Two

The Healing Power of Awareness

MAKING A SHIFT TO FREEDOM

It's not our fault that we repeatedly get depressed. We start to feel bad, and before we know it we've been pulled down into the spiral, and no amount of struggle will get us out. In fact, the more we struggle, the deeper we end up mired. We may blame ourselves for feeling bad in the first place—and especially for feeling worse the more we think about it. But what is really at work is a certain mental pattern, or mode of mind, that is triggered so automatically by unpleasant emotion that we hardly notice or know what is actually happening.

To see these mental mechanisms for what they are, we have to explore emotion and how we react to it. This exploration will reveal exactly how the struggle itself pulls us down—and how unjust it is to blame ourselves. Even more important, understanding that it is a certain mode of mind that gets us stuck opens the door to an alternative way of dealing with emotion: making a radical shift to a different mode of mind. Within that very shift, practiced over and over again in key moments, lies the possibility of transforming our relationship with depression and freeing ourselves from its grip.

The Role of Emotion

On one important level, our emotions are vital messengers. They evolved as signals to help us meet our basic needs for self-preservation and safety and to survive individually and as a species. The human emotional repertoire is remarkably sophisticated, its inner and outer expressions and messages often eloquent and complex. Even so, there are really only a few basic families of emotions. The most prominent are happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger, with each emotion having different ways of expressing itself. Each one is a full-body reaction to a characteristic situation: fear is triggered when danger threatens; sadness and grief when something precious is lost; disgust when something highly unpleasant is confronted; anger when an important goal is blocked; happiness when our needs are met. Naturally, we pay attention to these signals. They tell us what to do to survive and even thrive.

For the most part, our emotional reactions evolved to be temporary. They have to be. The messenger needs to be alert to the need to signal the next alarm. Our initial emotional reaction lasts only as long as the subject of the alarm continues—often a few seconds rather than a few minutes. For it to last longer would make us insensitive to further changes in the environment. We can see this clearly in the behavior of gazelle on the African savannah. Fear drives them to run desperately to avoid the predator that is chasing the herd. But once a gazelle has been captured, the rest of the herd rapidly resumes grazing, as if nothing had happened. The situation has changed; the danger is past; the herd also needs to eat to survive.

Of course, some situations endure, and so may our emotional reaction to them. Sadness as a response to the loss of someone dear to us may continue for a long time. Grief can continue to come in unexpected waves that may well up and overwhelm us for many weeks and months after the loss. Even here, however, the mind has ways of healing itself. Even with grief, most people find that, little by little, life eventually returns to some sense of normality and we begin to discover the possibility of smiling and laughing once again.

Why, then, do depression and unhappiness outlast the situations that trigger them? Or why, sometimes, does a sense of malaise and dissatisfaction

go on and on? The short answer is that these emotions persist because we have emotional reactions to our own emotions that actually keep them going.

THE PROBLEM WITH OUR OWN EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO OUR EMOTIONS

Carole often finds herself feeling "a little miserable" right before she goes to bed. Naturally this bothers her, especially because she can't always connect the feeling to any event that directly precedes the mood. "Last Friday, for example," she explained, "Angie came over and we spent the evening watching a film. Everything was fine. Then after she left, I went around the apartment clearing up, and I realized that a feeling of sadness had crept up on me. I started to think of times in the past when friends had let me down. When this happens, my mind always goes along the same lines: *Why am I feeling miserable again and dragging all this up?* Was I miserable all evening but just distracting myself because Angie was here, or is it the silence at bedtime that gets to me?"

Carole often tries to distract herself from her mood by sitting up in bed scrolling through her phone or channel-surfing the TV . . . but she finds that it doesn't help. She is soon distracted by her own thoughts.

"I try to find a reason why I'm feeling the way I am: *What happened today that made me feel like this?* I can usually think of something that went wrong, like when Jean went out for lunch without telling me she was going, and I wondered whether we are still friends. But it often doesn't really feel like it explains how I am feeling right now. So I start wondering what is wrong with me that I feel this way when other people seem quite happy. Soon I've dragged up lots of negative stuff, and I start to think, *Perhaps I'm always going to feel this way. How will my life be if these feelings last? How will I get on with people or do my job then? Will I ever feel really happy?* And, of course, that just drags me down further. I end up feeling really bad about myself: everything seems to take so much effort—making friends, doing my job, everything.

