

# **GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD**

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*How to Stop Negative Thoughts and Emotions and Live a Positive Productive Life.*

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# What's in Your Head?

There's only one person standing in your way and, spoiler alert, it's you. Don't let this be the case anymore, you don't want to be wishing you'd been able to speak to your past self (this present self) and tell it to stop worrying or to take more chances. You want to look back at the person you were and thank them for the incredible life they lived.

It all starts with you, right now.

There are stories in our heads about how things are supposed to go and what we need to do. Expectations are piling up from everyone surrounding us, stacking their judgments on top of your own personal judgments, creating a mountain of self-esteem crushing thoughts and behaviors waiting to be sifted through.

Do we really know what's happening outside of our heads anymore? In our bodies? In our everyday lives? In our relationships? The answer is most likely no, or maybe maximum 50% yes but the point is it's not a 100% yes.

We rarely know what is going on around us anymore because of the blinders we put in our brains so that we can focus solely on our 'productive' lives of constant work, heading for an inevitable burn out because of our overachieving tendencies. The questions posed in the previous paragraph should act as your beginner's guide; if you answered no to any of those questions, read on. If you answered yes to those questions, you must read on because there is a big chance you were not exactly transparent with yourself.

In this book we will describe tried and true methods for setting goals, forming habits, designing routines, and scheduling weeks to stop negative thoughts and become a more effective version of yourself. We discuss the importance of self-care and why you should include meditation in both your self-care and daily routines to reduce stress and create mindfulness. Finally, we will move into the interdependent aspect of the work addressing how the state of our minds can influence our relationships, how to reach out when you might need help, and how to ultimately let go of what is no longer serving you.

There is a lot to learn so take your time, there's no rush. Please feel free to use this as a guide in life, a reference that you can return to when needed.

# **Chapter 1: How to Go After What You Want**

When something does not cause us noticeable harm, we believe it is okay to continue doing it. For this reason, poor habits, routines, and chronic stress go seemingly unnoticed until we are facing more severe concerns regarding our health and wellbeing.

The danger of a poor routine is that you do not notice it. For example, doing the dishes after dinner: if you are not in the habit of doing them, they will pile up until the next morning. The next morning, you may not have time or may have other plans about how to spend your morning so the dishes pile up again until dinner. You then end up making dinner with limited dishes or you have to take time to wash a pan just to dirty it again. Not initially doing the dishes did not cause you any harm but now it will probably cause considerable frustration.

A routine is a series of actions that you usually perform, often starting around the same time every day. It is a set of activities that have become your norm. In society we can usually pinpoint what has become a norm and there are a lot of cases where societal norms influence people's lives negatively. It is the same with our personal, daily norms; they have the power to help or hinder our growth as a person.

You stress about following a routine and there are steps that you can take to ensure that designing a routine does not add to your list of worries. Similarly as you form a habit, forming a routine takes time, patience, and practice to become the norm of your life. You should have routines that you are proud of for almost every aspect of your life such as waking up, going to bed, starting your workday, spending time with family, and more. Chances are, if you brush your teeth, wash your face, and change into pajamas, you already have a bedtime routine but there are aspects of that routine that you can improve. The same can be said with every other action you take throughout your day.

## **Routines and Our Biology**

Living life without routines would be like traveling to a new destination every day without a roadmap. Routines are programmed into our physiology, there's a cycle and rhythm to everything our bodies do; hormone releases, sleep/wake and hunger cycles, digestion, stress responses, and more. Whether this routine is healthy is what should be of concern.

Intentionally setting a routine that positively influences your life and works to make you a more effective and efficient human being should be a goal of yours. A positive routine is something that you must plan, it won't just fall into your lap and adapt to your changing schedule.

Developing a routine can help reduce the feelings of stress and anxiety that you experience every day. Being human means that you will experience stress and anxiety about a significant number of the decisions you have to make in a day. You cannot avoid this but there are ways to reduce the volume and frequency of these feelings. Your unconscious mind is a stronger influence on how you live your life than you may think. It can quickly get filled up with lists, tasks, favors, expectations, and all of the items on your ever-increasing to-do list. Whether you notice it or not, these items are always sitting in the back of your mind, rent-free. By developing a routine, your unconscious mind can let go of some of those items because it now knows that they will get done.

Routines can also help reduce anxiety and stress by creating effective schedules that include time for unavoidable things such as thinking time and unexpected daily occurrences. If you know that you are someone who overthinks often, scheduling time for this 'task' can remove the negative, guilty feeling about wasting time doing it. After all, a routine that works for you will look very different from someone else's and if what keeps you most productive is scheduling time to worry, give yourself that time.

Routines are especially important during stressful times. Amidst the uncertainty, they provide some stability to your day and a break from worry and decision-making. With a lack of structure to your day, feelings of distress can be exacerbated and you are more likely to focus on the negative aspects of life, such as the root cause of this stressful period in your life. Routines and habits are very similar and one can be useful in establishing the other. Habits such as waking up early, exercising before work, and drinking two liters of water a day can quickly become your routine and with repetition, they will.

With either one takes time and effort to commit to your life and it is important that you find what works best for you. Adding some structure to your day can also ensure that you prioritize the most important tasks first. A routine can help you determine what time of the day is your most productive. This can be very powerful knowledge, especially if there are tasks that you dread at work or in life. Do the tasks you dread the most, or the toughest ones during the times that you know you are most productive and use the less productive time to do tasks that you like or that come naturally to you.

Often people without a routine suffer from feelings of stress, poor sleep, poor eating, and poor physical condition and use of time. Having a routine can decrease a phenomenon called decision fatigue. As with anything, too much fatigue can be bad and individuals who are responsible for making important decisions in their lives should be especially aware of this. Decision fatigue occurs naturally throughout the day and with the more



decisions you make. The time of day and how you are feeling can impact your decision-making significantly. The best time to make decisions is in the morning and after breaks, when you have given your brain time to refresh. Small decisions that you make at work, that may seemingly go unnoticed and be uninfluential, can be affected if you take more breaks throughout your work day. These breaks can be included in your daily routine to ensure you are always making effective decisions. Some further tips for making effective decisions are:

- **Make your most important decisions within the first three hours of your day.** A lot of people will waste this productive and creative decision-making on what outfit to wear or what to eat for breakfast.
- **Form habits that reduce decision-making.** Continuing on from the first point, don't waste your energy on choosing outfits or deciding on breakfast. Instead, limit your breakfast option to something enjoyable and nutritious. Even small decisions like morning coffee orders should be habitual for two reasons. One, it reduces the number of decisions you have to make in a day and two, on the days you order something else, it feels like a treat. Set your outfit out the night before or seek out inspiration ahead of time.
- **Take frequent breaks for a fresher mind.** Structure breaks into your daily work/school habits.

## Life-Crafting

Creating a routine that becomes your norm requires scheduling. We have been using the comparison of forming a habit and routine and each takes time and repetition. In order to make sure you have the appropriate time for your routines, you have to craft your life around them. Scheduling your week can ensure that you are not stumbling your way through, anxiously awaiting the next day to reset and start over.

The practice of scheduling your entire week instead of scheduling your day can be more effective in ensuring that you make adequate time for everything you need to do. As you look at your entire week, you may notice that there are some less important tasks that you can push over into another week. This also allows you to really prioritize your scheduled items. We have all experienced the regret of saying yes to something we knew deep down we probably should not have. Looking at your entire week can help remind you why it is important to say no to the things you truly cannot take on.

To be effective in your routine, you want to make sure that you are always accomplishing tasks that are important but not yet urgent. Once they become urgent, this means that there was some level of procrastination during the week and if you focus on the tasks that are not important, they are probably the source of this procrastination.

An effective way to plan your week is to reserve time on Sunday evening, or another day that works for you and signifies the end of your week. Scheduling your week should be based on both your short- and long-term goals. Using your long-term goals, you will be able to establish daily goals that you should accomplish to continue working toward the bigger goal. Once you have clearly established your goals, prioritizing your weekly tasks will become easier. Some suggestions for scheduling are:

1. **Know your goals.** This is important for almost every aspect of life and when you schedule your week around them you are ensuring that you make time for the things that you value. Aligning your schedule with your values can make it increasingly simple to stick to them.
2. **Schedule everything in a routine planner.** You can use a paper or online planner, notebook, calendar, or anything that works best for you. Schedule everything—even time to think, text, talk, and eat. Make sure you write your goals down somewhere visible— your planner is always a great place to keep them visible and keep the motivation high.
3. **Plan your weekends.** Your routine should not shift too much from the work week to the weekends. Evidently, you will fill your day with items that isn't work but your schedule should generally still have structure to your days, even if that structure is Netflix and lying on the couch. Waking up and going to bed at the same time on weekends is helpful to maintain your sleep/wake schedule, but not every weekend will allow this. After all, this is usually your time to do what you cannot during the week and staying up later might be how you choose to celebrate that freedom.
4. **Include a routine checklist in your daily routine.** Until your routine is your norm, it will take more conscious thought to go through the motions and a routine checklist can help with this. As you attempt to keep your calendar less overwhelming, checklists can add detail to each task that you schedule into your days.
5. **Always add buffer time.** Make allowances for the time it takes to travel, eat breakfast, shower, and other activities.
6. **Account for unplanned time.** Set aside time to just be present. This time can be used for other items on your list that may have gotten bumped for whatever reason but make this time visible in your planner. This can help ease some of the worry in case something goes wrong because you know you have time to handle it.

When you decide to plan your schedule, consider using weekly planning. Imagine being told to paint a picture of a flower but only getting a photo of one petal. You might feel nervous the entire time, wondering how you will draw the next petals. You do not need to stumble from day to day when you can schedule your routines to flow smoothly throughout the week.

However you decide to schedule your days (or weeks), the most effective points to keep in mind are:

- Constantly review your bigger plan and consider making a mission statement
- Make detailed lists of who you need to be and distinguish your roles in life
- Set your priorities right so you can adequately plan as these will most likely be your daily goals
- Formulate steps for action and try to keep your tasks important but non-urgent, and
- Make your schedule, even scheduling the small things and ‘common-sense’ things.

### ***Mission Statements***

A mission statement can be an effective tool to keep you motivated and pointed in the right direction. You can think of a mission statement as your life's motto, consisting of two to five sentences that identify your purpose. They are crafted from your beliefs, values, and purposes. Having a personal mission statement can ensure that you are living up to your purpose every day and holding yourself accountable to a certain standard.

Making a mission statement should be a reflective process and you can revise it at any moment if there is a shift in your life. Your mission statement can be thought of as your compass, pointing you in the direction of your goals. It helps you say no to the things that do not serve your goals and it provides reasoning for your journey. A mission statement can ensure that you spend your time being effective and productive.

Your mission statement should be detailed, stating your goal and what you are going to do every day to achieve that goal, but it should also be concise. It will help you align your values with your vision in life so that every day you are heading in the right direction. You should keep your statement visible so you can refer to it when you need to.

If you are thinking that a mission statement sounds a little like setting a goal, let us clarify. A mission statement should be clear and concise, but you should leave the specifics for

the goal setting. A mission statement uses your values and beliefs to state your purpose in life. If your ultimate purpose in life is to own a restaurant, well then so be it, but that is probably not the case. Your goal might be to own your own restaurant, but your mission statement could be “to inspire my employees to do their best work and to support them in achieving their hopes and dreams by always being transparent”.

Start by identifying your values in life and the values that you would like to share with the world. Then, choose who you’re doing this for: family, friends, employees, children– you probably have a targeted group for your purpose. For example, if you are a coach, your mission statement might look like this: “to inspire my athletes every day to grow beyond sports and into better students, family members, friends, and community members by committing to always showing up with the right attitude”. This coach values inspiring his/her athletes and wants to help them grow into better people holistically. The mission statement states that to do this, the right attitude needs to be brought to every interaction with the athletes so now, the coach has a measurable component to help track if he/she is living up to the mission statement.

Mission statements are often used to keep people and companies on board with their vision. Families can also make mission statements together, setting a standard for how to treat each other and guests in their home, defining everyone's roles in the family, and how to support each other in these roles.

## **Daily Routines**

“You have a choice in life. You can either live on-purpose, according to a plan you’ve set. Or you can live by accident, reacting to the demands of others.” – Michael Hyatt

### ***Family Routines***

Being effective in your relationships is extremely important in maintaining strong and healthy ones. As Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, puts it, you should aim for efficiency in routine and scheduling but always effectiveness with people (2020). If you try to be efficient with people, you will never be effective in your relationships. Scheduling family time and maintaining household routines can ensure that you will all have guilt free, focused time to spend with each other.

Some families call their special routines such as game nights, Sunday dinners, or other family events, rituals. Whatever you call it, scheduling time for family should always be a part of your routine. It will make sure that you can show up 100% for them every time you're around them, which everyone will appreciate.

Your family might have a daily routine that includes breakfast together before everyone heads off in their respective directions and then, at the end of the day, dinner together, where you share stories and lessons from your days. It might also seem that you can only eat together on the weekends because of hectic schedules but either way, make a point of developing a routine. Whatever your routine may look like, a good daily routine will be well planned, regular, and predictable.

When raising children, there is much you can do to teach them how to handle everyday stress at a young age and reducing stress in their environment can be beneficial. By developing a routine for your family and child you are creating a sense of safety and belonging in your home. A routine can also be developed to give your children responsibility, helping them build healthy habits for the future.

Nothing says "I love you" in a relationship more than showing that you trust someone, so giving your children their own responsibilities can strengthen your relationship. This is often done by giving them chores but it can be done in other ways such as allowing them to choose dinner, or the game for game night, and to pick out their clothes.

Toddlers and preschoolers will need a little more to fill their days without school so make a routine out of getting ready in the morning, eating meals, spending time playing and talking together, reading books, and having quiet time before bed. As they get to school-age, getting ready in the morning and before bed, doing after-school activities and homework, and doing chores can make up their routines. Lastly, it is a little more difficult to keep teenagers in a positive routine because of the natural tendency of their age group to start rebelling against structure, but as children get older, teach them the importance of routine and how reducing stress in their lives can be helpful for increasing productivity, and mood and energy levels. The chores may increase a little, as will their homework and possibly after-school activities. At this age, scheduling family time and relaxing time becomes important as their autonomy will continue to grow.

### ***Relationship Routines***

A failed relationship can rarely be blamed on two people not having enough love for each other; instead, it is not showing this love for each other as they used to. This can often be caused by letting stress and anxiety rule your life. We see how routines can help our

personal and professional lives as well as our family lives and now it is time to consider how routines can be beneficial in romantic relationships. In the most basic form, a routine is simply doing things intentionally. The best way to maintain a healthy relationship is to be intentional and effective with your actions with your significant other.

Every relationship in your life is a choice, even friendships, and these relationships can help or hinder your daily wellbeing, so make sure they are good ones. Some ways that you can build a routine in your relationship are:

1. **Take time to say goodbye when leaving for the day.** Set aside three to five minutes in your morning routine to properly say goodbye. Don't overlook small gestures like a kiss or hug goodbye, they can be a lot more meaningful when done with intention.
2. **Create little rituals in your day.** Leaving notes, texting a joke when you have a break at work or calling during your commute are all little actions that can help you and your partner to bond.
3. **Include them in your schedule.** Scheduling date nights or just time to talk and connect with one another is important, especially if you are two very busy people.
4. **Sync your bedtime routines.** If it's possible, do some bonding during your bedtime rituals. Pillow talk often increases the level of respect and open-mindedness of the communication in a relationship because this is a space that only the two of you share.

