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manage your mind

Gillian Butler | Nick Grey | Tony Hope

third edition

manage YOUR mind

THE MENTAL FITNESS GUIDE

Third Edition

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 1995
Second Edition published in 2007
Third Edition published in 2018

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017948694

ISBN 978–0–19–874727–7

Printed in Italy by
L.E.G.O. S.p.A.

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Preface

It is over 20 years since the first edition of *Manage Your Mind* was published, and 10 years since the second edition. In this time, we hope we have learned from our experiences in life, from the people we have worked with, from our friends and families, and from an ever-growing literature on how best to ride life's ups and downs. We have also been fortunate to receive much wise feedback from readers on the previous editions. This third edition of *Manage Your Mind* has been a great opportunity to use this learning to build on the earlier work, extending it into new arenas, and broadening its scope. The emphasis now is as much on how we can all thrive and flourish, as it is on overcoming the difficulties we all face. It draws on the increase in research in positive psychology while still being firmly grounded in evidence-based treatments for specific problems. In the introduction, we suggest that we need dual metaphors for the mind and life—both that of the mechanic and the gardener. This edition of *Manage Your Mind* has emphasized more than previously the role of gardening, and how we can nurture ourselves.

There are nine completely new chapters and a significant restructuring of the book. The new chapters include 'The value and practice of kindness', 'Increasing the chance of happiness', 'Becoming more creative', and 'Chronic ill health'. All other chapters have been revised in light of new learning, and some have been combined or expanded from previous editions. We found that we actually had too much material for the book—but with the benefit of modern technology these sections are available on the Internet.

We would like to acknowledge the people who have made the writing of this book possible. First and foremost are all those people we have seen with difficulties in their lives who have taught us what methods and ideas they found helpful.

We would also like to thank the many psychologists, therapists, and other healers whose writings (referred to in the 'Further reading' sections at the end of each chapter) have provided many valuable ideas that we have passed on to readers of this book.

We have learned much from our colleagues and would like, in particular, to thank David Clark, Anke Ehlers, Melanie Fennell, Ann Hackmann, Helen Kennerley, Joan Kirk, Martina Mueller, and Paul Salkovskis.

The editors and staff of Oxford University Press have given us encouragement and support throughout the writing of this book. In particular, we would like to thank Martin Baum, Charlotte Holloway, Shereen Karmali, and April Peake in the UK, and Sarah Harrington in the US. We thank the design team, the indexer, Chris Boot and Kiruthika of Newgen who saw the book through its final production stages.

We thank our families. Gillian thanks Christopher, Sophie, David, and Josie for endless patience and interest, and also her grandchildren, Alice, Eleanor, Jessica, Alex, and Thomas, for helping her keep up with the modern world and with the many uses of the World Wide Web. Nick thanks Mary, Jake, Alex, and Luke for keeping him grounded and reminding him of the most valuable parts of life. Tony thanks Sally, Beth, Katy, and John for keeping him going and for all the helpful discussions of the issues raised in the book.

Throughout the writing of this book the three of us met regularly, usually at *Le Pain Quotidien* near Victoria station in London. We thank the staff for looking after us and supplying as much excellent food and drink (*not* alcoholic) as was necessary to keep us focused. Without these meetings, and the pleasant ambience in which they took place, this book would never have been written.

GB
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August 2017

Online-only material

Some common defence mechanisms that impede understanding
What kind of coach do you want to be?
The mental crusher
The Zeigarnik effect
Thought records and key questions to go with them
Alternatives diary and key questions to go with it
Aspects of personality to consider when developing new habits
Planning your goal
The David Allen approach
Blank pie chart
Relaxation
Responding in a mature way to common voices of the Child
Responding in a mature way to common voices of the Parent
Keeping a worry-outcome diary
Developing confiding relationships to reduce your chance of depression
Diary of daily activities
The legacy of being bullied
Ground yourself in the here and now
Habit monitoring record
Stopping smoking
Averting problems with alcohol

What to expect from this guide

This book is written for people with differing aims: those who would like to develop themselves in some way, to make the most of their abilities, or to make changes in how they do things, or to overcome specific difficulties. We all need psychological resources and resilience to thrive in modern life and to survive changing fortunes. Developing resilience is not just about overcoming problems when they arise. It is also about laying a foundation that provides support. It is about increasing the store of resourcefulness and flexibility, confidence, and strength that helps you to live in the best and most satisfying way that you can, in line with your personal values. There is much about the world around us that we cannot control. How we think, how we respond, and how we act are, however, in the end, up to us. We are, to a great extent, our minds.

Every age has its fashions, as much in uncovering the mysteries of the mind as in covering up the secrets of the body. The computer has become the analogy of the moment: our minds are software, our brains the hardware. The analogy of mind and brain with computers has its value, of course, but it is only one of many possible comparisons. One problem with it is that it focuses us on thinking about the mechanical aspects of the brain. Another comparison might suggest that the mind is like a plant. In its own time the plant changes, grows, and, given the right conditions, flourishes. We can influence the process through providing it with those right conditions: the soil, water, and a good environment. The comparison with a plant reminds us that the brain, which must to a large extent underlie the workings of the mind, is organic. It works in part through its cells developing new connections. It works in part through chemical reactions. And, unlike so much of the workings of our computer or smart phone, these processes take significant time. The comparison with a plant also reminds us that we cannot control every aspect of the mind. Sometimes the best we can do is to provide a nurturing environment and leave the rest to take care of itself. Different analogies suit different situations. In this book, we recognize both the mechanical and the organic aspects of our minds, making use of whatever approach is best adapted to the specific issue.

Between us, we have nearly a century's experience of helping people through psychologically difficult times. We are sceptical of approaches to psychological change that advocate a single way for all people and all situations. What we have observed is that different people are helped by different approaches, and that most are helped in different ways at different times in their lives. Just as there is a danger in limiting our understanding of the mind to the perspective of a single analogy, so there is a danger of limiting the ways in which we help ourselves to change to a single method. We have, therefore, structured this book so as to make it possible to select those ideas and techniques that appeal the most to you: a buffet from which to choose rather than a set menu.

Part I. Making sense

We start with ideas that provide the context for the rest of the book. Part I explains how each of us individually can attempt to make sense of the complexities we experience. The assumption is that making changes, developing yourself personally, is best done with a certain gentleness and understanding. Accept yourself, just as you are. Understand yourself without fear. Value yourself despite all the reasons you might find not to do so. And, perhaps above all, be kind to yourself. Learn how to build up your self-esteem and self-confidence too, and these attitudes will provide you with a secure foundation. These are the messages of this first part.

Part II. Making your way

Each of us takes a different route through the world, and whatever the road you are on right now, it helps to be able to think about how you are making your way along it. This is something only you can do, but there is now a great deal more sound knowledge available than there used to be. Of course, we can all benefit from adopting positive and constructive attitudes, from making effective use of our time, from feeling happier, and from good relationships. Knowing how to increase the chances of these things happening is not so straightforward. The chapters in this part of the book provide information, ideas, strategies, and techniques to help you respond to life's ups and downs with resilience. Recent research has made clear that building up constructive and positive attitudes and habits helps in overcoming difficulties such as excessive anxiety and depression. So even if you are reading this book because you are wanting to deal with a specific difficulty, we recommend that you look through Parts I and II as well as the chapters in Part III that are relevant to your difficulty.

Section 1—*Thinking well*—is about understanding the world clearly and finding perspectives that help you, rather than hold you back.

Section 2—*Creating a framework*—will be particularly relevant for those who like to have a number of projects and specific goals. How can we best achieve the goals we set ourselves and develop habits that enable us to live the way we want?

Section 3—*Being happy*—brings together much recent research that shows how we can increase our chances of happiness, have fun, and develop our creativity.

Section 4—*Making your way with others*—is about the attitudes and skills that help us to build satisfying relationships.

Part III. Overcoming difficulties

This is where we describe how to start to tackle the psychological difficulties that many of us face at some times in our lives. For many people, the point of this book will be to find out how to overcome a specific difficulty. You may wish to start with the chapter that deals with that difficulty. We recommend, though, that at some stage you also look through the earlier parts of this book. The chapters in Part I that help to make sense of your world, and those in Part II that help you to make your way once you are on the road, will often prove of immense help in overcoming problems. One effective psychotherapy for depression, for example, focuses not on the depression itself but on building up more satisfying relationships.

Section 5—*Preparing to tackle difficulties*—helps clarify the changes you may wish to make in overcoming the difficulty.

Sections 6–9 address specific problems: the various types of anxiety, depression, excessive anger, the results of bereavement or trauma, addictions, and chronic ill health.

This third edition retains the guidance on overcoming difficulties that was the focus of the two previous editions, but the emphasis now is much broader as it provides information that is more generally useful at other times as well. It aims to help us think about how we can live the lives we want, and to identify what that would entail. This guide is intended to be practical, and it should be useful for helping you to make your way along an old or a new route as well as when you encounter difficulties. We hope that it achieves its aim of making available a wide variety of strategies and techniques for *managing the mind*.

PART I

Making sense

Chapter

1

The scientific background: knowing what works

RESEARCH shows that the methods and techniques for *managing your mind* that we describe in this book are effective. A large and developing body of research tells us what works, and the research that we draw on here comes from many different branches of psychology. It comes from basic research and from the application of this to helping people in numerous practical ways, for instance, in clinics, schools, the workplace, and in business. We also draw on findings from scientific studies in closely related fields including those of physiology, physical medicine, and cognitive neuroscience.

Over the last 20 years, a new field of psychological research has emerged, known as 'positive psychology'. This developed as a reaction to the much greater attention that had been given by researchers to 'negative' emotions and feelings such as depression and anxiety compared with 'positive' emotions such as happiness. Over the same period, the most widely used and best researched psychological approach to managing upsetting emotions—cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)—has been making greater use of ideas and techniques taken from the East, and from Buddhist philosophy in particular—such as the methods of mindfulness meditation, and a focus on compassion for oneself and others.

In this book, we draw on these recent research findings and also on the clinical experiences of ourselves and most importantly of the people we have worked with. We combine these with the more traditional research on overcoming distressing emotions, to show how you can build on strengths, develop more positive attitudes, overcome difficulties, and flourish in the ways that suit you. Our approach is rather like in fusion cooking, when a wide range of flavours and techniques, taken from all over the world, are combined in various ways. As with fusion cooking, the results are

sometimes stunning and sometimes less dramatic. Research and increasing experience with the new therapeutic approaches is helping to clarify which combinations are most effective.

In this chapter, we will first give a brief history of the research behind 'managing your mind' and then describe a general model—the five-part model—that has practical value in planning how to make changes in feeling, thinking, and behaviour.

Experimental research in psychology

Fundamental research in psychology tells us an enormous amount about how the mind works. The painstaking, experimental work of psychologists, which started about 150 years ago, has mapped out some of the basic processes involved in learning, remembering, and thinking. It has revealed the part we ourselves play in constructing our perception and understanding of the world around us. It has helped to explain how we develop, and to unravel the stages that we go through on the road from childhood to old age. It has thrown light on the relationships between our thoughts, feelings, actions, and sensations, and how these interact with the outside world: with the context within which we find ourselves. Its findings help us to understand more about the ways in which we relate to other people, adapt to new circumstances, respond when things go wrong, and change during the course of our lives. It has also helped to unravel the links between the mind and the body, between brain and behaviour, and to understand what motivates us and how we acquire new skills.

