On the kind of happiness that lasts a lifetime.
No matter what.

The Ten Worlds

The New Psychology of Happiness

Alex Lickerman, M.D.
& Ash ElDifrawi, Psy.D.

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each of the stories in this book are based in fact,
the names, identifying details, and histories
of the people involved have been altered to
preserve their privacy and protect
their confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION

Not long after I first began working as a primary care physician, my best friend, a clinical psychologist named Ash ElDifrawi, told me about a patient of his named April, who'd recently let him know that she'd been thinking about killing herself.

During her first two years in therapy with him, she'd been moderately depressed but mostly functional. Then a year and a half ago, her husband announced he was leaving her for another woman. Devastated, she begged him to stay, vowing to do whatever it took to make their marriage work. He refused, saying it was too late, and then moved out. In the months that followed, she reached out to him multiple times but to no avail. When she finally worked up the courage to confront him in person, he greeted her not with anger or even dismay, but indifference. He seemed switched off, as if she'd become just one of a million faceless people whose existence he hardly noticed. He left her, in short, with the impression that their relationship hadn't merely ended but had never actually existed in the first place.

Soon after that, she began to eat uncontrollably. She would snack on anything she could find—candy bars, popcorn, cookies, chips—and within twelve months she gained nearly thirty pounds. The heavier she grew, the more exhausted she became. She tried taking naps during the day, but they made little difference. When she finally nodded off at the wheel of her car one day, she decided it was time to see her doctor.

Her doctor, in turn, ordered a sleep study, which showed she had severe obstructive sleep apnea (a condition in which the tongue falls back in the mouth

and obstructs the throat during sleep, depriving the brain of oxygen). This had been the reason for her crippling fatigue, he explained. If she didn't lose weight, there was a good chance she'd eventually develop congestive heart failure. He recommended a gastric bypass, arguing that her obesity was no longer just a cosmetic concern but now a potentially life-threatening medical condition.

But she refused to consider it. So he prescribed a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine, which functioned by delivering a blast of pressure down her throat through a mask applied over her mouth to prevent her tongue from obstructing her airway while she slept. The machine worked, but she found using it a torture. She would fall asleep feeling like she was choking and dream of being strangled. Yet her physical discomfort seemed only a minor irritation compared to the self-loathing that now filled her with each blast from the CPAP machine, the cycling of its pneumatic gears an inescapable reminder that she'd been brought to this place by nothing other than her own weakness.

So she began to gain even more weight, the self-disgust her bloated stomach induced paradoxically only intensifying the pleasure that eating brought her. Knowing she was overeating at least partially to punish herself, though, failed to equip her with the will to stop.

Not surprisingly, the more weight she gained, the more depressed she became. So Ash referred her to a psychiatrist, who, over the course of a year, tried her on no fewer than four antidepressant medications. But none of them worked. Following that, April told Ash she no longer believed she was ever going to get better, and that she wanted to be dead.

So he sent her to the ER to be admitted to the hospital. Because she'd failed antidepressant medication, the attending psychiatrist decided to treat her with electroconvulsive therapy, the most effective known treatment for depression.

"Has it been working?" I asked.

Ash shrugged. "She doesn't want to kill herself anymore."

"Well, that's something."

"That is something," he agreed. "But I still don't know why she wanted to kill herself in the first place."

"She's depressed," I said, thinking the answer obvious.

"Sure," Ash agreed. "But why?"

"Her husband left her for another woman. She's obese and can't lose weight—"

"No, no, no," he interrupted. "I get all that. That's not what I mean. What I mean is I have at least ten other patients who've been through even worse than she has who have no idea what depression even is. What I'm asking is why does *anyone* get depressed? Ever?"

In my first book, *The Undefeated Mind*, I argue that the pursuit of happiness isn't "merely an inalienable right with which we're endowed or an activity we're capable of choosing; it's a psychological imperative we must obey."[1] The notion that nothing is more important to us than happiness—in fact, that nothing *can* be—doesn't come just from observations about the human condition throughout history by writers, philosophers, and poets, but also from a modern scientific understanding of the way the brains of animals evolved to promote survival. We know that animals don't fight to survive because they grasp the meaning of death; they fight to survive because their brains evolved pleasure and pain circuits that motivate them to do so. And though we humans *do* have the capacity to understand the meaning of death and are therefore capable of being motivated by more complex incentives than pleasure and pain, we remain incapable of shrugging off our evolutionary heritage. Pleasure and pain—or rather, their more recent evolutionary offspring, happiness and suffering—remain the core incentives our brains use to motivate us.[2]

But what exactly *is* happiness that we spend our lives pursuing it more fiercely than anything else? We would answer in part, as Daniel Gilbert did in his book *Stumbling on Happiness*, that happiness isn't just a good feeling but a *special* good feeling[3]—in fact, the *best* good feeling—we're capable of having: a feeling that's better than all our other positive emotions combined, including serenity, hope, pride, amusement, surprise, interest, gratitude, and love.

Happiness is something we all want. Yet it's also something many of us fail to achieve. Look around you. How many people do you know who exude joy on a daily basis, who would say they feel a powerful sense of satisfaction with their lives? How many people do you know who wouldn't find their ability to

be happy significantly impaired by the loss of a loved one, financial ruin, or a terminal illness?

The problem we face, however, isn't that genuine, long-lasting happiness is impossible to attain. Rather, it's that we're confused about how to attain it. So in the pages that follow, we attempt to clear up this confusion by exploring all the ways we get the pursuit of happiness wrong—the incorrect assumptions we make about what we need to be happy and our erroneous beliefs about what happiness *is*. We'll argue that only by attending to and embracing a correct understanding of happiness can we free ourselves from the limits our erroneous beliefs about happiness place on us and enjoy the kind of happiness we all want, the kind of happiness that can't be taken away by anything.

This, it turns out, is both easier and harder than we think. Easier because, as we hope to convince you, the number of erroneous beliefs we have about happiness totals only nine at the most fundamental level—far fewer false paths on the journey to happiness than perhaps we have any right to expect. Harder, though, because even though ideas flit in and out of our heads like mosquitoes, we cling to ideas we *believe* with magnetic force. Once we decide an idea is true, we develop an emotional connection and commitment to it that often has little to do with the merit of the belief itself.[4] As a result, freeing ourselves from our erroneous beliefs may be one of the hardest things to do in life.

Unfortunately, as authors, we're no more immune to being overly attached to our ideas than anyone else. So we need to concede at the outset that no definitive proof exists that the nine erroneous beliefs we discuss in the pages that follow unequivocally represent the elemental roadblocks to happiness. But our intent in writing this book wasn't to present our ideas as well-established scientific facts. Rather, we offer them as a set of hypotheses whose truth and relevance we invite you to test yourself in the proving ground of your own life.

For even if we fail to convince you that these nine erroneous beliefs are *your* erroneous beliefs—or that they're even erroneous at all—if we can convince you that the key to achieving happiness lies in correcting whatever erroneous beliefs you do hold about happiness, then we'll count *ourselves* happy, for we will have achieved the real purpose for which we wrote this book.

Life-Condition

Psychologists now use the term *core affect* to describe the most basic feelings we experience as human beings—that is, pleasure and pain.[5] Neurologist Antonio Damasio calls pleasure and pain *primordial feelings* and argues that they "occur spontaneously and continuously whenever one is awake . . . [and] reflect the current state of the body" at the most basic level.[6] Though specific emotions like anger and sadness may appear and disappear like good and bad weather, at no time are we ever without a core affect—much in the same way, to switch metaphors, at no time are we ever without a body temperature. At every moment we're experiencing a primordial feeling somewhere between the two extremes of agony and ecstasy. Universal and irreducible, core affect, research now argues, represents the most fundamental aspect of all subjective experience.[7]

Psychologists have also argued that the reason our core affect varies has less to do with what happens to us than with how we *think* about what happens to us—with our mindset, if you will.[8] Mindset explains, for example, why some people remain joyful and optimistic no matter how awful the tragedy that befalls them while others suffer and complain no matter how much good fortune comes their way. It also explains how two people can react to the same event in completely different—even opposite—ways, as well as how someone can feel differently about the same event at different times. How can a lottery winner be miserable? Mindset. How can a quadriplegic be happy? Mindset. Mindset is the reason one person's mountain is another person's molehill.

Though the science documenting the effect of mindset on our core affect is relatively new, the concept of mindset itself is old. Buddhist philosophers captured the same idea more than two and a half millennia ago with the term *life-condition*. Having carefully observed all the various forms in which the self might exist, they delineated ten foundational life-conditions—or worlds—describing, in essence, the ten basic mindsets through which we continuously cycle. From the lowest to the highest with respect to the desirability of core affect they produce they are: Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Tranquility, Rapture, Learning, Realization, Compassion, and Enlightenment.

Life-condition is defined essentially as the character of one's inner life. As such, it influences the most basic aspects of our being—our emotions, our thoughts, our behaviors, and our life energy. Not that any particular emotion is unique to any one life-condition (for example, we don't only get angry in the life-condition of Anger), nor that particular emotions always do only one thing to our core affect (for example, sadness doesn't always make us feel pain).[9] Rather, our life-condition is the lens through which we view both the world and ourselves and is therefore what determines which emotions we feel.

In one sense, then, the experience of life is really the experience of life-condition. Depending on which life-condition we find ourselves inhabiting at any one moment our experience of life will be different.[10] When we're in the life-condition, or world, of Hell, for example, everything will be warped by our suffering. In such a state we could win the Nobel Prize and not feel an ounce of satisfaction from it. But while in the world of Enlightenment, simply watching a sunset could give rise to the greatest joy we've ever known. Nothing, in other words, is inherently a burden or a delight, an obstacle or an opportunity. How happy or unhappy we are is ultimately determined by our life-condition and our life-condition alone.

The Power of Our Beliefs

If this is true—if our life-condition determines what we think and feel and how we behave in response to the events of our lives—what, we may ask, determines our life-condition?

Certainly a variety of things *influence* it. This includes both fixed things, like our genes and upbringing, and fleeting things, like drugs, diseases, hormonal states, and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, to name just a few. We'll argue in the pages that follow, however, that what influences it the most is something else entirely: our beliefs.

The degree to which our lives can be changed by the transformation of a mere idea into a belief is truly unparalleled. Belief can banish the most intense of fears, as belief in an afterlife often banishes the fear of death. It can strengthen the weakest of wills, as belief in the inability to drink safely can strengthen the will of an alcoholic attempting to become sober. And it can overpower the strongest

of desires, as belief in the vileness of apostasy can overpower even the desire to live in suicide bombers. Belief can diminish physical pain,[11] cause the release of dopamine in the brains of patients with Parkinson's disease,[12] and even induce signs of pregnancy—the cessation of menstruation, abdominal swelling, and breast enlargement—when a woman isn't actually pregnant.[13]

How does a belief gain such power? It would seem merely by being *stirred up*, or activated. A Buddhist metaphor compares our life to a glass of water and a belief to sediment lying at the bottom. It may be an event that stirs the water (our life), but it's the sediment (our belief) that clouds the water with suffering or colors it with joy. Remove the sediment, and no matter how vigorously the water is stirred, it will remain clear. So how do events like the loss of a job, the breakup of a marriage, or even the fleeting thought that we're less attractive than we once were cause us to suffer? By stirring up a *belief*—perhaps, for example, that we've lost our worth. How could such events instead bring us joy? By stirring up a different belief—perhaps, for example, that we've gained our freedom (in the case of our declining attractiveness, from the tyranny of our own ego). When our life-condition shifts, events represent only the *external* cause. The *internal* cause is always some pre-existing belief that the event stirs up. It's our beliefs that stimulate our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It's our beliefs that mediate our reactions to events. This isn't to suggest that events are unimportant. Rather, it's to suggest that events impact our happiness only and always *through* the particular beliefs they stir up. If we want to understand why we're thinking certain thoughts or feeling certain feelings in response to an event—whether an external event, like a divorce, or an internal event, like the realization we're not as attractive as we once were—we only need to ask ourselves what beliefs that event has stirred up.

One important implication of this hypothesis is that we can't predict—and shouldn't judge—the severity of a person's suffering based on the event that caused it. We may, for instance, expect a husband to be more devastated by the loss of his wife than an athlete is by the loss of a game, but the reverse could just as easily occur depending on the beliefs such losses stir up. We forget, or don't realize, the depth of a person's suffering is less determined by the ghastliness of external events than by the beliefs such events activate.

Ash and I were struck by the truth of this not long after we first met at the start of our senior year in college. I was a resident assistant charged with providing support to the students in the dormitory where Ash resided. One afternoon he came to see me in a panic. For as long as he could remember, he said, he'd wanted to become a doctor. He'd followed the traditional path, majoring in biology, taking the required pre-med courses, and studying for and scoring well on the MCAT. That afternoon, he finally learned that he'd been accepted to medical school. Yet instead of being flooded with relief, he'd been surprised to find himself flooded with anxiety.

After an hour or so of working through his thoughts and feelings about it, we figured out what we thought was the reason: while all his life he believed he'd wanted to be a doctor, he hadn't, in fact, wanted to be a doctor at all. Applying to medical school had simply been a way for him to fulfill the unspoken wishes of his parents.

But realizing this only *increased* his anxiety, for he now felt stripped of direction and confused about what he was going do with the rest of his life. Yet almost as quickly as we discovered that he didn't want to become a doctor, we identified his real area of interest: clinical psychology. But upon recognizing that, Ash found himself feeling even *more* anxious. It didn't take us long to piece together the reason for this as well: he'd taken no college courses in psychology, had no practical experience in the field, and had been told that getting into a doctoral program in psychology was even harder than getting into medical school. In short, he didn't believe he could do it. We thought we'd finally arrived at the central reason why his reaction to getting into medical school had been so negative: it had triggered a belief that he couldn't accomplish what he'd harbored as his real ambition all along.