### ***Exercise Routines***

Moving your body should be included in your daily routine; whether that means doing a full workout, starting your day off with a walk or ending the day with some yoga, the benefits of moving your body are unmatched. Not only are you improving your physical health and wellness, you are giving your mind a chance to reset itself. Exercising improves mood and energy levels and as we've learned, it improves sleep hygiene by keeping the circadian rhythm balanced.

Like making your bed, exercising can be seen as a little achievement every day. Having a routine can allow you to explore new ways of moving your body and keep you on track for any fitness goals you may have. An exercise routine can be planned while you're planning your upcoming week. This will allow you to schedule guilt free time to dedicate to some sort of fitness activity.

If the weather permits, combining your exercise with some time outdoors can free up some extra time. Getting outside in the sunlight every morning can be very beneficial for your sleep schedule, mood, and energy levels for the day ahead. You can choose to walk, jog, cycle or do yoga outside in the morning to wake up your mind and body. Scheduling fitness classes can be a great way to get started with an exercise routine, especially if you are new to working out. By scheduling a class, you are more likely to follow through on the commitment rather than cancelling, so this can help with motivation as well.

## **The Importance of Breakfast**

There's a reason why breakfast is called the most important meal of the day. An important part of your morning routine is getting a good breakfast because if nothing else goes right in the day, at least you started it with a meal that makes you feel happy and energized. People consider that eating nutritiously is an accomplishment and by eating breakfast you have achieved this goal and set the tone for the rest of the day. After a nutritious and satisfying meal, you're less likely to want to add a donut to your coffee order, but if you do, that's okay. You will always have days like this and the quickest way to resent yourself is to constantly tell yourself no.

In addition to eating a well-balanced diet, your brain will still need a little energy kick in the morning to make sure that it's ready to perform optimally. Your brain relies almost entirely on glucose so restoring your glycogen levels in the morning is important and will ensure your metabolism can keep up for the rest of the day. Eating within one to two hours of waking up can prevent substantial fluctuations in blood glucose levels and can help maintain weight and energy levels. Insulin is a hormone that is released in response to your blood glucose levels and it can be detrimental to your overall health if your insulin stops responding the way it should.

### ***Reasons to Include Breakfast in Your Day***

The foods that are typically eaten for breakfast are usually the highest in nutrients including folate, calcium, iron, vitamin B, and fiber. Later, we discuss mood-boosting foods, and you will notice that a lot of these nutrients are also associated with boosting and stabilizing the mood. If you are not convinced of the age-old saying that breakfast is the most important meal of the day yet, here are 10 reasons why you should prioritize this meal in your daily routine:

1. **Boost brain functioning:** After fasting for an extended period of time, your brain needs a little boost from a fresh supply of glucose. Without it, you may experience difficulty processing new information.
2. **Nutrient rich:** As mentioned, a lot of typical breakfast foods are nutrient dense and contain some nutrients that your body can only gain through food.
3. **Heart health:** Breakfast eaters tend to get more fiber in their diets and less fat which can lead to less overeating and less snacking between meals. Those who skip breakfast tend to have higher cholesterol levels, being a major risk for heart disease. There's a reason why most breakfast cereals advertise being heart healthy.
4. **Efficient metabolism:** Eating a good breakfast will likely lead to a reduction in meal size as the day continues, ending with a smaller dinner. The time of the day that you consume certain foods like fatty foods matters. Eating earlier and eating these foods earlier can ensure that your metabolism is working efficiently.
5. **Avoid disordered eating:** Skipping breakfast is a typical practice of someone who is trying to lose weight and this is considered a disordered eating pattern. Breakfast is necessary to jump start your body's functioning and pushing it further back in the day can delay a lot of necessary processes and lower your overall nutrient intake.
6. **Health immune system:** Keeping the body fueled and taking in the required amount of nutrients can boost antiviral immune cells in the body.
7. **Clear up your skin:** Eggs, one of the most popular breakfast foods, can work magic on your skin. Eggs contain nutrients that help preserve the elasticity in your skin and protect the skin cells from damage. One egg a day can go a long way.
8. **Heal your emotional relationship with food:** By eating breakfast, you're setting the tone for the rest of the day.
9. **Stable energy levels:** We discussed earlier how your brain needs glucose to function; depriving your body of energy in the morning can lead to a day of mental and physical fatigue.
10. **Increased longevity:** Making breakfast a habit can reduce the chances of developing a different habit, usually a fatal one such as smoking. The more you load up on healthy habits, the less room you have to include negative ones in your day. Like a tool belt, there are only so many spots for your tools; make them useful ones or you will not be able to get the job done effectively in the end.



## **Chapter 2: Self-Care is Not Selfish**

We are in just as much of a relationship with ourselves as we are with anyone else. Arguably, this is the most important relationship that you will have during your entire life because without a doubt, you begin and end in this world with one person and that is yourself. Who would want to spend an entire lifetime with someone who does not treat them well, ignores their needs, and takes actions that harm them? Virtually no one.

At the most basic level, self-care is about maintaining your relationship with yourself. There are long lists of actions that you can take to practice self-care aside from the clichéd bubble baths and face masks that may come to mind when you hear the word. Ultimately, your relationship with yourself will influence your relationships with others, from the way you treat others to the way you allow others to treat you.

Self-care practices are those that you do deliberately to benefit your health. These may include refraining from checking emails after your nightly routine or saying no to a night out because you know your sleep may suffer from it. By the way, neither of those practices are selfish. Saying no is always an option, especially when it means that your health and wellbeing won't suffer from it. Besides, there should be an unwritten rule about not responding to emails after a certain hour—should you really expect a reply to something you sent after 6 p.m. at the latest? Although, in this age of technology and never really unplugging, it is surprising what people expect of you. Self-care practices include letting go of your perceived obligations. In the above cases, you're not obligated to go out for the night or answer an email immediately since, if it were urgent, you would most likely receive a call.

One indicator that you may not be feeling your best is when you allow the daily practices and activities that focus on your relationship with yourself to slip. Skipping hygiene steps, leaving clothes on the floor, dishes in the sink and elsewhere, are all indicators that you may have stopped prioritizing yourself. Again, the way you feel on the inside will ultimately determine how you feel on the outside. Put your best foot forward by taking care of yourself; after all, how are you supposed to have the best foot if you are not taking care of yourself?

### **Hygiene**

For some, practicing good hygiene may be something they have never questioned as it has always been second nature, regardless of what is going on in their lives and in their minds. For others however, even the hygiene practices that are regarded as basic can feel like climbing a mountain. These following hygiene practices that may be considered basic can also be considered self-care practices and they can significantly influence your confidence and self-esteem, two feelings that many people struggle with.

## ***Smile Big***

Your teeth are the first features that people notice about one another. Instead of “putting your best foot forward”, the expression should be “put your best smile forward”, or something similar. Have you ever been rushed out of the house and forgotten to brush your teeth and for the rest of the day you talk in ways that you think would limit the chances of someone smelling your possibly bad breath? How about after a first date, when you’re standing at your doorstep, thinking about the clichéd first date kiss, what is the first thought that pops into your brain? You’re most likely wondering if you have bad breath. It’s a common concern.

Brushing your teeth and maintaining good oral health should always be a part of your daily routine, morning and night. Especially in the morning, you should consider this as something you do for yourself. Ladies: think of it as putting on mascara, you’ve elevated your confidence by taking two extra minutes out of your morning. Brushing your teeth in the morning will ensure that you don’t have to worry about how loud or closely you speak throughout the day, eliminating one small worry that could increase your stress level.

Maintaining your oral health will also save you money and not contribute another worry in the form of a dental bill. When it comes to your teeth, and almost every other aspect of your health, prevention is cheaper than a cure. By just brushing your teeth twice a day, you are significantly reducing your chances of getting cavities and gum disease and other diseases as well. Did you know that gum disease makes it more difficult for your body to regulate glucose levels and could lead to diabetes and impact the health of a future child? If just brushing your teeth can have such an effect, imagine what adding floss and a mouth rinse could do. You might want to omit this point when preaching to your kids about the importance of brushing their teeth, but it does keep you kissable and confident and, after all, you never know where you might meet someone you find interesting.

Brushing your teeth can be a helpful indicator of your mental health and the lack of a daily routine. If you find that you are running out of time in the morning and brushing your teeth almost takes the backseat every day, it is time to invest in a new morning routine. Wake up a few minutes earlier and put brushing your teeth closer to the top of the list

when getting ready. Skipping self-care practices that are typically referred to as basic in your daily life can be an indicator that you need to check in on your mental health. There might be something weighing on you that you don't realize, causing you feelings of low energy, depression, and low motivation. Check-in with yourself and try to pinpoint what could be causing this. Once you've determined the issue, take small steps to eliminate it and reintroduce these self-care steps into your life.

## ***Hair Care***

Consider your hair as an expression of yourself. Many people use it this way, dying and styling it in different ways depending on their moods, outfits, activities, and schedule. A very small number of people are happy with their hair; based on the number of hair care products and the price of a good hair stylist, this should be believable. Your hair can be another indicator of your mental health as it very often reflects what you think about yourself and how much time you dedicate to yourself. When you have a positive relationship with yourself, you will most likely want to model that relationship anyway you can, including through your hair.

When you have fallen into a rut instead of sticking to routines, you probably do not have much free time to do your hair. Including adequate time in your routine to style your hair every morning can improve confidence in the same way that brushing your teeth can. It is a simple task that you can do to elevate your appearance and boost your self-esteem. Additionally, practicing hair care in your weekly routines can maintain its health and keep you feeling satisfied with how it looks.

Spending the day stressing about things that you can control like bad breath, yellow teeth, messy or greasy hair, and even the outfit that you're wearing are all contributors to stress and anxiety that can lead to a decrease in your mental health and wellbeing. Individuals who take care of their hair are commonly also individuals who have additional healthy habits like drinking enough water, taking multivitamins, and overall physical health.

Never underestimate the power of a shower. Other than cleansing your body, it can also cleanse your mind. Believe it or not, there are meditation routines that you can practice while showering. Showering is linked to improving mental health and wellbeing and the benefits you gain, depending on the temperature of the shower. A warm shower can reduce feelings of depression and anxiety because warm water will naturally relax the muscles. A cold shower has been linked with improving productivity by increasing energy and alertness. Overall, a shower can significantly improve your confidence levels during the day because ultimately, if you look good, you will feel good. We can thank hormone

releases that are associated with positive self-image for the boost in our mood and confidence.

## **Sleep Hygiene**

Quality of life can be directly influenced by your sleep hygiene. Like other hygiene practices, sleep hygiene refers to how you prepare yourself for a good night's rest. Sleep hygiene includes more than just what you do before you are about to hit the pillow. The environment that you sleep in, most commonly a bedroom, and your daily routine are two influences on your sleep hygiene. A lack of preparation for sleep could contribute considerably to sleep problems.

### ***Preparation Starts Early***

Preparing for a good night's sleep starts the minute you wake up. This is not to be added to your list of worries, but these practices should be included in your daily routine. Practices that lead to mental and physical health and well-being often overlap, adding to the list of reasons why they should be included in your routine.

When making your weekly schedule, set wake up and sleep times and keep them consistent throughout the week. This will ensure that your internal clock, called your circadian rhythm will maintain balance. It is important to keep in mind that balancing your sleep/wake cycle starts from the beginning of your day. Exposing yourself to early morning sunlight tells your body that it is time to wake up and the time your body is most responsive to sunlight is 6:00-8:30 a.m. If it is not possible to expose yourself to sunlight for at least one half hour, you should consider getting an artificial sunlight lamp to include in your day. This can be beneficial for individuals who experience seasonal affective disorder and seasonal depression.

Your diet can play a huge role in influencing your sleep hygiene. What you eat and when, controls the hormone levels associated with your mood and energy. Along with your nutrition, your meal size should decrease throughout the day, starting with a substantial breakfast, moderate lunch, and a light dinner. Avoiding processed and refined foods can throw off your hormone balance significantly and interrupt your sleep. Your fluid intake should also decrease throughout the day with most of it ending around dinner time.

Having to use the washroom in the middle of the night is a sleep disruption that I know most people could live without.

Your entire caffeine intake should end before the early afternoon, ideally by 12:00-2:00 p.m. For some this might seem impossible because of afternoon fatigue, but once you have arranged your sleep schedule, you will find you do not need that afternoon coffee as much as you once did. Alcohol can also influence the quality of your sleep. It might seem that it relaxes you, especially after a long, stressful day, but it is still considered a stimulant.

There are some people that swear by naps and cannot go a day without them. This is not necessarily a bad habit, if they are doing it correctly. When done incorrectly, napping can have the opposite effect that we want and lead to a restless night where sleep seems impossible. If you are one of the people who needs to include a nap into your routine, do just that, make time for a nap. Schedule your nap in the middle of the afternoon and keep it under 30 minutes. Any longer and you increase the chances of not getting out of bed for an increased length of time and throwing off your entire routine.

### ***Exercise***

Getting regular exercise can contribute to a good night's sleep and doing so earlier in the day can be more beneficial than waiting for the end of it. Exercising elevates your body temperature and for an ideal sleep, your body temperature should be low. Naturally, your body temperature will decrease throughout the day, but exercising can raise it, making it more difficult to fall asleep. Your body temperature takes four to five hours after exercise to decrease so lining up your exercise time with your sleep schedule can be useful. Late afternoon and early evening exercise have been determined to be the best for increasing your chances of getting a good night's sleep. If you wait until too close to your bedtime to exercise, your body temperature will not decrease by the time you are trying to fall asleep, leaving you feeling restless and cutting into your hours of sleep.

Cardio is the best exercise to help improve your sleep and doing this in the late afternoon or early evening can be the most beneficial at ensuring your body temperature decreases at the time that it would naturally do so. Some people like to work out in the morning, especially for a harder workout that may cause you to sweat more as you get ready for the rest of the day. Whatever you do, try to include some type of aerobic exercise in your afternoon. This can be a walk, jogging, cycling or swimming, anything that raises your heart rate for about 15-20 minutes.

## ***Control Your Environment***

Your bedroom should be a space that makes you feel calm. This means limiting the clutter, mess, laundry, and anything else that causes you to become distracted. Limiting artificial light in your room can ensure that you get a good quality sleep. It is especially important to limit blue light because it can delay the moment of falling asleep, reduce REM sleep and push back the circadian clock so that you wake up later the next morning. Blue light can also suppress the production of melatonin. White noises and fans are popular ways to decrease distracting sounds in your environment.

## ***Bedtime Rituals***

In the same way that you have a morning routine, you should also have a bedtime one. The first step to achieving this is to have a set bedtime so that you know when to begin your bedtime rituals. The most important thing to remember when developing any sort of routine or ritual is that different things work for different people. It would be so much simpler if there was a set of steps that worked for everyone to get a good night's sleep or have a productive morning but unfortunately, we must each figure this out for ourselves. Regardless, there are relatively universal steps you can take to make a bedtime routine that will leave you feeling rested and ready to take on each day.