Psychologists have, through their scientific work, contributed to our knowledge about which aspects of ourselves we can change and which are fixed, and their work has revealed much about the processes of personal change. Applications of psychology, therefore, help us to control these processes, to use them to our advantage, and to recognize their limitations, in the same way as applications of physiology help us to keep our bodies in good shape without overstraining them. You do not have to be a physiologist to keep physically fit, nor do you have to be a psychologist to make use of the science of psychology.

Applications of psychological science to helping people clinically

Since the 1960s and 1970s, therapists have developed new and effective ways of helping people with problems in living, most of which are

relatively brief forms of psychotherapy. Following the decades after Freud, psychoanalysis was the main form of psychological treatment, but it typically required a long and intensive course of therapy, often extending over several years. Psychoanalytic ideas have provided therapists with a rich and fruitful source of ideas about emotional development and about relationships but they have not been amenable to scientific confirmation. In this book, we focus predominantly on more recent treatment methods, and we give most weight to those that have been scientifically evaluated and are demonstrably effective. These include behavioural therapies, cognitive therapies including the 'new wave' of ideas and techniques from the East, therapies focusing on relationships, and the findings from 'positive psychology'.

Behavioural therapies

The theoretical background to behaviour therapy, which developed in striking contrast to psychoanalysis, comes from psychological experiments on learning. It is based on what is called learning theory, which now recognizes that there are many ways in which learning takes place. The first type of learning found to have major implications for therapy was classical conditioning, first explored by Pavlov.

Discovering the rules of the different types of learning has led to the development of behaviour therapies, such as exposure treatment for phobias. Learning theory suggests that a person's phobia, for example, can be overcome by breaking the association between the feeling of anxiety and situations that are basically harmless, such as seeing a spider or going to a supermarket. Research showed that an efficient way to do this is in step-by-step stages, practising frequently and regularly. A person who is afraid of heights, to give another example, might start by walking up a stairway and looking down from progressively higher points. The next stage might be to look down from a third-floor window, then a fourth-floor window, and so on. Depending on the severity of the phobia, it might take days or even weeks to progress from stage to stage. This step-by-step method is simple and effective, but it can take a long time.

Behavioural therapies originated in learning theory but have since developed beyond these beginnings and now use a large number of methods for dealing with a wide variety of conditions. What they have in common is a focus on changing behaviour in very specific ways. Behavioural methods can be used, for example, to help change eating, smoking, or drinking habits, to build self-confidence, and to improve time management and personal organization. Changing behaviour can lead to changes in thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and also to changes in relationships. People who have recovered from a phobia are likely to *feel* more confident, to *think*

better of themselves, to suffer less from the *sensations* of anxiety, and to *relate* more easily to others.

One of the most important contributions of behaviour therapies is their focused attention on effectiveness and practicality. This is because they are based on specific, clear-cut, and observable changes. A therapy with goals can be tested to see if it works, and moreover, the therapy can be improved. Each of the improvements can then be tested to discover which precise methods are the most effective, in ways defined by the people who benefit from them, such as in enabling them to do things they previously avoided through fear. In this way, better and better therapies have been developed. This scientific evaluation of therapies has also revealed more about the processes involved in change, and has led to the recognition that changing behaviour is only one way of initiating the process of change.

Cognitive therapy

Cognitive therapy developed partly as a reaction against the exclusive focus which behaviour therapy places on behaviour, and partly as a reaction to the unscientific aspects of psychoanalysis. It is based on the recognition that thoughts, feelings, and behaviour are closely related. If you *think* something is going to go wrong, you will *feel* anxious and your behaviour will be designed to protect you, for example, by avoiding a situation that causes stress. If you *think* everything will go fine, you will *feel* more confident and you will *behave* in ways that express that confidence. By focusing on our patterns of thinking and on our beliefs, cognitive therapists have found many methods for helping us to change both our feelings and our behaviour.

Cognitive therapy was first tried and tested as a treatment for depression. It has since proved to be effective in helping with many other problems, such as anxiety, panic, disturbed eating patterns, difficulties in relationships, recovery after trauma, and severe bouts of mental ill health. Cognitive therapy shares with behaviour therapy the advantages of being a clearly articulated therapy, and this has meant that it has been, and is still being, extensively and rigorously studied and improved. It also means that it can be clearly described and its methods can be made generally available in many self-help formats, including books and on the Internet.

The new wave of cognitive behavioural therapies

In the twenty-first century, cognitive behavioural therapies have been developed that incorporate new approaches focused less on the specific *content* of thoughts and more on our *relationships* to these thoughts: on accepting and choosing how to respond to thoughts rather than feeling dismayed or bombarded by their content. These therapies have variably

been termed 'third-wave' cognitive behavioural therapies, or more recently 'contextual behavioural therapies'. They emphasize the relationships and influence of the external real-world context and environment on how we get by in the world, and also on the internal context and environment within our own heads—the link between thoughts and feelings. These developments have made much greater use of ideas of mindfulness meditation and of compassion that have their origins in Eastern thought. The evidence base for these newer therapies is still emerging, and is very encouraging in particular areas that we highlight at the relevant points in this book.

Therapies focusing on relationships

Relationships play a key part in our lives and contribute much to the ways in which we understand and feel about ourselves. They provide one of the main contexts for the things that we think, feel, and do. *Interpersonal therapy* is a specific and well-characterized psychotherapy that focuses on relationships and has been evaluated and proved to be effective not only in improving relationships but also in overcoming depression and disturbed eating habits.

Applications of psychological science in management and the workplace

Many psychological findings are of particular value in the world of work, of action, and of management and have been put to practical daily use in a large number of settings. Most of these findings concern ways of using the mind effectively. Applying management techniques can help you to organize both your personal and business lives, make the best use of your time, communicate well, negotiate change, and make decisions. The new science of behavioural economics, developed in response to the work of research psychologists on thinking and reasoning, has revealed the biases that standardly influence the judgements we make. Research into logical thinking and into memory systems has been especially productive and applied most creatively in the field of management, but these skills are also of general use in managing ourselves and our lives outside work.

Research in positive psychology

Systematic research over the last two decades in 'positive psychology' has led to the development of practical ways to enhance the positive aspects

of our lives. Such research has been directed at questions such as what conditions lead to increased *happiness*, or a *sense of satisfaction* in life, or of *flourishing*. Research has examined questions such as what are the characteristics of those times that people value most in their lives; and, what are the differences between those who seem particularly resilient to problems in life and those who are less resilient. Findings from clinical psychology suggest that overcoming problems can sometimes be best accomplished not by directly tackling the problems but by building on one's strengths, and in the work place building on strengths is often a better starting point than overcoming weaknesses.

Research in physiology and physical medicine

Mind and body interact. Perhaps, last night, you lay awake worrying. You think it is the worries which kept you awake; but it may have been the coffee you had after supper, or the stimulating conversation that went with it. In order to sleep better, you need to know about some facts of physiology to be able to decide which are the best strategies to use. The same applies if you are trying to reduce the time you spend playing computer games, or cut down your consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, or other non-prescribed substances. Similarly, there are times when depression and anxiety are helped by physiological methods—and the number of effective psychoactive medications available is constantly being refined and increased. In this book, we draw on the results of medical, as well as psychological, research when relevant.

The five-part model

One of the problems that all psychologists face is that their work involves trying to understand how different systems interact, and it is difficult to disentangle the numerous ways in which they influence each other: how ageing processes affect our memory for instance, or how our feelings affect the way we think and influence what we do. Psychological research often reveals complex processes: for example, we become more forgetful as we get older, but remain relatively good at remembering childhood experiences. Or feeling stressed makes you think that something will go wrong, and then you waste time double-checking your work—and end up feeling more stressed. Mind and body, brain and behaviour, thoughts and feelings work together to keep us functioning well. The *five-part model*, developed by Christine Padesky, provides us with a simplified way of understanding

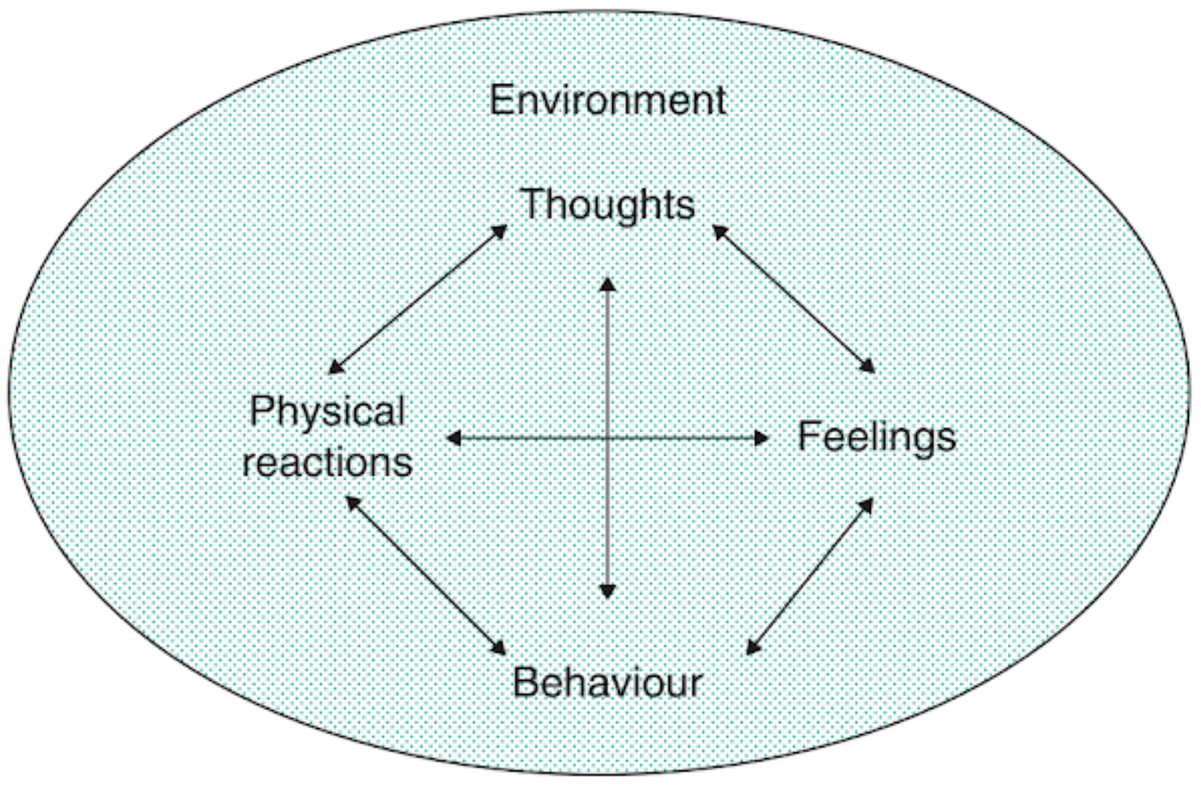

Figure 1.1 The five-part model.

these interactions that has been of great value to psychotherapists, and especially to those using cognitive behavioural methods. It is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

In the diagram, *feelings* cover what might be termed *moods, emotions, or feelings*, including, for example, fear, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, and joy. *Physical reactions* include *bodily symptoms and sensations*, such as palpitations, pain, nausea, and sleepiness. The term *thoughts* does not refer only to the explicit verbal thoughts that go through our minds. It also includes images, and the meanings and beliefs we may take from situations that are not as clear cut initially as a 'thought going through your mind'.