Stirring Up Beliefs

Yet Ash's anxiety wasn't induced by the certainty with which he now believed his real dream was out of reach. It was induced by the amount of *attention* he was now giving the possibility. Even a brief examination of our experience suggests the power of our beliefs to influence what we think, feel, and do is related less to the confidence with which we harbor our beliefs than to the frequency and

intensity with which external causes draw our attention to them, or stir them up.[14] For example, we all believe with unassailable certainty that we're one day going to die, but that belief seems to exert little influence over what we think, feel, and do until something comes along and draws our attention to it (a serious illness, the death of someone close to us, or even a flood of spontaneous rumination about our own mortality). On the other hand, even if we believe only slightly that the plane in which we're flying might crash, a strong bout of turbulence can still stir that belief up intensely enough to terrify us. It seems we can be powerfully affected by even the weakest belief if only it's stirred up strongly enough.

It is true that the greater the confidence we have in a belief, the more power it will have to affect us. But this seems to be only because the greater the confidence we have in a belief, *the more easily—and therefore the more frequently—it gets stirred up*. It's the extent to which our beliefs get stirred up, the extent to which we pay attention to them and to which we're engaged by them, that ultimately gives our beliefs their ability to affect us.

This is why even though a weak belief is harder to stir up—and is therefore less likely to be stirred up—once it *is* stirred up, it can have as much influence over us as a strong belief. For example, even though we know that the probability we'll win the lottery or be involved in a car accident is low—meaning we believe in those possibilities only slightly—we still buy lottery tickets and wear seat belts.

We do these things because what stirs up weak beliefs isn't the strength with which we believe them but *the potential consequences of ignoring them*. If the potential consequences of ignoring a belief are significant, that belief is more likely to draw our attention and affect us.[15] And *that's* the reason turbulence can terrify us even though we believe correctly that the probability of it causing a plane to crash is low—because the consequences of a crash would be catastrophic.

The Shifting of Life-Condition

In 1911 the neurologist Édouard Claparède concealed a pin between his fingers while greeting one of his amnesic patients with a handshake, causing her to yelp in pain when he stuck her with it. Within a few minutes, however, she'd forgotten not only that she'd been stuck but also that she'd ever met him! When Claparède

then came back in the room to introduce himself a second time, *she refused to shake his hand*. The reason? Some part of her—likely the orbitofrontal cortex, which is known to perform nonconscious appraisals of threats[16]—remembered being stuck with a pin. So when she saw his outstretched palm approaching, it stirred up in her a belief that to shake hands with him was dangerous—even as her conscious mind remained completely unaware that she believed it.[17]

Additional evidence that feelings can outlast our conscious awareness of their origins comes from a study conducted by Justin Feinstein at the University of Iowa in which emotion-inducing films were shown to patients who, because of damage to the area of the brain called the hippocampus, suffered significant impairment in their ability to form new memories. When he surveyed their feelings after the films were over and they'd forgotten they'd viewed them, he found that they continued to feel the emotions the films had induced. Not only that, but also they continued to feel them for an even longer time and with even greater intensity than a group of control subjects with normal brains who remembered viewing the films in their entirety.[18]

But we needn't have suffered damage to our short-term memory to be unaware of the reasons we feel, and therefore behave, the way we do. In fact, we *all* frequently forget what's caused us to feel what we feel, sometimes just moments after we start feeling it. Who among us, for example, hasn't at some point found himself feeling anxious for no apparent reason? It's not, of course, that no reason exists; it's often that we've simply forgotten it, sometimes so quickly that our conscious mind was able to register it for only a moment (or perhaps, as with Claparède's patient, not at all). Maybe, for instance, a co-worker frowns at us as we pass her in the hallway, stirring up a belief that she might be angry with us, or even that she may not like us, and our life-condition plummets. In the very next second, though, we lose track of that belief as other thoughts fill up our mind. But that belief has only gone dormant. If it were to be stirred up again even a little—say, by a chance phone call from that co-worker's supervisor—our life-condition would likely plummet again. Just as a body at rest will remain at rest until acted upon by an outside force, so too our life-condition will remain in one world until an event stirs up a belief that shifts it into another one. It doesn't matter if we're consciously aware of that belief or not.

Our Beliefs About Happiness

This brings us to the central thesis of this book: while many different kinds of beliefs are able to influence our life-condition, we'll argue that the beliefs that influence it the most are *our beliefs about happiness itself*. In fact, we'll argue that our beliefs about happiness are what *create* the Ten Worlds.

A story from Greek mythology about Hercules, the son of Zeus, king of the gods, illustrates this point. One day Hercules fell into a mad rage and inadvertently killed his wife and two children. To atone for it, he was instructed by an oracle to complete twelve labors. For the eleventh of the twelve, he was told to bring back the golden apples of the Hesperides to King Eurystheus. Because he didn't know where the apples were, he sought the advice of Atlas, a Titan who was the father of the Hesperides and whose job it was to hold up the world on his shoulders. When Hercules asked him where he might find the apples, Atlas replied that if Hercules would only take the world onto his shoulders temporarily, Atlas would get the apples for him. Hercules readily agreed. Atlas did return with the apples, but when Hercules asked him to take the world back, Atlas refused. He told Hercules that he would deliver the apples to Eurystheus himself. He wanted to have a chance to enjoy his new freedom, he said. Maybe he'd come back in a few years and take the world back. Then again, maybe he wouldn't.

Thinking quickly, Hercules told Atlas he would be happy to continue holding up the world if only Atlas would take it back for just one moment so he could adjust himself into a more comfortable position. Not being the brightest of Titans, Atlas put the apples down and complied. Of course, as soon as Hercules was free, he thanked Atlas, picked up the apples, and went on his way. Atlas raged at Hercules as he sped off but remained powerless to stop him. By the time Hercules was gone from sight, Atlas had once again resigned himself to his fate.

Though what follows doesn't appear in any book of Greek mythology, we imagine that one day, years later, Hercules returned to see Atlas. "Doubtless you've come back to chide me for being so easily tricked into taking back the burden of the world," Atlas said. But to this Hercules only replied, "When I gave you back the world, why didn't you drop it and come after me?" Astonished, Atlas said, "That would have meant the end of every living thing upon it!" To which Hercules replied, "Then you have your answer, great Atlas, as to why I

came back. Not to ridicule you but to praise you, for a lesser Titan wouldn't have cared." And with that, Hercules left. Alone again, Atlas pondered what Hercules said. And then slowly he began to smile. And forever more, whenever anyone, man or god, would come to see Atlas and ask him about his burden, he would seem to straighten and say only, "It is no burden at all."

How did Atlas find relief from carrying what was literally the weight of the world on his shoulders? Not just by realizing that he cared about other people. Nor just by realizing that he had a purpose in keeping others safe. Rather, we would argue that his task was transformed from a burden into a delight when Hercules stirred up in him another belief lying *underneath* the belief he had a purpose in keeping others safe—namely, the belief that he needed a purpose to be happy.

Delusions Are the Obstacles to Happiness

If we accept that our ability to be happy is determined mostly by what we believe we *need* to be happy, then the reason so many people *aren't* happy becomes obvious. Quite simply, most of our beliefs about what we need to be happy are wrong.

Though the word "delusional" is usually used to indicate the presence of mental illness, even those of us who don't suffer from mental illness are, to a certain extent, delusional. What makes us so isn't just that we believe implausible ideas, meaning ideas that contradict a general understanding of reality (that the sun is intelligent, for example). Though delusional ideas are, for the most part, implausible, so are ideas that are eventually recognized as groundbreaking truths (for example, that the entire universe is made of atoms). Nor are we delusional because something we believe turns out to be wrong. We may simply lack the relevant facts, as was the case when most of the world's population believed Earth was flat.

Instead, what makes a person delusional is the refusal to abandon an idea when confronted with incontrovertible evidence that it's untrue.[19] A delusion isn't just a false idea. It's a *fixed* false idea. We're not delusional because of the *content* of our ideas; we're delusional because of the *thought process* that maintains our conviction in them. Certainly, some people are rightly considered delusional based solely on the content of their ideas (for example, people who suffer from

the Cotard delusion, the bizarre belief that one is already dead). But we wouldn't automatically consider someone delusional for believing, say, that the FBI is spying on him solely on the basis of the content of that belief, as we know the FBI has, in fact, spied on private citizens. We *would* be more likely to consider that person delusional if when confronted with convincing evidence that the FBI wasn't spying on him, he continued to believe that it was. Refusing to abandon a belief in such a case and offering instead impossible-to-falsify justifications for why he believed it was true—and, further, refusing to consider that anything could prove it otherwise—might, in fact, point to a diagnosis of schizophrenia.[20]

Then again, schizophrenia isn't the only thing that causes people to cling to ideas in the face of contradictory evidence. Nearly everyone, in fact, demonstrates what's known as *belief perseverance* at one time or another, suggesting that when it comes to revising or abandoning beliefs, emotionally healthy people can be almost as delusional as people suffering from mental illness. The beliefs that vaccines cause autism, that the earth is less than 10,000 years old, and that human beings were created in their present form and not through evolution are just a few examples of beliefs that persevere even in the face of overwhelming evidence that they're false.

The cause of belief perseverance, however, differs drastically from that of schizophrenia. Belief perseverance occurs because we're not perfectly objective about what we believe. We cling to beliefs for reasons that have nothing to do with the strength of evidence that supports the beliefs themselves: to protect or enhance our self-image,[21] to appear to be, and actually be, consistent,[22] and to make ourselves feel good—or at least, less bad.[23] Quite simply, we believe things without sufficient evidence, or even in the face of contradictory evidence, because we *want* to believe them—because believing them serves us in some way. This is almost certainly why, for example, people believe in astrology despite a complete lack of evidence that its predictions are accurate.

But how exactly do we convince ourselves that an unproven idea is true? Or that an idea that's actually been *disproven* is true? One study by researcher Craig Anderson and colleagues suggests the answer is surprisingly straightforward: we convince ourselves that an idea is true by explaining to ourselves *why* it's true.[24] According to Anderson's study, we're more swayed by good stories than

we are by credible evidence. In fact, we're so swayed by good stories that we'll continue to believe them even when evidence comes to light that proves they're wrong. The reason, according to Anderson, is that we remember stories better than evidence. It's stories, not evidence, that draw our attention the most and therefore command our first allegiance, becoming, in essence, the bedrock upon which our conviction rests. What's more, other studies suggest that the easier a time we have creating a story, the more likely we are to believe it.[25] That is, the ease with which we come up with a story is itself what makes us believe that our story is correct.

The Core Delusions

It's this propensity we have to believe the stories we tell ourselves that becomes the true obstacle to happiness. For once we become attached to beliefs about how to attain happiness that are erroneous, freeing ourselves from them becomes nearly impossible. This was what I told Ash I thought had happened to April. Events were continually stirring up her delusional beliefs about what she needed to be happy, and she simply wouldn't—or couldn't—abandon them. I thought these were beliefs that, despite her great confidence in them, had trapped her in the lowest of the Ten Worlds, the world of Hell. They were likely beliefs she didn't realize she held—or that she held without ever questioning—but which nevertheless were the cause of all the emotional, cognitive, and even physical manifestations of her depression.

"That's actually the foundational principle of cognitive therapy," Ash remarked. "Stressful situations activate dysfunctional beliefs, which lead to negative thinking, which leads to depression.[26] Correct the dysfunctional beliefs and the depression goes away."

I nodded. "Except I'm also wondering if there's just *one* dysfunctional belief—one *core delusion*—that's driving all the other dysfunctional beliefs that are causing her depression."

"The end-all-be-all cause of her depression?"

"The end-all-be-all cause of depression *period*. Or at least of one *type* of depression."

Unlike Beck's view that dysfunctional beliefs arise from early childhood

traumas, I suggested that this core delusion arises from foundational life experiences common to us all. Further, I speculated, if there is indeed one core delusion that lies at the heart of the world of Hell, other core delusions would undoubtedly lie at the hearts of the other worlds.

This might explain, I argued, why people tend to make the same mistakes over and over in their pursuit of happiness. Though any of the core delusions could be stirred up in any of us at any time, because of our genetics, the way we were raised, the way our lives had unfolded—or some combination of all three—in each of us, I speculated, one core delusion would tend to get stirred up more consistently than all the others. Thus, though everyone has the potential to live in any of the Ten Worlds at any moment, each of us has one life-condition—one world—from which we come and to which we invariably return. One *basic life tendency*: the life-condition in which we live most of the time.

"When you say core delusions, are you actually talking about *core beliefs*?" Ash asked. "Because I could easily name ten of those just off the top of my head."

"I'm not sure," I said. "Name one and I'll tell you."

"Here's three: 'I'm worthless.' 'I'm incompetent.' 'I'm unlovable.'" Core beliefs, Ash said, were defined as "fundamental, inflexible, and generalized beliefs that people hold about themselves, the world, or the future."[27]

"Then, no, we're not talking about core beliefs," I said. "We *are* talking about beliefs that are fundamental, inflexible, and generalized, but not beliefs that people hold about themselves, the world, or the future. They're beliefs people have about what they need to be happy."

"That are wrong . . ."

"Yes. Except for the belief that lies at the heart of the world of Enlightenment," I added.

Ash thought for a moment. "So there are only *nine* false beliefs about what we need to be happy?"