"Sometimes I can see exactly what I'm doing: I'm making myself more miserable. I say to myself: *All this thinking is doing me no good at all. So why*

do I do this to myself all the time? Then I set off on another round of thinking about what's wrong with me."

Carole could see that her reactions to her sadness were actually making her more miserable. Her attempts to feel better—by trying desperately to understand what was going on in her mind—actually made her feel worse. Our reactions to unhappiness can transform what might otherwise be a brief, passing sadness into persistent dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

The problem with persistent and recurrent depression is not "getting sad" in the first place. Sadness is a natural mind-state, an inherent part of being human. It is neither realistic nor desirable to imagine that we can or should get rid of it. The problem is what happens next, immediately after the sadness comes.

"GET ME OUT OF HERE!"

The fact is that when emotions are telling us that something is not as it should be, the feeling is distinctly uncomfortable. It's meant to be. The signals are exquisitely designed to push us to act, to do something to rectify the situation. If the signal didn't feel uncomfortable, didn't create an urge to act, would we leap out of the path of a speeding truck, step in when we saw a child being bullied, turn away from something that we found repugnant? It's only when the mind registers that the situation is resolved that the signal shuts itself off.

When the problem that our emotions signal needs to be solved is "*out there*"—a charging bull or a roaring funnel cloud—reacting in a way that will allow us to avoid it or escape from it makes sense. The brain mobilizes a whole pattern of mostly automatic reactions that help us deal with whatever is threatening our survival, helping us get rid of or avoid the threat. We call this initial pattern of reactions—in which we feel negatively toward and want to avoid or eliminate something—*aversion.* Aversion forces us to act in some appropriate way to the situation and thereby turn off the warning signal. In this regard, it can serve us well, can even save our lives. Sometimes.

But it's not hard to see that the same reactions are going to be counterproductive and even dangerous to our well-being when directed at what's going on "*in here*"—toward our own thoughts, feelings, and sense of self.

None of us can run fast enough to escape our own inner experience. Nor can we eliminate unpleasant, oppressive, and threatening thoughts and feelings by fighting with them and trying to annihilate them.

When we react to our own negative thoughts and feelings with aversion, the brain circuitry involved in physical avoidance, submission, or defensive attack (the "avoidance system" of the brain) is activated. Once this mechanism is switched on, the body tenses as if it were either getting ready to run or bracing itself for an assault. We can also sense the effects of aversion in our minds. When we are preoccupied, dwelling on how to get rid of our feelings of sadness or disconnection, our whole experience is one of contraction. The mind, driven to focus on the compelling yet futile task of getting rid of these feelings, closes in on itself. And with it, our experience of life itself narrows. Somehow we feel cramped, boxed in. The choices available to us seem to dwindle. We come to feel increasingly cut off from the wider space of possibilities that we long to connect with.

Over our lifetime, we may have come to dislike or even hate emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger, in ourselves and in others. If we have, for example, been taught not to "be so emotional," we will have picked up the message that expression of emotion is somewhat unseemly and may have assumed it wasn't okay to *feel* emotion either. Or maybe we remember clearly the drawn-out feeling of an emotional experience like grief and now react with dread when a hint of similar feelings arises.

When we react negatively—with aversion—to our own negative emotions, treating them as enemies to be overcome, eradicated, and defeated, we get into trouble. So understanding aversion becomes fundamental to understanding what gets us stuck in persistent unhappiness. We run into problems because the unhappiness we are feeling *now* triggers old, extraordinarily unhelpful patterns of thinking from the *past*.

Mood and Memory

Have you ever visited a place that you haven't been to for many years, perhaps since childhood? Before the visit, memory of things that happened at that time of your life may be quite sketchy. But once you get there, walking down the streets, taking in the smells and the sounds may bring it all

back—not just memories, but feelings: of excitement, of sorrow, of first love. Returning to the place—the old context—does something that our best efforts to remember could not do nearly as well.

Context has incredibly powerful effects on memory. Memory researchers Duncan Godden and Alan Baddeley found that if deep-sea divers tried to commit something to memory while on the beach, they tended to forget it when under water and were able to recall it fully only when they were back on dry land. It worked the other way around too. If they learned a list of words under water, their memory of that list when on dry land was not so good, but came back when they returned to the water. The sea and the beach acted as powerful contexts for the memory, just like a visit to a childhood town or an old campus haunt. Although this experiment is hard to repeat, other scientists have found a similar effect using virtual reality environments deliberately designed to be very distinct (for example an "underwater" versus a "Mars planet" environment).