In this model, you will see that four of the five systems—thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and physical reactions—are interconnected. They are linked by double-headed arrows, showing that they influence each other, and also showing that a change in one can affect all the others. Of course these four systems have a context—they occur in someone who belongs to a particular environment which is made up of their history, culture, age and experiences, by their relationships with others, and by the actions of those around them. So their environment, the fifth part of the system, is also linked to everything else. This is hard to illustrate in a two-dimensional diagram but is indicated by placing all the elements that interconnect within the same sphere (ellipse) of influence. Here are some examples of the interactions between the systems:

- You are sleepy (a physical state): you feel relaxed, you think about lying down, so you put your feet up on the sofa and have a doze.
- You run upstairs (a behaviour): your heart pounds, you think you are getting unfit (a thought), feel disappointed (a feeling), and think about taking more exercise.

- You wake feeling worried: a friend who is ill comes to mind (a thought), this slows you down (a physical reaction), and you send them a cheering text message.
- You think life is all work and no play (a thought): you are tired (physically), and decide it's time to do something more enjoyable. You ask a friend to meet up for lunch (a behaviour) and come home feeling better (a feeling)—and more relaxed.

There are in addition factors in the environment that affect the other four elements—for instance, the person who put her feet up for a doze wasn't expecting a rowdy group of children to burst in at any moment. The environment provides the context within which the other four systems interact. It provides the setting conditions for the way the whole system changes, and of course the limitations too.

These are all examples of normal interactions, and noticing the different aspects of our reactions to daily experiences helps us to understand them. Taking account of aspects of the environment fills in more of the picture, so that the whole complex story can be summarized in the diagram—and simplified though it is, it has some very important implications. The main ones are shown in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 The main implications of the five-part model

1. This pattern of interconnection is universal. It is useful for understanding others as well as ourselves.
2. The interconnections operate whether you feel good or not. They can create a virtuous spiral that enables you gradually to feel better or they can create a vicious spiral downwards and make you feel worse. They form cycles of interaction that can feel self-perpetuating.
3. All five parts of the model are always interconnected. However, some of the influences are easier to notice than others, and some are easy to miss. For example, some people keep busy when they are worried, as if this keeps the worrying thoughts at bay. They are reluctant to *think* their worries through, or to pay attention to their *feelings*. Others worry away at it when in a difficulty, but may forget to give themselves a break by *doing* something absorbing—by turning their attention to something else (by changing their behaviour).
4. Change in one part of the system will affect all of the other parts, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, as part of a chain reaction. Therefore, in theory at least, we should be able to choose between different ways of trying to change our reactions.

Options for change

This model is especially useful when deciding how to make changes in your life. The first question is, where should you start? Giving someone medication primarily changes their physical reactions and thereby may affect their mood. Other changes will follow, so the person may become less troubled by upsetting thoughts and feelings, and may sleep better too so that, as the chain reaction continues, they become more able to do the things they want to do—and feel better. Research has shown that this works better when people are depressed than when they are anxious, when their problems tend to re-emerge once the medication is stopped. But the model also tells us that there are other ways of initiating the process of change.

Trying to change moods (feelings) directly has not resulted so far in demonstrably effective therapies. If I feel miserable, then it doesn't (usually) help to tell myself simply to 'snap out of it', and 'feel different'. Nor can I respond to the demand not to feel the way I do. Maybe in the future researchers will be able to tell us more about how moods work, and this will help us discover how to change them directly. But, for the present, we must use the chain reactions shown in the five-part model and focus on finding ways to set a more positive, helpful, or accepting cycle in motion using ways of changing thoughts and behaviour. So, if I feel miserable it might help to become more active and do something that I usually enjoy, or it might help to think differently: to pay attention to my successes, friends, and sources of pleasure—or to learn how to shift my prevailing attitude (that things should always go my way, for instance). I could also try out these methods to find out which suits me best, and which one works in my particular circumstances . . . and that is one of the suggestions made throughout this book. Search for a way that fits for you, and works for you, and use this book, rather like a buffet meal, to select those parts that are most relevant.

Initiating changes in the chain reactions shown in this simplified model is usually something that can be done here and now. Making changes to environmental factors, to things like your work, your home, or your relationships, is a longer-term proposition—in every sense. And there will be some things that you cannot change—most obviously, the things that have happened to you in the past. However, you can re-consider the meanings you have taken from such events at any point, and there are times when factors in your environment, in your work or relationships for example, are likely to continue to weigh on you if they are not changed. There are also changes that are just part of life, like leaving home, going to college, creating a new family, retiring, and becoming more forgetful and less mobile as you get older. These all demand that we adjust, that we make changes, and throughout this book you will also find many points at which

we say something about finding a balance: between change and stability, between accepting and resisting, between building strength and accepting weakness, between rigidity and flexibility, and between being creative and acquiring widely used and demonstrably effective skills for living. So, this model, which condenses much information, allows us to make good use both of research findings and of our own preferences and inclinations. Using this model helps us to find out what works well for us, in our present circumstances.

Summary

- The approaches and methods in this book are based on research in various branches of psychology.
- The findings from clinical psychology enable us to overcome difficulties such as anxiety and depression.
- Research in management psychology has identified effective strategies for increasing resilience, for better time management, for making and reaching goals, for developing useful habits, and in negotiating with others.
- Positive psychology helps us to build on our strengths, become more creative, to be happier, and to flourish in our lives.
- A five-part model provides a foundation for much of this help and supports us in choosing which approaches will be most helpful to us.

Chapter

2 Valuing and understanding yourself

The still point of the turning world

Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance …

T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'

In our fraught, bustling, always-active modern world, change implies activity, and fast. But wise change begins at a 'still point'. For psychological change, for personal development, that still point is provided by valuing, accepting, and understanding ourselves, and doing so with an attitude of kindness. It begins from a point of reflection. It involves giving oneself time and space to stop, to see more clearly where you are, which way you are going, and how you feel about that, and then considering whether (or not) to take action. This chapter is about using that still point—that process of reflection—to provide a sure foundation for change. It starts by recognizing the importance of *valuing yourself* and of *identifying your values*.

Valuing yourself just as you are

The chef's tale

Marc was a chef. He ran a successful restaurant but had one ambition: that he and his restaurant should be recommended in the *Good Food Guide*. He believed that he was not good enough for even a passing mention. Then, one day, the great honour came, and his excellence was recognized with a wonderful review. But he did not feel happy. He had wanted this honour

all his working life and now when he attained it he felt wretched and miserable. Why? Because, instead of valuing himself more as a result of this achievement, he valued the opinion of the *Good Food Guide* less. His reasoning went something like this: there can't be much to being in the *Good Food Guide* if they include the likes of me.

If you do not value yourself independently of your achievements, you will not value your achievements.

We are vulnerable to having little sense of our own worth partly because we tend to value ourselves by our achievements. It is by finding within ourselves a sense of value that does not depend on our achievements, or our talents, or any similar characteristics, that we can establish for ourselves a sense of self-worth that provides a surer foundation.

In the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Mark Darcy says to Bridget: 'I like you very much. Just as you are.' And when Bridget tells her friends what Mark had said, Jude says: 'Just as you are? Not thinner, not cleverer ...?' The psychologist, Carl Rogers, spoke of this attitude, which he called an attitude of *unconditional positive regard*, as the ideal attitude of parents for their children. It does not mean that you approve of everything, or even of most things, the person does or says, nor that you think that the person should not make changes in how they behave. But your valuing the person is *unconditional*. You value and accept the person *just as they are*. You recognize their value. And this is the attitude that, we are suggesting, you adopt towards yourself.

The idea that each of us has an intrinsic value, independently of our achievements or our attributes, is one that forms a part of many religions. 'Each of us is equal in the eyes of God' encompasses not only our intrinsic value but the idea, too, that at this fundamental level we all have the same value. The democratic principle—that each of us has one, and only one, vote—is the political embodiment of this idea; and we can all experience the same feelings—of love, grief, fear, doubt, and so on.

No double standards

In order to value yourself you don't have to like everything about yourself and certainly you do not need to approve of all your actions. If you tend to undervalue yourself you are almost certainly applying double standards: underrating yourself just because you are you and not someone else. If you value yourself less than you value other people, ask yourself if that is fair. Are you downgrading your view of yourself just because it's you? What would you say to someone else in the same position as you? Is it the same as you are telling yourself? Applying double standards is always undermining: it is like trying to build a house on top of a swamp. The house won't last, and its foundations will be constantly eroded.

Three common reasons for undervaluing yourself

1. *I think I'm not good enough.*

   Think of someone you admire because of how much that person has done to help others. Do you use that person's goodness as a reason to berate yourself for not being as helpful as them? That wouldn't be right because to admire such a person is to value people, including you, just for being human, and because what this person has done is to help other people. Helping other people would not be admirable if those other people did not have intrinsic value.

2. *I think it would be arrogant.*

   Valuing yourself, your own opinions, and character *more* than other people may be arrogant. It is being unfair to others. If you undervalue yourself, you are falling into the same trap as the arrogant person, except in reverse. You are not being fair to yourself. Being fair to yourself is not arrogance, but will in fact help to protect you from behaving in an arrogant fashion, since such behaviour is often due to a deep-seated lack of self-esteem.

3. *I think I have been bad.*

   Sometimes we undervalue ourselves not because we are disappointed in our achievements, but because we are disappointed in ourselves, in our moral character. We have not come up to our personal standards of behaviour, and we whip ourselves for this mercilessly. We set standards for our children, and tell them off when they fail to meet some of these standards. But it is in the nature of standards that they cannot be lived up to all the time: if they could, they would perhaps be too undemanding. Minding about failing to meet a standard is a reason for valuing yourself, for recognizing that it is worth trying to make changes, and starting to make them; it is not a reason for ceasing to value yourself.

Recognizing your values: understanding what matters to you

Knowing what your values are is just as important as knowing that you have intrinsic value. Our values are important and useful because they tell us what we are for and what we are against. They are like ideals that reflect our opinions about things that matter to us, such as working hard, or being broadminded and tolerant. When we meet others who share our values it is easier to feel connected to them. But values are often unspoken—as if everyone 'should' accept the same set of values, and be guided by a similar set of internal rules. They may run underground in our lives, without

Box 2.1 What values are and are not

- Values are not goals
- Values are not feelings
- Values are not outcomes
- Values are not judgements
- Values are in the here and now
- Values do not mean the path is straight
- Values entail responsibility—you always have the ability to respond
- Values can't always be lived up to
- Values are chosen
- Values provide a direction for us.

being put into words, which makes it hard to know whether the choices and decisions we make fit with our (underlying) values.

The psychologist Steven Hayes has described values as *chosen life directions.* A direction can never be reached as you are not trying to get to a specific place. Values are thus something you do rather than something you simply have. You may hold the value of being a loving person—this is not something that is ever finished, or arrived at—you simply continue to try to act in line with this direction, with this value, of being loving. Values are also choices—choices about what we want our lives to be about (see Box 2.1).

There are many areas of life that can provide us with direction—with information about our values. Look at Box 2.2 and consider those areas most important to your direction in life.