One of the most important practices to start including in your bedtime routine is taking the necessary time to unwind before bed. Ideally, this is time away from anything that may stress you out. If you bring emotions with you to bed, anything that you did not deal with during the day can leave you feeling restless and make it difficult to fall asleep. Anxious thoughts can produce adrenaline and cortisol in the body that may activate your fight or flight response. Try falling asleep while you are confronted by a bear. . . really, this will make it very difficult to fall asleep.

A good way to relax your mind is to engage it in a passive way. Have you ever been reading a book and you feel your eyes begin to shut? This is not necessarily a problem with the book, your brain is just turning itself off in some way. Reading can be a great way to relax your mind before going to bed; just don't pick up a page turner or anything that may make you emotional.

Limiting screen time is another important practice to include in your bedtime routine. This is partly because of the impact that blue light has on your body's sleep cycle but also because most of the time our screens also come with other distractions. Our smartphones,

laptops, and tablets are most likely synced up with our social media and email accounts, giving them access at all times. When you are trying to relax your mind for bed, this can be an issue. Everyone's body will respond differently to blue light and there are often features on your devices to turn them onto night mode. If that is the case or you are not as sensitive to its effects, you can feel less guilty about using your devices during your nightly routine; just don't get caught up in responding to emails at 10:00 p.m.

Various practices that people may include in their bedtime rituals are listening to music, meditating, or praying, a warm bath, or watching TV. When it comes to watching TV, keep it a good distance from your bed so the light does not harm you and try not to fall asleep while watching as this will just disrupt your sleep later in the night. Some people may find that hunger keeps them up at night; if this is the case, snack lightly. Avoid foods that make you feel uncomfortable and reach for a snack rich in magnesium and calcium. These vitamins have a calming effect on the nerves and essentially, with your bedtime ritual, you should choose practices that make you feel calm and relaxed.

Including a bedtime ritual in your daily schedule will build a routine that promotes sleep hygiene. Even the things you do in the morning can have an impact on your quality of sleep so make sure that you are aware of this when making your daily routine. The most important thing to remember when making a bedtime ritual, and any type of routine, is that you probably won't get it right the first time. Take the time to test out your routines, adjusting them as needed.

### ***Trouble Sleeping?***

The reflexes that we typically have when we cannot sleep such as looking at the time and trying to force yourself to sleep are counterintuitive to what can actually help us fall asleep. If you're having trouble falling asleep, instead of scrolling through social media into the late hours of the night or binge-watching Netflix until the birds start chirping, get out of bed. Do an activity that calms you such as yoga, stretching, reading, or meditating. Eventually, your body will get tired and you will feel ready to sleep again and hopefully it is successful this time. Getting frustrated, stressed, or anxious about not being able to sleep and how it might impact the next day will only increase the chances of activating your stress response. Instead of calming your body and relaxing your mind, you end up winding it back up again. When this happens, it is difficult to control our thoughts but it is important to do so.

If you are someone who often experiences insomnia, a bedtime ritual can be especially helpful. Try following these steps intentionally throughout your day and see if it makes a difference:

1. **Take melatonin two hours before bed.** Melatonin is a natural hormone that signals to your body that it is time to sleep. When starting any new vitamin, you should consult your healthcare provider.
2. **Eliminate blue light before bed.** This includes your smartphone, laptops, tablets and other devices that give off blue light. Try using blue light glass for the second half of your day, especially if you work with a computer for a significant portion of your day.
3. **Get in the sun soon after you wake up.** As we learned, this will help signal to your body that it is time to wake up, keeping your circadian rhythm balanced.
4. **Stick to a regular schedule.** Again, your body's internal clock will thank you in many ways for sticking to a routine and this is one of them.

## Making Your Bed

Making your bed is a task that many people have been told to do since they were young, making them slightly dread the thought of doing it now, just because our inner child is still rebelling. Our parents were right about this though because making your bed can have a significant impact on your day. By making your bed in the morning, you have chosen to control the narrative for the day. You are telling the world that you decided you are in charge today. Starting your day with one small task can lead you to do many other small tasks, and if you cannot do the small things right, you will not be able to do the big things right.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey starts with three habits that are all about oneself. This is because you cannot have interdependence without having independence. In the same fashion, you will not be effective in larger tasks requiring more dedication, if you cannot dedicate yourself to a small task. Each rock is made up of millions of little sand particles.

U.S. Navy Admiral William H. McRaven stresses the importance of making your bed because it means that you have accomplished the first task of the day. He also states “making your bed will also reinforce the fact that the little things in life matter” (Goalcast, 2017), reminding us of the importance that lies within the details of our actions and of our life. The earlier in the day that you complete productive tasks, the more quickly your day becomes a positive one. Accomplishing this one task can ensure that you go into the rest of the day with a productive and effective attitude. It’s the small tasks and the small successes that will give you momentum to complete larger tasks.



Living in a tidy and organized environment can also positively influence your mental health. When you have a space that you are proud of, you take that pride with you into your day and by leaving a tidy room every morning, you are bringing that positive feeling with you. Working and living in an organized, clutter-free environment is associated with improved focus, goal-setting skills, productivity, and lower levels of stress. Particularly for elderly people, living in a tidy environment has shown to improve or retain brain function, enhancing the overall quality of life.

If not for any other reason, making your bed in the morning gives you a comfy, warm and clean place to crawl into at the end of the day. This can feel like heaven after a particularly long and troubling day. Getting into a made bed is like receiving a hug from a good friend and by making your bed every morning, you will be guaranteed at least one hug every day.

## **Regain Confidence**

We have most likely all heard the saying “look good, feel good” and by now hopefully, it is clear why this saying is so common. Feeling good on the inside can radiate on the outside because you want to reflect how you’re feeling. Regain your confidence by taking pride in yourself because you are worth it.

Some ways to ensure that you are boosting your self-esteem through daily practices are:

- Learn new things as often as you can
- Dress in clothes that make you feel good about yourself
- Design your living space to reflect who you are and be proud of it
- Eat intuitively and make mealtimes special and
- Make use of your talents and abilities.

Some people may struggle with eating intuitively. In a society filled with constant cravings and instantly gratifying foods, it can be difficult to say no and you don’t necessarily have to. Eating intuitively just means listening to your body. This practice can increase body confidence because you are introducing fewer foods that make you feel uncomfortable. By allowing yourself the freedom to eat a donut when you want, you will not be constantly thinking about eating a donut. Attaching shame and guilt to foods can decrease your self-esteem every time you eat those foods or even want to eat those foods. This will add unnecessary negativity to your life.

## *Ageism*

As we age, losing self-confidence is very common. It is difficult not to do so when you can no longer do the things you used to. You can imagine that retired athletes may feel less capable of their abilities because they are no longer training for their sport, therefore are no longer in the physical shape to perform in the same way. Each of us is an athlete in the sport of life and although you are not in the same shape you once were, you do not need to give up trying.

One of the hardest things to overcome as you grow older is your own belief in the stereotype that old people cannot do certain things. Don't give into this mindset; some of your best days could still be ahead of you! Enhancing the self-esteem boosting practices in your daily routine can be increasingly beneficial to prevent the drop in self-esteem that occurs naturally as you age.

These practices are very similar to those that everyone should include in their daily routines, they just have new meaning:

- **Get dressed each day as if you're going to work.** Remember, look good, feel good. When we retire, it is natural that we may not wear the same clothing that we would wear to go to work, but that doesn't mean we should trade in the slacks for a pair of sweat shorts. By doing this, your opinion of yourself can quickly improve.
- **Learn something new.** You're never too old to pick up a new hobby and the chances of you being more accepting of yourself, even if you aren't the best at it, are much higher.
- **Challenge yourself physically.** You can do this with any form of exercise. Challenging yourself daily can improve confidence significantly because you are continually showing yourself that you can do more.
- **Stay connected.** Personal connections are directly associated with reducing the risk of depression and anxiety that accompany feelings of low self-esteem.

## *Mood Boosting Foods*

What we eat can have an influence on the way we feel, especially when it comes to confidence. Eating foods that make you feel good can make you feel more confident in your body than if you were to eat foods that usually make you feel uncomfortable. This is not only because physically you will feel better by avoiding bloating, gas, and digestion troubles, but certain foods have either positive or negative influences on your hormones.

Carbohydrates and protein are two categories of foods that can influence the way your brain receives serotonin, a hormone that stabilizes our mood and feelings of well-being. Carbs are broken down into glucose which is the primary source of energy for the brain so including healthy, complex carbs in your diet will maintain your energy levels throughout the day. Tryptophan is an essential amino acid that is not produced by your body and therefore you need to obtain it from your diet. This amino acid helps the body receive serotonin, thus making it essential in gaining the benefits of serotonin. Tryptophan also affects the body's ability to produce melatonin, so it can be beneficial in achieving the quality of sleep you need. High protein foods will contain tryptophan but foods that are particularly high in the amino acid are poultry, shrimp, eggs, elk, and crab.

You may prevent low moods by using foods that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids because of their effects on the neurotransmitter pathways in the brain. Omega-3s do not naturally occur in the body, despite their influence on the brain, making up about 18% of the brain's weight. Therefore, it is important to make sure that you are sourcing enough omega-3 fatty acids from your diet, especially as you age. Including a minimum of one portion of oily fish in your weekly meal plan can go a long way. Other foods that contain omega-3 are eggs, avocados, and cashews. Vitamin D is also found in a lot of the same foods and can help in regulating your mood. If you are finding it difficult to get enough vitamin D in your diet, taking supplements is a common solution.

Vitamin B, particularly vitamin B6 and B12 can affect your mood and energy levels. This vitamin is associated with a healthy breakdown of carbohydrates and proteins and it is essential in the creation of red blood cells in the body. Low levels of B12 specifically can cause fatigue, slow reasoning, paranoia, and depression. Common sources of vitamin B6 are chickpeas, yellowfin tuna, salmon, chicken breast and fortified cereals. Common sources of vitamin B12 are rainbow trout, swiss cheese, mozzarella cheese, and tuna in water.

## Chapter 3: What You Think and How to Tweak it

When we move into a new house, we typically wait until we're sure that we intend to stay there before we start doing renovations and redesigning it in a way that we like. After all, what is the point of investing time and energy into a home that you are not going to live in? An inevitable part about being human is the tendency to live in the past or future and not in the present. No matter where you live, your mind and body are your forever home and, in the same way as your house, why would you invest time and energy in it if you're busy living elsewhere?

Meditation is a practice of bringing us home, back to the present moment. Practicing meditation is not about becoming a new, better version of yourself but about unlocking the potential of your present self. Meditation is a skill and like riding a bike, it is something that needs to be learned and then practiced. The best part about meditation however, is that it is your own practice, and unlike riding a bike, there are a variety of ways to meditate. If you have ever been to a yoga class you may have heard the instructor say something along the lines of "this is your practice, do with it as your please but I will be here to guide you." They say this as an invitation for you to stay with what feels good for your body in the present moment and allow you to skip anything that you may want to avoid. Think of meditation in the same way—it is your practice and sometimes you will be up for more and different practices than at other times; it is called a practice for a reason and does not have to be perfect.

By inviting awareness into your life, you become more mindful in all aspects of your life. Mindfulness is what is referred to as the ability to be present, resting in the here and now and fully engaged with what you are doing or what is going on around you. Every human has the ability to be mindful; you just have to learn how to access it. Mindfulness can be cultivated at different times and in different places throughout the day whether you are walking, sitting, standing, exercising or being still in a meditation practice. It can be helpful to insert short mindful pauses into your everyday life and merge meditation with other activities in your daily routine.

There are numerous ways to meditate and like building a daily routine and weekly schedule, finding what works best for you is important. Understanding your dominant thought patterns and mindset can be beneficial in finding the right meditation practice. This will also open you up to what you want to achieve from a meditation practice.

## ***Why Meditate?***

Each form of meditation will have the same benefits. Some practices will enhance those benefits, but any form of meditation can be beneficial to your overall health and well-being. The only way to avoid receiving any benefits is by not practicing at all. The basic benefits of meditation come from the awareness that its practice brings to your life. This awareness can help you reflect on the way you react to internal and external influences in your life. On the long list of meditation benefits are:

- Enhanced focus and decision-making
- Ability to dial down emotions
- Enhanced feelings of calm and clarity
- Increased empathy and compassion
- Reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and pain
- Reduced stress related to lower cortisol
- Increased pain tolerance
- Reduced blood pressure
- Better quality of sleep, and
- Increased immunity.

In sum, the benefits of meditating can help you understand what you are feeling both physically and mentally by bringing you to awareness and acceptance. It is amazing what we can notice once we reduce the brain chatter and listen more clearly.

## **How Do You Reflect?**

The best way to discover the benefits of meditation is by starting and staying consistent with it. As we have discussed, the best way to stay consistent with something is by finding what works for you and fits into your life. You can do this effectively by determining the type of person you are, by determining the mindset and thought patterns that frequent your mind. In psychology, there are numerous thought patterns and mindsets that can be discussed. Those used in this book were chosen as a focus because of their ties with productivity and the ability to reframe them using meditation practices.

## ***Fixed vs. Growth Mindset***

An inquiry into the power of our beliefs and how they influence our conscious and subconscious mind can offer an understanding of what mindset is most dominant in our lives. The two mindsets are growth and fixed, which can influence how we feel about ourselves and how we treat those around us.

First and foremost, individuals with a growth mindset believe that attitudes and personality are not something you are born with and that they remain static throughout your life. Instead, they believe that it is something that you can grow. A growth mindset sees failures as lessons and thrives on the challenges that they encounter. The growth mindset is built from the belief that your basic self, qualities, beliefs, and values are all things that you can cultivate. You create your own passion and destiny through intentional actions and practices. You not only know what you want, but you are prepared to go after it.

Individuals with a growth mindset already hold a lot of positivity in their lives, but there are still ways in which routines and meditation can add to that positivity. Ensuring that the hunger for growth is focused and sustained is important. It is easy to fall down the rabbit hole and end up plateauing if you do not constantly feed your growth. Meditation is one way to continually check in on yourself, your needs and wants, so that you are able to prioritize those in your everyday life.

A fixed mindset is based on the belief that we inherit a set of character traits from birth that remain unchanged throughout our life. We cannot work toward achieving and improving intelligence and creativity. An interesting characteristic of the fixed mindset is that it measures worth and productivity against a set of external values that are also static. For example, the only way to become effective at something is to put in a certain number of hours rehearsing it or working toward it. It is more about the quality of those hours than the quantity. An individual with a fixed mindset will avoid risks and failure at all costs because they believe that failure is a measure of unintelligence.

Your mindset can influence your love life. Those with a fixed mindset expect their partner to hold them on a pedestal and center their lives around them. Those with the growth mindset would rather have a partner that helps them grow and improve, someone who is going to encourage them to be a better person and for whom they would do the same.

Relationships built on a fixed mindset can become toxic and often set an unprecedented standard of what “true love” is in today’s society, one in which small discrepancies can cause insecurity in the relationship and threaten the trust between the two partners.