MEMORIES TRIGGERED BY MOOD

Over the last few decades, psychologists have discovered something really important about how our emotional states can have such pervasive effects on our minds. A mood can function as an internal context; it can act in the same way that the sea did for the divers, bringing back memories and patterns of thinking that are associated with times when we were in that mood, just as if we had dived again into that particular stretch of water. *When we return to that mood, thoughts and memories related to whatever was going on in our mind or world to make us unhappy will come back quite automatically, whether we want it to happen or not.* When the mood comes up again, so do the thoughts and memories connected with it, *including the thinking patterns that created that mood*.

Because we live different lives, the experiences that provoked unhappiness in the past will differ from one person to another. For that reason, *we differ, one from another, in the kinds of memories and thinking patterns that get reactivated by the moods we are experiencing in this moment*. If the main things that made us sad in the past were losses, such as the sad but expected death of a beloved grandparent, when we feel passing sadness now, these will be the memories that come to mind. We may feel sad again, but we may have

no trouble acknowledging our loss and then shifting the focus of the mind to other things while the echo of the grief fades in its own good time.

But what if our previous moods of unhappiness or depression were evoked by situations that somehow led to our thinking and feeling that we were not good enough, that we were worthless, or frauds? We saw (in the box on page 19) that a first episode of depression occurs most commonly between thirteen and fifteen years of age. Sadly, we now know that many people who become depressed as adults have experienced trauma, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse when they were children or adolescents. And even if such trauma did not occur, adolescence is a time when, without the life skills we now have, feelings of being a failure in comparison with others, of being lonely, or of being just plain no good can be overwhelming. If such experiences were a significant part of your childhood, the thinking patterns that made you depressed *then,* the sense that you are not good enough in some way, are highly likely to be reactivated in the present by even a passing feeling of depression.

> *We can react so negatively to unhappiness because our experience is not one simply of sadness, but is colored powerfully by reawakened feelings of deficiency or inadequacy. What may make these reactivated thinking patterns most damaging is that we often don't realize they are memories at all. We feel not good enough* now *without being aware that it is a thinking pattern from the* past *that is evoking the feeling.*

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When Carole was fourteen, she changed schools when her parents moved across the state. She missed her old friends, and although they had promised to stay in touch, it didn't happen. She found it really hard to make friends at her new school, and she deliberately kept to herself, not joining in activities with others, and soon they ignored her completely. She felt lonely, cut off, and unwanted.

Carole couldn't wait to get out of high school. She came back into her own in college. But she was always prey to unpredictable mood shifts that would drain her of energy and send her shuffling back into an isolated corner somewhere, sometimes for a few weeks at a time. Her mood could begin to slide at any time. Recently any slight sadness could retrigger the

whole constellation of feelings of inadequacy from the past, leaving her feeling lonely and friendless. When this happened, she found herself unable to switch her attention back to what she was doing—her mind seemed completely taken over by her feelings.

Carole's experience shows clearly the cycle that afflicts so many people. Once negative memories, thoughts, and feelings, reactivated by unhappy moods, have forced their way into our consciousness, they produce two major effects. First, naturally enough, they increase our unhappiness, as Carole found, depressing mood even further. Second, they will bring with them a set of seemingly urgent priorities for what the mind has absolutely got to focus on—our deficiencies and what we can do about them. It is *these* priorities that dominate the mind and make it so difficult to switch attention to anything else. Thus we find ourselves compulsively trying over and over to get to the bottom of what is wrong with us as people, or with the way we live our lives, and fix it.

Caught up in this way, how on earth could we possibly contemplate switching our attention away from these pressing and understandable concerns to focus on other topics or approaches, even if doing so might contribute to a lightening of our mood? Sorting things out and forcing a solution will always seem like the most compelling thing to do—figuring out what it is that is not good enough about us, sorting out what we need to do to minimize the havoc that our unhappiness will wreak in our lives if it persists. But in fact focusing on these issues in this way is using exactly the wrong tools for the job. It simply fuels further unhappiness and keeps us fixated on the very thoughts and memories that are making us unhappy. It is as if a horror story were being enacted in front of us: we hate looking, but, at the same time, we can't turn away.