A useful exercise to help in understanding your values is the 'funeral exercise' (see Box 2.3). It helps clarify what kind of person you wish to be and also what you might want to do in life—itself a reflection of values. You may find it helpful to write down a statement of your values as revealed by the *funeral exercise*. You may wish to keep this statement private, or share it with those to whom you are close. You may change your values in response to reasons and experience. Carrying out the *funeral exercise* again in, for example, a year's time will help you to see what changes you have made.

With the results of the funeral exercise in mind, to what extent, in broad terms, is your current life in line with your values? You will find some simple rating scales in Box 2.4.

Box 2.2 Possible areas that you value

- Couple/personal relationships
- Parenting
- Family relations (other than intimate and parenting)
- Friendships
- Work
- Learning and growth
- Play
- Spirituality
- Citizenship
- Physical health and well-being.

Box 2.3 The funeral exercise: understanding your values

Imagine your own funeral 3 years from today.

What would you like people to say about you? What would you like a *close friend*, a *member of your family*, and a *colleague or neighbour* to say about you? It may be helpful to distinguish two issues: what kind of person you were, and what kind of life you led.

The point of this exercise is not to think about your death, but about the kind of person you want to be and the kinds of thing you wish to achieve. Three years from now is far enough away for you to do new things but near enough not to feel remote. Feel free, however, to choose another time frame.

Do not try to guess what people would really say about you but think about what you would *like* them to say. The purpose of this exercise is to help you to understand what is important to you.

When you have done this exercise you are in a position to write a statement, for your own personal use, about your values.

Values are the source of the rules we live by. Another way to find out more about your own values is to think about the rules that matter to you: you *should* ... be kind, helpful, and generous. You *should not* ... tell lies, steal, or hurt people. We express our values in general statements that often begin like this:

Box 2.4 Is your current life broadly in line with your values?

Question 1: Are you doing what you want with your life?

1. Yes—almost all of the time
2. Most of the time
3. Some of the time
4. Only a little of the time
5. Almost none of the time.

Question 2: Are you the kind of person you would like to be?

1. Yes—almost all of the time
2. Most of the time
3. Some of the time
4. Only a little of the time
5. Almost none of the time.

You should (almost) always ...
Never (or hardly ever) let yourself ...
Whenever ... such and such happens ... then you (generally) must (or must not) ...

How would you finish these sentences? Give yourself a moment to find some of your own answers (see also Chapter 7, 'Finding new perspectives').

Values are also reflected in the judgements we make. Imagine you hear someone say: 'I really don't know why he stays with her.' What value judgements are being made here? Are they about consideration for others? About sharing? Or selfishness? Or about being willing to give as well as to take? About happiness, and how everyone has a right to seek it out? About making people unhappy? About respect for others, and how we should show it? People will think differently about this situation, and indeed about whether it is possible to make such a judgement about others in the first place. The point is that choices and decisions that fit with our underlying values are likely to be those that work best for us. We need to know them in order to understand ourselves better—and they are often revealed by the judgements we make about others.

If you are uncertain about your value and your values

If you find it difficult to *value* yourself and hard to discover the values that really matter to you, then set the idea of valuing to one side and start by simply *accepting* yourself *just as you are* whether or not you like yourself. Accepting yourself, with an attitude of kindness, will clarify your vision and help you to understand yourself, but fighting yourself, or rushing in to change, tends to obscure this level of understanding. It is difficult to change if, at the same time, you are berating yourself or being self-critical. Psychological understanding and change work best when undertaken with acceptance and kindness and we say more about each of these in Chapters 3 and 4.

It can also help to adopt an attitude *as if* you accepted yourself with kindness, even if you don't yet feel, deep down, that you can. The attitude that we are suggesting might be described as follows: 'In learning to understand myself I will look at myself clearly, acknowledging whatever feelings that brings, without judgement, whatever it is that I find out about myself. For the moment, I am not judging myself, nor trying to change myself (that will come later) but just understanding myself.' The main purpose of kindly acceptance is to see yourself clearly without judgement. Leave judgement and change for the future.

Understanding yourself better

There are many aspects to all of us, and we all have complex, and sometimes contradictory parts of our personalities. Most of the time we continue on our way without stopping to think much about who we are. Which is fine so long as things are going well—or well enough. But when we are not doing so well, or have the sense that we could be doing better, then the better we understand ourselves the quicker we will be able to put things right. However, it is difficult to know how to start.

Starting from how you feel now

People have different needs, and they have more or less complex needs, but overall, they will not do well if they do not know what their needs are and how to set about meeting them. There are needs that are essential for basic survival such as those for food, drink, and shelter, and those that are less essential for keeping you alive, but important for creating the sense that you are doing well. These include the need for security, exercise, rest, and a good diet, and also 'higher-level' needs such as those for meaningful occupation, companionship, recreation, and intimacy.

We have a built-in tool that helps us to find out what we need, and that is our feelings. We feel better when things go well for us, and worse when they don't. So, the process of understanding starts by tuning in to feelings—by recognizing, naming, and thinking about them. Feelings provide the motivation (to make things better) and the measure (of how bad it is, or how well you are doing). You feel impatient. What you need is to get going. But your companions are dawdling about, and seem to be in no hurry at all. What can you do? Ask them to hurry up? Yell at them? Bite your tongue and hang in there trying to keep calm? Your job is to choose a way that works—one that fits well for you, for others, and for the situation you are in. Then the impatience will subside. Knowing what you need helps you to decide what to do. It organizes you for action. If tomorrow you feel impatient that could be for other reasons: you could be bored by your work and need to be doing something else, or your impatience could be a more enduring characteristic. Then the options for change may be less clear and take longer to work out, but at all these levels, tuning in to your feelings helps you to start working out what to do.

- We all have slightly different needs. Some people need company when feeling sad while others recover more quickly when left alone.
- We need different things in different situations, and at different stages of life. So, it helps to be flexible, and to develop different ways of meeting your needs: at work or at home; aged 17 or 70.
- What you need in the short term (another drink) may be different from what you need in the long term (to limit your alcohol use).
- Needs aren't just wants. A child says 'I *need* another biscuit' when they have just been told that two is enough. I might need a break, but I don't really *need* a holiday in the sun.
- Needs can be confusing: thinking you need something to eat when someone has done something that upsets you, or when you feel lonely.
- Feelings are often mixed, and can be in turmoil, especially when important relationships are not going well. Thinking about what you need is then harder, but still just as important.

So, thinking about what you feel and what the feelings suggest you need does not always produce easy answers, and nor are available options easy to work out—or there would be no need for a book like this. It does, however, begin the process of understanding yourself better, and the main points can be turned into a simple, but useful plan of action (see Box 2.5)

In this way, what you feel and what you do can fit together to meet your particular need at a certain time. Tuning in one Saturday morning, you notice you are feeling bored, lethargic, and tired. What do you need?

Box 2.5 A simple action plan

(Bare bones that provide a structure for change.)

- Tune in to your feelings.
- Ask yourself what the feelings suggest you need.
- Think about your options for meeting your needs, in this particular situation.
- Choose one option and act on it.

The answer you give yourself on this occasion is not a rest, but something to liven you up. What could that be? Of course, that depends on your circumstances and the possibilities before you. These will be different if you have to go to the supermarket and take the kids swimming or if you are on your own, and different again if you feel you are too much on your own. Only you know, and only you can decide. So, it is important to be able to understand yourself.

Understanding your nature: your likes and dislikes, your relative strengths and weaknesses

Another way of understanding yourself is to look at what you enjoy. To think about what gives you pleasure or pain, about those people, events, and activities that you like or dislike. To recognize the things that come easily to you, and those that you struggle with so that you can acknowledge your relative strengths. On the whole, it is more effective to build on strengths than it is to try and overcome weaknesses (see 'Using your strengths' in Chapter 6 for a longer discussion on how to identify and use your strengths). Although you may know these things quite well, prompting yourself to think about them systematically (see Box 2.6) can bring surprises, for instance, in recognizing how the balance of your time is spent. Too much time doing those things you do not like, and struggling with too many things that are hard for you, will be discouraging. A balance is much easier to live with although a hard struggle is sometimes worth it: carrying on learning to drive despite endlessly failing your driving test, or getting used to living on your own for instance, may bring rewards later on.

The dynamic process of understanding yourself

Understanding yourself well, recognizing your values, and believing in yourself (having a good sense of your worth and your value) are important but often difficult to achieve. One obvious difficulty is that none of these

Box 2.6 What are your likes and dislikes?

1. What do you enjoy? What activities, what settings, do you look forward to with pleasure? Whose company do you seek out? Who do you like to spend time with?
2. What do you *not* enjoy? What activities, events, or circumstance fill you with dread? Or bore you stiff?
3. Which of the things that you are now quite good at were interesting or fun to learn?
4. And which of them were and remain a struggle for you, both to learn and to remember?

things is set in stone. Self-understanding is a useful starting point but self-development can involve changes of all kinds: in preferences, values, attitudes, skills, and even talents. The process of reflection, which provides the still point in a turning world, and which provides us with the space to think about who we are and how we are doing, continues to be valuable because we never stop changing and developing. It is necessary whenever we think about making changes, and especially so when we are prompted to change by feeling dissatisfied, unhappy, or uncomfortable in some way.

Blocks to understanding yourself

Before thinking about how to set the process of change in motion, it is important to be aware of some blocks to self-understanding.

1 Social pressures

What other people think about us, and how others expect us to behave, are important to us. But when we start to behave in ways that other people want us to, when we try to please them, and are guided by what they think of us, then we may cease to see ourselves clearly and find it hard to be ourselves.

Sometimes we may wish to please or follow others but if we behave very differently in different company or feel we are 'not ourselves' in some situations, then social pressures may be getting in the way of self-understanding. The questions in Box 2.7 may help identify social pressures of this kind.

Box 2.7 When might social pressures prevent you from being yourself?

1. In what, if any, situations do you not feel free to make your own choices?
2. In what, if any, situations do you not feel free to express your views and opinions honestly?
3. Do you feel you can be yourself on a daily basis?
4. With whom do you feel that being yourself is restricted? Or that you are 'playing a part'? Think about colleagues and others at work; friends and former friends; partner and former partners; family including children; and acquaintances.
5. Who do you try to please in your life?
6. Who scares or frightens you, so that you make efforts not to displease them?

Do some of your answers suggest habits that you would like to change?

Ultimately it is not satisfying for us to be following the script of others. We may, of course, endorse what others say or think or want from us and in endorsing it we are making it our own. But when we follow others without reflecting on whether we agree with them then, at some stage, we are likely to become uncomfortable and dissatisfied. See also Chapter 24 ('Overcoming fears and avoidance: social anxiety and phobias').

2 Voices from the past

Most of us carry with us echoes of the past, or what might be called *inner voices* that affect our behaviour and self-understanding. These inner voices, particularly those that echo messages received from parents and other authority figures, can affect our feelings, thoughts, and behaviour, and they are discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 19 ('Understanding voices from your past'). In that chapter we show how you can recognize and understand these voices, and also free yourself from being constrained by them.