Another common belief of a relationship built on a fixed mindset is that it should feel like work when it should not cause any negative stress in your life.

A relationship built on a growth mindset avoids placing blame on personality traits or imperfections of their partner and focuses on communication. This eliminates a lot of the negative emotions that can be associated with placing blame on someone. A relationship built on a growth mindset encourages personal growth in both partners, offering support and acceptance. Possibly the most important aspect though, is that the relationship is not causing additional stress in either of the partners' lives.

Understanding how one thing can quickly lead to another when it comes to your mindset, how your belief in your qualities can host your thoughts and actions and the view that you adopt for yourself affects the way you lead your life and is important. The interconnectivity between your view of yourself and your dominant thought patterns can have a profound influence on your productivity and effectiveness in life. Indeed, creating awareness in your life can help shift your mindset from fixed to one of growth. If you identify that you already inhabit a growth mindset, meditation can help you maintain it and to go further, giving you what you need for sustained growth. There's always more to give and more to learn.

### ***Thought Patterns and Productivity***

Our thought patterns can be categorized in four ways. Again, there are entire psychologies and philosophies based around these concepts, but the four dominant thought patterns we will discuss here are ones that you will be able to relate to, depending on what thoughts frequent your mind. These four thought patterns are presented so that you can use them as a guide for self-reflection. Understanding your dominant thought patterns and mindset can help you determine what you want to take away from your meditation practice.

The first thought pattern can be referred to as defeatist mode. Unfortunately, this mode is an inescapable part of being human and even the most positive, productive, effective individuals will spend some time in this mode but they just know how to find their way out. Defeatist mode is defined by worry, frustration, and fear about what might go wrong or living a lot of your life in the future. The wandering and subconscious mind often goes through negative and unproductive thought loops. A lot of emphasis is put on painful past events and personal setbacks that hold back someone in defeatist mode. Their sadness comes from dwelling on the should, could, and would have's of life. An individual in defeatist mode also struggles with using their imagination. Their idea factory is temporarily stalled, making it difficult to be creative and invite new ventures into their lives.

The second thought pattern is called sustainer mode and can be best described by being on autopilot. An individual in sustainer mode is concerned with living up to the status quo so they will go through the motions of life as they believe they should. Their work ethic is often characterized by multitasking and grinding out tasks, never really giving their full attention to one thing. Here, the voice of judgement is in charge making it common to ignore ideas or make excuses why we should not follow through on them. An individual in this mode is worried about how the people they care about will see them. The sustainer mode is also an inevitable part of life but long periods in this mode can be very damaging to our creativity and our confidence.

The third thought pattern is dreamer mode. This mode is more promising because you are on a track leading to higher performance than the other two modes. Dreamers are all about generating new ideas and their creativity and imagination are constantly flowing. When you are in this mode, it is helpful to determine how you feel and what you're doing when you generate the most ideas. This could be getting outside or spending time with old friends that stimulate great conversation, or meditating. Whatever it is, make sure you take note of it in order to continue generating creativity when times get tough. If you were to take an MRI of an individual's brain in dreamer mode, the pleasure center would be lit up. There are often frequent dopamine rushes associated with being in dreamer mode indicating that your mood will most likely be very high in dreamer mode. The only task that dreamers may have difficulty with is putting these ideas in motion because their idea factory is so active. This does not mean it is impossible, and being able to access your dreamer mode can be extremely beneficial, especially when faced with tasks that require creative problem-solving.

The last dominant thought pattern that we will discuss is opportunity mode. Just from hearing the name, it might be evident why this mode is at the top of the list or the desired thought pattern. An individual in opportunity mode can build on dreamer mode and essentially make their dreams come true. Their idea factories are working like well-oiled machines, producing feasible ideas that you then turn into realities. Character traits of opportunists (as we'll call them) are confidence, positivity, can-do attitudes. They are the types who look at the glass half full and thrive off of optimism. Instead of dwelling on problems, they turn them into opportunities. Being in opportunity mode requires you to live in the present mode and be aware of yourself and what is going on around you. Without awareness, you won't be able to focus on the task at hand.

Using mindfulness, you can shift between modes, accessing each mode when appropriate. The first step is becoming aware of what mode you are in. This requires being mindful of yourself and how you act in certain situations. Since it can be easy to slip into the less productive modes (defeatist/sustainer), especially if you are experiencing a stressful time in your life, it is important to check up frequently. Taking any sort of action on an idea, even if it is one on your to-do list, can help alter a negative mindset by creating a sense of



calm. This can be helpful when switching out of a negative mindset like the defeatist and sustainer modes. Small tasks are small successes and small successes will always lead to bigger ones; it is important to get started and stay consistent. When switching out of sustainer mode, practicing gratitude can be helpful. For example, practice counting your blessings by making a list of 10-15 things that you are grateful for. After you've made this list, write down something that might be troubling you, no matter what it is. From there, come up with 10-15 solutions to this problem and be very creative with it. You will be exercising your creativity and allowing your dreamer mode to step in for a while, which will hopefully make your transition out of sustainer mode and into dreamer mode smoother.

## **Testing the Mirror**

### ***Passive vs. Active Meditation***

The Latin phrase, “Cogito ergo sum” meaning I think therefore I am, has become the predominant center of meditation in Western philosophy and meditation. This is commonly known as passive meditation, the meditation practices that we will discuss most are simpler and require less guidance than active meditation does. Passive observation is observing your thoughts, both internal and external, without mental reaction. The practice of meditation is to watch your thoughts come and go while focusing on keeping your attention in the present moment.

Beginner meditation practitioners often feel as if they are doing it incorrectly because they cannot quieten their minds. This is not exactly the purpose of meditation, especially at the beginning. Passive meditation is about acknowledging your mind wandering and bringing it back to the present moment. Similar to when you have trouble sleeping, trying to force your thoughts down only counteracts the calming effect meditation has on your mind.

Active meditation refers to combining meditation with active movements such as yoga postures and Tai Chi sequences. Practicing active meditation can help in clearing your mind of all other thoughts except for those in the present moment. It helps you feel the sensation of your body as it flows through movements, keeping your mind engaged.

## ***Mental Silence***

If we watch our mind long enough, the desire to explore its depths increases. Mental silence is exactly the name; its aim is to silence the mind and create stillness. Mental silence has a deeper history, offering greater improvements in lowering stress, depressive feelings, and anxiety levels. In opposition to the goal of mindfulness, the goal of a silent mind is often referred to as remaining like a piece of wood, denying thoughts. As a higher practice in Buddhist traditions, reaching a state of awakening is considered a goal state. Vago and Zeidan use the quote, “do not chase the past; do not invite the future; rest the awareness occurring now in a clear and nonconceptual state” (2016). Meditation here is not about creating awareness but about releasing any effort to self-reflect or acknowledge any thoughts at all; it is truly about letting go. By creating tranquility and stillness of the mind, it provides freedom from destructive types of emotion and cognition.

## **Play Around**

It will always take time to find the things that you enjoy doing in life. That is why as kids, our parents sign us up for every sport and activity possible, so that we have the opportunity to figure out what we like. As we grow older, the sports and activities that have stuck with us either continue or we let them go because of our schedules and the demand of our lives.

Meditation should not feel like a chore and if it does, that might mean you have not found the practice that speaks to you and your desires. Knowing what you want to get out of your meditation practice can help you choose one that is most associated with those desires. At the end of the day however, the benefits of each practice are all very similar.

Meditation can be a fun way to let your creative side reveal itself. For some this may naturally occur when practicing so you may want to keep a journal close by. Journaling can also be a great addition to any meditation practice whether you write down creative thoughts, or any thoughts or feelings you want to remember, or how the practice went. There is no need to stick to the same practice every day; playing around with a new one can be a source of excitement in your day, or week, if you choose to switch it up less often. Just remember, the only way to get the benefits is to start.

## ***Guided meditation***

For most beginners, this can be the simplest way to start practicing meditation. It might be a little difficult to just sit down and decide that you're going to meditate for five minutes. Using a guided meditation can teach you what to expect when meditating and how to bring your thoughts back to the present moment when you notice them wandering. Guided meditation will often allow you to sit with your thoughts for a moment and then let them go during the practice. This exercises your mind's ability to notice your thoughts and then let them go without forcing any specific action.

During guided meditation, you are led through the entire practice. During the practice you are usually asked to focus on something like your breathing related to introducing physical well-being, manifesting, and abundance into your life. Guided meditation can help you clarify physical, mental, and emotional challenges as it includes practices that will guide you through a specific meditation for each of those topics. Recalling mental and emotional challenges can help you work through the feeling of being stuck in whatever you might be struggling with. It is a good idea to include this practice in your schedule whenever you have time because it brings the active mind to a focus.

The mention of manifesting came up in the discussion on guided meditation and to clarify, manifestation can also be a helpful meditation practice. Some guided meditations may include it in their practices, but it can also be used on its own. Manifestation in its most fitting definition means bringing something into the physical reality using thought, feelings, and beliefs. You can use it as the center of your meditation by using it as the focus of your thoughts and feelings while you quiet your mind. In our discussion of thought patterns, we learned how strongly our feelings can influence our actions as well as our lack of action. Manifestation uses the conscious and subconscious mind to achieve what you truly desire. It is a lot more than every day thinking of winning a million dollars and then buying a lottery ticket just once. Instead, it might involve working harder at your job or taking a leap of faith and then suddenly you have a million dollars. To choose something that you want to manifest, you have to be true to yourself. It must be something that you truly want, that you will benefit from, and is right for you and others. Manifestation is a perfect example of how powerful an influence your mind has over your life and why it is important to take really good care of it, throughout your entire life.

## ***Loving-Kindness Meditation***

If you have identified that your desired outcome from meditation is to get out of a fixed mindset or a defeatist mode, loving-kindness meditation might be the best place to start. If you want to change your perception of the world, you must first change your perception of yourself. Loving-kindness meditation uses images and feelings to invoke feelings of love and acceptance toward yourself and others. One of the major aspects missing from the lives of individuals living with negative mindsets is typically the love and acceptance for themselves. This type of meditation increases self-love and mental and physical well-being. By working on the inner self, it also enhances your relationships with others and increases social connections. Even if you identify as having a positive mindset but still struggle in your relationships with others, loving-kindness can teach you a lot of empathy and compassion to carry into your relationships. If you have done this type of meditation before, you may have experienced a self-reflective moment shortly after, about an earlier time where you could have shown more compassion toward someone. Although there is nothing you can do about the past, use this feeling to drive you to remain consistent with this practice, and you will have fewer moments like this and eventually none at all.

## ***Mindfulness Meditation***

The simplest way to incorporate meditation into your busy day is to practice mindfulness meditation. This can be done while eating, walking, sitting, standing, commuting, practically anywhere. The main purpose for mindfulness meditation is to bring your awareness to the present moment; its purpose is to create mindfulness. With deep roots in Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is a state of mind where you practice loving acceptance, void of judgement. There are a lot of aspects of your life that could probably be improved by giving them your full attention. As previously mentioned, productivity is no longer about how long you spend on perfecting a certain task, it is about the quality of that time. You can spend 100 hours multi-tasking on four different tasks or 25 hours on each task. You will gain a lot more and produce significantly more effective results from dedicating 25 full hours to one item.

Mindfulness meditation is about observing the world around you, your thoughts and feelings, but also about creating stillness in the mind. The regular brain chatter is replaced with observations. Mindfulness meditation can refocus attention and enhance self-awareness in the mind and body. Being mindful of how you feel physically can bring a new level of attention to your physical health and well-being. There may be some issues that you haven't dealt with or even noticed yet because you've been too busy. This type of

meditation can decrease the stress response that your body activates when there is a perceived threat or increased level of stress. It can also shift you to a positive mood.

A simple way to practice during the day is referred to by the acronym 'STOP', with each letter defining a different action in a mindfulness meditation practice.

- S: Stop what you're doing.
- T: Take a breath and pause.
- O: Observe what is happening in your mind, body and environment. Are there any default emotions that you recognize?
- P: Proceed mindfully. Go about your day in the present moment.

Repeat this practice throughout the day as many times as may seem helpful to you.

### ***Affirmations***

In a similar fashion as manifestation, affirmations are about speaking into existence your worth, your desires, and your intentions. These usually take the form of "I am . . ." or "I deserve. . ." where the blank is filled in with what you are affirming. Affirmations can be included in your meditation practice and they can self-improve your self-worth, gain mental clarity, and reduce stress. They can engage your subconscious mind into working toward your true desires. You can also practice affirmations for other people by visualizing them and replacing the 'I' with she, he, or they. Those who are not religious or spiritual in nature can feel as if they are praying for someone by affirming positive things for them, increasing your empathy toward them.

Mantra meditation is also used in a similar fashion, but the practice is considered more structured than other meditations because it uses instruments of the mind. These can be sounds, words, or phrases that are repeated during meditation. Mantras are more sacred, as they are about something you hold close to your heart and often try to live your life by. As they are commonly a guide in your life, mantras can help gain clarity into your true desires by reminding you of them and again, engaging your subconscious to join on the same path toward your goals. Mantras can be useful in situations where your emotions are being tested. They can remind you of your true self and loosen the grip your emotions have on the way you react.

## ***Breathwork***

When you experience the need to reduce stress very quickly, breathwork can be very helpful. However, to use it effectively in an instant, you need to practice. Focusing on your breathing helps to ground you, clearing and centering the mind on your breath, instead of whatever may be causing your stress. Breathwork can improve physical well-being and revitalize the body by bringing in increasing amounts of oxygen and directing it to parts of the body that need recovery.

A common breathing practice is Nodi Shodhana or alternate nostril breathing. This is a simple yet powerful practice that has a long list of benefits. Practicing Nodi Shodhana can ease racing thoughts which can improve mental focus and meditative focus on the mind and also help with falling asleep. This might be something that you consider including in your bedtime routine. Alternate nostril breathing can support lung and respiratory function, restore balance between the left and right brain, and rejuvenate the nervous system. It is like watching a machine light up as you fix it; as you breathe oxygen into your body in an intentional practice, it works wonders throughout the body. This practice can also settle stress and remove toxins from the body, increasing the list of benefits.

To paint a better picture of Nodi Shodhana here is a practice that can act as a reset button for your mind during times of stress (Eisler, 2015):

1. Take a seat, somewhere that you can sit tall comfortably, with a straight spine and open heart
2. Gently place your left palm comfortably into your lap and bring your right hand just in front of your face
3. With your right hand relaxed, bring your pointer finger and middle finger to rest between your eyebrows, using them as an anchor. The active fingers that we will be using in this practice are the thumb and ring finger
4. Close your eyes and take a deep breath in and out through your nose
5. Close your right nostril with your thumb. Take a slow and steady inhale through your left nostril
6. Close the left nostril with your ring finger so both nostrils are now closed; retain your breath at the top of the inhale briefly
7. Open your right nostril and release the breath slowly through the right side; pause briefly at the bottom of the exhale
8. Take a slow and steady inhale through the right nostril
9. Hold both nostrils closed, again using your ring finger and thumb
10. Open your left nostril and release breath slowly through the left side. Pause briefly at the bottom
11. Repeat five-10 cycles, focusing the mind on your inhales and exhales (Eisler, 2015).