THE CRITICAL MOMENT

We can't change the fact that past memories and self-critical and judgmental ways of thinking are triggered when we feel unhappy. It all happens quite automatically. But we may be able to change what happens next.

If Carole had seen how a slight shift in her mood was reactivating *old* patterns of mind that were around at a time in her life when she felt alone, misunderstood, and devalued, she might have been able to let it float by and

gone on with her day. She might even have been able to treat herself with a little kindness.

We *can* learn to relate differently to our unhappiness in just those ways. The first step is to see even more clearly the ways in which we entangle ourselves. In particular, we need to become more aware of the pattern, or mode, of mind that gets switched on and can cause so much suffering.

Doing Mode: When Critical Thinking Volunteers for a Job It Can't Do

When the thinking reawakened by depressed mood tells us that *we* are the problem, we want to get rid of these feelings *right now.* But larger issues have been triggered and dredged up: it is not just that *today* is not going well; our whole *life* feels as if it is not going well. We feel caught in a prison, and we *have* to find a way to escape.

The problem is that we try to think our way out of our moods by working out what's gone wrong. *What's wrong with me? Why do I always feel overwhelmed?* Before we have any idea what hit us, we're compulsively trying over and over to get to the bottom of what is wrong with us as people or with the way we live our lives, *and fix it.* We put all of our mental powers to work on the problem, and the power we rely on is that of our critical thinking skills.

Unfortunately, those critical thinking skills *might be exactly the wrong tools for the job.*

We're rightly proud of what we can do through critical analytical thinking. It's one of the highest achievements of our evolutionary history as human beings and does get us out of a whole slew of fixes in life. So when we see things are not going well in our *internal,* emotional life, it's hardly surprising that the mind often quickly reacts by recruiting the mode of mind that functions so effectively in solving problems in our *external* world. This mode of careful analysis, problem solving, judgment, and comparison is aimed at closing the gap between the way things are and the way we think they should be—at solving perceived problems. Therefore we call it the *doing mode of mind.* It's the mode by which we respond to what we hear as a call to action.

Doing mode is mobilized because it usually works very well in helping us achieve our goals in everyday situations and in solving work-related technical problems. Consider the simple everyday action of driving across town. For making a journey, the doing mode of mind enables us to reach the goal by creating an idea of where we are now (at home) and an idea of where we want to be (at the stadium). It then automatically focuses on the mismatch between these two ideas, generating actions aimed at narrowing the gap (get in the car and drive). It continuously monitors whether the gap is getting bigger or smaller to check whether these actions are having the desired effect of reducing the "distance left to travel" between the two ideas. If need be, it adjusts the actions to make sure the gap is decreasing rather than increasing. It then repeats the process over and over again. Finally, the gap is closed, we've reached our destination, the goal has been achieved, and the doing mode is ready to take on the next task.

This strategy offers us a very general approach for attaining our goals and solving our problems: if there is something we want to happen, we focus on narrowing the gap between our idea of where we are and our idea of where we want to be. If there is something we *don't* want to happen, we focus on increasing the gap between our idea of where we are and our idea of what we want to avoid. This doing mode of mind not only enables us to manage the routine details of our daily lives but also underlies some of the most awe-inspiring accomplishments of the human species in transforming the external world, from the construction of the pyramids to the engineering feat of modern skyscrapers. All these achievements required exquisite and elegant problem solving of a certain kind. It is quite natural, then, that the same mental strategies should get recruited when we want to transform our internal world—to change ourselves so that we can attain happiness, for example, or get rid of unhappiness. Unfortunately, this is where things can start to go horribly wrong.

WHY WE CAN'T PROBLEM-SOLVE OUR EMOTIONS

Imagine yourself walking along a path by a river on a sunny day. You're feeling a little down, a little out of sorts. At first you're not really aware of your mood, but then you realize you don't feel very happy. You're also aware that the sun is shining. You think, *It's a lovely day; I should be feeling happy.*

Let that thought sink in: *I should be feeling happy.*

How do you feel now? If you feel worse, you're not alone. Virtually everyone reports the same response. Why? Because, in the case of our moods, the very act of focusing on the gap, comparing how we are feeling with how we want to feel (or how we think we *should* feel), makes us feel unhappy, taking us even further away from how we want to be. Focusing on the gap in this way is actually a reflection of the mind's habitual strategy for trying to sort out situations in which things aren't as we want them to be.