"Nine at the core, yes. I'm sure April has several beliefs that are contributing to her depression—maybe even, for example, that she's worthless, incompetent, and unlovable. But I'm thinking there's one delusion that sits at the innermost layer, underlying all her other beliefs—a belief that represents the true cause of depression itself, the core delusion of the world of Hell."

"Which is—?"

I shrugged. "It would have to be something really basic."

Ash was intrigued by the paradigm and promptly suggested one way we could identify the core delusions—one way we could figure out if the concept even made sense—was by finding them at work in actual people.

"Like April," he offered.

I understood immediately what he was proposing. We could start with any one of April's more superficial dysfunctional beliefs and follow it along a trail of other, more deeply embedded dysfunctional beliefs until inductive reasoning brought us to the answer we sought. In fact, he added, we could do the same thing with other patients who came from the other worlds to identify the core delusions that created those other worlds as well.

"Because if we could identify the core delusions actually living and breathing in the lives of real people," Ash said, "if we could verify them as the most influential determinants of happiness, wouldn't we be looking at a unique way to explain why people *aren't* happy? Or happi*er*?"

"I think we would," I answered.

From that conversation was born the idea for this book. And now, after twenty years of research, we've become convinced that the concept of life-condition offers a valid way to understand and categorize all the various life states through which human beings cycle. Each chapter, therefore, opens with a description of one of the Ten Worlds. Following that, we meet a patient of Ash's whose basic life tendency centers on that world and who granted Ash permission to share the details of his or her therapy with me. The bulk of each chapter is then spent in recreating both the therapy sessions themselves and the behind-the-scenes conversations that Ash and I were having as we attempted to puzzle out each of the core delusions. To show rather than merely tell readers what it's like to live in each world, we present the sessions as they unfolded, in many cases fictionalizing some of the dialogue for purposes of clarity.

Though readers may not recognize in themselves the same degree of pathology on display in the stories that follow, we believe the core delusions we were able to

identify—admittedly not through experimental design but through reflection, reason, and thought experiment—are in fact the same core delusions that trap us all.

So though the core delusion we propose as April's doesn't explain in every instance why people get depressed, it does, we believe, explain why people suffer. We discuss the difference—as well as the difference between suffering and pain—in Chapter 1 as we recount the rest of April's story in an exploration of what it means to be trapped in the life-condition of Hell.

In Chapter 2 we tell Patrick's story, beginning with his struggle to rid himself of the irrational fear that his girlfriend is cheating on him and ending with the discovery that, despite the obsessive nature of his desires, he doesn't in fact enjoy any of his attachments or find satisfaction in any of his accomplishments at all. We discover the explanation for this paradox when we uncover his firm conviction in the core delusion of the life-condition of Hunger.

In Chapter 3 we introduce Dominique, a woman who appears at first blissfully unconcerned with the pain she causes others. Only when we learn how consumed she is by a craving that impairs her better judgment do we discover the belief that drives her impulsive behavior, the core delusion of the life-condition of Animality.

In Chapter 4 we tell Roosevelt's story, beginning with the conflict he feels between his desire to keep his family together and his need to maintain absolute control. Only when we identify the part of him that's driven by the need for that control do we recognize the degree to which he believes in the core delusion of the life-condition of Anger.

In Chapter 5 we meet Frankie, a police detective so desperate to avoid conflict that he's afraid to become angry at all. In helping him learn to prioritize his own needs over the needs of others, we discover the core delusion of the life-condition of Tranquility, a world characterized by the futile desire to keep everything in one's life unchanged.

In Chapter 6 we reach a turning point in our thinking about happiness itself when we meet Nick, an architect whose mood changes so abruptly with the rise and fall of his good and bad fortune that at first he appears to suffer from bipolar disorder. In identifying the true cause of his rapidly changing emotions as his belief in the core delusion of the life-condition of Rapture, we articulate a crucial distinction between two different types of happiness, relative and absolute, and

argue that the kind of happiness we all assume we want is in fact a pale version of the kind of happiness it's possible for us to have.

In Chapter 7 we introduce Ken, the CEO of a midsize healthcare software company whose difficult personality and arrogance cause several high-value executives to consider quitting. This prompts a board member to hire Ash as Ken's executive coach. In seeking to explain Ken's excessive attachment to his own views, we discover the core delusion of the life-condition of Learning.

In Chapter 8 we meet Anjali, a social worker who finds herself unable to control her anger at one of her patients. When achieving several important insights in supervision with Ash fails to alter her reaction to her patient, she discovers that what drives her is the core delusion of the life-condition of Realization.

In Chapter 9 we tell Louisa's story, beginning with the death of her daughter and ending with her struggle to forgive her daughter's murderers. In helping her to navigate her grief, we're led to the core delusion of the life-condition of Compassion.

We finish in Chapter 10 with thoughts about how we might find our way into the tenth world, the world of Enlightenment. For in that life-condition, we'll argue, lies a joy in which no harmful overindulgence is possible, one that resists diminution by any and all adverse life events, and which is therefore absolute and indestructible.

Key Points

- The moment-to-moment degree of pleasure or pain we experience is referred to as our *core affect*. Unlike other emotions like anger or guilt that come and go, we experience our core affect continuously.
- *Life-condition* is defined as the character of one's inner life. It reveals itself in ten different states, or worlds, each of which engenders a particular set of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as well as an accompanying core affect.
- Though we can find ourselves in any of the Ten Worlds at any moment, each of us tends to spend most of our time in just one of them. That world is considered our *basic life tendency*.
- It's not the things that happen to us but rather our *beliefs* about the things that happen to us—specifically, our beliefs about how they impact our happiness—that determine the life-condition in which we find ourselves from one moment to the next.
- Beliefs about how things impact our happiness arise out of nine *core delusions,* which themselves create the life-conditions, or worlds, through which we continuously cycle. It's therefore our beliefs about happiness itself that determine our core affect, or degree of happiness.
- The core delusions are defined as our most basic erroneous beliefs about what we need to be happy.

1

Hell

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

—Helen Keller

Hell is defined as the life-condition of suffering. When fully immersed in it, all we know is misery; our energy falls so low we become nearly incapable of taking any action to help ourselves feel better.

In such a state, we tend to view almost everything, even positive events, in a negative light. When our suffering is extreme and prolonged, we may become inconsolable, leading to one of the worst consequences of being trapped in the life-condition of Hell, social isolation.

The more isolated we become, the more we flatten out, eventually becoming mere two-dimensional versions of ourselves—lethargic, sometimes even paralyzed versions that we hardly recognize—as we lose our ability to think clearly and with good judgment. We begin clinging to reasons why we can't solve our problems and blame our unhappiness on the problems we can't solve.

Sometimes we even come to feel we're worthless or disgusting and try to numb ourselves with alcohol, drugs, food, sleep, and the like. Alternatively, sometimes feeling worthless causes us to lash out at others, the impulse to destroy ourselves expanding to include those around us as well.

Sometimes, on the other hand, we suffer in silence, living a life of such quiet desperation that no one, not even our closest friends and family, suspects how overwhelmed we've become. At other times our suffering is so awful, so intense, it leaks out of our every pore, preventing us from hiding its existence from anyone.

But whether expressed or concealed, mild or severe, lasting decades or only the briefest of moments, the one constant feature of the life-condition of Hell—of suffering—is that it prevents us from thinking about anything else. All we have room left to want—in fact, what we want sometimes even more than life itself—is to escape it.

Though she no longer wanted to kill herself, when April followed up with Ash in his office three days after being discharged from the hospital, she still felt worthless and hopeless and had difficulty finding pleasure in anything. She felt little motivation to take care of herself. "I have no reason to move on," she told Ash.

She was still convinced that her ex-husband was the reason she was depressed. For the year and a half since he'd left, she'd persisted in her attempts to reconcile with him but had succeeded in provoking only one response—a handwritten letter mailed in an envelope with no return address in which he explained that he'd moved out of state specifically to get away from her. Despite this, April still felt it was possible that their marriage could be saved.

"How exactly do you envision that happening?" Ash asked her.

"I'll move wherever he is. I'm sure I could get a job at the local hospital." When he pointed out that her answer failed to address the real issue—that her ex-husband no longer wanted to be married to her—she insisted she could make him see that they were still right for each other. Yet when she went on to describe what she hoped their reconstructed relationship would look like, she talked only in vague platitudes, her voice devoid of emotion. Even when Ash got her to admit just how angry she was about the way her ex-husband had left her, she didn't actually *sound* angry. In fact, to Ash she seemed switched off in the same way she'd described her ex-husband had been when she'd confronted him in person after he'd left. When Ash remarked on it, she said that this was the

way she'd always sounded, which made him wonder just how long her depression had been going on prior to the dissolution of her marriage.

"What made you decide to marry him in the first place?" he asked her after a moment.

"He asked," she answered simply. Though they'd known each other for only two months, she'd said yes before he could change his mind. "He was just so generous."

But almost immediately after they were married, his generosity seemed to evaporate. He began to abuse her verbally, calling her fat and stupid. She'd completed her master's degree in education and worked with physically disabled children at a local children's hospital, a job she loved. But he'd tell her she worked with disabled kids because they were "at her level." He seemed to have no interest in her needs or in pleasing her. She wanted children. He wouldn't even consider it.

She'd been able to refuse him nothing, however, no matter how immoral or unethical his request. She'd been reluctant to act against her principles, she said, but she'd found herself able to bear her own disgust more easily than his.

This imperative to avoid all conflict with him soon bled into other areas of her life. She began to dread crowds—a problem that had plagued her mother—and became shy and nervous in social situations.

Intrigued to learn that her mother had been agoraphobic, Ash began questioning April about her childhood. How had she grown up? What had her relationship with her parents been like? She told Ash she'd been an only child and had felt anxious as long as she could remember. Her father had worked at the loading docks of their small New England town and had hardly spoken to her at all during her childhood. Her mother, in contrast, had demanded that April remain at her side constantly. April would have to come home from school immediately every day to be with her—to buy her food, to cook her meals, to clean up around the house. She used April, in sum, as a shield against the world.

A shield, April said, that she held close only so she could get a better view of the things she wished to criticize: Why did April bite her nails so incessantly? Why did she suck her thumb until she was nine? Why didn't she try harder to make friends? Why was she so fat? April hated that she couldn't stand up to her mother, that she couldn't answer these criticisms. But no one ever knew it.

Despite her mother's constant belittling, April remained incapable of becoming angry with her.

"Why, do you think?" Ash asked her.

"I didn't want to make her even more critical of me than she already was. I still don't. There's only so much disapproval I can take."

"And her criticisms don't make you angry?"

She shrugged.

"Seems hard to imagine they wouldn't," Ash said.

"What good would getting angry do me?"

"Feelings are rarely that rational. It's hard to just turn them off."

"I don't think I'm having any feelings I turn off."

"Maybe. Or maybe you're turning them off so quickly you don't realize you're having them."

One corner of her mouth curved in a half-smile. "How would I be doing that if it's as hard as you say?"

"Touché," he said. "So here's another thought: If you won't let yourself get angry at your mother but you are actually angry at your mother, what *can* you do? Get angry at someone else. Someone safer."

"Who?"

"Yourself."

He reminded her she'd said to him in their first session that she knew she was overeating at least partially to punish herself. But now he was wondering if there was more to it, if she was feeling so much rage that she was overeating to *transform* herself.

"Into what?"

"Into the ugly beast your mother spent so much time deriding," Ash said. "The ugly beast your husband ran so fast and so far from. The ugly beast you believe yourself to be."

"She *could* be depressed just because she's overweight," Ash told me. "But what would that make the core delusion of the world of Hell? That you can only be happy if you're thin?"

"No, I agree, not broad enough," I said. "I do wonder, though, if it's connected to her low self-esteem."

Ash shook his head. "That doesn't seem likely either. Poor self-esteem may increase your risk for depression,[1] but people with healthy self-esteem get depressed all the time."

"True."

There was a pause.

"Okay, what about this," I said. "What if she isn't just afraid of her mother's disapproval? What if she's afraid her mother is going to *abandon* her? Maybe that's why she's never been able to get angry with her. Maybe she figures having a terrible mother is better than having no mother at all. And maybe that's the same reason she became suicidal when her husband left. Maybe having even a jerk for a husband is better than having no husband at all—because maybe she believes she can only be happy if she's loved."

Ash thought for a moment, then shook his head again. "For one thing, it's probably true that she can't be happy if *nobody* loves her. It's probably true for all of us. But even if it weren't, the belief that you can only be happy if you're loved can't be what creates the life-condition of Hell."

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Because people who feel loved suffer all the time," Ash said.

The Difference Between Pain and Suffering

Where pain is defined as an unpleasant physical or emotional sensation, we would argue that suffering is defined as a *response* to pain, a way of *experiencing* pain. Specifically, it's the experience of being overwhelmed, or defeated, by pain. Indeed, studies argue that at a neurological level, pain and suffering are separate experiences. This is because pain actually arises from activity in two separate areas of the brain, one called the posterior insula, which registers the *sensation* of pain (its quality, intensity, and so on) and the other the anterior cingulate cortex, which registers the *unpleasantness* of pain. We know this because patients who've sustained damage to their anterior cingulate cortex will feel the sensation

of pain *but not its unpleasantness*.[2] That is, astoundingly, they feel pain but aren't bothered by it. Suffering, we could therefore say, occurs when the intensity of pain becomes *so* unpleasant—when the activity in the anterior cingulate cortex becomes so great—that it becomes intolerable.

"But when does pain ever *not* cause suffering?" Ash asked.

"All the time," I said. "Are you suffering when you exercise? Or when you have your blood drawn? Or when you have a headache?"

"I guess it depends on the headache."

"Exactly. Not all pain causes us to suffer because not all pain is intolerable. Unpleasant, yes, by definition, but not intolerable."