Some tips for the practice are to try to match the inhale and exhale lengths. You can try to do this by counting to a certain number while taking breaths. Try to practice this regularly, whether it accompanies another meditation practice, or you include it into your bedtime routine as suggested.

## ***Yoga***

An active type of meditation, yoga is a nice way to move the body a little bit, especially if your work or school day consists of a lot of sitting, hunching, and stillness. Yoga is used to become conscious of the present moment by flowing through movements and postures. This is a very powerful form of meditation because it connects us with ourselves and roots us with the earth. Yoga is commonly used as a light form of exercise and recovery as it is beneficial in increasing flexibility and bringing awareness to the needs of the body. This meditation practice incorporates conscious breathing where you are encouraged to align your movements with your breath, to flow as one.

When practicing yoga, expectations and judgements should be left at the metaphorical door, or if you go to a studio for practice, the actual door. It should be used as a personal practice, opening your heart and mind to the energy that you will create as your flow. Yoga can be a nice way to challenge yourself every day. Each pose has different levels that can be reached with consistent practice. If you are someone who thrives on achievements, it gives you something to work towards.

The benefit of including yoga as a meditation practice is that it brings awareness to the present moment, along with oneself, and alleviates the subconscious from the reel of thoughts that it is usually playing. Yoga creates a loving connection between the mind and body, bringing you in touch with yourself and your intentions in life. It is a very rejuvenating process that can release tension throughout the mind and body that you may be unaware that you were holding onto.

It can be a very spiritual practice, or it can be guided stretching, whichever is more appealing to you. The best way to incorporate yoga into your daily routine is to flow through a full practice either in the morning or the evening. If this is not possible or you would like to incorporate it throughout your day, choose a few of your favorite postures or a quick flow to do when you need it. Make sure to move slowly when you begin, to ensure the body is warmed up before moving it in new ways.

## **First Steps**

The key to consistency in life is about complimenting your schedule. If something feels too difficult to do during the day or you have to drag yourself to do it, it won't last very long. As humans, we tend to enjoy simplicity and the path of least resistance. When it comes to including meditation into your daily schedule, this still rings true.

Getting started with a mediation routine can be a good way to ensure it fits into your schedule easily. This way you will know how long it takes for you to move through a practice and therefore, how much time you need to set aside. To start a routine, first find a place and time that works for you. This is where playing around with meditation will help as you will be able to pinpoint what you enjoy the most. Once you have a time, place and practice chosen, decide on the length. This will most likely depend on the practice, but you can do almost any length with meditation. Try to aim for about three to ten minutes and build on that. Make yourself comfortable in your space. Again, depending on the practice you choose, it might require a certain posture but there are ways you can introduce a little extra comfort into your meditation. If there is no suggested posture, choose one that is comfortable so that your mind does not keep returning to a foot falling asleep or the ache of a bent knee. Some people enjoy making a little meditation space where they might include a pillow, blanket, yoga mat and other meditation props.

A simple meditation routine that can be used with any practice might look like this:

1. Take a seat or lie down
2. Set a time limit
3. Notice your body
4. Feel your breath
5. Notice when your mind has wandered and bring the attention back to your focus point (commonly your breath)
6. Be kind to your wandering mind
7. Close with kindness by taking some time to return to the world, slowly moving your body parts.

Being kind to your wandering mind is probably one of the most important concepts to remember when practicing meditation. It's not about stopping your mind from wandering because that takes extensive practice. It's about exercising the mind's ability to notice that it is wandering and gently bring it back to the present. Allow it to go off but call it back kindly.

Your new meditation routine can be fit into your morning or bedtime routines, or it can be something that you practice incrementally throughout the day. In either case, do not ignore the benefits that meditation can bring to your life just because you are busy. As you practice more often, you will find yourself forming a natural daily routine that includes meditation and eventually it will just become second nature. Experiencing the benefits



first-hand is the most rewarding part of meditation, especially when it is improving your relationships with others.

## ***Building Resilience***

Life is riddled with challenges and without them, no one would experience change or growth. It is inevitable that we will face adversities in life but how we handle these difficulties can be the difference between experiencing setbacks and moving forward. A person's ability to bounce back in light of challenges is defined as resilience. Like the attentive mind, resilience is like a muscle that can be built. The techniques that can be used to build resilience are reflective of many of the benefits and practices of meditation. You should keep this in mind when practicing meditation as a benefit and as something that can be strengthened with practice.

Building resilience can quickly translate into success in your personal and professional lives. At work we often want to take criticism negatively, possibly knocking our self-esteem down a notch. The same can be said about an idea not turning out the way we had hoped. A resilient person would take these as learning opportunities and bounce back, ready for the next challenge. In your personal life, a breakup, illness, or a tragedy such as the death of a loved one can be a major setback in life. Resilience can help you cope with the feelings and stress of these setbacks, giving you the ability to process the event and one day move forward.

To build resilience, there are some concepts to keep in mind. These don't have to be a practice on their own because they could be incorporated into your chosen meditation. You may use the following as a checklist that you return to every so often, to check up on yourself and maybe track the benefits of a shifting mindset or thought process.

1. **Find a sense of purpose.** Become involved in something that is meaningful that can drive you forward.
2. **Believe in your abilities.** When you come across negative thoughts, replace them with affirmations of your worth and purpose.
3. **Develop a strong social network.** The most resilient people have support behind them and are able to support others. Sometimes, it takes a village.
4. **Embrace change.** Don't shy away from growth and new opportunities.
5. **Be optimistic.** It is easier said than done but this is one of the cultivated benefits of meditation!
6. **Nurture yourself.** Don't ignore your needs and wants in life, the same way you would not ignore the needs and wants of a loved one.

7. **Develop problem-solving skills.** Engage your creative mind and dreamer mode often to exercise this skill.
8. **Establish goals.** Decrease the overwhelming feelings of life and break them down into achievable tasks. There is nothing more motivating to a human than success and progress.
9. **Take action.** Find a solution to problems, challenges, and obstacles that you face. Accomplishing these will remind you that you can continue to move forward.
10. **Keep working on your skills.** Do things that you're good at often, don't let yourself forget that you have skills and talents (Cherry, 2009).

### ***A Tool for Success***

Meditation should be a tool for success, especially in the discussion of dominant mindsets and thought patterns. The practice can help improve the fluidity of the brain, increasing its ability to shift through thought patterns as needed and permanently transition out of a fixed mindset. Paying full attention to a task can improve the mind's processing speed, strengthen its ability to make connections, and expand and create neural networks related to the task at hand. Meditation can create a feedback loop where you notice that the mind is wandering, and you can bring it back. This can improve attention and focus significantly, especially in scenarios that would usually lead to daydreaming like work meetings or peer presentations. Your focused attention is a muscle, and it needs training as much as any other muscle. Meditation can also shift you away from your default setting of autopilot as the attention muscle and feedback loop in the mind grow stronger. Reducing the amount of time spent on autopilot will also increase the amount of quality time you spend in the present. Again, returning to the time versus quality of hours argument, a lower number of hours spent on deliberate practice or deliberate work will always win over the same or more hours spent doing the same task/work on autopilot.

# **Chapter 4: Connect and Engage With Ourselves and Others**

Meaningful connections are at an all-time low. Whether this is a result of increasingly busy schedules, the rise of technology, or the diminished importance placed on engaging with others, this remains a fact. Building meaningful connections begins with building a meaningful connection with yourself and protecting that connection at all costs. Being selfish with your health and wellbeing is okay because ultimately this is for you alone.

Once we have mastered the connection with ourselves, connecting with others in meaningful ways becomes simpler. Getting involved in your community is one of the greatest ways to build meaningful connections and engage yourself in new ways. Keeping socially active can combat loneliness and keep you away from negative thoughts, habits, and emotions. You would be surprised to learn how simple it can be to form deeper connections than you currently have by making little additions to your life.

## **Start Selfish**

### ***Goal Setting***

U.S. Navy Admiral William McRaven talks about his experience in basic training where the entire system is designed to weed out those who are not really committed to serve. Every test and trial is designed to push them to their very limits to see who will hold on until the very end. Everyone who joined wanted to be in the U.S. Navy but not everyone will make it because not everyone is willing to make the sacrifices (Goalcast, 2017). In the same sense, you may feel stuck in your career or another area of your life and you want to make changes. Are you willing to make the sacrifices that come with chasing your goals? People are quick to give up on their goals when faced with challenges, but you will never accomplish your goals without moving past those challenges. For example, you may be planning to start a new job, something you have always dreamed of like writing or opening a coffee shop. Unless you accept the sacrifice of quitting your current job in order to dedicate time to this new endeavor, you won't make it very far.

Everyone has dreams, aspirations, and goals but not everyone is willing to work for those goals. This is not about determining what you want in life as you've been doing that since you were five years old, and you've probably been asked about this every year since then. That question never ceases but no one ever asks what you are willing to do to get what you want. Achieving your goals is not about stating your goals; it is easy to say I want to be a millionaire, or I want to be a teacher. What is not easy is designing a path that will get you there.

Setting goals is about designing a system that will get you to your goal. The goal is the direction, the North star, the GPS point, all of which are useless if you don't have the power and the tools to get there. You can turn your steering wheel in any direction, but you will not go anywhere if you don't press the gas. Creating a system is pressing the gas.

When they say "you can do anything that you set your mind to", it is not the act of setting your mind to it that will get you there, it is the motivation that goes with setting your mind that will drive you toward your goal. You can do anything that you are motivated enough to do, so make sure your goal is something that you truly want and then press the gas.

When focusing on a goal, it is more beneficial to set one goal at a time. From there, design a system that will help you achieve that goal and make sure it fits into your schedule. We discussed making effective routines and schedules in chapter two and it might be helpful to now incorporate the knowledge you gained on goal setting. Focusing on one goal reiterates the previous point of quality over quantity when it comes to how you spend your time. You can have a long list of goals, but you may never have enough time to reach all of them if you are, in fact, trying to reach all of them at once. This is not meant to be discouraging but realistic in the sense that effectiveness comes from spending quality time on what you're doing, not reverting to autopilot, and going through the motions.

When making a system, you should consider what type of schedule you build. We discussed that the most effective schedule is looking at an entire week and fitting your tasks in accordingly. You should do the same with your goals.

Once you have determined your master goal, break it down into smaller goals or sub goals. These should be achievable on a more short-term basis. Once you have done that, schedule these goals into your week. Your action plan for the week will determine the effectiveness of your system.

### ***SMART Goals***

Before we continue with goal setting, we should define what effective goals look like. The most common goal setting technique that is taught is called SMART goals. SMART is an

acronym for what your goals should be in nature for them to be effective. SMART stands for:

- S: Specific
- M: Measurable
- A: Attainable
- R: Relevant
- T: Time bound.

Starting with Specific, your goal should be written down in one to two sentences. This is usually the case, but no matter the length, you want to be as specific as possible. For example, if you are an Environmental Studies student and you are making a career plan, saying “my goal is to be a CEO” when thinking of a career choice will not be very helpful. If you say, “my goal is to be the CEO of Parks Canada”, it becomes a little clearer. If you don’t exactly make it to being the CEO of Parks Canada, you may still end up somewhere that you enjoy. This is where “shoot for the moon and you’ll land among the stars” might actually be acceptable.

Making your goals measurable is important because as we have learned, humans are motivated by success and progress. Measuring your progress along the way will keep you motivated to keep working with your system. Measurable and attainable can both be used in designing your system because you will need to set smaller goals to achieve the master goal. This will also allow you to understand where your system might need a little tweaking.

Now you can design your system, making sure that it is measurable and attainable. In the same example the Environmental Studies student will make sure that to reach the desired goal by creating a system to get there. Selecting the necessary classes and getting a passing grade in each class will be steps that lead to another achievement of graduating. After that, the system will focus on getting the right job and experience, and the achievements become promotions and raises. All these measurable and attainable smaller goals lead to the larger goal.

Making your goal relevant is about aligning it with your true desires. Your values, beliefs, and desires will ultimately rule your life and if they do not align with your goal then there will be little to no motivation to get there. If you are in Environmental Studies, how are you going to pass your classes if you do not really have much interest in the environment? Instead, you are daydreaming about programming a computer or racing a car. No matter how hard you push, a horse will not run unless it wants too; don’t expect to be thrilled about a goal that you are not truly thrilled about.

The last dimension of an effective goal is time-bound. Set a time frame on the goal, on both ends. You want to reach your goal in the minimum time but you don’t want to lose

motivation if you happen to go too fast. First, setting long-term goals is helpful to give your life an ultimate direction but they need to be accompanied by short-term goals (your system) or you will never get there. So, the first step is to remember to set the long-term and short-term goals.

Secondly, it is important to add time frames to each of those goals. You want to reach your ultimate goal by the age of 45 but no later than 50. This gives you room to breathe. Perhaps you enjoyed another job for a few extra years, or there was a bump in the road. For the smaller goals, you graduate university in four years, you get your first job at 23 and stay until you are 26. Adding a cap to your goal will make sure that you remain on track with your system.

To reiterate, everyone is different, and everyone will thrive using different techniques. SMART goals have been proven to be a very effective way of setting goals but that does not mean you absolutely need to follow their every suggestion. Discovering what works for you is always the most effective practice because ultimately, you will do what you want to do rather than what you are told to do almost every time; unless there are severe consequences of some sort.

### ***Know Your Roles***

A less common but very effective way to set goals is to identify your roles in life. Everyone will have different roles as they have different responsibilities and functions in life. By defining your roles, you can determine how you need to show up in the different areas of your life. This can be a helpful method while looking at your weekly schedule as well because your roles will change depending on the week.

Roles include your job, family, friends, pets, hobbies, health, and commitments. A mother and wife might identify the following roles: mother, real estate agent, best friend, pet owner, board member, yoga practitioner, and reader. Now, she could list the goals she has for each role—she may be meeting a new client this week so her goal as a real estate agent is to show them three properties. As a mother, her goals might be to watch soccer practice twice this week.

By breaking your responsibilities down into roles can help you see them in their entirety. Sometimes when we get too busy, we let certain areas of our lives slip and feel guilty about not prioritizing other areas. Determining your roles can also help you prioritize your responsibilities and possibly push some tasks into the next week if they are not yet important. It can also help you to say no to adding new roles and tasks because you have

a breakdown of all your current responsibilities and all the goals that you would like to achieve.

### ***Forming Habits***

The first habit to form when it comes to any aspect of life, whether it is designing a system to reach your goals or creating daily routines, is to show up. Think of it in the same way as making your bed—showing up is the first accomplishment. You will not get stronger if you do not show up to the workout. You will not become a better listener if you never show up when your friends need to talk. In fact, showing up is most important and if that is all you can do some days, you are still accomplishing the most important part of any habit, goal, and routine.

Once you build that habit, the other habits become a little easier. It would be a little silly to show up to the gym and end up not working out. Even if you opt for a light walk on the treadmill opposed to your weight-lifting schedule, you still move your body in a positive way.

