next time I will handle things differently.*
- *There’s no such thing as “always” or “never.”*
- *Making mistakes doesn’t mean I’m stupid, broken, weak, or bad.*
- *I have a lot of blessings in my life to be grateful for, despite the hard times.*
- *Maybe I’m being too hard on myself or somebody else.*



## Exercise 2.3 Consider the Evidence Worksheet

When you identify a repeat offender at work in your mind, use this worksheet. It would be a good idea to make several blank copies of this page. You could also do the work in your journal and use this worksheet as a guide.

You are likely to have many thoughts moving through your mind at once. Choose one to focus on at a time. You can then go back and do the exercise again with the other thoughts.

Before getting started, think about the following examples. Review the previous “Balanced Evaluations” as needed.

### Example A

Thought: *I’m not a nice person.*

Evidence that this is true: *I snapped at the waiter at lunch. Dave is mad at me for not visiting Mom’s grave on Mother’s Day. I was tired and didn’t take out the trash when my wife asked me to last night.*

Evidence that this is not 100 percent true: *I helped Aunt Joan move last month, even though I was busy and my back hurt. I think about Mom and pray for her whenever I see her picture. I am usually a good tipper and friendly to people. I try to be helpful around the house.*

Balanced evaluation: *Sometimes I’m rude when I am having a bad day, but nobody’s perfect. Going to Mom’s grave would have been too painful for me right now; I can grieve in my own ways. I don’t always help around the house as much as I should, but that doesn’t make me a bad person; it’s just something I want to work on. I’m human.*

What, if anything, could you do to improve this situation? *I could call Dave and ask him how the visit went, and maybe even explain why I chose not to go. I can practice being friendly and patient with others, and maybe apologize to the waiter. I can do something nice for my wife, like clean up the kitchen as a surprise.*

### Example B

Thought: *Nothing ever goes my way; it isn’t fair!*

Evidence that this is true: *I didn’t get the job I wanted, even though I am qualified. Our car broke down again. My best friend never has to struggle with her weight like I do, and her husband makes so much money that they never have to worry like we do.*

Evidence that this is not 100 percent true: *We’ve been making ends meet ever since I lost my job, and we aren’t going to end up on the streets. I may not be skinny, but my health is good and I’m lucky I haven’t gotten the diabetes that runs in our family. I have a loving husband and kids to cherish.*

Balanced evaluation: *Sometimes things don’t turn out the way I want and I don’t get the things I think I need, but we always get through it. It doesn’t matter what other people have; some people have more and some people have less than I do. I have a lot to be grateful for.*

What, if anything, could you do to improve this situation? *I can keep a gratitude list to stay focused on the positive. I can keep putting out applications and living in a healthy way, whether I get what I want or not.*

## Your Responses

Use this worksheet to balance your unbalanced thoughts.

Thought: \_\_\_\_\_

Evidence that this is true: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Evidence that this is not 100 percent true: \_\_\_\_\_

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Balanced evaluation: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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What, if anything, could you do to improve the situation? \_\_\_\_\_

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# Distracting Thoughts

Remember, our repeat offenders, by their very nature, are inaccurate. These types of thoughts may distract you and prevent you from getting closer to your goal. Distracting thoughts can sidetrack you, leading you down a wrong path. These thoughts divert you from reaching your full potential. That's why observing and identifying your distracting thoughts is so important.

Neuroscientists at the Kavli Institute for Systems Neuroscience at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology have found what the brain uses to filter out distracting thoughts and focus on a single bit of information. They compare your brain to a radio. You're turning the knob to find your favorite radio station, but the knob jams and you're stuck listening to that fuzzy sound between stations. It's incredibly frustrating. According to researcher Laura Colgin and her colleagues (2009), tuning in to the right frequency is the only way to really hear what you're trying to hear. This requires concentration and practice. By identifying and changing your distracting thoughts, you are actually changing how your brain works for you. You are tuning in to the thoughts you want to focus on and tuning out your distracting thoughts. You are changing your mind!

It's helpful to be aware of the *types* of distracting thoughts. Take a look at the five common "thought distractions" that follow. Notice the ones that seem familiar to you.

## *All Good or All Bad Thinking*

You see everything in one of two categories: something or someone is either all good or all bad; there is no in between. If your boss doesn't give you that raise, she is all bad, even though she supported your time off work when your father was ill last year. The idea of a person or experience having both good and not-so-good qualities surprises you. Is "all good or all bad" thinking distracting you from making the most of your experiences and relationships?

Write down examples of your "all good or all bad" thinking:

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## *Wet Blanket Thinking*

You put a huge, heavy wet blanket of negativity over all events, regardless of the outcome. If your cousin doesn't repay you the money you loaned her, you think, *No one ever repays loans, so why bother helping anyone out?* It takes too much energy to get out from under a heavy, wet blanket. It's easier to just leave yourself covered in the negativity. Is this type of thinking distracting you from heading in the right direction?