What mostly makes the unpleasantness of pain intolerable is its intensity. On the other hand, the point at which we can no longer tolerate pain—meaning the intensity at which it starts to make us suffer—varies so much from person to person that pain intensity can't be what causes pain to become intolerable alone. (When researchers plunge the hands of test subjects into freezing cold water, the length of time the subjects are able to keep their hands submerged differs in some cases by as many as four minutes).[3] In fact, pain tolerance even varies from moment to moment in the same person. Studies show, for example, it's increased not only by a good mood,[4] but also by anger[5] and even cursing.[6] We're also better able to tolerate pain that's harmless compared to pain that represents tissue damage,[7] and pain that's caused accidentally compared to pain caused with an intent to harm.[8]

Interestingly, this seems to be true not just for physical pain but also for emotional pain. Perhaps this isn't too surprising, however, as the regions of the brain that physical and emotional pain activate are mostly the same.[9] This is probably why, for example, Tylenol, a pain reliever that acts on the central nervous system, alleviates not only the pain of a smashed finger *but also the pain of hurt feelings.*[10] In a very real sense, physical pain is just emotional pain mapped to a body part.

"Meaning the core delusion of Hell should be a belief that makes *both* types of pain intolerable," Ash said.

"Exactly," I said.

At the end of their session, April noticed a book lying on Ash's coffee table titled *Love's Executioner* by Irvin Yalom. She asked him if it were a manual for therapists with lovesick clients like her. Ash told her the book contained ten case histories from the author's psychiatry practice, and that he'd written it as a guide to healing for both patients and practitioners alike. April went out and bought a copy the next day.

That weekend at 2:00 AM, Ash received a page to a number he didn't recognize. He dialed it immediately. "Hello, this is Dr. Ash."

"You hate me!" a voice yelled at him. "Why didn't you tell me that was how you felt?"

"April—?" He could hear the sound of pouring rain in the background, the howl of wind.

"I read your book! I can't believe you feel that way about me!"

"I don't understand what you're talking about. Slow down. Tell me why you're upset."

"I hate you, too!" She was sobbing. "I just can't believe it. You're just like all the rest!"

Before he could reply, she hung up.

The next morning Ash pieced together what had happened. In one of the early chapters in his book, Yalom describes how revolted he'd been by of one of his female patient's morbid obesity. He even goes so far as to express mock outrage that overweight people would dare to impose their bodies on the rest of society, confessing he hates everything about them, "their absurd sidewise waddle, their absence of body contour, their shapeless, baggy dresses."[11] Once having admitted his prejudice, however, he writes about becoming determined to challenge it. Ash reasoned that April must have projected herself into the role of Yalom's patient—and Yalom's abhorrence of obesity onto him.

He tried to reach her several days in a row but never heard back. When she then failed to show up for her next appointment on time, he became seriously concerned. She'd always arrived early, and he feared her tardiness now was a message, that she was trying to tell him in a way she thought would be hurtful that she wanted to terminate therapy.

Ten minutes after their session was supposed to have started, however, he heard a rustling in the waiting room. He opened his office door and looked out,

and there she was, sitting in a corner next to a pile of magazines, arms crossed in front of her, fuming. She looked like a petulant child, waiting, presumably, for him to come out and notice her.

He spent the next fifteen minutes coaxing her into his office. Once inside, he found her sullen and edgy, and for the first time since he'd known her, visibly angry. She wasn't so much angry at him anymore, she said. She'd spent the week sorting that out, her intellect arguing with her emotions until her anger had at last relinquished him as its target. But once uncorked, it was sprouting like blood from a slashed artery, splashing against everything near, and she had lost all ability to stem it. She felt like she wanted to kill someone—anyone—she told him, and it bewildered her.

Then, staring away from him, in a voice seething with rage, she began to list the faults of all the people who had populated the inner circle of her life. Her ex-husband was an alcoholic. Her father was cold and indifferent. Her mother was too needy. She spoke without hesitation or apology. She confessed the true extent of her negative feelings for each one of them in detail, feelings that had been buried so deeply and for so long that their existence took her by surprise. When she finally concluded her diatribe, announcing that she was "sick of being so nice all the time," Ash knew he'd witnessed a remarkable change. She'd finally begun to turn her anger outward, away from herself.

They spent the next few weeks processing what had happened and identifying appropriate ways for her to express her anger. The work was difficult as her anger often reoriented on him. But it was also productive, and soon she was reporting she'd become able to express her anger to others outside the confines of his office. She began to feel more in control of herself. Her weight steadied, and at long last her depression began to lift.

Then several weeks later she called to tell him that her mother had died. In between hysterical sobs, she told him she was afraid she was going to kill herself and desperately needed his help. "I don't have any more tricks up my sleeve," she wailed. "I'm done. There's nothing left. I don't know what to do."

"Tricks?" Ash asked. "What kind of tricks? Tricks for what?"

"To make someone love me."

The True Cause of Suffering

"Because she doesn't believe she can," Ash announced.

"What, you mean make someone love her?" I asked.

"Yes! I can't believe I didn't think of this before. It's learned helplessness. The core delusion of the world of Hell is that you're powerless."

"Powerless," I repeated. Then: "Over what?"

"Over your problems. The core delusion of the world of Hell is that you believe you're powerless to solve your problems."

"What problems?"

"*All* of them!" Ash said. "Any of them. Any problem that matters."

"Any problem that—" I stopped. "Obesity, poor self-esteem, a loveless existence! Any problem that causes you pain. That's it! It's not a belief we have about pain that makes it intolerable, like whether or not we think it represents tissue damage. It's a belief we have about *ourselves*—that we're powerless to end it."

Withstanding Pain

Recent research supports this idea. Jeroen Swart found that making competitive cyclists aware at every point along a racecourse how far they had to go to the finish line (letting them know not only *that* their pain would end but also *when*) enabled them to make greater efforts (tolerate more pain) than when they were prevented from knowing when the race would end. According to Swart, the brain is constantly calculating how much effort to make—how much pain it can tolerate—based on the expected amount of exercise (meaning pain) that remains.[12] Apparently, believing we have the power to *end* pain engenders a belief that we have the power to *tolerate* it.

And *believing* we have the power to tolerate pain, studies suggest, is what enables us to do so, which is then what prevents pain from making us suffer. One such study, for example, found that female undergraduates who were made to believe they could tolerate having their hands submerged in cold water were, in fact, able to do so far longer than subjects who were made to believe they couldn't.[13]

"But don't you think there's such a thing as pain that can't be tolerated?" Ash asked. "Pain so bad it makes you want to die?"

I nodded. "There clearly is. But just because people *don't* tolerate that kind of pain doesn't mean that they *can't*. It's certainly possible—maybe even likely—that past a certain level of intensity pain will always cause suffering. But if that's true, I wonder if it's because past a certain level of intensity we don't *believe* we can tolerate it."

"Except maybe we don't believe we can tolerate it because we *discover* we can't," Ash suggested.

"Except in some cases, people *have* been found to tolerate the kind of pain we're talking about." In a study by anesthesiologist Henry Beecher conducted during World War II, 75 percent of soldiers with severe injuries—injuries that in a civilian population required significant doses of narcotics—declined morphine entirely. The reason? According to Beecher, it was because of what their injuries meant—namely, *that they were going home.*[14] "The intensity of suffering," Beecher writes, "is largely determined by what pain means."

"So maybe, depending on what we believe pain means, our capacity to tolerate pain can be even *greater* than our capacity to feel it," I said.

Solving Every Problem

"So April is in pain because she has no one to love her," Ash said. "But what makes her suffer is her belief that she can't find anyone who will—her belief that she's powerless solve the problem of a loveless existence. Which then prevents her from believing she can tolerate the pain a loveless existence causes her."

I nodded. "In fact, take any problem—a painful breakup, the loss of a job, a diagnosis of cancer—and imagine stirring up the belief—the certain knowledge—that it's solvable. You'll still be in pain—even terrible pain—but will you suffer? I don't think so. Not as we've defined it. Your pain won't overwhelm you. It won't defeat you."

In fact, a number of studies support this hypothesis. In one, people with a pessimistic self-explanatory style, characterized by a belief in one's powerlessness, were more likely to become depressed in response to negative life events.[15] In another, a belief in a concerned God increased the likelihood that depressed patients would respond to treatment specifically because that belief reduced feelings of powerlessness.[16] A third showed that the more powerless we feel, the less likely we are to respond to antidepressant medication.[17]

"Okay, but how is believing you're powerless to solve a problem always a delusion?" Ash asked. "Some problems really *are* impossible—or nearly impossible—to solve. Some cancers can't be cured. A truly loveless existence *is* unendurable. And the statistics on achieving long-term weight loss are abysmal. What if April can't lose the weight?"

"Without a doubt she'd need to summon up a greater determination than you or I would need to. But *can* April lose weight? Is it *possible*? Clearly, yes. Other people have done it. It's just really, really hard. *Impossible* is jumping off a building and floating into the sky."

"You really think there's no such thing as a problem that can't be solved?" Ash asked.

I thought for a moment. "I think there's no such thing as suffering that can't be ended."

"Really? How about the suffering that comes from knowing you're going to die? How do you end that?"

"You don't think it's possible to face death without being afraid?"

Ash paused. "I think it is for some people."

"Well, doesn't that solve the real problem of death?"

"No. You solve the real problem of death by not dying."

I smirked but shook my head. "You solve the real problem of death when the idea of dying no longer makes you suffer."

"So your answer is . . . what? Acceptance?"

"There's a lot of power in acceptance," I said.

"So you're saying *everyone's* pain can *always* be tolerated in *all* circumstances? That there's *always* a way to avoid suffering?"

"I don't know how we'd ever be able to prove that. I guess I'm saying I agree that believing we don't have the power to solve a problem that's causing us pain is the fundamental cause of suffering. But being denied the power to solve a problem that's causing us pain doesn't *always* cause suffering because sometimes we figure out that we don't need to solve the problem at all. Think about what happened to me with Melissa."

Melissa had been my first girlfriend and first great love. When she ended our relationship at the end of my second year of medical school, I fell into a severe

depression that lasted months. I was convinced that the only way I could end my suffering and become happy again was to get her back. But that's not what happened. Instead, I had the sudden insight that I didn't need her to love me to be happy at all—that the only person whose love I needed was my own. I solved my problem, in other words, not the way I thought I needed to solve it and wanted to solve it, but through the acquisition of wisdom.

"Meaning you don't have to be able to solve a problem the way you think you do to stop it from making you suffer," I said. "So I guess what I'm saying is that the core delusion of the world of Hell is *the belief that we're powerless to end our suffering.*"

"So if a problem is making me suffer," Ash said, "the only way I can be happy *without* solving it is by ceasing to believe I *need* to solve it? Or that I need to solve it in a particular way?"

"That's it. Once you realize—once you *accept*—that your problem can be solved in another way—even a way you hate—your suffering will stop. Think about a professional athlete who blows a championship game and becomes depressed. There's no way, of course, he can solve that problem the way he wants. He can't go back in time and win the game. But he can solve the problem another way. He can let go of his belief that to be happy he needed to have won the game in the first place."

"So we're saying there are two ways out of Hell. One, we figure out a way to solve the problem that's causing us pain. Two, we figure out how we don't need to solve the problem at all. As you did with Melissa, we figure out how to solve a *different* problem that makes solving the first problem unnecessary."

"Yes," I said.

"Well," Ash said, "that second one's the thing, isn't it?"

Ash met with April for an emergency session the day after she'd called him with the news about her mother and found, to his relief, that her desire to kill herself had been only fleeting. But she reported feeling more depressed and anxious than she'd been in weeks.

"Depressed I understand," Ash said. "But why anxious?"

Her right leg jackhammering, she answered, "I don't know."

"People feel anxious when they feel unsafe in some way. So why would your mother's death make you feel unsafe?"

April nodded. "That's exactly how I feel," she replied, her leg still bouncing. "Unsafe."

"Can you say why?" Ash asked her again.

"She loved me. In her own way, she did. And now she's gone."

"And without her here to love you . . . ?"

She dropped her gaze to the floor. "I don't think anyone else ever will."

Ash nodded. "Why not?"

She shrugged feebly. "Who would want to love this?"

Ash sensed they'd come to a turning point in April's therapy. Despite her newfound ability to express her anger, she had yet to acknowledge that her self-worth had been constructed almost entirely out of her belief that her mother had loved and needed her. Now, with no one left whose love and attention could validate that worth (she'd long ago stopped talking to her father), her self-esteem had crashed like a plane shorn of its wings. Ash didn't think she would ever be granted a better opportunity—or more motivation—to confront her insecurities head-on.

"April, do you see the irony here?" Ash asked. "Your mother's death has taken away your ability to value yourself, but it was the way your mother treated you while she was alive that prevented you from learning to value yourself in the first place."

"Everything she said about me was true."

"What, exactly? The way you always put the needs of others before yours? The way you've done your best to live up to every demand your mother placed on you without complaining, no matter how unreasonable those demands were, because you think it's good to try to help people when you can? The way you've spent your entire career working with handicapped children, trying to teach them things that make it easier for them to get along in the world? The way you tell me you want to give up all the time, but you never do?" He held her gaze firmly. "April, if I wasn't describing you but some other person instead, wouldn't you say she sounded like someone who deserved your admiration?"

It was a sham, marching out this list of her positive qualities to prove she was worthy of admiration—not because she wasn't all those good things, but because her value as a human being couldn't of course be calculated by subtracting the sum of her weaknesses from her strengths and classifying her as worthy of esteem only if the balance were positive. But because she was so entrenched in the distorted view that her failings were evidence of her worthlessness, he thought countering with examples of her successes seemed a reasonable means to start her down a path toward healthier thinking.