A helpful tool in building habits is to habit stack. This means ‘scheduling’ your new habits around habits that have already been established. This can look like: after/before I [current habit], I will [new habit] (Clear, 2013). For example, after I brush my teeth, I’m going to do 15 minutes of yoga. By doing this, you are establishing a cue for yourself that you will continually recognize as the time to do this new activity.

The psychology of conditioning is somewhat similar. Most people will probably already know the story of Pavlov’s dogs but if you don’t, here it is. A Russian scientist, Ivan Pavlov, used conditioning to train his dogs. To do this, he rang a bell and gave his dogs food. After repeating this enough, the dogs began salivating as soon as they heard the bell ringing, even if they were not presented with food. He conditioned his dogs to have this response by presenting them with food each time he rang the bell. Eventually, your body will be conditioned to doing yoga after brushing your teeth and you may convince yourself that your muscles feel tighter and more tense on the mornings you miss out on yoga.

In the same way that a habit can be conditioned, or formed, it can be unconditioned. With Pavlov’s dogs, they eventually stopped salivating when they heard the bell because they stopped believing they would be presented with food. This example is used to demonstrate how eventually habits will become routines if you stay consistent.

A part of designing an effective system to achieve your goals is eliminating habits that are not serving the system. If your goal is your steering wheel, your system is the pedal, then your habits are the car's condition, and you will want to make sure it is in good shape for your journey.

Forming good habits includes removing negative habits from your life. One of the simplest ways to do so is to replace the negative habit with a positive one. Instead of spending the time you should be studying scrolling through your phone, replace the urge to pick up your phone with a habit like getting up and stretching your legs. Every time you go to reach for your phone, get up and shake your legs out a little bit. Eventually, you will replace checking your phone with stretching your legs, which happens to be a way better study break anyway.

### ***Control Your Environment***

Aligning your environment with your goals can make or break your system. For example, you may be trying to quit smoking and will probably avoid the designated smoking area at your work or school to limit the temptation of smoking by being in that environment. It is difficult to stick to positive goals in a negative environment. Surround yourself with an environment that is going to influence your performance in a positive manner, not hinder it or introduce obstacles whenever possible. Keep your habits simple by not overwhelming yourself. It is hard to focus when you are surrounded by noise. Have you ever tried conducting research for a project and suddenly 20 tabs open on your laptop? Overwhelming yourself can make it difficult to focus on what you're reading and ultimately what you're researching. Returning to the benefits of meditation, quieting the brain chatter can help you focus.

Using visual cues in your environment can be helpful. Your space should reflect what you're trying to achieve. If you find your mind is extremely cluttered maybe you should check your room or your house to see what condition they are in. They may need a little organization and TLC. The visual cues in your environment should point you in the right direction toward your goals. Another environmental factor that can help in achieving your goals is scheduling things that will help achieve your goals. For example, if your goal is to practice yoga four times a week, schedule four yoga classes. You are a lot more likely to follow through with this commitment than if you did not schedule them; no one likes cancelling any type of appointments or classes as this is an added hassle!

The same can be said about your mind. It is hard to keep positive and remain optimistic in a negative mindset. You have got to be your biggest supporter.



Your environment also includes who you surround yourself with. Before we get into how working on ourselves will influence our interactions with others and the benefits we gain, we should discuss how others can influence us. As mentioned, you should be your biggest supporter and your second biggest supporters should be the people that you hold close to you. These are the people who have the power to influence you the most. One of the major benefits of having good self-esteem is that it is not easily influenced, but that is not always the case. One of the saddest things that humans do is accept what they think they deserve, and this can often be much less than we deserve.

Hopefully, the work that the beginning of this book asks you to practice has positively influenced you so that you are not looking for external sources of validation and acceptance.

### ***Too Much is Never Good***

Too much of one thing is never good; this can be said for goals as well. To achieve your goals, changing the word into singular is a good place to start. If you set multiple goals at once, they end up competing for your attention. As we have discussed, the effectiveness of spending 100 hours working on four different tasks is not as valuable as spending 25 hours working on each task separately. Quality matters when it comes to goal setting.

Take one large goal and break it down into an action plan or groups of smaller goals that you can achieve on a daily or weekly basis, if they will lead you to your master goal. The path to failure is paved with good intentions and the path to success is paved with good actions.

It is extremely difficult to implement a long list of routine changes and good habits in your life. Instead, making incremental changes can better ensure that you will stick to them. If you want to start waking up earlier in the day, your success rate will plummet if you jump straight to waking up at 5:00 in the morning. Instead, wake up 15-30 minutes earlier every day until you have reached your goal.

In addition, there are other changes that you might need to make in your routine to accompany that goal. Again, if your goal is to wake up earlier, going to sleep at the same time as usual might be counter intuitive. In this case, you can group the goals together by changing to a desire to improve your sleep schedule. Then break down this goal into two habits you can do each day to achieve the goals.

Rapid growth is a myth. Sayings like “shoot for the stars” or “big risks mean, big rewards” might be motivational or inspiring, but they lack the fundamental concept of a positive life—sustainability. If you want to be an overnight success, prepare to stay that way for the

same amount of time that you put in to get there. If you make a million changes to your life at once, every single one will be fighting against you. As humans we enjoy comfort and consistency, even if it is not aligned with what we truly want. That is why forming healthy habits and sticking to the goals we have set are difficult and the difficulty level only increases as we try to implement more changes all together.

As we build our mental strength and resilience, changes will be easier, and regardless of the difficulty level, embracing change and growth is important. The path of least resistance will always be the one we choose.

## **Support, Connect, and Grow**

What is going on the inside of your head is often reflected on the outside. Research from the Heart Math Institute has discovered that what you are feeling in your heart radiates outward up to 10 feet away. The people around you can sense your feelings before you even speak to them so imagine how much influence this has over the people that we spend a lot of time with. You are constantly broadcasting your feelings so make sure that they are good ones. This all starts in the mind and that is the reason we started our discussion about working on yourself, for yourself. Now, we apply the reasons that working on yourself matters to others and how it can be increased depending on the people that you surround yourself with and how you tend to those relationships. Your emotions can be contagious—be conscious of this.

Tending to your relationships can ensure that they remain positive. Having positive relationships in your life can reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and loneliness. The center of every effective relationship is trust. Trust in a relationship allows for you to make mistakes and not have to worry about them being the straw that broke the camel's back. When life gets busy, the added stress of a relationship with no trust can lead to feelings of resentment toward yourself and your partner when really you are resenting what the relationship is lacking because of the absence of trust. Without trust, communication goes out of the window while blame, guilt, assumptions, and expectations take its place.

To build trust in your relationships, and this applies to all relationships, you need to be effective. If we think about our weekly schedules, what are the hardest items to plan into our days? Those that involve other people. Coffee with an old friend, going to visit your parents or siblings, these are all things that are difficult to put a time limit on because you don't know how long they will last and that's okay. Although our goal with scheduling is efficiency, our goal with people is effectiveness.

It is okay if you run over time while catching up with an old friend or playing a round of golf with your brother because being effective with people means not rushing the time you spend with them. It is also okay to set boundaries around your time but if you do so, the quality of the time you spend with each person is increasingly important. With any relationship, quality time always wins over quantity (are we surprised?) so, turn your phone on silent and put it away. The beauty of scheduling this time is that you won't feel guilty for doing so.

Along with trust, communication is the foundation of a healthy relationship, but you cannot have effective communication without trust. An interesting concept of our relationships with others is that they rest more on how our mind perceives, understands, remembers, evaluates, desires, and responds to them than they really are. These can quickly become our expectations and assumptions of the people that we are in relationships with and without effective communication we can let those assumptions and expectations control our relationships. This is one reason why keeping a healthy mind is important. Communication should always be easy and effective.

The quality of the relationships around us can have a significant impact on our mental health and well-being. Loneliness can kill, we see it in animals all the time and we think how precious it is, when really it is heartbreaking. As much as loneliness can have a negative influence, so can unhealthy relationships. Without trust in your relationship, you can never live independent of the relationship, your growth and opportunities would be hindered. The people around you should be supportive as you independently pursue your dreams.

A relationship with a lack of trust means that mistakes are less likely to be forgiven and they may even be used against one another later. Inevitably life will interfere with your plans and you may have to cancel or may get home late from a meeting, a situation that can be magnified because of the underlying lack of trust and associated lack of forgiveness. Worrying about how your partner or friend will react to you being late or cancelling plans is added stress and anxiety that can be avoided.

Lack of trust in friendships can be a significant source of insecurities in the relationship. Have you ever seen your friend talking to someone that they knew you had feelings for, and your mind immediately jumped to the conclusion that they are flirting? This is an immediate sign of a lack of trust. Later, you might act differently toward your friend without bringing up the topic, they could pick up on the change in attitude and the result is that you both begin to feel insecure. Maybe at some point your friend did not repay a loan immediately and you were getting anxious that they never would. The more you ask for the money, the more you show your friend that you do not trust that they will pay you back. On the other hand, the longer you take to repay your friend, the more the trust that

you will pay them back dwindles. Now the next time you would like to split dinner, both of you will probably feel a little insecure about who pays.

Internal insecurities can also make appearances in your relationships. For example, receiving criticism from a boss or colleague can feel like a personal attack if you have insecurities about your role or your performance. In friendships, this can feel like being in competition with your friends constantly because you need to prove your worth. These feelings can quickly turn into resentment of each other and resentment of your friends for achieving their goals, which might be one of the worst feelings of any relationship. Your friends are most likely already well aware of your worth and if they are not, they may not be great friends and you have nothing to prove. You will both get further in life by leaning on one another.

In a relationship, feelings of low self-esteem can also get in the way. This is often accompanied by jealousy, anger, resentment, and other negative feelings toward your partner.

In an effort not to turn this into a relationship book, the point here is that how you feel about yourself can often be deflected onto those around you. Being able to effectively communicate your feelings in your relationships is important. The first step is acknowledging and accepting your feelings, then the second part, to effectively communicate them, will come a lot easier.

### ***Think First, React Later***

The way we react is based on our previous experiences. Your brain stores memories and connects emotions to those memories along with a pattern of behavior that it believes is an appropriate reaction. This process is often referred to when discussing fears and the stress response. The fight-or-flight response that is initiated when we are confronted with a perceived threat is initiated a lot more commonly now with less threatening situations. This is when we do not feel control over the way we react resulting in overreactions and inappropriate responses to a situation.

In emotional moments, our brains react based on these previous experiences. The brain does not forget—it will store almost everything it experiences in the subconscious making it more difficult to recall immediately, but it is forgotten. This can cause us to react to others in an inappropriate way. For example, your old boss favored criticizing your work as their approach to feedback, resulting in negative interactions and leaving you feeling bad about your work whereas your new boss focuses on constructive feedback. When your

new boss approaches you to discuss your work you may react negatively even if what they were saying was constructive.

To control this immediate reaction, take some time to self-reflect. Think first, is this my response to someone or my response to my previous emotions. Once you have clarified this, you can react appropriately. Like smothering your fears, you want your responses to eventually be unconditioned and to start forming a connection with new emotions. By surrounding yourself with positive people and positive interaction, eventually your brain will let go of these old initial reactions and replace them with positive ones.

In relationships and close groups, negative emotions can spread like wildfire. This is important to keep in mind; your negative emotions will transfer more often than your positive ones. Consider how much more effort it takes to get someone out of a bad mood than it does to put them into a bad mood.

You can often carry the emotions of someone with whom you have interacted into a new interaction. For example, you work at Old Navy and during your shift you interacted with a customer who was inconsiderate of your feelings as a person and reflected that in the way they talked to you. You are likely to carry how they made you feel into your dealings with customers for the rest of the day. In addition, you may even bring those emotions home. Suddenly you are taking out your frustrations on your significant others through little actions and comments that they do not at all deserve.

We have all had this experience, and it is difficult not to give into our emotions, especially if someone else has caused this reaction. To avoid this, be conscious of the emotions of the person you are dealing with. If you perceive negative emotions associated with them, take a break before moving onto a new interaction. This is where meditation can be very useful to recenter your emotions and let go of the negativity that may have built up with that first interaction.

When communicating in our relationships, it is important to listen to understand the other person's thoughts, not to hear their feelings. Often our stubbornness or our desires can get in the way of hearing what someone else is saying. Do not reflect on emotions, reflect on thoughts because those are the drivers of the emotions.

To ensure this, avoid phrases like "I'm sorry you feel that way" and instead replace it with "I'm sorry that I made you feel that way" or "I'm sorry you think that it was my intention to make you feel like that, I can assure you it wasn't". If first you listen to understand the thoughts behind the feelings, you will better understand what led to this point. Second, you will show the other person that you are committed to understanding and taking responsibility for what happened.

How often do you think you heard someone, and forgot what they said minutes later? This happens often and can cause a breakdown in the trust of your relationships. It is important to hear the other person so that you can understand them. From a place of understanding you can then make an appropriate decision about how to effectively react to them.

### ***Four Burners Theory***

It is not a surprise when an individual is struggling as they try to juggle every aspect of their life equally. It is hard not to admire their effort and feel sympathetic when this individual is often near a burn out, only because they did not want to let anyone down. It's a sad paradox really.

The Four Burners Theory is used to explain this paradox and ultimately determines that to succeed in life, you must cut off one burner but to be truly successful you must cut off two burners. The four burners are work, health, family, and friends. Despite many attempts at merging burners, friends with family or family and health and other combinations, the conclusion is that the only way to reach your maximum potential in one area of life, is to let the other areas suffer.

What if they did not have to suffer though? This theory must be built on the perception of some negative relationships. Instead of suffering, the word sacrifice should be used and not with a negative connotation. The relationships you have in your life (family and friends) should be strong enough that during certain parts of your life, your focus can be elsewhere. For example, you are trying to get a promotion at work, so you miss Thursday night game night to stay late at work. Eventually, your promotion means you can take more weekends off and longer vacations, so ultimately, there is achievement in both areas.

The catch to this seemingly simple solution to the four burners theory is that you must have a strong, healthy relationship so that everyone involved will understand the long-term achievements all around. Your family's initial desire might be to focus on the downside that you are missing family game night or that you work too much. Instead of snuffing off these concerns, use your communication skills and together, you can all understand the plan. Controlling your emotions in these situations is important to manage your frustration. It might be difficult to approach without the mindset of "don't they see how hard I'm working for them" but this will not help because essentially, they cannot see it. You have to share it with them by communicating.

Returning to how to think about the Four Burners Theory, the best way to approach this is by being fluid. There are times in your life when it is okay if one burner is burning hotter than the other. It is important to support those in your life in the same manner if you expect the same level of support. Numerous writers have dedicated their works to their significant others because once they turned on the burner to its maximum, their other burners, including family, were not as hot. There will always be times in life when you can thrive in one of the four areas so do not ignore opportunity when it comes knocking. Olympic athletes will excel in the work burner for years, until the time comes to dial back, retire maybe, and then they can spread their time amongst their other burners, possibly even reaching their full potential in another area because their work burner is no longer their focus.

This approach can be characterized by “seize the day” because you will not always have the same amount of time and energy to spend in a certain area of your life, so when you do it is important to get caught up. We often let societal norms influence us to conform to specific roles, often obscuring our full potential in that moment. Do not let yourself be blinded by what the outside world wants you to do. This is the reason this book began with a focus on the inner workings—start selfish first, then move onto our interactions.