Normally, if our mood is not too intense, we may hardly notice the slight downturn in our feelings when we make a comparison between how we feel and how we'd like to feel. However, if the mind is in doing mode—trying to solve "problems" like "What's wrong with me?" and "Why am I so weak?"—*we can get trapped in the very thinking that was recruited to rescue us.* This is "*driven-doing*"—the mind brings up (and then holds in consciousness) the relevant ideas it is working on—for instance, an idea of the kind of person I am right now (sad and lonely), an idea of the kind of person I want to be (peaceful and happy), and an idea of the kind of person I fear I might become if the sadness persists and I sink into depression (pathetic and weak). The driven-doing mode then relentlessly focuses on the mismatch between these ideas, the ways in which we are not the people we want to be.

Focusing on the mismatch between our idea of the people we want to be and our idea of the people we see ourselves as makes us feel worse than we did in the first place, when the doing mode started its attempts to help. It uses mental time travel to "help," calling up past times when we may have felt like this in an effort to understand what went wrong, and imagining a future, blighted by unhappiness, to remind us that this is what we desperately need to avoid. The memories of previous failures and the images of feared future scenarios that we bring to mind in the process add their own twist to the spiral of worsening mood. The more we have suffered low mood in the past, the more negative will be the images and self-talk unlocked by our present mood, and the more our mind will be dominated by these old patterns. But they seem real to us *now*. These patterns of feeling worthless or lonely feel familiar, but instead of seeing the feeling of familiarity as a sign that the mind is going down an old mental groove, *we take the feeling of familiarity to mean that it must all be true*. That's why we can't snap out of it, as our family and friends may have been urging. We cannot let go, because the "driven-doing" mind

insists that our highest priority is to sort ourselves out by identifying and solving this "problem." So we hammer ourselves with more questions: "Why do I always react this way?," "Why can't I handle things better?," "Why do I have problems other people don't have?," "What am I doing to deserve this?"

You may think of this self-focused, self-critical frame of mind as *brooding*. Psychologists also call it *rumination*. When we ruminate, we become fruitlessly preoccupied with the fact that we are unhappy and with the causes, meanings, and consequences of our unhappiness. Research has

THE DEFAULT MODE NETWORK

Rumination occurs when a normal daydreaming processes in the brain gets hijacked by negative thinking. What's going on here?

We are creatures of habit, with minds and lives often running on autopilot. This is no accident. There is a network in the brain that has evolved to help us do just that. It's called the *default mode network* (DMN) and involves a group of brain regions including the prefrontal cortex (behind your forehead), parts of the temporal lobe (on the sides), and other inner areas called the *posterior cingulate cortex* and *precuneus*. These work together sending waves of activation to each other and are active when our mind wanders, daydreams, or when we're not focusing on something specific. This helps us be more efficient with our attention. The DMN switches on when we are navigating familiar settings, moving through traffic, or following familiar recipes while still allowing us to plan for the future or listen to a favorite podcast while doing so.

What we tend to forget is that this efficiency comes at a cost. The DMN is always looking for problems to solve—matching situations to habits. This is seen most clearly in brain-scanning studies when the person disengages from an effortful task, such as memorizing words or rotating images. At this point the DMN kicks in. When participants are told that they can "rest and relax," their minds start to wander to stories about themselves, planning, regrets, obligations, and desires. This is how rumination, triggered by the DMN, can feel like productive problem solving, when in fact it is just the mind casting about for a problem that needs fixing, a future plan imagined, or an unfinished goal that needs resolving.

repeatedly shown that if we have tended to react to our sad or depressed moods in these ways in the past, then we are likely to find the same strategy volunteering to "help" again and again when our mood starts to slide. And it will have the same effect: we'll get stuck in the very mood from which we are trying to escape. As a consequence, we are at even higher risk of experiencing repeated bouts of unhappiness.

Why, then, *do* we ruminate? Why, like Carole, do we continue to dwell on thoughts about our unhappiness when it just seems to make things worse? When researchers ask people who ruminate a lot why they do it, a simple answer emerges: they do it because they believe it will help them overcome their unhappiness and depression. They believe that not doing it will make their condition worse and worse.