3 Self-protection and self-defence

It is only natural to want to hide away, or to seek out safety, if you are feeling threatened or at risk. Then ways of protecting yourself from pain, from the danger you fear, and ways of defending yourself from harm or outright

attack come into play almost automatically. Protecting oneself has the obvious advantage that it makes you (at least temporarily) feel better. Sometimes we are aware of what we are doing when we seek protection, and, for example, avoid expressing an opinion for fear it will meet with censure or outrage. But sometimes we are completely unaware of using such 'defence mechanisms', as they were originally called by psychoanalysts. These psychotherapists also suggested that there were advantages to protecting ourselves in such ways, as they enable us to hide aspects of ourselves from ourselves—aspects that if we saw clearly would upset us and cause psychological pain; aspects that we would find hard to accept. For short periods, such defence mechanisms may be useful—to ease the pain of a loss or trauma, for example. But if they persist they usually fail to cover over the cracks and gradually problems arise due to the fact that we have not dealt constructively with the underlying issues. Or it may be that the need for protection is just a perception—there is no threat—and this is never learned while the protections are still in place. There is more on such 'safety-seeking behaviours' and their unintended consequences in Section 6 and especially Chapter 24 (see 'Overcoming the fear: testing predictions'). This is why 'defence mechanisms' and 'safety-seeking behaviours' can at times impede understanding—at least until one can recognize them in action and understand that they result from a need for self-protection. Some of the ways in which self-protection can help us to hide from aspects of ourselves that we find hard to accept are also described in Chapter 20, 'Recognizing that you can change: facing problems'. The more common defence mechanisms, as they were originally understood are listed in 'Some common defence mechanisms that impede self-understanding' which is available online at http://www.oup.co.uk/companion/manageyourmind.

4 Unhelpful judgements

Do you recognize these pressurizing statements?

- I must do everything perfectly.
- I must never upset anyone.
- I must be a rock for other people.
- I must be more clever.
- I must be more beautiful.

The assumption behind them seems to be that unless you are more like this then something will go wrong for you: you will be excluded, rejected, unsuccessful, unloved. The pressure behind the statements comes from the belief that goes with them, that you are not OK as you are. So you

should try to be different—which bypasses the important processes involved in truly valuing and understanding yourself.

5 Attitudes

Most of the time we continue on our way without stopping to think much about who we are, which is fine so long as things are going well—or well enough. But sometimes we are not doing well, and sometimes, although nothing is particularly wrong, we have the sense that we could be doing better. Then, in order to understand ourselves better it helps to use the simple action plan described in Box 2.5 ('Starting from how you feel now'), and pay attention to our feelings, tune in to what we need, and think about what to do about it. But unhelpful attitudes can get in the way. Five of them are listed next.

Trying to be good. You might, for example, have a habit of always putting others first which, even though it sounds unselfish, runs the risk of ignoring your needs to the extent that if you have only yourself to please, you end up not knowing what to do. Or you ignore the weight of the load you are carrying until exhaustion and stress force their way into your attention. Perfectionism is another way of trying to be good—by doing well. However, it tends to leave you feeling you have never done well enough. Perfection is elusive, and a constant sense of not coming up to the mark lowers your self-esteem and makes it harder, not easier, to do your best.

Patterns that backfire. These are patterns that made sense in the past, and were once useful to you, like learning not to let your feelings show when you were teased, or learning to hit before you got hit when violence erupted around you. When your situation changes but the old habits remain, they can be more of a hindrance than a help. Their legacy leads you to misread signals, so that you distance yourself from people who are not about to tease or hit you, and potential friendships wither away. Outdated patterns prevent you feeling better and stop you discovering a different side to yourself.

Being stuck in a rut. If the rut is more like the groove that keeps you moving then all is fine. However, if you have been doing too much of the same thing, in the same ways, for too long you will begin to feel bored, detached, and unsatisfied, as if life is full of restrictions rather than possibilities, and no longer has much meaning for you.

Fear of change. Better the devil you know—provided only that the next devil would be worse. Fear makes you want to keep safe, and seeking safety reduces self-confidence and stops you making new discoveries.

Feeling worthless. For many people this attitude to themselves is stultifying. It both makes them feel bad and stops them doing something about it.

Beginning the process of change and development

Imagine that after watching a TV programme about refugees you made a donation to the relevant charity. What would that say about you? Would it suggest you were a charitable person? Often we do not live up to our values, and some of our choices and decisions also make this clear. Earlier that same day you might have walked past a homeless person without buying their magazine. What would *that* say about you? The fact is that one charitable act alone, or one uncharitable one, tells us almost nothing. Values are discovered, rather, by observing your direction of travel. Do you generally go this way? Or that way? You might usually be heading in a westerly direction when you travel. But there is no single point of arrival. West is not a place but a direction, just as being charitable is not a single thing but a more general set of beliefs and dispositions that (some of the time) link up with what you do. The process of change is similar.

One of our patients said: 'If I matter it matters what decisions and choices I make, and these help to determine my sense of who I am.' What she meant was that if it is true that she is intrinsically valuable as a person, then her choices and decisions are also important, and if they fit with her values, they will help her to live the life that she wishes to live.

Curiosity: an attitude that helps

Just as some attitudes interfere with doing well, so there are attitudes that help, and of these, curiosity is perhaps the most helpful. If you are curious you are more likely to be interested than to be bored; more likely to want to find out what your options are, and to act on them, than to remain stuck; less likely to be fearful and more able to think ahead. Curiosity invites you to wonder about the possible options and opens doors rather than closing them.

That curiosity can also be used to understand yourself as you are right now. Try answering these questions:

1. How does your daily activity fit with your inclinations? Or talents? Or skills?
2. Do you have opportunities to do some of the things you like to do?
3. Are you happy with the way you relate to those people who are important to you?

These questions focus on three of the things that make you the way you now are: what you do (how you fill your time), what gives you pleasure and enjoyment, and your main relationships. If you want to look after yourself

better, turn the simple action plan we outlined earlier into an experiment. Use your curiosity to think about any of the ways in which you might want to look after yourself better and then start an exploration. Open your mind to the possibilities so as to discover the options. Then try something new. Do something differently. Make a small change. Keep the curiosity going so as to find out what happens next, after you have made a change. See what you can discover about yourself, and about how you can help yourself to do well (see also 'Start to explore' in Chapter 20).

Taking responsibility for yourself

To be agents of our own destiny we need to take responsibility for ourselves: to own, as it were, ourselves as we are now—hence the need to acknowledge our intrinsic value, to identify our personal values, and to understand ourselves better. Taking responsibility includes acceptance and acknowledging past mistakes, not making excuses. It is saying: I am who I am; and if I want to change then it is up to me to take responsibility for those changes (see Chapter 3, 'The value and practice of acceptance').

The mechanic and the gardener

When you decide to face a psychological problem, or to become more resilient in the workplace, or develop more satisfying relationships, or become happier you are starting a process of *change*, of *psychological* change, or developing yourself in some way. Change can come about in many ways. Consider, on the one hand, the mechanic, and, on the other hand, the gardener.

The mechanic understands the machine which, even if complicated, is *predictable*. The mechanic understands how the function of the machine is a result of its structure. The mechanic builds the machine and if the machine does not function as it should, the mechanic needs to fix it because the machine cannot fix itself. It is *inorganic*.

The gardener, in contrast, does not so much build the garden as try and create the right conditions for the plants in it to grow well. Gardens are *organic*. They are also subject to *unpredictable* conditions such as the weather or pests, that make the plants wither or fail to develop as the gardener had wished or expected. The gardener has to respond flexibly to such events, perhaps adapting the original plan, or even changing it altogether. Or the gardener may not wish to exert much control over the garden at all and may enjoy both its organic nature and its unpredictability. Such a gardener may *nudge* the garden in particular directions, by enriching the soil here, planting some bulbs there, and making more space for survivors, but leaving the rest to nature.

In his book, *How Change Happens*, Duncan Green, senior strategic advisor to Oxfam, discusses two approaches to international aid programmes. The first he calls the 'linear approach'—the approach of the mechanic. In this model a clear intervention is imposed in the expectation that it will have the desired specific positive results. In some settings this approach is appropriate and effective, but, Green says, often it is not. Societies, and the causes of social and political change, are too complex and, more crucially, too unpredictable.

This mechanical approach also ignores the organic aspect of international aid. The people 'on the ground'—the aid workers and even more importantly those who are members of the society that is supposed to benefit from the aid—will respond and act in their own ways. The changes that will take place are not fully, or even mainly, controlled by the aid programme. Engaging with a system that is both unpredictable and organic is, Green argues, somewhat like raising a child. Designing a 'project plan' for a child that sets out the goals, and how to reach them, until the child is adult is unlikely to be the best approach. Instead parents generally 'make it up' as they go along. Being a parent requires constant adaptation. It requires flexibility, collaboration with other people (teachers, grandparents, friends, and colleagues), coping with uncertainty, perseverance, and the ability to try out different things and respond to the effects, results, and feedback.

In making psychological changes, in developing ourselves, it is sometimes most effective to be our own mechanic—to make clear specified changes with a clear goal in mind. This approach will work best in situations that are broadly predictable, when the intervention is clear cut and one over which we have control, and when we know what goal we wish to reach.

If the situation is not highly predictable, either because our own responses to possible interventions are uncertain or because the people around us, and the world more generally, is unpredictable, then we will need to be more flexible in our approach to self-development. In unpredictable situations it can be most effective to try out various approaches, to make changes rather as scientists carry out pilot experiments. That is, to make a change, see what happens, and to be prepared to try out several approaches, and to see which work best.

Whether the situation seems predictable or not we may wish to take a more or less organic approach—either, like the mechanic, consciously making specific changes through the force of our will, or, like the gardener, focusing more on preparing the ground and then letting ourselves change and develop without the imposition of detailed, moment-by-moment control. '[W]hen we can let go of the idea that there are clear guidelines and a stable world . . . and . . . lay the groundwork for growth, and . . . work with

what we have ... You will find parts of yourself you didn't know existed' (*The Path* by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh). If we live our lives exclusively in terms of reaching pre-determined goals, we risk limiting ourselves to what we are able to imagine at the time of choosing those goals.

A questioning approach

Constructive change is best undertaken from a 'still centre' of self-acceptance, self-understanding, and self-valuing. There are many ways of going about the business of self-development or changing oneself. We can be 'gardeners' for some areas, 'mechanics' for others, we can focus on overcoming problems or building on strengths, we can aim to take control of ourselves or go with the flow. Whatever routes we take, they are likely to be most fruitful if taken with *understanding*. And understanding comes from curiosity—from a questioning, engaged, and interested approach.

Summary

- Value yourself as you are. Try to be as fair to yourself as you would be to others, rather than apply double standards
- Values are *chosen life directions*.
- Values provide the compass for our lives, not a set destination.
- Considering what you would like to hear people say at your funeral can help identify your values.
- Understanding ourselves is helpful but can be hindered by social pressures, voices from the past, the way we try to 'protect' ourselves, and our own judgements and attitudes.
- In undergoing a process of change and development we can be *mechanics* or *gardeners* of ourselves—being flexible with the approach as necessary.

Further reading

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Chapter 3

The value and practice of acceptance

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Serenity Prayer

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

Carl Rogers

- You are stuck in a traffic jam. You are going to be late for work. There is an important meeting you have to attend. At this point you can sit in your car fuming, feeling angry, irritable, and frustrated. An alternative is to accept that you are stuck for the time being and examine the options open to you. There may well be no way of avoiding the jam right now. You decide to stay in your lane and call ahead to send your apologies for the meeting. You turn on the radio.
- Your eldest daughter is 12 years old and wants to go into town to meet her friends. You are concerned about what she might do and whom she intends to meet. You know she is sensible but perhaps a little immature. You suggest that you could go into town with her on the bus. She thinks this is an awful idea. You have a number of choices: you could let her go in by herself; you could go in with her; you could stop her going at all. Whatever you decide, you realize that she is growing up and becoming more independent. Accepting this key point helps you realize that a main task for you as a parent is to try and instil good sense in your children, but that you can't live their lives for them. Being overprotective is likely to hurt both you and them in the long run. You realize that this is a tricky balance for any parent.
- You are lying in bed at night finding it difficult to get to sleep. Your mind is racing with worries about your health, your finances, and your family

relationships. You know that lying there and tossing and turning doesn't help but it's hard to stop. You keep trying to push these thoughts out of your mind and distract yourself with the radio. This works briefly but the worries return. You remain in a tug of war with these thoughts for much of the night.