We can easily lose sight of how important the quality of our relationships is but here is a prime example of how our personal and collective growth can be hindered by not being effective in our relationships. Unfortunately, you often do not realize what is happening until it is too late but you should think of your close relationships as a seesaw with one end taking and the other giving. You need to have a perfect balance between the two or one side of the relationship will be enjoying the view while the other is in the dirt.

### ***Keeping Strong Connections***

By getting to know your community, you also know its available resources. This knowledge makes it easier to break down the barrier between accessing those services and pretending they do not exist. Whether they are psychological, social or physical resources, it is always a little intimidating to seek them out, especially if you are unsure if they will be useful. Volunteering with different resources gives you a chance to learn more about them before giving them a try for yourself.

Let us not overlook the benefits you receive from the feeling of helping others. There is no day more fulfilling than a day that you have given back to another person in a meaningful way. The “feel good” hormones that are released when you do a good deed can have physical benefits as well. Volunteering is heart happy work, in a literal way; it can lower your blood pressure and lessen the risk of heart disease, stroke, and premature death.

Volunteering also presents another way for you to train your brain and as we age, it is especially important to keep our brains active and engaged.

The power of volunteering and connecting with the community that surrounds you is so important that it has even helped professional sports teams win consistently. There is almost no correlation to the skills needed in sport to volunteering in the community (unless you are teaching kids the sport) but by making these connections and spending that time together as a team, they perform better. Volunteering can build a bond in your relationships with others, especially within families. Your social and relationship skills will be increased without you even realizing. Stepping into new roles allows you to build confidence in new areas of your life and interactions. Volunteering is an opportunity to practice your social skills in new settings, making you more likely to volunteer in different and more meaningful ways as you grow more comfortable.

Need we discuss the benefits that networking can have on your professional life? By volunteering you can make contacts with people that you may need some day and since you met them volunteering, they probably already have a good impression of you. Many people also choose to volunteer in areas that they are passionate about or that will help them gain career experience, an additional benefit.

The best benefit though might be that it creates resilience within your community. Unfortunately, we see terrible things happen to communities everyday but the ability to come together and stand up in the face of tragedy is one of the most beautiful things ever. Community resilience means benefits for all, even those who do not volunteer. Volunteering also creates social awareness, not just for you as the volunteer, but for those around you. There may be issues in your community that you were never aware of. The environmental racism movement NIMBY gains momentum from the desire to prevent their communities from being used as dumping grounds or treated differently than others. This works because people want to have a sense of pride in the community in which they live. That sense of pride is less than authentic if you are not truly aware of what is going on around you.

Furthermore, volunteering for altruistic motives has been said to increase longevity significantly. You should get involved in volunteering and giving back to your community and communities around the world because it is the right thing to do. It can bring you a long list of benefits but can do even more for those you are assisting, and that's why you should volunteer.

Start by scheduling a few hours a month and from there, increase it. Every three months, volunteer at a new place if you want to spread the love. If you have a family, replace some of your game nights with volunteering and watch your bonds become stronger and your family perform more effectively in other areas of life. By spending a Sunday morning volunteering at the local Food Bank or Ronald McDonald House, you can also find a great



way to connect with friends. It is a great way to catch up and bond while giving back to your community. Relationships that connect in a more meaningful way are much more effective and will become stronger for all involved.

### ***Growing Together***

Loneliness is on the rise, despite our constant 'connectedness' through smartphones, which makes it more important than ever to make actual efforts at connecting. Connecting with one person on a deeper level than discussing the weather can decrease that feeling of loneliness, so make it a priority while planning your weeks. Strong social connection can lead to a 50 % increase in longevity, strengthen your immune system, help you recover from disease, and lower your blood pressure. It can also reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, and increase empathy, self-esteem, trust, and cooperation (Seppala, 2014). By increasing one connection in your life, you will be more compelled to increase all of them because a deep, meaningful connection always feels better than an inauthentic one.

Accountability often has a negative connotation and yet it can be the key to achieving your goals and helping others achieve theirs. Accountability can be considered like a promise. Accountability in every area, to yourself and to others, needs to be set in time and space and needs a desired outcome and expectations with attached and defined roles for everyone involved. Sometimes these roles are not active, but they are defined.

Including others in your personal accountability can build trust in your relationships. First of all, you are bonding with one another on a deeper level. By sharing your goals, action plan, and progress, you are allowing yourself to be vulnerable with that person. In turn, this might encourage some vulnerability to be returned, strengthening your relationship. Secondly, for some, giving feedback and help can be very important. You know that feeling you get when someone takes your advice? It is a good feeling and it makes you willing to give more advice. The same goes for helping someone stay on track to achieve their goals. Thirdly, accountability ensures that you are matching your words with your actions. If, in your relationships, you constantly do not live up to your words, you will be associated with this type of behavior. If you do not even stick to a simple task like going for a walk every morning, why would they think that you will keep the commitments you make to them?

Holding yourself accountable in your relationships and the way you treat others is important. This means taking ownership of your words and actions, stepping beyond the initial victim reaction that is commonly deployed, and taking responsibility in situations where we are in the wrong.

Holding yourself accountable to yourself is sometimes difficult. Faced with adversity, it is hard not to quit and this is where others can come in. Share your goals with your loved ones as not only will they hold you accountable, but they will now be aware of the work you are putting in for yourself. This type of communication can create awareness about the daily actions that are being taken for growth in your relationships. By growing separately, you are growing together.

As always, after discussing accountability for yourself, it is important to hold others accountable for the way they treat and interact with you. To expand on this, we will discuss setting boundaries. This concept has become increasingly relevant recently as mental health discussions have become more normalized. In every relationship there should be boundaries and if someone crosses that boundary, you should be able to openly discuss it and hold them accountable.

Setting boundaries can be crucial in protecting your mental health and well-being. Boundaries are set in relationships for many reasons. Sometimes a friend tends to talk about issues in her relationship too much, often lowering the mood of your interactions, so a boundary should be set around discussing certain topics. You are not being a bad friend, and healthy relationships will be able to withstand setting healthy boundaries. Often in situations like these, your friend might not even realize how much information they share. You should always set boundaries but especially during particularly stressful times of your life. Keeping relationships with people during stressful times without boundaries can make you feel as if the worries of others are being piled on top of you. This can quickly lead to feelings of resentment towards your friends and family.

As you set boundaries in your relationships, there are four things that you can do to make them effective (Chesak, 2018).

1. **Be assertive:** use phrases that are clear, there's no need to beat around the bush. Using "I feel \_ when \_." and "I need \_." can ensure that your message is clearly sent.
2. **Say no:** believe it or not, the word 'no' can be considered a full sentence. If you have something else to do you can always say no without giving an excuse. It is tough to do this, especially for those who do not like letting others down, but sometimes you have to do it.
3. **Protect your space:** you can also set boundaries for your space, physical and technological. In the age of devices, giving your passwords out to those close to you is unnecessary and you should not let yourself be bullied into believing so. This can relieve an underlying stressor that you were never aware of. You are not hiding anything; you are setting boundaries. You can also benefit by setting a boundary with your technology. Being constantly available to others can be exhausting so give yourself some guilt free time away.

4. **Seek support:** if your boundaries are being crossed and this is resulting in a decrease in mental health and well-being, do not be afraid to seek the support you need (Chesak, 2018).

Holding others accountable for their actions toward you can be very brave. Whether you are standing up for yourself by correcting their actions toward you or asking them not to speak to you a certain way, it is difficult to do. Protecting your mental health, a goal you've been working so hard to achieve, is extremely important. Don't shy away from holding others accountable; you show others how they can treat you by allowing them to continuously treat you in a particular way.

If your relationships are healthy, they will never falter when you hold someone accountable for their actions because they were not trying to harm us intentionally. Some people become hostile when you call out their actions because their intentions on some level were to harm you. Some people act in ways that are damaging to us and that can be considered intentional, even if they were not conscious of their intentions. When someone treats you poorly, there is usually an underlying reason. The risk that you may realize this underlying reason makes them get hostile when you try to hold them accountable.

You are always encouraged to seek help if you feel that setting boundaries is a good next step for you. It can be difficult to talk about the reasons you feel the need to set boundaries and having a support system in place is always helpful. Even the healthiest of relationships should have boundaries; protecting your mental health is not selfish, but smart and brave.

Understanding how to set boundaries for yourself can also help you be aware of other people's boundaries. The Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" can be a good guide but not the answer as everyone will have different boundaries. Simply asking before taking any sort of actions toward someone can also go a long way to make them feel comfortable around you and build trust in your relationships.

# Chapter 5: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

As a psychological treatment tool, cognitive behavioral therapy centers on the practice of changing an individual's thought patterns. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is based on an individual having unhelpful patterns of thinking as their default or that have been learned. Unhelpful coping methods can also be learned by using CBT which can lessen symptoms that may normally affect their lives. In conjunction with changing thought patterns, CBT can also be used to change behavioral patterns. This can be helpful in relieving the reaction volume during the fight-or-flight response.

One reason that CBT has become more popular is that it teaches people how to be their own therapists. It places a large emphasis on developing coping skills to disrupt thought and behavior patterns. It teaches skills that can be used every day and in situations that can be particularly emotional, stressful, or threatening.

As we've discussed, your thoughts, feelings and emotions directly influence your actions and reactions to yourself and the world around you. Introducing an approach to changing these thought and behavior patterns seems like a considerable thing to do, as they are the root of it all.

CBT is not meant to be a lifetime practice; this is where meditation and mindful practices can step in. After you have learned the positive skills through CBT you can continue practicing these skills every day.

## ***Benefits***

CBT can be used to reduce stress, cope with complicated relationships, grief, fear and other challenges. The approach requires an individual to be actively involved in the process, giving them a sense of responsibility over their feelings and reactions and how to change them.

Earlier it was mentioned that the brain attaches emotions to memories and in the same concept, people attach meaning to the events that they are involved in. These meanings and emotions then tell the body to act and react. There are a lot of beneficial things that people can learn during CBT, including (Davis, 2018):

- identifying problems clearly
- develop awareness of automatic thoughts
- challenge underlying assumptions

- distinguish between facts and irrational thoughts
- understand connection between emotions of past events and present feelings
- stop anxious behavior
- gain perspective on different situations
- better understand the motives and actions of others
- developing positive ways of thinking, become aware of mood
- establish attainable goals
- ditch expectation and focus on the present
- face fears, and
- accept and understand yourself (Davis, 2018).

Therapy is often associated with mental illness and the myth that you must have a certain level of illness to seek help can be extremely damaging. CBT can be used to treat bipolar disorder, eating disorders, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and psychosis, phobia, and substance disorders. It can also be used for people who want to have more control in their everyday life. Stress and anxiety are on the rise, especially high-functioning anxiety, and CBT can be very helpful in developing positive thought and behavior patterns that will relieve those feelings.

## **Targeted Research**

CBT has long term benefits rooted in the idea that its focus is not on forcing you to be positive about a certain situation but it gives you the tools to replace the negativity in your life with positivity. A study done on patients with depression compared the effects of CBT versus the use of antidepressants. In the study, patients who were treated with only antidepressants had a greater chance of relapse than patients who had received CBT. A major benefit of CBT is that the cost goes down after a while. Medication to treat depression can be very expensive, especially for individuals without insurance and CBT has been proven to be a good substitute for some people.

CBT is a goal-oriented approach, so it fits well into your daily routine and work schedules. It can help you to become more productive at work and it can help eliminate any negative cognitive associations that you might have associated with work. A study from Ohio State University reported that after four months of CBT, participants were able to concentrate and accomplish more tasks at work (Stieg, 2021).

CBT can be very beneficial to individuals struggling with mental health illnesses as well as individuals who just feel stuck in their negative patterns. In either case, gaining a basic

understanding of CBT practices can be beneficial so you can learn how to include them in your daily routine and meditation practices. We will discuss similarities between some of the meditation practices and CBT techniques. Of course, CBT is a clinically researched tool against mental health, but meditation has been proven to bring significant benefits to your mental health and well-being.

## **Seeking Help**

The reduction of the stigma around mental health has been heading in a very positive direction in the past few years and hopefully, this trend will continue. As the acceptance of mental illness becomes normalized, so does the practice of seeking help. Common worries that arise around seeking help are appearing weak, incompetent, or unable to take care of yourself, feelings and labels that everyone wants to avoid. When you are exposed to these stigmas, you can quickly begin internalizing them, creating a barrier between yourself and seeking help.

Denial and the nature of your mental health condition can both be barriers that stop you from seeking help. It is important to recognize possible barriers and eliminate the negative thoughts associated with them. Often, episodes of depression and anxiety can be accompanied by difficulty leaving the house, reaching out to others, and making phone calls—all tasks that are associated with seeking help. Again, it is important to recognize this behavior. The first step to seeking help is acknowledging you need it and the second step is to make a plan to seek it out. Even if you do not quite make it to the third step of seeking help on the same day, you have taken important steps. Be kind to yourself during this process which can be daunting but remember, you are worth the help.

A part of self-care is making your mental health a priority. Whether you're being held back by internalized stigma or there are other barriers in your way, seeking help starts with you. This may seem very daunting, because it is, but you can do it. Seeking help is the exact opposite of being weak, incompetent, and unable to take care of yourself. It is exactly what you need to do to take care of yourself and demonstrates strength and competence.

Therapy is always a good option when self-care and healthy habits are not enough to keep your mind positive. Therapy can help identify areas in your life that could use a little more or a different type of self-care. It can also give you a safe space to approach your true feelings. The mind can be a scary place sometimes and we do not always have the tools we need to face it alone. Finding a good therapist is an important part of the process. Often, someone will try therapy once and decide it is not for them because they did not like their therapist.

Finance is a common barrier to seeking help for mental health needs. Unfortunately, often many treatments for mental health are not covered adequately by average health care plans. Perhaps half of reported individuals struggling with anxiety, depression, and substance abuse will not seek the help they require because of cost. Even with the sliding scale of pricing based on income, the initial anxiety about cost still deters many from seeking help.

## Tools and Techniques

CBT brings awareness to patterns that have been influencing our every move of which we may have been unaware. These are called cognitive distortions and to name some of the monsters under the bed, here are some explanations:

1. **Filtering:** This is searching for and magnifying the negative details of situations.
2. **“Black and White” Thinking:** This is seeing things as one extreme or the other, hence the use of the two opposite colors. Here, there is no gray or in-between, either one thing happens or the other will.
3. **Over generalization:** This is jumping to a conclusion about a situation based off of a previous situation.
4. **Catastrophizing:** This is also jumping to a conclusion but assuming something horrible based on a small ‘bad’ outcome.
5. **Personalization:** This is assuming everything is about you, that you caused other people to respond negatively to you.
6. **Mind Reading:** This is assuming you know what other people are thinking and so, you jump to conclusions based on previous emotions.
7. **Control Fallacies:** This is seeing yourself as a victim of fate where you have no control over what happens to you.
8. **Fallacy of Fairness:** This is focusing on how life and situations are unfair and since you are not being treated fairly, you react accordingly.
9. **Blaming and always being right:** This is not taking responsibility and not holding yourself accountable for your actions. Reacting to situations in an unproductive way because you cannot be wrong.
10. **Should statements:** This is using the word ‘should’ in most of your statements. There is no should, only what you want, what you need and what you’re willing to do. The same can be said for using the phrase “I have to. . .”