We ruminate when we feel low because we believe that it will reveal a way to solve our problems. But research shows that rumination does exactly the opposite: our ability to solve problems actually *deteriorates* markedly during rumination. All the evidence seems to point to the stark truth that *rumination is part of the problem, not part of the solution.*

Imagine a car trip during which, every time we check to see how close we are to our destination, we find that the car has instantly moved farther away from it. This is tantamount to what happens in the interior world of emotions and feeling states when we call in the doing mode of mind. That's why we often find ourselves saying things like "I don't know why I feel so depressed; I've got nothing to be depressed about," and then discovering that we feel even more unhappy. We've checked our destination of feeling happy and found ourselves farther away from it. We can't seem to stop reminding ourselves how bad we feel.

SPILT MILK

It was the 1940s, and the Second World War was still raging in Europe. An old dairy farmer in England was talking to a new farmhand who had recently come to help with the cows as part of his rehabilitation after being wounded on the front lines. The farmhand had been learning how to call the cattle back to the barn, lead them into their stalls, give them their food, clean them, milk them, then take the pails full of milk to the cooler and then to the churns. The farmhand was upset because he had spilt some

of the milk from the churn and had tried hosing it down with water. As the farmer came around the corner, there was the inexperienced farmhand, gazing in despair at the huge white puddle he had created. "Ah," said the farmer, "I see your problem. Once the water has mixed with the milk, it all looks the same. If you've spilt a pint, it'll look like a gallon. And if you've spilt a gallon, it looks like . . . well, a bit like that lake you're standing in. The trick is just to deal with the milk you've spilt. Let it run off, sweep up what's left into the drain; and then, when it's pretty clear, you can hose it down."

The milk the farmhand had originally spilt was now mixed with the water he'd been trying to clear it up with, and *it all looked the same*. And so it is with our moods. Our best attempts to clear them up can make them worse, *but we don't realize this is what is happening*: it all looks the same and so simply intensifies our desperate attempts to fix things. Nobody waves a flag at us and says, "Wait just a minute; that extra misery you just felt was not part of the mood you were feeling when you started." There is nothing "out there" to remind us that, even with the very best of intentions, we are actually making matters considerably worse for ourselves.

Ironically, as all this is happening, the mood that triggered the whole process in the first place may well have moved on. But we don't notice that it has faded of its own accord. We're too busy trying to get rid of it and creating more misery in our attempts.

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Rumination invariably backfires. It merely compounds our misery. It's a heroic attempt to solve a problem that it is just not capable of solving. Another mode of mind altogether is required when it comes to dealing with unhappiness.

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THE ALTERNATIVE TO RUMINATION

If Carole had been able to relate differently to the feelings that came over her as she was clearing up her apartment, she might not have gotten lost in the vortex of thinking, thinking, and more thinking. She might have realized that the initial feeling was a passing sadness that often arose when an evening with a friend came to an end. Sadness can arise when friends

leave. No further "causes" needed to be unearthed. But we don't *like* to feel sad because it can quickly turn into a sense that we are somehow flawed or incomplete, so we call in the intellect to focus on the mismatch between what "is" and what "should be." Because we can't accept the discomfort of the message, we try to shoot the messenger and end up shooting ourselves in the foot.

There is an alternative strategy for handling the negative moods, memories, and thinking patterns *in the present moment, as they arise.* Evolution has bequeathed us an alternative to critical thinking, and we humans have only just begun to realize its power to transform us. It is called *awareness.*

Mindfulness: The Seeds of Awareness

In a sense we've been familiar with this alternative capacity of ours all along. It's just that the driven-doing mode of mind has eclipsed it. This capacity does not work by critical "problem-solving" thinking but through awareness itself. We call it the *being mode* of mind.

We don't only think *about* things. We also experience them directly through our senses. We are capable of directly sensing and responding to things like the smell of spices, the sound of trucks, and a feel of a cold wind on the skin. And we can be aware of ourselves experiencing. We have *intuitions* about things and feelings. We know things not only with the head, but also with the heart and with the senses. Furthermore, we can be *aware* of ourselves thinking; thinking is not all there is to conscious experience. *The being mode is an entirely different way of knowing from the thinking of doing mode.* Not better, just different. But it gives us a whole other way of living our lives and of relating to our emotions, our stress, our thoughts, and our bodies. And it is a capacity that we all already have. It's just been a bit neglected and underdeveloped.