In these situations, we might want to control circumstances or change things from how they currently are. It is one of the challenges of life to work out what we would like to change, what we are able to change, how best to bring about change, and what we are not able to change. One key skill in learning how best to cope with these difficult situations is the practice of acceptance.

Change through the practice of acceptance

Much of this book is a guide to the process of making changes in your life, towards living the life you want, in line with your values. This thread runs right through Part II, 'Making your way', and Part III, 'Overcoming difficulties'. This chapter is about acceptance, and about using mindfulness as one of the main routes to the practice of acceptance. Acceptance and pursuing change might appear to be polar opposites. Paradoxically, however, one of the most powerful ways of helping yourself to change is through fostering acceptance. The word 'acceptance' alone is too passive. Better to think of the *practice of acceptance*, which is a practice developed in Eastern meditative techniques and which is now being incorporated into Western practical psychology—and for good reasons.

The practice of acceptance itself brings about change. First, it helps us to *understand* ourselves (see Chapter 2, 'Valuing and understanding yourself'). Understanding oneself is no easy matter. One major problem is that we tend to try and avoid some of our emotions and thoughts—and particularly those that are causing us problems, difficulties, and pain. This avoidance impairs our self-understanding and therefore impairs our ability to see how we want to change—or might want to change if we saw ourselves clearly.

Second, the practice of acceptance *removes barriers to change*. By avoiding accepting aspects of ourselves—our thoughts and our emotions, particularly those that perhaps we don't like—we make it harder to understand ourselves, and we also block our ability to change, an ability that requires us to face ourselves, unflinchingly, but with acceptance.

Third, the practice of acceptance alters attitudes. In particular, it *moves us towards kindness*. Through accepting ourselves as we are, instead of berating, fighting, avoiding, and criticizing ourselves, we become kinder

towards ourselves. And such an attitude of kindness provides a firmer base for effective change than does a critical and negative attitude. It also provides the foundation for realizing the value of kindness (see Chapter 4, 'The value and practice of kindness').

The practice of acceptance goes beyond acceptance of ourselves, of our thoughts, and our feelings. Also of value is the complementary practice of acceptance of others and of the world around us. For many of us, difficulties in accepting aspects of other people cause us problems. Our anger, despair, envy, and so on concerning others tarnish relationships that are important to us, or prevent us from responding in ways that are more helpful to us. By practising acceptance of others we will not only be in a better position to help and be kind to others, but we will also help ourselves to make changes in how we respond to them. These new responses will bring about developments in our relationships that are in line with the changes we wish to make. The practice of acceptance of ourselves will help us in our practice of acceptance of others, and vice versa. Both practices help us develop an accepting attitude, and this can be directed towards ourselves, towards others and towards the world about us.

The practice of acceptance helps us to develop in ways that we wish to change, including when we have difficulties to overcome (see Part III, 'Overcoming difficulties'). One foundation for overcoming difficulties is 'facing the problem' and the practice of acceptance provides a valuable approach in helping to do this. It will enable you to:

1. Understand the present through *accepting where you are now*.
2. *Accept, and step lightly from, the past*.
3. *Accept the uncertainty of the future*.

(See Chapter 20, 'Recognizing that you can change: facing problems'.)

What acceptance is

In everyday use, acceptance has a number of possible meanings: the action of receiving or taking something that is offered ('he accepted the compliment'); the process or fact of being received as adequate ('she was accepted by the group'); the agreement with an idea ('acceptance of the teaching of the church'); and the willingness to tolerate or endure a difficult situation ('he accepted his pain').

The concept of acceptance is found in many spiritual and religious traditions. The Hebrew word 'Kabbalah' can be translated as 'receiving' or 'acceptance'. The first 'noble truth' in Buddhism, often described in

English as 'all life is suffering', suggests that there is a need to accept that suffering is a natural part of life.

From a psychological perspective, acceptance is focused on knowing truly 'where you are right now'. Within the tradition of mindfulness, Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman describe mindful acceptance as the ability to acknowledge that 'this is the way things are, for now'. Building on the analogy of life's path as a garden (see 'The mechanic and the gardener' in Chapter 2), acceptance includes knowing what type of soil you are rooted in, when the light and the sun reach you, how much rainfall there might be, and perhaps whether there are gardeners around to help. Once we truly know where we are then we are better able to take effective action to change what we are able to become. Self-acceptance means being OK with who you are, recognizing that you are not perfect, but refusing to buy into the judgements your mind sometimes makes about you. Impatience, with yourself and others, as when you are stuck in a traffic jam, is the face of non-acceptance.

Recently developed psychotherapies within the wider family of cognitive behavioural therapies have emphasized the role of acceptance, often within the tradition of mindfulness. These therapies include *acceptance and commitment therapy* (ACT—pronounced as the single word 'act'), *compassion-focused therapy* (CFT—see Chapter 4, 'The value and practice of kindness'), and *mindfulness-based cognitive therapy* (MBCT). There is emerging evidence for the effectiveness of these therapies, particularly in conditions which tend to have a chronic or relapsing course, such as depression, pain, and dealing with other long-term health conditions. Within ACT, the word 'willing' is often used in the same way as 'accepting'. Steven Hayes, a clinical psychologist and the founder of ACT, says that ' "acceptance" and "willingness" can be understood as responses to the question: "Will you take me in as I am?" ' Thus willingness and acceptance in this context mean responding to your feelings by feeling them, responding to your memories by remembering them, and responding to sensations in your body by sensing them. This is the opposite of avoidance—suppressing feelings, pushing memories away, and trying to rid yourself of certain bodily sensations. Hayes highlights that the goal of acceptance and willingness is learning how to *feel* better rather than simply trying to feel *better*.

A list of some of the things we might accept

- That we have thoughts and feelings.
- That we can become better at recognizing and identifying these.
- That we can't control what other people think, feel, and do.

- That others can hold different opinions from you.
- That we are human—and not perfect.
- That others are human and not perfect.
- That not everything can be controlled—including having thoughts and images.
- That some circumstances can't be changed—life involves some suffering and pain.

What acceptance is not

Acceptance does not come with a sense of defeat, or surrender, or giving in. It does not involve trying to keep a stiff upper lip, or being determined to 'grin and bear' those things you do not like, as if you have no other choice. Nor is it the opposite: acceptance that *everything* is right now—either in your body or head, or in the world. Acceptance is acknowledging that this is how things *are*. It is not, however, necessarily accepting that this is how things *should be*. In order to try to change yourself or the world, there needs to be an acceptance of what the current circumstances *truly* are: for internal acceptance, what symptoms or difficulties you have; for external acceptance, the state of the world and how others are. This is the acceptance that is needed in order to change yourself or the world.

Acceptance is not thinking that the world's climate is changing and that therefore there is nothing we can do about it. It is to think *yes* the world's climate is changing and then to ask: what can I do in these circumstances? Similarly, acceptance is neither fighting nor ignoring your physical or emotional pain. It is acknowledging the pain for what it really is and then engaging in the life you want to lead in the best way you can. Such acceptance is, of course, difficult. It is likely to require more than an act of will. It is likely to require a *practice* that includes exercises for developing your capacity for acceptance. Some of these exercises are described later in this chapter: 'Ways to develop the practice of acceptance'.

Neither is acceptance allowing unethical and immoral behaviour to go unnoticed. What we choose to accept in others and in the world is guided by the values we hold (see Chapter 2, 'Valuing and understanding yourself'). The self-understanding that comes from the practice of acceptance helps us clarify our values, and the acceptance of others helps us to avoid a judgemental attitude that can often obscure an effective response. Acceptance, therefore, does *not* mean that we respond passively to unethical behaviour. Quite the contrary. The practice of acceptance enables us to see more clearly how we can best confront and change such behaviour.

Some examples of unethical behaviour, beliefs, and situations—not to be accepted

- Prejudice
- Abuse
- Oppression
- Violence
- Poverty
- Hunger
- War
- Violation of human rights
- The belief that nothing can change for the better in our lives or world.

Social, political, and personal changes come from commitment and action. The best way to make such action effective is to accept and understand the world as it currently is and to plan how to bring about change from that starting point.

Acceptance and painful experiences

There may be times, particularly following physical or psychological trauma, when avoidance of dwelling on the trauma seems preferable to acceptance. Perhaps we are better off in a state of 'blissful' ignorance about ourselves and the world. There is indeed some evidence that for people in New York traumatized after '9/11', the use of denial as a coping strategy in the first few months following the event was associated with higher post-traumatic growth (greater well-being following a traumatic event). This was surprising to some psychologists who had argued that such denial is likely to be harmful. However, it emerged that when denial was still being used some months later it was not helpful—rather the attitudes associated with highest growth were positive reframing and acceptance. This was acceptance of the events having in fact happened and of being able to think, talk about, and experience emotions related to them. Hence acceptance in the long run was of most benefit. Mindfully moving on and engaging with life, putting the events out of one's mind, is not denial, but acceptance. Immediately after traumatic experiences, however, including bereavement (see Chapter 29, 'Loss and bereavement'), a period when thoughts of the trauma are 'repressed' can be helpful. Denial in the longer term is problematic because the thoughts and emotions associated with what is being denied remain easily triggered. Indeed we remain highly sensitive to the thoughts and emotions that we try

Box 3.1 An experiment you might like to try

For the next 2 minutes you may think about anything you like except one thing: you must not think about a *white bear* at all. If the thought of a white bear comes into your mind then push it out as quickly as you can. You simply must not think about any white bears.

OK?! Then start the 2-minute timer now . . .

. . .

. . .

Don't think about those things. . . .

. . .

. . .

Great. Well done.

Think for a moment about what happened and whether you thought about white bears and if so how much and how often.

to suppress, so that they are all the more likely to persist and become salient. This can be illustrated by doing the experiment in Box 3.1.

If you tried the experiment in Box 3.1 you almost certainly found that white bears came to mind once or twice, if not a lot more. This is a famous psychology experiment first carried out by an American social psychologist, Daniel Wegner. Through a series of experiments, he found that if we try not to think about something, one part of our mind does avoid that thought, but another part keeps checking in to make sure the thought isn't coming up—which, ironically, brings it to mind. Indeed, thoughts that you try not to have, including the memories, thoughts, and feelings following painful and traumatic events, tend to "rebound" into your mind more than thoughts that you accept.

The practice of the acceptance of others enables us to help those about us through times of painful experiences. For many survivors of abuse, one of the things that helps is the genuine acceptance of them by another person—either a kindly and caring adult during childhood or a similar significant relationship in adulthood. Our acceptance of others provides important benefits to them. Indeed, we may even view this acceptance as a basic human need. If we aren't accepted by others, and instead are neglected or abused, we are more likely to experience ongoing distress later in our lives.