"I tried to please my mom because I wanted her approval, not because I thought it made me a good person. And I work with handicapped children because I like them, not because I'm helping them. And if I haven't given up it's because you're a really great therapist and much more important to me than you should be, and I don't want to disappoint *you*."

Ash sighed as he watched his strategy fail. An amateur mistake, he realized, thinking he could change her view of herself just by arguing her into it.

"I'm the last person in the world you have to worry about disappointing," he said.

April shrugged, her expression blank. Wrong, Ash thought to himself. Wrong, wrong, wrong. He needed to try something else. He knew at some point he needed to explore the significance of his own importance to her, but he also felt a sense of urgency to offer her practical advice about managing her acute crisis. He thought for a few moments while her gaze circled his office.

"April," he asked suddenly, "why do you think you can't lose weight?"

She glanced back at him with an irritated frown. "It's not like . . . like . . . quitting smoking," she said. "I can't *give up* eating. I have to control it. That's *so* much harder."

"Harder, yes. But not impossible. Other people have done it."

"Is this your way of trying to make me feel *better*?"

"I'm trying to suggest something. I know you're grieving over your mom. But I don't think the reason you're suffering is because you feel like there's no one left to love you. I think the reason you're suffering—the reason you're anxious and depressed—is because you feel powerless to do anything about it."

April snorted. "Gosh, why don't you tell me what you *really* think?"

Rather than feeling dismayed by her sarcasm, he was actually encouraged by her feistiness. Engaged was far better than indifferent. "What I really think, April, is that the reason you want someone to love you so badly is because you don't love yourself. And I wonder if you're depressed because you feel powerless to fix *that*."

April looked down at the ground, despondent. "I'm such a cliché."

"Look, if the reason you think no one will ever love you—the reason you don't love yourself—is at least partly because of the way you look, maybe it's time to take on that problem with everything you've got. You've already stopped trying to punish yourself by overeating—don't forget the progress you've made!—so now maybe you actually have a chance to succeed. I know losing weight is incredibly hard, but ask yourself: if you were really going to get serious about it, what exactly would you need to do?"

She looked back up at him. "Eat less. Exercise more."

Ash nodded. "Okay. Then let's figure out how we can get you to do that."

Understanding with Your Life

"I was just thinking if she could only experience herself as capable of accomplishing *something*," Ash said. "Especially something so closely tied to her self-esteem."

"It's an intriguing idea," I said. "You can't just *decide* you have the power to solve your problems. You have to become convinced you do—and what better way to become convinced you do than by actually solving a problem that's causing you pain?"

"You know, she told me she looks in the mirror literally fifty times a day."

"Why?"

"She's trying to figure out what angle makes her look the thinnest."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Well," I said, "I think your strategy is a good one. She needs to be confronted with evidence that she's not powerless. She needs to believe it the way she believes the sun will rise in the East. With all her heart. With her life."

"With her *life*?" Ash asked.

"It's a Buddhist term. It means with total conviction. It means thinking and feeling and behaving in accordance with your understanding. For example, we don't just understand the law of gravity intellectually. We believe it in a way that prevents us from jumping off buildings. With our lives." To believe something intellectually, I said, was to have confidence that it was true. To believe something with your life, on the other hand, was to have an emotional and behavioral response to that confidence. "You might, for instance, believe that smoking is bad for you intellectually—meaning, you have confidence that it's true. But you can't be said to really understand it—to understand it with your life—unless that belief causes you to quit."

"So maybe this will work," Ash said. "Maybe if she starts to lose weight she'll begin to believe with her life that she can solve her other problems, too, and her depression will start to improve. Maybe she'll convince *us* that believing you can't end your suffering is the fundamental cause of depression."

"Well," I said, "at least the fundamental cause of *some* depression."

The True Cause of Depression

Though all depression causes suffering, not all suffering causes depression. We can suffer, or feel overwhelmed by pain, without experiencing the classic symptoms of major depressive disorder. And though we're arguing that believing we can't end our suffring is *often* the fundamental cause of depression,[18] we're not arguing that it's *always* the fundamental cause of depression.

Two other things cause depression besides the belief that we can't end our suffering. Studies show that differences in the genes that build the parts of the brain responsible for generating our core affect—the brain's *machinery of mood generation* (principally, as we'll discuss, the hypothalamus and the hippocampus,[19] but also the anterior cingulate cortex,[20] the ventral pallidum,[21] and the amygdala,[22] to name a few others)—lead to differences in mood vulnerability. Thus, variations in genes lead to differences in the risk of becoming depressed in response to stressful life events,[23] and even to differences in the risk of suicide.[24] So just as some people are born with poor athletic ability, some people are born with a

mood-generating machine that does a poor job of maintaining a good mood, or positive core affect. They have a mood-generating machine that's *malformed*. On the other hand, the performance of even the best mood-generating machine could deteriorate as a result of a disease (a brain tumor, a stroke, hypothyroidism), a medication (beta blockers, steroids), hormonal fluctuations (from premenstrual syndrome), inflammation,[25] changes in gut bacteria,[26] a poor diet,[27] or factors as yet unknown. In cases like these, depression is caused by a mood-generating machine that's experiencing a *malfunction*.

Unfortunately, we often can't distinguish between depression caused by the belief that we're powerless to end our suffering and depression caused by a malformed or malfunctioning mood-generating machine. This is because when the cause of our depression is that we feel powerless to end our suffering, we often don't know that's why we're depressed. We often discover the truth only in retrospect, after we resolve the problem that's making us suffer—or the problem resolves itself—and our depression lifts.

Even if we're blind to its cause, however, the severity of our suffering will correspond to the urgency with which we believe our problem *needs* to be solved. Meaning we don't suffer or become depressed when we face just *any* problem we believe we can't solve. It has to be a problem we believe we *need* to solve to be happy.

In the worst case, when we find ourselves trapped in what seems like suffering without limit—in severe major depression—because the problem we believe we can't solve is one upon which we believe our entire happiness depends, we may have a hard time even recognizing ourselves. We don't just come to view our future as bleak; we become incapable of seeing how it could ever be otherwise. In that life state the capacity to self-reflect vanishes, and our ability to consider evidence that belies our belief that the future is hopeless falters under the weight of our impaired thinking. We refuse to believe any evidence that contradicts our hopeless outlook in the same way a patient with schizophrenia might refuse to believe any evidence that contradicts his belief that the FBI is spying on him. We may be unable not only to stop feeling bad but also to imagine ever again feeling good.[28] Depressed mood, sadness, hopelessness, impaired self-esteem, mental and even physical sluggishness, a lack of interest in pleasure,[29] suicidal

thinking, even anger—all symptoms that flare to life when we're trapped in the deepest parts of the life-condition of Hell.

"Anger is interesting," Ash said. "That's not one of the traditional features of major depression."

"I know of at least one study suggesting anger is far more common in major depression than we realize, especially in men."[30]

"At ourselves," Ash guessed, "for being powerless?"

I nodded. "If nothing else," I said, "the world of Hell is rage turned inward."

"I can't fucking do it!"

Ash winced. He didn't think he'd ever seen April this angry. When he'd held his office door open for her at the beginning of the session, she'd marched past him without a word of greeting or even a sideways glance, sat down in her chair, folded her arms across her chest, and fixed her gaze to the floor. He'd taken his place across from her, and after a moment bent his face down toward hers at a questioning angle in an exaggerated attempt to make eye contact. "You seem upset," he'd said finally, at which point she'd taken him by surprise by cursing in front of him for the first time since he'd known her.

"What exactly can't you do?" Ash asked her.

"Anything!"

"Okay, catch me up-to-date. I take it our plan for you to walk to work every day didn't work?" They'd decided last time that was to have been her only objective for the week.

"No, I did it." Abruptly, the anger drained out of her voice, replaced by a dull resignation. "But so what? I didn't lose any weight." She sighed. "And even if I did . . . I mean, even if . . . even if I was already thin, why would anyone want to be with me? It doesn't matter. I'm still the most disgusting person on the planet."

"That's the depression talking," Ash insisted evenly. "You've been here before, April. You know not to believe every voice that's in your head."

"Well, the depression is right!" Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes.

Ash leaned toward her. "April, I know right now you can't imagine that your pain will ever stop, that you'll ever be able to solve any of your problems, or

that you'll ever be happy. But those are all feelings *created* by your life-condition. You're in Hell. Your thinking is distorted by *definition*. You can't trust it." This, he knew, was how people could become utterly convinced that suicide was a good option, that their loved ones would actually be better off if they were dead. "Your judgment, your outlook, your feelings—they're all so completely different when you're depressed compared to when you're not that you might as well consider yourself an entirely different *person*. When you're depressed, it's like you were never happy at all. Like the memory of having been happy, of having had that happy person's thoughts and feelings, belongs to someone else. But April, that happy person is literally only one moment away from this one."

"I miss my mom," April suddenly burst out.

"I know."

"It's like my insides have been ripped out. I'm not sure I'm going to make it."

"I know," Ash repeated. "I know."

"I don't want to talk to anyone. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want anyone to see me. I didn't even want to come here. I just want to stop . . . being."

Ash paused to wonder if he'd too quickly discounted the likelihood that April's depression came from an inherited tendency toward mood vulnerability. She had, after all, been depressed for most of her life, suggesting that her depression was at least partly a result of a malformed mood-generating machine.

Being accurately able to identify the cause of a depression is, of course, often crucial. If a patient is depressed because she's floridly hypothyroid, that patient needs thyroid hormone, not increased confidence in her ability to solve problems. On the other hand, when Ash helped patients find the confidence they needed to solve problems that were, they believed, serious threats to their happiness, that confidence didn't just improve their depression—it resolved it. He'd also seen many patients through the years who did well until they encountered one problem too many—one problem they didn't feel they could solve—and who then found themselves feeling that they couldn't solve any. Sometimes, interestingly, that would then cause them to lose sight of exactly which problem had been responsible for making them feel overwhelmed by them all.

This made him realize that believing yourself capable of accomplishing only *one* of the tasks necessary to solve a problem you believed was an obstacle to your

happiness would do little to alleviate your suffering. You needed to believe you could accomplish them all, which brought his thinking back to the unhappy fact that some problems probably couldn't be solved. What if April really didn't have the ability to lose weight, to find love, or to improve her self-esteem? Was he right, then, to encourage her to believe that she could? Should he instead have begun working with her on accepting herself as she was, on smashing through the delusion that she could only be happy if she solved the problems she thought she needed to solve in the way she wanted to solve them?

For even if she did lose weight, what guarantee did she have that it would bring her love? And even if it did bring her love, when had he ever seen that improve a patient's self-esteem? Then again, maybe losing weight alone would improve her self-esteem enough to resolve her depression. Alternatively, what if she both lost weight *and* found love but experienced no improvement in her self-esteem? Would her depression lift then? Or what if, he thought suddenly, she needed to solve an entirely different problem that they hadn't even identified?

"April, last time you seemed genuinely hopeful about getting control over your weight," he said. "I know you're disappointed that you haven't. But now I'm wondering—even if you lost all the weight you wanted, do you think it would make you happy?"

April opened her mouth to speak—almost certainly to say yes, Ash thought—but then shrugged instead. "I honestly don't know anymore."

"Me either. Which makes me wonder what *other* problems you feel you can't solve."

"What, you mean, like, what else don't I think I can do?"

Ash nodded.

"How about everything?"

"I think it might be useful if we made a list."

Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes again. "It feels like it *is* everything." She put up her fingers one by one. "I can't lose weight. I can't get my husband back. I can't find a new one. I can't stop feeling like I'm a worthless piece of shit no matter how much I keep telling myself that feeling worthless is stupid—which of course only makes me feel worthless *and* stupid."

"That *is* a lot. But is that really it? Is there anything else at all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"More than enough," Ash agreed. "But I think it's important that we identify everything that could possibly be causing you to feel depressed. You'd be surprised how often people don't realize the real reason."

April looked away for a moment. Then she looked back at him and said, "How about this: I can't convince my mom I'm not worthless. Because now she's dead."

"So I think she went into a tailspin when her mom died not just because, you know, her mom died," Ash said, "but because it made her feel like she'd lost her last chance to be anointed a lovable person."

"We always thought her mom's opinion of her was the lever that controlled her self-esteem," I pointed out.

"*We* knew it. Now *she* knows it. I don't know if that's why—but she's less depressed now than I've ever seen her."

"She's okay knowing her mom died thinking she was worthless?"

"I'm not sure her mom actually thought that. I'm not sure even *April* thinks her mom thought that. I think April just felt constantly criticized and wanted to hear her mom say something just once that made her feel good."

"So why would she be better now?" I asked.

"I'm only guessing, but I think fully realizing—you know, like you said, with her *life*—just how badly she wanted her mom to say she was worth something made April realize just how much control over her self-esteem she'd let her mom have. Which I think helped her to see that even if she didn't have the power to control her mom's opinion of her, she did have the power to control how much that opinion mattered to her."

"Not necessarily—"

"Not necessarily," Ash agreed, "but in her case, realizing it was at least possible seems to have made it so. I don't think she'd say it's *easy* for her not to care what her mom thought of her, but she really does seem to care less. Or, at least, less often."

"So what you're really saying is that she solved one problem by solving another—the other being not only a problem she *could* solve but also the problem she really *needed* to solve to be happy. That she cared too much about what her mother thought of her."

"I guess I am."

"So is she feeling more confident now about losing weight?" I asked.

"In fact," Ash said, "she's lost ten pounds."