BEING MODE

Being mode is the antidote to the problems that the driven-doing mode of mind creates.

By cultivating the awareness of being mode we can:

■ Disengage the autopilot in our heads. *Being more aware of ourselves—through the senses, the emotions, and the mind—can help us aim our actions where we really want them to go and make us effective problem solvers.*

■ Get out of our heads and learn to experience the world directly, experientially, without the relentless commentary of our thoughts. *We might just open ourselves up to the limitless possibilities for happiness that life has to offer us.*

■ Start living right here, in each present moment. *When we stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, we're open to rich sources of information we've been missing out on—information that can keep us out of the downward spiral and poised for a richer life.*

■ Sidestep the cascade of mental events that draws us down into depression. *When awareness is cultivated, we may be able to recognize at an early stage the times we are most likely to slide into depression and respond to our moods in ways that keep us from being pulled down further.*

■ Stop trying to force life to be a certain way because we're uncomfortable right now. *We'll be able to see that wanting things to be different from how they are right now is where rumination begins.*

■ See our thoughts as mental events that come and go in the mind like clouds across the sky instead of taking them literally. *The idea that we're no good, unlovable, and ineffectual can finally be seen as just that—an idea—and not necessarily as the truth, which just might make it easier to disregard.*

■ Sense when the doing mode is driving us to exhaustion. *We'll be able to see how best to be kind to ourselves, taking a pause to regather and nourish ourselves before choosing what to do next.*

The rest of this book describes in detail how you can cultivate the type of awareness we're talking about. The core skill is mindfulness. It can profoundly change your life.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to things as they are. Pay attention to what? you might ask. To anything, but especially to those aspects of life

that we most take for granted or ignore. For instance, we might start paying attention to the basic components of experience, like how we feel, what is on our minds, and how we perceive or know anything at all. Mindfulness means paying attention to things as they actually are in any given moment, however they are, rather than as we want them to be. Why does paying attention in this way help? Because it is the exact antithesis to the type of ruminative thinking that makes low moods persist and return.

First, mindfulness is *intentional*. When we are cultivating mindfulness, we can be more aware of present reality and the choices available to us. We can act with awareness. By contrast, rumination is often an automatic reaction to whatever triggers us. It is tantamount to unawareness, being lost in thought.

Second, mindfulness is *experiential, and it focuses directly on present-moment experience*. By contrast, when we ruminate, our minds are preoccupied with thoughts and abstractions that are far away from direct sensory experience. Rumination propels our thoughts into the past or into an imagined future.

Third, mindfulness is *nonjudgmental*. Its virtue is that it allows us to see things as they actually are in the present moment and to allow them to be as they already are. By contrast, judging and evaluating are integral to rumination and the entire doing mode. Judgments of any sort (good or bad, right or wrong) imply that we or the things around us have to measure up in some way to an internal or external standard. The habit of judging ourselves severely disguises itself as an attempt to help us to live better lives and to be better people, but in actuality the habit of judging winds up functioning as an irrational tyrant that can never be satisfied.

By cultivating mindfulness, Carole might become aware of the intricate interconnections between external events, her feelings, her thoughts, and her behaviors, noticing more and more how one can trigger the other and the entire spiral of depression. She might no longer repeatedly feel quite so stuck in a seemingly never-ending depression because she now has new and wiser ways to relate to her experience in the present moment. She might even find a way to be kind to herself in those times that she is feeling most vulnerable, and this in turn might increase her enthusiasm for taking up new interests and making new friends.

As explained in the rest of this book, practicing mindfulness is more

than just noticing things around us that we hadn't noticed before. It is learning to become aware of the particular *mode of mind* that gets us stuck when misapplied to ourselves and our emotional life. The following chapters describe practical skills for disengaging from that mode when it is not serving us and shifting to an alternative mode of mind that will not get us stuck. With an increasing ability to sustain mindfulness, we can explore what happens when our emotions are allowed to come and go in awareness with a nonjudgmental attitude and self-compassion.

As you'll see in the next chapter, the practice of mindfulness teaches us to shift into being mode so that we can be more at peace with our emotions. Our emotions are not the enemy, after all, but messages that reconnect us in the most basic and intimate of ways with the adventure and experience of being alive.

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