Ways to develop the practice of acceptance

Cultivating acceptance involves developing two key abilities: first, becoming better aware of our experiences, including the thoughts, feelings,

emotions, and bodily sensations we have; and second, identifying blocks to acceptance. In becoming aware, we recognize that our thoughts are just that: thoughts. We are able to reflect as well as react. We are able to see and clarify for ourselves our experiences— 'This is . . . a pain I have to live with, or a loss that cannot be replaced, a limitation that interferes with my plans . . . .'

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) has for many years helped people to recognize, and reflect on, the feelings and thoughts that they experience (see Chapter 7, 'Finding new perspectives'). Practices that have encouraged and aided people in paying attention to their internal and external experiences, however, have existed for much longer than formal therapies such as CBT. Some of the best developed of these practices are in Eastern meditative traditions, and a particularly important one is mindfulness. Mindfulness has therefore been integrated into a number of the newer therapies mentioned earlier, such as ACT, CFT, and MBCT. In order to practise acceptance, this chapter will highlight how you can start to be mindful, and develop the skill of mindfulness.

Using mindfulness to develop the practice of acceptance

There are many books, websites, downloads, and courses available for learning about mindfulness. Its increasing popularity may have made you curious but also cynical. You may have wondered what it is, or have read about it and practised it already.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, perhaps the person who first started to popularize the role of mindfulness in Western health practices, has described it as 'paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally'. Mindfulness is something we do deliberately—a conscious process. It is a process of awareness: paying attention to the present moment. You don't have to meditate to be mindful. The first step is to be aware of your own thoughts, feelings, urges, and behaviours. One common urge is to try to get rid of 'bad feelings'. Mindfulness is becoming aware that you have the urge to get rid of the feelings and consciously *noting* that this is the case rather than fighting the feelings. The practice of acceptance is to be mindful—to pay attention *non-judgementally*. The practice of acceptance is usually most difficult when we are distressed, when we are in emotional or physical pain, and when we are in a rush. In order to be able to use mindfulness at these difficult times, it helps if we have already developed the skills, just as we usually learn to swim in a calm, warm pool rather than in the choppy ocean. Times of relative emotional and physical calm are therefore good times to develop the skills of mindfulness.

Mindfulness can be practised with different degrees of formality, from briefly paying attention to one's breath to a formal daily meditation practice.

The latter is probably the most effective way to obtain the greatest benefit from mindfulness, and to develop the practice of acceptance. This may not, however, be something you wish to commit to at this time, or indeed ever. When getting physically fit, jogging regularly may help most but it will also be helpful to take opportunities to walk upstairs or get off a bus one stop early and walk the rest of the journey. Similarly, even if you don't wish to meditate, you can still practise being mindful and find this to be helpful.

Next we describe some simple but powerful practices in mindfulness and acceptance. Further meditation practices can be found in Chapter 4, 'The value and practice of kindness'.

Practical meditations

Meditation isn't something that always has to be done in a seated position. There are meditations that can be built into our everyday routines and which are described next. These examples are adapted from the excellent books by Mark Williams and Danny Penman, and by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman. We suggest that you first read through all the exercises and decide where you might like to start. Exercises 1 and 2 (see Boxes 3.2 and 3.3) help us bring our awareness to the everyday activities (if you are lucky) of eating chocolate and drinking tea or coffee. Exercise 3 (see Box 3.4) is a classic meditation exercise in bringing one's awareness to

Box 3.2 Exercise 1: chocolate awareness (meditation)

- Choose a chocolate bar (or other food) that you've not tried before or you've not had recently. Open the packet and inhale the aroma. Break off a piece and look at it. Really let your eyes see what it looks like, examining every nook and cranny.
- Put the piece into your mouth. Let it melt. Notice any urge you have to suck at it. Chocolate can have hundreds of different flavours. See if you can identify some of them.
- If you notice your mind wandering, just bring it back to the present moment.
- After the chocolate has completely melted, swallow it slowly and deliberately. Let it trickle down your throat.
- Repeat this with the next piece.
- How do you feel it is different from normal? Is the chocolate taste different or better? How would it have been if you'd eaten it up quickly?

Box 3.3 Exercise 2: tea or coffee awareness (meditation)

- If you make the drink yourself, look closely at the coffee grounds or the tea leaves or bag for a few moments. Note every detail. Observe how light bounces off the surfaces. As you add the water what can you hear? What can you smell?
- If you buy your drink, focus on the sounds and smells as it is made. Can you hear the clink of cups? Can you hear water being added or steaming? Try to tune directly into your senses rather than mentally describing the experience in words. If you are adding milk or sugar, observe how it swirls or dissolves. Does the smell change?
- Take a sip. Coffee has over 30 different flavours and tea has many more. See if you can identify some of them. Can you spot any sweet flavours, or sour ones?
- Resist the temptation to gulp the drink down. After a few moments when you feel your taste buds have become saturated, swallow the liquid. How does it feel? When you breathe, how do your mouth and throat feel? Hot? Cold? Hot followed by cold?
- Repeat the previous two steps with another sip of your drink. Carry on repeating this for a few minutes or until you've finished your drink.
- How do you feel? Did the drink taste different from usual? If you had drunk it at your usual pace, for instance?

the experience of examining and eating a raisin. These first three exercises help you to 'flex your attention muscle' by truly noticing as full an experience as possible, compared to being on the usual daily autopilot. You may prefer to start with Exercise 4 (see Box 3.5) which takes only 3 minutes and can be carried out almost anywhere. This exercise is a good daily practice although as with any new activity, however brief, you have to *make* the time because you are not going to simply *find* the time. If you find these exercises helpful, engaging, or if they raise your curiosity, there are longer, fuller meditations and trainings available (see 'Further reading'). However, being mindful and developing the practice of acceptance is something that can start right now with the exercises provided here. For meditation practice, it is important to remember you do not need to enjoy it, though some people do. The idea is to follow the practice each day until it becomes a routine (also see Chapter 9, 'Developing useful habits'). Only you can decide what mindfulness becomes for you.

Box 3.4 Exercise 3: raisin awareness (meditation)

Give yourself 5 to 10 minutes when you can be alone and won't be disturbed by the phone or family or friends. You need a few raisins (or similar). The following steps give you an idea of what you need to do. It's the spirit of how you do it which is more important than covering every instruction in detail. Try to spend about 20 to 30 seconds on each of the following eight stages.

Holding: hold the raisin in your palm, or between your finger and thumb. Notice the weight and any shadows it casts.

Seeing: focus on it as if you have never seen one before. Notice patterns of light and shade on the folds and ridges.

Touching: turn it over exploring the texture. How does it feel on your thumb and forefinger?

Listening: hold it to your ear and notice any sounds as you roll it between your thumb and forefinger.

Smelling: hold it to your nose. Is there a scent? Focus on what this is like. If there is no scent, notice this as well.

Placing: place it in your mouth noticing how your tongue 'receives' it. Explore it with your tongue without chewing.

Chewing: bite into it and notice the effect on it and your mouth. Notice the texture and any taste.

Swallowing: try to notice the first intention to swallow. Follow the sensations of swallowing it, whether all in one go, or in two or more goes.

After effects: notice the aftermath. Is there an aftertaste? Is there an automatic tendency to look for another raisin? How does this compare to normal eating? What surprised you and what did you learn?

Mindfulness might also be brought to everyday activities without carrying out formal meditation (see the following section in this chapter, 'Everyday mindfulness: being mindful without meditation').

Everyday mindfulness: being mindful without meditation

How are you feeling right now reading this book, or scrolling through the computer, phone, or tablet? What sensations are you aware of in your body? What does the book or device feel like in your hand? What is your posture like? What expression is on your face? What thoughts or images are running through your mind? Bring your attention fully to the experience

Box 3.5 Exercise 4: 3-minute breathing space

Step 1: becoming aware

Adopt an erect and dignified posture, either sitting or standing. If possible close your eyes. Bring your attention to your inner experience. What *feelings* are here? Notice them without trying to change them, even if unpleasant. What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Notice them for what they are, just thoughts . . . What *bodily sensations* are here right now? Scan the body to pick up sensations without trying to change them.

Step 2: gathering and focusing attention

Focus your attention to a narrow 'spotlight' of the physical sensations of the breath. Notice the sensations of the breath coming in and going out again, in the nose/mouth and abdomen. If your mind wanders, just bring your attention back to the breath.

Step 3: expanding attention

Expand your awareness to the body as a whole, your posture, your facial expression. Notice any sensations of tension or discomfort. Gently explore these sensations by bringing your attention to them, imaging that your breath can move into and around the sensations, without trying to change them. Bring your awareness to your whole body, moment by moment.

you are having right now. Be aware of your breath. Now bring your attention to your bodily feelings, your emotional state, any thoughts or images running through your mind, and the surroundings around you. Take a few moments to identify each of these aspects in turn. Just notice them and then continue to read—mindfully, paying attention to what you are reading and how you are, right here, right now.

Learning to pay attention to the present moment does not only have to be developed through using formal meditations. We can at any moment, in any situation, be more present and aware of our breath, our bodily sensations, our surroundings, our thoughts, and our feelings. We can start by trying this during routine, everyday activities that we usually do without thinking, on autopilot. Some examples are provided in Box 3.6. We all find that our minds wander as we try to be mindful. That is to be expected, it is how the mind works. We can note that our mind has wandered and gently bring our attention back to our breath and then to whatever is the matter in hand.

If we take a few moments to be mindful frequently during the day, it will gradually help our ability to be mindful in other, more emotionally charged,

Box 3.6 Everyday activities to which we can bring awareness

- Showering and bathing.
- Getting dressed.
- Having breakfast (see Boxes 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 for coffee, tea, and raisin meditations).
- Brushing teeth.
- Travelling to work and making other familiar journeys.
- Walking around home, workplace, or other familiar place.
- Chores such as washing up, cleaning, or loading and unloading the dishwasher or washing machine.
- Paying attention from time to time to your sensations (what you can see, hear, feel physically, smell, or taste); to your emotions (noticing, for example, any urges, pulls, or drives to do things); and to your thoughts and what happens to your attention. When (not if!) your attention moves away, just gently pull it back to the matter in hand.

situations. By paying purposeful attention we can learn to see our current experiences in a clearer light. Being able to recognize our thoughts and feelings, as just that, thoughts and feelings, is an important step in understanding ourselves and developing the practice of acceptance—this is what I am feeling, this is what I am thinking, this is truly the situation I am facing . . . my current reality.

How will you remember to practise these everyday moments of being mindful? There are several practical ways of reminding yourself, from regular or irregular alarms or notifications, to putting coloured sticky dots in places where you will see them regularly, such as your watch-strap, steering wheel, and phone. How would you try to remind yourself of other activities? Experiment with different ways of reminding yourself until you find what works for you personally so that you can develop the habit of mindful practice. (See also Chapter 9, ‘Developing useful habits’.)

Practising acceptance

The actor Michael J Fox was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease at the age of 30. He wrote in his memoir:

> [T]he one choice I don't have is whether or not I have it. But beyond that my choices are infinite. How I approach it is up to me. It has a lot to do with—and this is hard for people to understand—accepting it. And that doesn't mean being resigned or not looking for a cure. But if you're trying to get away from it or change it, you're going to wear yourself out.