Key Points

- Hell is defined as the life-condition of suffering.
- Pain is an unpleasant physical or emotional sensation and is considered to be wholly separate from suffering, which is defined as the experience of being overwhelmed, or defeated, by pain.
- When trapped in the life-condition of Hell we live in a constant state of despondency. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness fuel an inwardly directed rage that's often projected outward toward others. Pessimism and negativity are the watchwords that define the way we view all experiences.
- The cause of suffering is believing that we're powerless to solve a problem we think is preventing us from being happy.
- To end suffering, we can either figure out a way to solve the problem we believe is preventing us from being happy or we can figure out how to be happy without solving the problem.
- The core delusion of the world of Hell is that we're powerless to end our suffering.

2

Hunger

There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it.

—George Bernard Shaw

Hunger is defined as the life-condition of desire. Simply desiring something, however, isn't what traps us in the world of Hunger. What traps us in the world of Hunger is obsession.

Desire itself, we should be careful to note, is neither good nor bad. It's merely the engine that makes our lives move. Whether it does so in a positive or negative direction depends entirely on what we desire and how that desire causes us to behave. Few people would consider the desire to live a principled life, for example, to be a bad thing. But when even a virtuous desire intensifies to the point of obsession—whether for a person, a thing, a state of mind, or anything else—we're more likely to convince ourselves that the ends justify the means and act in a way that causes grievous harm. History is filled with examples of people so consumed by their desires that they disregarded all moral concerns and became monsters.

On the other hand, sometimes obsessing over our desires enables us to move beyond a devastating failure when we might otherwise have given up. To achieve greatness, some degree of obsessiveness may even be necessary.

Yet even when it leads us to greatness, obsession exacts a price: it drives all other concerns into the background, leaving us uninterested in, or even dissatisfied with, what we already have. This in turn only enhances our sense of desperation to achieve our desire, as if our failure to attain what we want is a mistake we can't afford to make.

Yet, ironically, when we're trapped in the world of Hunger, attaining our desires does little to satisfy us as the joy of acquisition or accomplishment fades almost as quickly as it appears. This in turn creates a sense of emptiness that pushes us on toward the next thing, the next obsession, which then captures our thinking entirely, leaving our previous desire, which consumed us only just moments before, nearly forgotten.

Ash had been telling me about a patient he believed was from the world of Hunger named Patrick, who'd come to see him because of severe anxiety.

"If I could just get over this one thing, I'm sure I'd be fine," Patrick told Ash at their first meeting as he slumped down in his chair. "Everything else is great."

"Get over what?" Ash asked him.

Patrick stared at the scene outside Ash's window for a few moments. "I know she's going to leave me," he answered finally. "She's trying to be subtle, but I know what's really going on. She's cheating on me. I'm sure of it."

His expression grew sullen, and he began to rock back and forth in his chair, gnawing at what was left of his already-mangled nails.

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," Ash said.

Patrick said he'd come in because of his growing concern that his girlfriend was about break up with him. He'd been having trouble sleeping, sometimes for the entire night, and couldn't focus during the day. When he wasn't with her, he had to fight with himself constantly to avoid calling her to find out where she was and what she was doing.

"How long have you been dating?" Ash asked.

"A little over a week. But we've seen each other every day," he added quickly in response to Ash's surprised expression. "I've never felt this way about anyone

else in my life. She's just so beautiful. She could be—and I don't want to jinx this—but she could be the one. That's what scares me so much."

That Patrick had developed such a powerful attachment to someone in so short a time made Ash wonder what was compelling him to seek love so obsessively. Fear of loneliness? Poor self-esteem? Fear of missing out? Before Ash made any suggestions about how to achieve long-lasting relief from anxiety, he preferred in general to pin down its root cause as definitively as he could. Did it rotate around a specific issue or set of issues, or was it more generalized, not connected to any one particular thing? Many therapists made symptom management their main focus, often recommending behavior modification or medication to reduce anxiety quickly regardless of its cause. But Ash had learned that helping patients control anxiety too well at the outset often reduced or even eliminated the main force driving them to investigate the reason they felt it. So while he never wanted to leave anyone incapacitated by worry, neither did he want to resolve his patients' worry too quickly.

Ash's first step, therefore, was to assess each patient's level of distress. Did Patrick possess sufficient coping skills to prevent his anxiety from overwhelming him? Patrick said he wasn't sure. But he agreed that seeking the central cause of his problem was a good idea. How else was he going to solve it once and for all? "Sometimes my anxiety is so intense," he said, "it nearly stops me from functioning."

"Are you feeling that way now?" Ash asked.

"No. It helps to talk about it. It's good for me to get it out in the open."

"Good," Ash said, and then suggested they start by exploring the context that was triggering his anxiety, promising to make himself available by phone if Patrick found himself suddenly unable to cope with it. If Patrick started experiencing full-blown panic, Ash told him he'd have one of his psychiatry colleagues prescribe an anti-anxiety medication. Patrick readily agreed.

"So what's her name?" Ash asked.

"Angie."

They'd met three weeks earlier at a painting class. Even as she started setting up her easel next to his, Patrick had felt the first stirrings of chemistry between them. To his eye, she looked far younger than her twenty-five years, which he found titillating. By the time the class ended, she'd agreed to go out to dinner

with him. By the end of that first date, they were back in his apartment having sex. Patrick told Ash he knew then that he was in love.

Within a few days, however, he'd begun to suspect Angie was cheating on him. When Ash asked what had triggered his concern, Patrick told him she'd stopped answering his calls on the first ring. When Ash then asked how this amounted to evidence she was cheating, Patrick replied he was worried she wasn't able to answer immediately "because she was giving some guy a blow job."

"You think she can't answer you because she's performing oral sex on someone else every single time you call?"

Patrick sighed. "I'm just so bad at this."

"What?"

"Relationships. Trust." He waved his arm dismissively. "She swears nothing is going on. I yell at her and tell her I don't believe her. I make her cry. Then I cry." He seemed suddenly exhausted. "I don't know why I do it. I know I'm being totally ridiculous, but I can't stop myself."

Ash was encouraged to find Patrick had at least some insight into the inappropriateness of his behavior. "Can you imagine anything she could do to make you believe she's telling the truth?"

Patrick thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"Do you think she'd be willing to come in to therapy with you?"

Patrick's eyes widened. "Actually, yeah!" Angie was already "sick to death of his jealousy" and desperate for him to stop hounding her, he said, so she had good reason to agree. Also, Patrick added in a breaking voice, if Ash had a chance to get a read on Angie, he might then find a way to convince Patrick once and for all that his suspicion she was cheating on him was nothing more than a paranoid delusion, something he knew in his head but still couldn't quite convince his heart.

Anxiety as an Event

Where Hell is considered the world of suffering, Hunger is considered the world of pain. It's painful, after all, to be separated from a desired attachment. The intensity of our desire may be so minor we don't realize it *is* pain, but desire, at its core, is an ache.

Desiring something also frequently creates the worry that we won't get it. But anxiety itself isn't generated by a core delusion. As Ash told April, it's generated (when not by a neurologic abnormality) by the perception that we're unsafe in some way[1]—whether because our mother just died leaving us alone in the world, or we think we're about to be abandoned by a girlfriend.

Though anxiety is, of course, a feeling, it could also be considered an event—like a car accident or a marriage proposal. This means that anxiety, like any event, will affect us in keeping with the core delusion it stirs up.

"So," I said, "if your anxiety draws your attention more to the belief that you can't solve the problem that's causing it, you won't believe you'll be able to end your anxiety, so you won't feel able to tolerate it. And if you don't feel able to tolerate it, your anxiety becomes a pain that makes you suffer, thrusting you into the life-condition of Hell. Which is why for people like April anxiety is paralyzing."

"But if you're Patrick," Ash said, "and you believe that you *can* solve the problem that's causing your anxiety, then your anxiety isn't paralyzing. It's motivating."

"Meaning it motivates you to solve the problem that's causing it," I agreed.

"So maybe *that's* the reason we become obsessed in Hunger with getting what we want," Ash said. "Because getting what we want *ends our worry that we won't get it*. Maybe the core delusion of the world of Hunger is that to be happy you need to be rid of anxiety."

"Except that would mean anxiety is what drives every desire anyone would ever have."

"Every *obsessive* desire—yes. Anxiety *is* incredibly common. It's not a bad guess."

"I'm not disagreeing that people go to incredible lengths to avoid anxiety," I said. "But just because you're obsessed with something doesn't mean you're worried about being denied it. Not everyone trapped in the world of Hunger is anxious. Not by a long shot."

"Name an obsession you think *isn't* driven by anxiety," Ash said.

I thought for a moment.

"Stamp collecting."

Angie was every bit as beautiful as Patrick had described, with shoulder-length light brown hair and the toned body of a dancer. As Patrick held Ash's office door open for her, he seemed to swell with pride. He chuckled with an awkward, giddy excitement as he introduced her, as if he'd accomplished something important by connecting himself to so attractive a woman. He evinced none of the anxiety that had been evident in their first session.

"I really appreciate your coming in, Angie," Ash said. "I know this is a bit unusual."

"Whatever I can do to help," Angie replied. She seemed confident and comfortable, as self-possessed as Patrick seemed sophomoric.

Patrick beamed and hugged her with one arm. "Isn't she great?"

After they were seated, Ash dug right in. "In the two weeks you've known each other, Angie, how often would you say Patrick has become jealous?"

"A lot," Patrick interjected.

"Dr. Ash, no joke," Angie said, "I probably spend at least two hours a day trying to convince Patrick I'm not cheating on him."

Patrick stroked Angie's hand awkwardly and then said, "Patrick's sorry, baby. He's such a little jerk. He trusts you. Yes, he does. Yes—he—does." He sounded like a parent cooing at an infant. He lifted her hand and rubbed the back of it over the tip of his nose playfully.

Even more startling was Angie's reply. In the same singsong voice, she said, "Angie wuvs her widdle Patrick. Yes, I *do*. Yes, I *do*."

"I wuv you so much," Patrick said.

"I wuv you more."

Ash held up his hand. "Hold up a minute, guys." They both looked at him. "Do you realize you're both talking like . . . uh . . ."

"Infants," Angie said, embarrassed, as if she'd just realized he was still in the room. "Yeah."

"It's a thing we do," Patrick explained. "Baby talk."

"Baby talk?"

"Yeah," said Patrick.

"Why?" Ash asked.

"We know it's weird," Patrick acknowledged. "But it makes us feel better."

"Feel better about what?"

"It just makes us relax," Angie offered. She looked at Patrick expectantly. "I don't know, not take things so . . . seriously?"

"When do you usually do this?"

Angie thought for a moment. "When we're making up after a fight."

"After sex," Patrick added.

Ash's first thought was that this represented a bizarre form of regression. He could readily imagine why it might happen after they fought, especially if Angie was as receptive to it in their personal lives as she appeared to be in his office. What better way to mitigate the potentially fearsome consequences of conflict than to collude in making their fights appear as if they were occurring between children?

It might also explain, Ash thought, why Patrick had sought professional help. Regression is one of the most primitive defense mechanisms and is therefore easily overwhelmed. Ash wondered if when Angie wasn't present in Patrick's immediate environment to regress with him, his fear of being abandoned was free to mushroom—and apparently often did—into nearly full-blown panic.

Ash thought he might learn something about Patrick's fear of abandonment if he could convince them to reenact an argument that Patrick's jealousy had triggered. But despite his prodding, neither of them felt comfortable enough to do so. So he spent the remainder of the session using direct questioning to tease out the thoughts and feelings Patrick experienced that would lead him to accuse Angie of cheating. But this approach proved fruitless. With Angie present, Patrick simply had no access to his jealous nature. By the end of the session, Ash felt stymied and frustrated.

Patrick, on the other hand, felt Angie's presence had been of tremendous benefit and told Ash he wanted her to attend all his therapy sessions. This brought Ash to the only insight he was to have in the session: Patrick had wanted Angie to come to therapy for the same reason he would pull her into acts of regression—namely, to provide him relief from his anxiety.

Ash countered by proposing that he continue to see Patrick alone while agreeing to remain open to inviting Angie back if it seemed purposeful. When Patrick started to protest, Angie herself began to question the value of her involvement.

She thought Patrick's usually incisive insight had been dulled by her presence and concluded that he would likely get more out of therapy without her there. Overwhelmed, Patrick expressed his love for her several more times and then agreed that she knew best.

Two days later, Patrick phoned Ash to tell him that Angie had broken up with him. "What am I going to do!" he sobbed.

"Take a deep breath," Ash said. "Tell me what happened."

In a trembling voice, Patrick told him that Angie had announced "she couldn't handle his jealousy anymore." Patrick was certain now that he'd driven her away for good. He loved her so much he was going out of his mind. This was a pain he couldn't bear one more minute, an ache he felt along every limb, a throbbing in every joint.

Ash offered to see him immediately. But to his surprise, Patrick declined. "I don't want to talk about it anymore," he said suddenly.

Ash was concerned that Patrick's refusal represented another primitive defense mechanism—denial—and pressed him to come anyway. But Patrick remained adamant. "I'll be okay. It's just par for the course for my sorry ass. Maybe I could come in next week after I've had a chance to chill out a little."

When further entreaties failed to change his mind, Ash made Patrick promise to call if he felt like doing anything impulsive, hoping he was hearing more fatigue in Patrick's sullen voice than a desire to end his pain by ending himself. Patrick agreed, and they scheduled their next session for the following week.

But at the appointed time, Patrick failed to appear. Ash called his home phone and cell phone several times but to no avail. The next morning, without a word from him still, Ash began to worry in earnest. Though a suicide contract was often effective at preventing patients who struggled with depression from killing themselves, it was far less effective with histrionic patients whose suicide attempts were more impulsive.