Write down examples of your "wet blanket" thinking:

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## *Can't See the Upside Thinking*

You reject positive experiences by insisting for some reason that they "don't count." You can usually provide a strong argument to support your negative beliefs. If a coworker compliments you about your work today, your first thought is, *That assignment was a joke.* You don't have a place in your mind to put positive experiences or interactions. To make space for something positive would require you to give up something negative. You're not sure you're willing to give up the negative "real estate." Is this type of thinking distracting you from recognizing your strengths?

Write down examples of your "can't see the upside" thinking:

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## *Disaster Forecaster*

You go quickly and directly to punish yourself with a negative thought. You haven't even had a chance to slow down and explore other options. It feels as if you have already arrived at the negative conclusion, even without all the facts. If you think your doctor is about to give you bad news about your illness, you arrive at a negative conclusion without waiting to hear the facts. Is this type of thinking distracting you from looking at all the facts in a situation?

Write down examples of your “first to the finish line” thinking:

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## *Should or Shouldn't Thinking*

You try to motivate yourself with “shoulds” and “shouldn'ts,” as if you need to be disciplined before you can be expected to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” can also be thoughts that distract you with anxiety and fear. When you direct “should” statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment. And when you direct them at yourself—if, for example, you believe you should have more money in your savings account but you keep buying things you don't need—punishing thoughts arise. Instead of having compassion for yourself and learning how to manage your money, you beat yourself up on a daily, if not hourly, basis. All these “shoulds” and “shouldn'ts” lead to anger and sadness. Is this type of thinking distracting you from following through with your plans for success?

Write down examples of your “should or shouldn't” thinking:

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## *“Of Course, I’m Responsible” Thinking*

You see yourself as the reason a bad event happened, when, in fact, it had little or nothing to do with you. Thinking of yourself as responsible for all negative events actually gives you the illusion that you’re in control. But there’s a toll: you will feel exhausted and even depressed. Thinking that you are responsible for your mother-in-law’s decision not to visit during the holiday could lead to feelings of confusion and sadness. Are there other ways to think about this situation that don’t make you the reason for someone else’s decision? Is this type of thinking distracting you from focusing on your own life path?

Write down examples of your “of course, I’m responsible” thinking:

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Remember how the brain is like a radio. Identifying and decreasing your distractions is like allowing yourself to tune in to one station at a time. Being aware of the distracting thoughts that are influencing you will be a terrific aid in healing. Your perceptions of the losses in your life can create powerful negative emotions. This makes it harder to tolerate the way you feel, which reinforces the false belief that you cannot accept and tolerate your emotions. That’s the kind of false and distracting belief we have been trying to unravel in this workbook so far.

### **A Visit with the Gomez Family**

Using this chapter, Carmen and Tony begin the difficult work of watching, recognizing, and adapting their thoughts.

Carmen finds out she has been carrying several repeat offenders from her childhood, including that her ideas aren’t good enough and that she doesn’t have anything to contribute. It’s painful for Carmen to explore the origins of these negative thoughts. She hesitates at first, realizing that it will mean looking back into her childhood and knowing that her parents, even if they didn’t know it, gave her negative messages about herself. But in looking at the past, she can see a brighter future. She starts to notice the messages she might be sending to

her daughter, Tina. It's a relief to know that as she encounters her own negative thoughts and finds more balanced views, she very naturally begins to relate more positively with Tina. Somehow, breaking the cycle of negative thinking is freeing her in her relationships too.

Tony, too, has a good experience with learning about his thoughts and the influence they have on him. He takes comfort in rationally following how his thoughts trigger his emotions. He doesn't have to feel so out of control of his moods. That makes it easier not to reach for a drink when stress or sadness comes over him. He can see now that in the past, the thoughts built on themselves repeatedly, making the emotions so intense that they seemed unbearable. Now he is beginning to catch his repeat-offender thoughts as soon as they strike. Knowing where they came from and that they aren't rational allows Tony to break free from their spell.

Tony enjoys using the "Consider the Evidence" worksheet to uncover a more balanced perspective. He finds this especially helpful in arguments with Carmen, when an unbalanced thought places all the blame on her or tells him she doesn't care about him. Using this worksheet, Tony begins to see that those thoughts are not based in reality. He finds himself less angry at Carmen and better able to reach out to her after a fight.

Tina seems to notice a change in Tony too. She stays home for dinner more often. In fact, one night the whole family plays a board game together. That's something they haven't done in a very long time. Tony has a sense that the family is coming back to life, little by little.

## Conclusion

Remember, it isn't just your emotions or even your thoughts that truly cause problems in your life: it's the way you *respond* to them. As you saw in chapter 1, your emotion-dodging strategies not only were doomed to fail, but also often made things worse. Responding to your thoughts and emotions in new ways will be the key to changing your life. For this reason, the next chapter is devoted to your behavior.