While most of us are fortunate in not facing a situation similar to that of Michael J Fox, we all experience distress and suffering in various ways. It's as though we are standing on a platform at a train station and our thoughts and feelings are the trains coming down the tracks. If we get down onto the tracks to try and push away these trains of distressing thoughts and feelings, we will fail: they will drive relentlessly on, leaving us all the more exhausted. Worse still, to adapt the metaphor, we may find ourselves carried away by the train of thoughts, dwelling on them and finding we are stuck ruminating on those thoughts and feelings. The practice of acceptance, on the other hand, means that we allow ourselves to notice and experience unpleasant feelings and sensations rather than trying to push them away. It enables us to stay, as it were, grounded on the platform, observing the trains and watching as they pass at their own pace. In practising acceptance, we observe our thoughts and feelings as they pass through our minds, neither trying to push them away, nor dwelling on them. We see them as they are: thoughts and feelings that we are experiencing in that moment.

This practice helps us to see our thoughts in a new way—as just thoughts, rather than as a reflection of some 'truth'. This acceptance doesn't mean you like or approve of the upsetting thoughts or feelings but it does mean you stop losing energy in fighting them, or that you ignore them. The practice of acceptance helps us to face our problems and to know what they are. Then we can tackle them.

Acceptance, through being mindful, is an important first stage in knowing how best to take action. When facing adverse life circumstances, it helps in the long run to accept where we are and what we are experiencing. By understanding this better we will be better able to take the action needed to change what can be changed and to live life to the full, within the limits we may have. This recognizes that acceptance alone is not enough—it is necessary but not sufficient. In order to live the life we want we also have to commit to actions in line with our values (see Chapter 2, 'Valuing and understanding yourself').

Practising acceptance of ourselves can also help us accept others, potentially enhancing our relationships with them. Anger with others is rarely helpful in bringing about constructive change. In accepting others we are not necessarily agreeing with them or approving their values and behaviour. But it enables us to understand them, and such understanding leads to greater flexibility in how we can engage with them, increasing the

chance of constructive change in both the other person and ourselves (see chapters in Section 4, 'Making your way with others').

> The things in our life we call obstacles are mostly the experiences we find ourselves unable or unwilling to welcome [accept]. Mindfulness is being intimate with all things, including those we fear or hate the most.
>
> Christina Feldman

Summary

- Acceptance provides the foundation for change.
- Acceptance is knowing 'where you are right now'.
- Acceptance involves engagement rather than avoidance.
- Acceptance is a willingness to respond to your feelings.
- Acceptance is not giving in; it is not being passive or helpless.
- Acceptance makes taking action more effective, including overcoming problems.
- Being mindful helps us develop acceptance.
- Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment.
- We can practise mindfulness in everyday situations as well as through formal meditation.
- Acceptance is an ongoing process rather than a one-time thing.

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Websites

Association for Contextual Behavioral Science: http://www.contextualpsychology.org

The Mindfulness Initiative: http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk

Chapter

4 The value and practice of kindness

Three things in human life are important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind.

Henry James

Kindness is crucial

- You trip over in the street and the contents of your shopping fly everywhere. Two people stop to help you pick up your things and check you are OK.
- In January 2015, a young mother and her 3-year-old son were on a long train journey. She was doing everything she could to keep her son entertained, counting sheep out of the window, colouring, and playing games. A man unexpectedly handed her an unsigned note with some money as he got off the train. It read:

  "Have a drink on me. You are a credit to your generation—polite & teaching the little boy good manners. PS, I have a daughter your age. Someone did the same for her once. I hope when she has children she is as good a mother as you!"

  The mother was really touched by this but didn't know who the man was. She took to social media to find out so she could thank him personally. This was picked up by TV stations who then invited her as a guest and spread the word further. Eventually the kind man was found and thanked. The kindness from the man touched the mother and she wanted to show gratitude and kindness back. The fact that this act of kindness led to such widespread media attention showed that it touched a positive nerve for the public.

- Tom is a 9-year old boy. When he was 7, some of the other boys in his class teased him and called him names for not wanting to play football with them and for playing with the girls in his class. Tom became upset and it came to the attention of his class teacher. She intervened and later held a class discussion about how we treat one another. However, this only led to two of the boys picking on Tom, calling him names, telling the other children not to play with him, and threatening him with worse treatment if he complained or went to the teachers or his parents. The boys were clever and sneaky and did nothing in the presence of adults at the school. Two years later, Tom is quieter and scared on more occasions.
- Jay is a 45-year-old woman. She is married with three children between the ages of 7 and 14. Her elderly mother is finding it hard to care for herself now and Jay is spending increasing amounts of time helping her. Jay has always had good relationships with her children but now finds herself unable to spend as much time with them as before. On the one hand, she is self-critical—I should do more, I should do better—on the other hand, she reminds herself that she is doing the best she can in difficult circumstances, and that she is a good person with loving relationships.

As these examples show, receiving kindness from others, offering kindness to others, not receiving kindness at all, and whether or not we treat ourselves kindly can significantly affect our lives. Acts of kindness, or the lack of them, have an important impact on how we feel and what we do (see Box 4.1).

Kindness has been defined as the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate, and as the act of being kind. Kind is variably defined as generous, helpful, and thinking about other people's feelings; and of having a sympathetic and warm-hearted nature. For most of us these are qualities that we welcome in others and in ourselves.

Box 4.1 Kindness in the present day

There are many organizations that aim to promote kindness by providing resources and making suggestions about what we might do. The *Random Acts of Kindness Foundation* is an internationally recognized non-profit organization founded upon a strong belief in kindness and dedicated to providing resources and tools that encourage acts of kindness. The *Pay it Forward Foundation* also inspires acts of kindness and encourages the beneficiary of a good deed to do a kind act for someone else. Through acts of kindness to strangers we can try to foster a more caring society.

Kindness is a virtue valued by major world religions. In Buddhism, 'Metta' refers to loving-kindness, a strong wish for the welfare and happiness of oneself and others. In Christianity, 'Caritas' refers to a selfless kindness and love shown to others (and to God). From these spiritual perspectives, kindness is seen as intrinsically moral. In psychological research, kindness is also one of the most commonly endorsed character strengths around the world. Our interest here is practical, focusing on what is known about the benefits kindness brings, and how to make these more readily accessible.

We all have an innate capacity for kindness, and we have evolved to be receptive to care and kindness from others. Kindness also plays a part in the process of bonding and attachment between parents and their children. This parental bonding of course becomes stronger when there is love as well, but kindness is still crucial. Kindness can be felt and shown among all people and it has a key role in helping us make friends, develop other relationships, and generally in providing a guide for us throughout life. Kindness and warmth from others calms us, soothes us, and makes us feel safe. When people are unkind, or even worse, bully us, we feel anxious, wary, and under threat. There is extensive evidence showing that cruelty, abuse, and neglect are associated with long-term psychological difficulties such as low mood, anxiety, and difficulties in relationships. The Dalai Lama, the head of Tibetan Buddhism, has suggested that since kindness is widely seen as crucial at the beginning and end of our lives, as infants and when elderly, why should not the rest of our lives require kindness as well? Our brains are evolved to respond to kindness and to be kind so it is not a case of whether or not we deserve kindness. Like water and food, kindness is a basic need, and provides motivation for us to seek it. Feeding the need for kindness is an important part of keeping mentally fit. The psychotherapist Piero Ferrucci reflects that for us to flourish 'kindness is not a luxury, it is a necessity'.

There are a number of ways kindness can be shown and felt. The two most obvious are showing kindness to others and receiving kindness from others (Box 4.2). A kindness sometimes less noticed, but which has profound effects on our feelings, is the kindness—or lack of it—that we show ourselves.

Box 4.2 Amelie

Watch the award-winning film *Amelie* to see how kindness can have benefits for the person being kind as well as for those receiving kindness, and to see how showing kindness can lead to further kindness.

Over recent years, there has been increasing scientific and therapeutic work examining the role of kindness and especially the related concept of compassion. This has built on centuries of wisdom established from various traditions. In the following sections of this chapter, we distil some of this work into a usable guide that will help you to foster the quality of kindness and to overcome possible obstacles to showing it, both to others and to yourself.

Understanding kindness

In order to be kind we need to be thoughtful and to understand how our behaviour affects others. Kindness requires the ability to recognize our own thoughts and feelings and also the capacity to recognize those of others. The *five-part model* described in Chapter 1 shows us that thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are linked, and in Chapter 7 ('Finding new perspectives') we provide examples of how thoughts—both your thoughts and those of others—can lead to false ideas of reality as well as accurate ones. If we understand another's thoughts and feelings we can show empathy and imagine how we would think and feel in their place—important steps on the road to kindness.

Numerous studies have shown that kindness interventions, such as counting acts of kindness received, performing acts of kindness for others, volunteering, or doing 'random acts of kindness', are linked to better well-being. There is an increasing number of organizations and individuals promoting kindness (see Box 4.1). However, the link between being kind and greater happiness only holds if we are helping people because we ourselves choose to do so and not because we are motivated by guilt or fear.

The role of compassion

There is a close link between 'kindness' and 'compassion'. Compassion is a word more commonly used in the media and in politics in recent years, so we hear about the need for compassionate care in health organizations, for example. What is compassion? The Dalai Lama defines it as 'a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a deep wish and commitment to relieve the suffering' and he adds 'my religion is very simple. My religion is kindness'. Compassion encompasses warmth and kindness, so in being compassionate we are encouraging kindness and warmth in how we act, think, and feel.

Two people who have been influential in furthering our scientific understanding of compassion and kindness and their practical application are Kristen Neff, a psychologist in the United States, and Paul Gilbert, a

psychologist in the United Kingdom. Kristen Neff has focused on the role of self-compassion. This has three components. First, *self-kindness,* which is being kind, understanding, and gentle to ourselves particularly at times of pain or difficulty, rather than being angry and self-critical. Second, *common humanity,* which refers to the recognition that our experience is part of a larger human experience: we are not unique or alone in facing the difficulties we face and having the feelings we experience. Third, practising *mindfulness*, which involves adopting a non-judgemental receptive mind-state, allows us to observe our thoughts and feelings as they are without being caught up and swept away by them. Self-kindness and self-compassion are linked to physical and emotional well-being, better coping with stress, and greater ability to reach one's goals. Curiosity, optimism, resilience, and self-worth are also associated with self-compassion.

To help explain the role kindness may play in our lives, Paul Gilbert has built on an evolutionary model of emotions and how they are controlled. Evolution has hard-wired us with the ability to feel anxiety, anger, sadness, and happiness; with a need for attachments and relationships; and with tendencies towards behaviours such as fighting or running away. However, much as we may wish to, we can't simply rid ourselves of these parts of being human. While we have this degree of biological hard-wiring, life experiences then shape which emotion systems are most used—which emotions we may experience most often. Although we cannot control the fact that we have a range of emotions, we can learn to control to some degree how we respond to them, and to control how we may further develop these systems. The next section explains this more, and shows where kindness fits in.

Three interacting systems for drive, threat, and soothing

Research in the neuroscience of emotion suggests there are at least three types of systems for controlling our emotional lives.

1. The threat system
2. The drive system, and
3. The soothing system.

All three systems are essential to our survival, and through the close links between them they help to regulate our emotions. They are a shorthand way of making sense of more complex systems that we have in our brains, and they can be more or less well developed depending on the experiences we have in life. The threat system is associated with anxiety and anger. It leads to seeking safety and protecting oneself, including in an immediate physical sense. This is linked with avoiding things we think are a threat to us. The drive system is associated with excitement and