Later that day, however, when Ash walked into his waiting room in between patient appointments, he found Patrick sitting in a chair reading a magazine.

Ash stared at him. "What happened to you yesterday?"

"What do you mean?"

"We had an appointment at one o'clock."

"We did? Are you sure? I'm sorry." He sounded genuinely apologetic. "I thought it was for today."

Ash was completely nonplussed. "No, it was yesterday. I was actually pretty worried about you. You sounded pretty upset last time we spoke."

"I'm fine," Patrick replied dismissively. "I'm totally over that situation. Angie just wasn't the one, you know? But I've got something totally amazing to tell you that you won't believe! I've met the real woman of my dreams. She's engaged to another guy—but not for long. Her name is Lily."

The Need for Validation

"You've got to be kidding," I said. "He gets over Angie—the love of his life—in one week?"

"He's looking for love," Ash replied. "It doesn't matter who he gets it from. It's the love he wants; the person is incidental."

"That *does* actually sound like the world of Hunger."

"I'm definitely beginning to see how it's not such a fun place to be."

"And the baby talk?" I asked. "You said you thought he was doing it to make their fights seem less serious?"

"Or to get her to see *him* as a baby."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"I'm not sure. To send the signal that he's dependent on her? To make her feel responsible for him? I mean, think about it. What woman would leave a helpless baby?"

"What kind of man wants a woman to think he's helpless?"

Ash shrugged. "Maybe he believes he can only be happy if he has someone to take care of him."

"Or someone to protect him?"

"Or maybe just someone to be with him. Maybe the core delusion of the world of Hunger is that to be happy you need to be in a relationship."

"But how would believing that to be happy you need to be in a relationship cause you to become obsessed with things that aren't related to relationships?" I asked.

Ash frowned. "Right. It wouldn't."

"On the other hand: looking for love and terrified to lose it. Sound like someone else we know?"

"April," Ash agreed.

I nodded. "So maybe *that's* the explanation for the baby talk. Keep things light and silly not to make her think he's helpless but to hide his insecurities." As we'd both observed in our respective practices, people with poor self-esteem typically derived their sense of worth from the value other people assigned them. I wondered if this was why even though Patrick had been terribly hurt by Angie's rejection, he felt compelled to place himself at risk for being rejected again by pursuing Lily. Perhaps his need to find someone to validate him was so strong that it overpowered his fear of being judged worthless, compelling him to form relationships that filled him with dread.

Less clear to us was the reason Patrick might be struggling with low self-esteem at all. Ash wondered if he was using his romantic relationships to rewrite the ending of some critical scene, or series of scenes, from his past, ones in which he'd been denied the regard he seemed to be so desperately seeking now. So at their next visit, he told Patrick he wanted to construct a genogram.

"What's that?" Patrick asked.

Ash explained that a genogram is a family tree that documents a comprehensive history of relevant facts about immediate and extended family members. It includes everything from mental illnesses, addictions, and divorces to abuses, feuds, and family secrets, as well as the patient's reactions to being asked about them all. When the patient talks about his family, what's his mood? When does he get angry? Bitter? Indifferent? What does he remember? What doesn't he remember? What's difficult to talk about? A well-constructed genogram could predict a patient's pathology much in the same way a nearly completed puzzle predicted the shape of its missing pieces.

Patrick thought it was an interesting idea and proceeded to share a number of his observations about *Lily's* family—whom he'd already met—before quickly turning to Lily herself. Ash pulled out a notepad and began jotting down some

of the phrases Patrick used as he talked about her. Then he pulled out his notes from their first session and started reading some of the phrases Patrick had used in connection with Angie. They were almost identical.

Patrick looked down at the two notepads placed side by side as if he'd just found a piece of gum under his shoe. Then he looked up at Ash, a confused, worried look creeping onto his face. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means none of this is really about Angie *or* Lily."

Patrick agreed to begin constructing a genogram immediately.

At their next session, however, he reported several fires had flared up in his life in the intervening week that required dousing. First, he'd decided to quit his job as waiter to commit himself full-time to painting. Then only three days after that, he'd decided to go into advertising. He was tired of being poor, he told Ash. He put his resume together and scheduled interviews with several advertising agencies, thinking to get into copywriting. He expressed great concern that if he didn't get the job he wanted, he had no idea "how he was going to survive."

All of these changes required processing, which Ash felt duty-bound to provide, especially given the breakneck pace at which they were occurring. But at the following session, Ash told him that they could spend the next several years dealing with the various manifestations of Patrick's anxiety and never come close to identifying the underlying cause of it. To do that, he argued, they needed to focus at some point on creating the genogram.

Patrick replied that he could provide his family history "in a few minutes." He wasn't close to his parents and never had been. His father was a surgeon and his mother a stay-at-home mom.

"Well, that's a start," Ash said. He stood up, walked over to his whiteboard, and picked up a marker. "But think about a genogram as a tree with lots of branches and leaves. We'll start at the bottom and work our way up and out." He pulled the cap off the marker and touched it to the board. "Why don't you start by telling me about your grandparents?"

Patrick groaned, but then dutifully began answering each question Ash asked. He did so, however, in an uncharacteristically stolid manner—a stark contrast, Ash noted, to the hyperbole that was his usual fare. They recorded the basic

structure of Patrick's extended family, but the process rendered Patrick almost mute. At the end of the session, Ash announced his intention to discuss Patrick's immediate family next time, more as a warning than anything else.

But at the beginning of the next session, Patrick seemed once again his usual theatrical self and displayed no interest in continuing to work on the genogram at all. "You're not going to believe what happened!" he announced as he sat down in his chair. "Lily postponed her engagement! Can you believe it? She won't say it's because of me, but give me a break! And I got a job at an ad agency! This has been an unbelievable week. There's so much I want to talk about."

This time Ash actually found Patrick's opposition to continuing with the genogram encouraging. Most therapists considered resistance to be a signal that an important truth was about to be exposed. So when Ash said he wanted to hold off on discussing the events of the week and instead continue with the genogram, he wasn't surprised to see the excitement drain from Patrick's face. Undaunted, Ash picked up the marker and stood next to the genogram on the easel.

"Let's talk about your parents," Ash said. "What kind of relationships did they have with *their* parents?"

Patrick sighed. Then in a subdued voice he told Ash that his father hadn't gotten along well with Patrick's grandfather at all. Apparently, his grandfather had lost all interest in Patrick's father soon after Patrick's father left for college. His grandmother had died when Patrick was a child. His father rarely, if ever, talked about her.

"What about your mother's side?" Ash asked.

His mother was the youngest of six children, Patrick told him. She was the baby of the family, and apparently everyone had taken a turn caring for her at some point. His mother's family was extremely close, Patrick said, which he found "really weird."

"Any siblings?"

"A brother and a sister."

"Are you close to either of them?"

"Not really. My sister is fifteen years older than me and my brother is two years older than her. They were practically out of the house by the time I was old enough to notice them."

"Do you know if your parents planned to have children so far apart in age?"

After a moment's pause, Patrick answered, "I was an accident. I pretty much ruined the plans they had for their golden years. At least that's how my dad always put it. He took it out on my mom all the time."

"On your mom?"

Patrick nodded and then stared down at the floor.

"And what about you? Did he make *you* feel like an accident while you were growing up?"

Without looking up, Patrick nodded again.

"Tell me a little about that," Ash said.

"There was this one day . . ."

Ash waited. Patrick opened his mouth, then shut it. Then finally he said, "He was just going to let me walk out the door. He didn't care at all." He gave a half shrug.

"Tell me what happened."

Patrick took in a breath and said he'd been ten. The second storm of the Blizzard of '79 had just struck the Chicago area over the first weekend in January. The city and surrounding suburbs had been completely unprepared for the onslaught of snow that piled up to twenty-seven inches, a new record. By Monday, the roads had become impassable, forcing Patrick to stay home from school and his father to stay home from work. Patrick had suggested they build a snowman or go sledding together, but his father hadn't been interested. Instead, he'd picked on Patrick the entire day. Why hadn't his room been cleaned? Why hadn't his homework been done? Why weren't his grades better? He'd been freeloading, his father had said, sucking all the fun out his father's life with his mother. His father hadn't yelled, but every criticism he'd levied had been like a stab wound, leaving Patrick weak and dizzy with pain. They'd been standing in Patrick's room, his father marching out one issue after another, when Patrick announced he couldn't take it anymore and started crying. When his father started disparaging him for that, too, Patrick had darted from his room and down the stairs. He ran to the front door, opened it, and turned around to look back up at his father, who'd followed him as far as the top of the stairway.

He'd told his father that he hated him and that he was going to run away and never come back, and he meant it. He saw that his father believed him, and he felt a thrilling sense of power in anticipation of the pain he was about to inflict.

"But that's not how it went," Patrick said.

"How did it?"

Patrick finally looked up at Ash, his eyes shining. "He told me to make sure I closed the door after I left so the snow wouldn't get in."

After a moment, Ash told him he thought it was one of the worst things he'd ever heard a father tell his son.

The Desire for Love

"So what if we suppose for a minute that one of Patrick's primary drivers is his need to be loved and accepted by his father," I said. "What might that cause him to believe he needs to be happy?"

"You mean aside from being loved and accepted by his father?" Ash asked.

"Aside from that, yes," I replied dryly. "Something more general. More generalizable."

"How about just love and acceptance, period? From anyone."

"That could explain his obsession with women. . . ."

"But not all the jobs," Ash said.

"You don't think so?"

"Love and acceptance from a job?"

"Not love and acceptance," I said. "Validation."

"Maybe. . . ."

"The need for love *is* one of the most universal needs there is," I pointed out.

"So is the need to be free of anxiety."

"True."

Then Ash shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Do people become obsessed with—I don't know—*eating* because they're looking for love?"

"Sometimes."

"I thought *sometimes* wasn't good enough."

"Yeah, no, it's not," I conceded. "We're looking for a belief that explains *all* obsessions."

"Are people obsessed with *money* because they're looking for love?"

"Yeah, okay—"

"Power?" Ash added. "Survival?"

"Right," I agreed.

At their next visit, Ash told Patrick about a book titled *Man Enough*. The author, Frank Pittman, a psychiatrist, argues that sons who failed to be "anointed" men by their fathers will spend their lives not only trying to prove themselves men but also trying to resolve their anger at their fathers for not providing them enough respect and admiration when they were little. How do fathers "anoint" their sons? Not in any one single act, but in consistent, small ways throughout their childhood and adolescence: by attending their baseball games, by showing up to their graduations and smiling with pride for their pictures, by listening to their fears without judgment, and by accepting them so completely that no chip could ever form on their shoulders.[2] Properly anointed men, Pittman argues, feel no need to prove anything in their adult lives because they've already proven everything they felt necessary to prove when they were children. Pittman argues that men whose fathers haven't anointed them struggle to anoint themselves in three ways: by philandering, by overachieving, and by competing. The best way for these men to break out of these destructive behavior patterns, Pittman says, is to focus their energies not on anointing themselves but rather on anointing sons of their own.[3]

Patrick devoured Pittman's book in one night and affirmed at their next session that it read like a case study of his life. He believed now that his obsessive desire to find the "perfect woman" hadn't arisen out of a need to shore up his self-esteem but from a need to demonstrate to his father that he was a man.

After that, Patrick's progress in therapy began to accelerate. He started to report recurrent, albeit brief moments in which he felt "more self-contained, more whole." These feelings were subtle, occurring at odd times and for no reason he could figure out. Yet it was undeniable. Coming to understand just how much he'd needed his father's approval as a child had improved his ability to approve of himself as an adult.

Soon Patrick found his anxiety had receded enough that he no longer felt the need to continue therapy. Though Ash thought he had more to uncover and said as much, he told Patrick he'd support whatever choice he wanted to make. So they shook hands and said their goodbyes.

A Universal Anxiety

"Any final conclusions about what was causing his anxiety?" I asked Ash.

"I'm still not sure," Ash said. "Fear of not measuring up as a man? Fear of disappointing his father? Fear of failure? Fear of *being* a failure?" He shrugged.

"But now his anxiety is gone."

"Seems to be."

"You think he's still from the world of Hunger?"

"I think he *was*," Ash said. "I'm not sure if he still is."

"Because he's not anxious anymore?"

"No, because . . . well . . . I don't know." Ash paused. "Yeah, because he's not anxious anymore."

I considered this. "So maybe anxiety *is* the right answer." But then I shook my head. "Except I still don't see how it could be the universal driver of *every* obsession—"

"That's the problem with *everything* we've suggested," Ash said. "The need to be free of anxiety, the need to be in a relationship, the need to be loved and accepted—none of them are universal enough. We're trying to figure out why we want things obsessively, but instead we keep coming up with different things we all want."

"It's the *way* we want them that's the problem. Like our lives are at risk if we don't get them."

"So maybe we've been asking the wrong question," Ash said. "Maybe instead of asking why people trapped in the world of Hunger are obsessed with getting what they want, we should be asking what they believe will happen if they don't."

"I guess there could be a *deeper* anxiety at work here," I offered. "Not a specific anxiety about losing your girlfriend or disappointing your father or being a failure, but an existential anxiety. A universal anxiety."

"Yes! Maybe that's why Patrick doesn't seem like he's trapped in Hunger anymore. Maybe he's freed himself from *that* anxiety."

"But anxiety about what?"

"Being abandoned? A loveless existence? Death? I don't know," Ash said. "But something elemental. Something we haven't figured out yet. The thing that really trapped Patrick in the life-condition of Hunger. The thing that traps us all."

Three years later, Patrick called Ash again. He was doing well, he said, still mostly anxiety-free, but he had a new problem that he wanted to discuss. Did Ash have room in his schedule to see him? Ash did and arranged for them to meet the following week.

When Patrick arrived, Ash noticed he'd gained some weight—enough to round out the edges of his face—and wore his hair shorter and neater than he'd remembered, making him seem more meticulously groomed. "You look different," Ash told him.

With a self-deprecating laugh Patrick admitted he hadn't been exercising much or following as rigorous a diet. His obsession with fitness had waned. "Which I'm sure is why this chair feels so tight against my ass." His tone was light, innocently self-mocking. Charming, even.

Ash was intrigued. Patrick's demeanor had changed almost entirely. No trace of his previous awkwardness remained. The frenetic mannerisms, the dramatic rise and fall in the pitch of his voice, the worried expression that spoke of a persistently distracting anxiety—all had vanished and been replaced by a steadiness of bearing and a calmness of tone that struck Ash as polished and powerful. He found himself thinking that where before he'd been presented with an anxious boy, now he saw before him a full-grown man.

Patrick quickly summarized the intervening three years of his life since he'd last seen Ash. He'd learned to confront anxiety maturely and proactively. Rather than regress, now he would take definitive steps to solve whatever problem was causing it. He'd been involved in a serious relationship with a successful, intelligent woman until six months ago when he himself had ended it. He'd been dating her for a little over a year when vague but persistent feelings of dissatisfaction

had led him to conclude she simply wasn't the woman for him. The breakup had been painful, but not inappropriately so. He hadn't dated anyone since.

But the reason he'd come back to see Ash had nothing to do with any of that. He'd come back, he said, because after he left therapy three years ago, he'd decided to write a book.

Pittman had inspired him. He'd wanted to write about the numerous ways father-and-son relationships failed and how devastating the consequences of such failures could be. However, several agents to whom he'd pitched the idea had all pointed out not only that he lacked the credentials to write such a book, but also that the book had already been written—and written well—by Pittman himself.

Refusing to be discouraged, Patrick decided he would turn his idea into a work of fiction. By that point he'd also started business school, so he told himself that sleep was for the weak and started writing immediately.

After two months, physically exhausted but mentally energized, he finished the first draft and showed it to a writer friend. His writer friend, however, shortly returned it with pencil slashes scrawled across nearly every page pronouncing the prose amateurish and the story predictable and uninspiring. Patrick accepted the feedback stoically but was terribly hurt. He paused for a week to let the sting fade and then arranged to audit some writing classes.

After honing his writing skills for six months, he decided to rewrite the book from beginning to end. Rather than risk being criticized by his friend again, he decided this time to query literary agents. In short order, though, each one sent him back a rejection letter. At that point, almost everyone he knew urged him to put his manuscript in a drawer and to focus on business school.

Instead, he decided to rewrite the book a second time. By the time he'd graduated and found a job as a management consultant, the rewrite was done. This time he decided to send out query letters to publishers who, according to *Writer's Market,* accepted unsolicited submissions. By then, he told Ash, his desire to become a published author had completely taken over his life, becoming an itch just beyond the reach of his fingers to scratch.

Over the next four months, even as the rejection letters began to accumulate, he continued to open each successive response with a sense of hope, quickly shrugging off the pain of each rebuff, one after another. He continued in this

way until he received the final response from the last of the publishers—it, too, was a rejection—and then his hope had crumbled. He couldn't understand it. What had he been doing wrong? Could he have been that deluded about the quality of his work?

His mother had recognized his distress and pulled him aside to encourage him. She'd told him she thought the book was good but that it read as though someone else had written it. Where was his quirkiness? The book was too serious. It needed an edge.

Patrick felt instantly re-energized and decided to rewrite the entire thing from beginning to end a *third* time but with humor, sarcasm, and wit, allowing his personality to roam wildly over the pages. It took him five months. Then he sent out this new and improved version to the same publishers—only then to be quickly and summarily rejected by them all again.

He'd felt then that he simply couldn't continue, that as badly as he wanted to publish his book, as much as he believed in it, he couldn't take any more disappointment. So he'd busied himself with other interests, hoping his desire to become a published author would pass or perhaps diminish enough to cease hurting him. He'd been about to shred the entire manuscript and delete all the files from his computer in a final effort to free himself from his obsession when he received an unexpected call from his friend, the writer. Patrick had impulsively sent the fourth version to him when it was making the rounds with publishers the second time. His friend had just finished reading it, he'd called to say, and he wanted Patrick to know that it was now, in his opinion, a publishable book. When Patrick replied that every publishing house to whom he'd sent it had disagreed, his friend suggested that he publish it himself.

Instantly, Patrick's heartache vanished, replaced by a swell of excitement, which in the next moment was joined by a sense of urgency to implement his friend's suggestion as quickly as he possibly could. By this time, however, he'd left his consulting job to try his hand at real estate development with two of his management consultant friends, so he had little cash on hand. Nevertheless, he began a search for an on-demand printer he could afford and soon found one who agreed to charge him a thousand dollars to print five hundred copies. He could print as many more as he wanted as long as the orders were placed

in minimum batches of five hundred. Marketing, distribution, and sales would be up to him. Elated, Patrick had written them a check, purchased an ISBN number, and then gone in search of someone to design the cover.

He'd turned then to the business of selling and promotion. He asked every independent bookstore in the city to stock it, but they all turned him down. Frustrated, he'd started selling the book himself, at first to family and friends, then soon also to friends of friends, and then eventually to their friends as well.

After three months of "shameless self-promotion," he'd finally managed to sell all five hundred copies. By then a small following had developed online. Encouraged, he sent the finished book in manuscript form to a few carefully selected agents, one of whom agreed to represent it. Within a month it had sold to a publisher. Contracts were signed, a marketing plan developed, and a new book cover approved.

And now, nine months after that, a first run of five hundred copies were poised—finally—to land on the shelves of bookstores across the country. Patrick was about to realize his dream of becoming a published author at long last. And that, he concluded to Ash, was the reason he'd come back to therapy.

"Because . . . ?" Ash asked.

Patrick spread his hands helplessly. "Because it feels completely empty."

A Worthless Life

When we're trapped in the world of Hunger, no matter what we may have or what we may have achieved, we're continually dissatisfied. We're always turning to something *else*, to our *next* desire, something bigger, something better, perpetually hoping to find the one thing that will resolve the painful sense of emptiness that continuously permeates our life. The world of Hunger is indeed the world of pain.

The root cause of such dissatisfaction? Psychologists Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert argue we routinely overestimate both the intensity and duration of the emotions we expect to feel in response to future events, and therefore the degree to which getting what we want will improve our well-being.[4] In other words, we're predisposed to want things out of proportion to the pleasure or satisfaction that they're likely to give us.

"But that doesn't mean we're all disappointed by the pleasure or satisfaction we get," Ash said.

"No," I agreed.

"So then why would Patrick be?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he's just sitting on the far right of the curve. Maybe his expectations are so unrealistic that he *never* gets as much pleasure or satisfaction as he thinks he will, so what pleasure or satisfaction he does get seems, in contrast to his expectations, insignificant."

"But why would he keep expecting so much? Especially if he keeps being disappointed. You think he'd figure it out."

"Maybe it's not about *expectation* so much as *desperation*," I said. "Maybe the wound his father inflicted hasn't mended. Maybe all the things he's been doing have actually been attempts to heal himself in some way."

"I'm not sure what that wound would be at this point. He's clearly not looking for love anymore. And these days his self-esteem almost looks healthier than mine."

"I agree it doesn't sound like he's still having trouble valuing *himself*. But I wonder if he's having trouble valuing his *life*."

"That sounds like a distinction without a difference," Ash said.

"It's not. You can value yourself but still feel that the things you're doing aren't meaningful or important." Maybe, I said, his skipping from relationship to relationship and from job to job hadn't been a search for validation but for *meaning*—an attempt to fill a void left by an indifferent father whose final legacy to his son was an inability to feel good about any of his accomplishments. Nothing Patrick did was ever good enough for his father, so nothing he did was ever good enough for Patrick himself. He may have freed himself from the belief that he needed his father's approval and in so doing from the belief that he was worthless. But I wondered if his inability to find satisfaction in nearly everything he had or did had stemmed all along from a persistent belief that no matter what he was doing there was something else more meaningful he should have been doing instead. That although he'd discovered worth in himself, he nevertheless felt he was living a worthless life.

Patrick jerked his head back and blinked several times. "You mean not even publishing a book—" He stopped and heaved out an angry breath. "So I'm still damaged goods."

"What do you mean?" Ash asked. "No you're not. Why are you saying that?"

"I spent my entire life trying to please my dad, and now I have no idea how to please myself!" He shook his head in disgust. "All those years I wasted trying to do what *he* wanted me to do."

"How do you figure you did what he wanted you to do?" Ash challenged him. "Maybe you've spent your entire life trying to please him, but not by doing what he wanted. You did it by trying to accomplish great things! You've always known exactly what you wanted and aimed to accomplish your goals with a determination that's been nothing short of amazing. How else could you have pushed through all those obstacles if you didn't know exactly what you wanted? You may believe you're living a worthless life because painting and copywriting and getting your MBA and real estate development and publishing a book have all left you feeling dissatisfied, but in no way were you ever uncertain that you wanted to pursue each and every one of them."

"Then why aren't I any happier? Why does everything I do always—*always*—seem so goddamn empty?"

"Maybe you just haven't found the right—" Then Ash stopped. "Or maybe . . ." He tapped his fingers together. "Hang on a second." Another moment passed. Then he asked, "Patrick, what exactly do you think you need to be happy?"

Patrick looked at him helplessly. "That's the problem. I don't know."

"Actually, I think you do. I think you always have. You just don't know you know it. Just give me the first answer that pops into your head. What do you think you need to be happy?"

"I don't know," Patrick repeated. "That's why I'm here."

"You're not getting it. What do you think you need to be happy? Your father's approval? A girlfriend? The right job? A published book? Which one?"

"Stop asking me! I don't know! Fuck! All of them! How about that? Every single goddamn one!"

"That," Ash said, "is exactly right."

Miswanting

"The core delusion of the world of Hunger," Ash announced, "*is that to be happy we need to get what we want.*"

"Interesting . . . ," I said.

"Think about it. Why would Patrick be so obsessed with everything he wants and at the same time be so dissatisfied by everything he gets? Because he doesn't expect just to *enjoy* the things he gets. He expects them to turn him into a *happy person*."

I blinked several times. "Right! It's the belief that fulfilling your desires will *change* you. What drives every obsession there ever was and ever will be? The fear that if you don't get what you want, you won't be able to be happy at all. *That's* the universal anxiety we've been looking for!"

Yet getting what we want doesn't improve our long-term happiness in the slightest. For one thing, the intensity with which we want something doesn't predict how happy we'll be when we get it. Neurologically, it turns out that *wanting* and *liking* are two entirely different processes created by entirely different circuits in the brain, involving entirely different neurotransmitters.[5] This is how it's possible not only to want something far more intensely than we like it, like a fourth piece of chocolate cake, but also to want something we don't like at all, like a ride on a rollercoaster. This is something Gilbert and Wilson call *miswanting.*[6]

A second reason that getting what we want doesn't turn us into permanently happy people is that what makes us happy *today* often make us *unhappy* tomorrow. Think of an alcoholic who wants to drink, a dieter who wants to overeat, or a student who wants to see a movie instead of studying for a test.

Finally, even if what makes us happy today *doesn't* make us unhappy tomorrow, it's unlikely to keep making us happy the day after that. The principle of *hedonic adaptation* is as straightforward as it is difficult to avoid. Simply stated, for most of us, most attachments have the power to make us happy—or happier—only temporarily.[7] Getting what we want, in other words, is like chewing a piece of gum. It tastes sweet at first, but eventually the flavor fades.

"Except for most people, it fades slowly," Ash said. "With Patrick, it fades the minute he pops it in his mouth. Why would that be?"

"I think it's just what we're saying: When he finds that getting what he wants doesn't turn him into a happier person, he thinks the problem is that he just hasn't found the *right* thing to want. He doesn't realize he's nursing this open wound, this inability to find *any* of his accomplishments meaningful. So he goes immediately back to the trough, trying to make himself happy by accomplishing something else. He never has a chance to feel joy because he turns his attention away from the things he accomplishes the moment he accomplishes them."

Feeling that we're not happy enough—or that we could be happier than we are—likely explains why we sometimes *all* fall into the world of Hunger and become convinced that the entirety of our happiness depends on getting something we want. I reminded Ash of my own reaction to the success we'd had in optioning a television pilot to DreamWorks Television a few years earlier. We'd both been stunned by the studio's interest in our script and by the possibility that we might—dared we imagine it?—have the opportunity to write and produce a television series. For a period of several months that was all I thought about, all I dreamed about, all I worried about being denied—so much so that I couldn't sleep. I constructed an entire herd of rationalizations to justify not only why I wanted it to happen but also the actions I took to make it happen. I even rationalized actions I knew had hurt others—more actions than I care to admit—convincing me that the power of the world of Hunger to obliterate moral concerns can't be overestimated.

"Because we don't enter the world of Hunger just by wanting something," I reminded Ash. "We enter the world of Hunger by becoming obsessed with what we want. When what we *want* becomes something we think we *need*."

"So what are you saying I should do?" Patrick asked Ash. "Just . . . stop wanting things?"

"I'm not sure how you could do that even if you wanted to," Ash replied with a shake of his head. "Wanting things isn't the problem. Wanting things is what makes life interesting. Wanting things is why people raise children and take care of the sick and write books and paint paintings and do everything else in life