Other explanations can be added to this list but if any of these statements of thought patterns are resounding for you, then CBT could be beneficial for you. Many of these are

our default behaviors and being on autopilot can allow them to become our way of life. Recognizing your cognitive distortions can help pinpoint if CBT is right for you. Unfortunately, to get the same benefits of CBT, you should start with a therapist. They will offer you exercises and tools that you can carry with you in your daily routine.

When starting CBT, you should approach it with an open mind. It is meant to be collaborative and what you put in is essentially what you will get out of it. The objectivity of the practice is increased when we have a therapist monitoring our progress and the motivation will not taper off before we have gained the tools we need.

### ***I'm Not Ready***

If therapy is not for you yet, that's okay. There are CBT practices that you can use on your own in a conscious effort to change your thought and behavior patterns. Some of the practices that you can do at home require self-reflection and awareness. By bringing awareness to your thought patterns you can practice ways of actively changing them.

A form of CBT that is commonly used when negative thoughts arise is restructuring and reframing. Identifying negative thoughts as they arise allows you to replace them with positive ones or associate them with positive reasoning. You can practice this in the moment, as thoughts arise, or you can practice it in preparation for negative thoughts. You can do this by identifying your negative thought patterns and reframing them so that the next time you experience something that would typically elicit negative thoughts, positive ones are there to replace them. Athletes and individuals who perform in high-stress situations often use reframing to lower the stress around a certain skill or scenario.

Journaling is an underrated form of self-therapy that many people do not dedicate enough time to. Journaling can be anything you want it to be—lists, affirmations, stories, sentences, words, doodles, really anything that gets you in touch with your thoughts and feelings. In CBT, keeping a list of negative thoughts during the day can help identify negative thought patterns. When you have compiled a list, make it a practice to write a positive thought that can replace each one, right beside it. You can include this in your bedtime routine.

You should always do the most dreadful task on your daily to do list first. By getting it out of the way, you are lowering the chances of putting it off for another day. In CBT, there is a practice called activity scheduling where you deliberately schedule an activity that typically gives you anxiety or that you don't follow through with often. By doing this, you may end up having to cancel or remove it from your calendar instead of getting it done. If possible, schedule these tasks for the beginning of the day. Not only are you more



productive and open in the mornings but you will also be able to celebrate the success of completing them all day long, carrying the momentum into the rest of your tasks.

When you notice yourself slipping down the rabbit hole of catastrophic thinking, it can be helpful to write down your predictions for the outcome of something causing you anxiety. Later, after the event of the scenario, return to that prediction and see if it is correct. If you were involved in intense catastrophic thinking, there is likely a chance that the prediction is an overreaction to what really happened. By showing yourself that your prediction of the future was not true, you are breaking the thought pattern of assuming that the worst possible outcome will occur. Hopefully, in time, the intensity of your catastrophic thinking will lessen.

The last CBT practice that we will discuss as practicing with yourself is one that should only be practiced with mild fears. Exposure therapy is used to confront fears and phobias to provide ways to cope with them in the moment. There are some mountains you cannot climb alone and attempting to conquer a severe fear or phobia may be one of them. When dealing with fears, our reactions are influenced by the emotions that our brain has attached to the memory of that fear. In a moment of fear, your fight-or-flight response is activated, and you must decide to fight or take flight. Exposure therapy can help you acknowledge your fear in that moment and move past it, essentially neither fighting nor taking flight. You can do this by learning more about your fears, exposing yourself to them in little doses over time, and practicing calming techniques like breathwork, when you feel your stress response activating.

Overall, CBT calls for you to be aware of your thought and behavior patterns and replace the useless ones with useful, positive ones. If we move through life on autopilot, it is extremely difficult to identify these negative thought patterns and how they hinder our daily lives. If you are wondering where to begin, start by bringing awareness into your everyday life and move through the present moment fully aware of what you're doing and what is going on around you. Naturally, you will begin noticing things you never had, especially the ones that are working against you.

## **Chapter 6: Why You Need to Let Go**

There can be many reasons why letting go is difficult. We cannot deny that this is hard to do but to move forward in life, we will need to let go of some things. Some animal species let go of their offspring a mere few days after giving birth or hatching them. Thankfully humans are not among those species but regardless, letting go is a necessary part of life. Trust the process and let go of what you need to. Sea turtles for example, lay their eggs on beaches and then return to the sea, trusting that one day, their young will find their way back to them. Let go and what is meant to return, will always return.

### **Don't Fear Change**

In our brains, uncertainty is worse than a negative outcome. We would rather know that something terrible is going to happen than know nothing at all. Uncertainty feels to our brains like failure, another feeling that we don't like very much. Our fear of change stems directly from our fear of uncertainty and avoiding change limits the amount of uncertainty we must face. Concerning the stress response, uncertainty has a strong role to play in fear and the activation of the fight-or-flight response. Usually it is the uncertainty about the object of our fear that makes us feel afraid. This makes more people afraid of snakes than flowers because of the uncertainty about their movements and motives. If you planted a snake in the ground, it would become a lot less scary. The uncertainty that surrounds change and the future can have the same effect on the stress response as other fears.

Without change, we risk getting left behind by the people in our lives. This is not meant to sound like a threat, but if you are not moving forward, you are moving backward. Your life is a storyline and you are the main character. Even movie and TV actors will make a character their own; yes, they have a script and plot lines to follow but at the end of the day, the character is what they make it. Your job is to make your life what you want it to be and that requires changing, growing, and evolving.

### ***The Only Way Forward is Up***

Life is an uphill climb where growth is our guide. The only way to keep moving forward is to keep growing. Sometimes we grab a loose rock or face more difficult climbing

conditions than usual, but in the face of challenges we learn and keep moving forward. To grow, we must change, so we must combat our fear of change. Earlier, you were encouraged to think of yourself as the main character in a TV show or movie. Let's stick with thinking of yourself as the main character in a TV show where every day is a new episode. Sadly, movies come to an end but TV shows can go on for seasons and seasons before anyone stops watching, like Grey's Anatomy for example, now on season 17 and still retaining the majority of its original fan base. At any rate, endings are inevitable but instead of thinking of them as the end of a series, think of them as the end of a season. A new season always has minor changes, character growth, and new beginnings but it does not require a completely different story.

Embrace the fact that you will have to make choices along the way; every main character has a major choice to make in almost every episode. Although they might not come as often as that, do not shy away from making decisions because you are afraid of how they might create change. You will make mistakes, unfortunately that comes with making choices, but instead of seeing them as failures, view them as lessons. The only true mistake in life is making the same mistake twice. Everything else is a learning opportunity and that should be exciting.

Along with mistakes, there will always be twists in your story line and you should seek to create twists where possible. Take that new job, apply to school in another country, do something outside your comfort zone. The most rewarding stories are those that you did not expect.

At the end of the day, not everything has to be planned and scheduled in life. Being spontaneous can be rewarding. By putting yourself out there with people, places, and things you will have experiences that you never would have imagined. All you have to do is take that first step, despite your fears, right into the face of uncertainty.

### ***Imposter Syndrome***

No matter who you are and what you accomplish, there's a good chance that you have felt as though you are a fraud in your achievements and that everyone around you will one day realize this. If this sounds familiar, well, you share these feelings with both Albert Einstein and Maya Angelou. You may have automatically thought of a list of amazing accomplishments that these two people reached in their life but the truth is, if they met you, they probably would have thought that you could have done it better than they did. This is known as the imposter syndrome which describes the feeling of being an imposter in your own life and in your accomplishments. The feelings usually stem from the belief that everyone is capable of the same things, so why should you get more of an opportunity

than others. Imposter Syndrome can be a reason why you resist change in your life because you do not believe you deserve a new job or you do not think you are intelligent enough to continue with school.

Nobody wants to admit that they are doubting themselves so not many people discuss their feelings of imposter syndrome, reinforcing the notion that you are the only one experiencing these feelings. However, everyone will experience these feelings throughout their lives. Since we cannot be sure of how hard our peers work or how difficult they find their work, we cannot really say for sure how easy it was to arrive at the finished product.

Imposter syndrome can often set in motion a vicious cycle of anxiety and overachieving. Believing that at any moment, the people around you are going to realize you are not good enough is exhausting. You are in a constant cycle of self-doubt, berating your performance, and even when you receive praise, it is difficult to accept it as genuine.

Graduating students often experience imposter syndrome and in fact, these thought patterns were first discovered in a group of female college students. The most common thoughts are “what gives me the right to be here?” or “Am I even qualified for this?”. Well, yes, you are qualified or you would not be here and you earned your right to be here in the years of school that you have behind you. Graduating students face a lot of pressure not only to graduate, but to go out and land a job shortly afterwards. After many years of school, they still do not feel qualified enough and lack confidence as they look for a job. Students often feel that they have made it to where they are based on luck and the sympathy of others, completely disregarding their years of hard work, countless hours in the library, and social sacrifices.

You can use the following questions to identify whether your negative thought pattern is driven by imposter syndrome. Perhaps the worst part about imposter syndrome is that you can experience imposter syndrome about having imposter syndrome. This may seem confusing but often with mental health related topics, people do not want to admit that they are struggling with what may seem like smaller problems because someone else is having a worse experience, or they feel like a fraud in their own struggles. If you answer yes to any of these questions it is okay to believe you have imposter syndrome, which is common and very real (Cuncic, 2020):

- Do you agonize over very small mistakes or flaws in your work?
- Do you attribute your success to luck or outside factors?
- Are you very sensitive to constructive criticism?
- Do you feel that you will inevitably be found out as a phony?
- Do you downplay your own expertise, even in areas where you are genuinely more skilled than others?

In a world where many people tread lightly when discussing their strengths, it is not surprising that the internal struggle of not believing you are good enough has become a rising issue. Do not let feelings of imposter syndrome hold you back. Remind yourself that these feelings are common, reframe your negative thoughts as they arise, and help others do the same. Focusing your help on others sometimes works wonders for both parties.

The first step to overcoming imposter syndrome is to recognize the behavior. Once you are able to recognize it, you can acknowledge the thoughts driven by imposter syndrome as they occur. Simply practice observing the thoughts instead of engaging with them and letting them determine your self-worth. The CBT practice of reframing can also help by replacing the negative thoughts with positive ones as they arise.

Talking about imposter syndrome can be the most helpful tool to overcome it. By talking about it with others you will realize that you are not the only one who experiences these thoughts and even people who you may hold at a high standard or believe are the most accomplished people you know, have the same feelings. It is our default setting to dislike ourselves but it's time to flip the switch and shut off autopilot for good.

### ***The Future Will Come***

The only thing that slows down the future from arriving is worrying about it. Uncertainty is one of the most hated feelings for human beings, which is the reason psychics are popular and seeing into the future is considered a superpower. Not knowing the future allows your life to be full of surprise and excitement. Although uncertainty can make us worry, anticipation can bring us so much joy. Waiting to meet your newborn baby, growing up, watching your children grow up, are all aspects of life that could go wrong. If we knew that something was going to end negatively, we would lose months and years of our lives dreading each day that goes by.

Instead of focusing on the uncertainty, focus on the excitement of what is to come. Treat each day as if something amazing is going to happen and eventually, you will notice something amazing happening every day. The future will come whether you worry about it or not, so why waste your energy?

## **Embrace Impermanence**

There is a difference between letting go and hiding your true feelings. Although you may not notice and those around you may not notice, your mind and body do. Hiding your feelings does not make them go away. As with every fear, phobia, and negative and anxious thought we have discussed so far, the only way to truly let go of your feelings, is to acknowledge them.

Repressing our feelings comes from a place of judgement. We tend to make judgements about what is good and what is bad, especially when it comes to our feelings. When something bad happens our first instinct is to avoid thinking about it because if you do not think about it, you will not feel it, right? Wrong. Unfortunately, you are going to feel it regardless, so repressing it will only make those feelings worse. Repression can lead to more intense and prolonged feelings. The longer you ignore it, the longer it takes for you to accept and truly move on.

Running away from your feelings and emotions can become a theme with repression and it can quickly become a cycle. By never dealing with your emotions, a lot of emotional build up, potentially damaging to the mind and body, can occur. Your brain will become distracted constantly, making it difficult to concentrate and focus on the things you need it to. Emotional build up can also become the driver of your reactions. If you do not deal with the negative emotions in your life, it will be hard to invite any positive ones, especially towards other people. Your relationships can really suffer if you continue repressing your emotions.

Letting go deals with the business of awareness and acceptance—two of your new favorite words in life. You can acknowledge your emotions without judging whether they are bad or good. Being aware of your feelings calls you to simply observe the emotions and accept that they exist rather than that they are good or bad. Once you are aware of your emotions, you can accept what caused them as something that happened. By labelling the event as good or bad and associating the emotions with the event, your brain will predetermine how you are going to respond if you experience that event again. To limit the amount of time that we get hurt by the same experience, we want to limit the chance of our brains connecting negative emotions with bad events.

Letting go is much easier when you deal with your emotions as they come. The effort to move on becomes a lot less difficult because you have removed the emotions from it and dealt with them already.

We have become accustomed to capturing the present moment using pictures, videos, and recordings as if we could relive the experience in the future. Unfortunately, there is no way to relive the past if you do not fully experience it in the present moment. Learn to let go of the camera, remove the expectations of the present moment, and just fully embrace it. The feeling of making memories will be stronger than any photograph.

Impermanence is the understanding that nothing is permanent. No situation or negative emotions will last forever. Embrace the evolution and growth that life offers. To ignore impermanence is to ignore the present moment and the changes that will come from it. Being mindfully aware of the present moment can help embrace the fact that you will never get the opportunity to experience this exact time in your life ever again.

Let go of your expectations and embrace impermanence, don't resist change. By embracing the notion that nothing lasts forever, you gain the power to rise above difficult situations and emotions, accept them for what they are, and move forward. Letting go is a powerful act you can take to gain a new perspective in life. It can be difficult to see the view when you have something covering your eyes; uncover them by embracing impermanence.

## **Death and Blinking**

The ultimate uncertainty in life is death. This fear is called thanatophobia and it is simply the fear of death or of the dying process. Naturally, we worry about our health, especially as we age, and an increased worrying can be tied to the fear of death. The feelings associated with this phobia are classified as general anxiety and can include feelings of dread and distress. Interestingly, a fear of death often peaks in a person's 20s and fades as they get older (Holland, 2019). This seems to be a little backwards but provides a good explanation for why older people seem to have a better handle on their feelings toward death.

Fearing death is quite common but there comes a time, as with any fear, that it can become unhealthy. If you notice your fear of death is attempting to interfere with your everyday life by stopping you from leaving the house, crossing the street, or getting on an airplane, or hindering you from making a different rational decision, it has become unhealthy.

As with any fear, death can be broken down into smaller feelings of anxiety that you can pinpoint and treat, rather than facing your fear of death blindly. Fear of the unknown is the major driver of the fear of death because no one can tell the story of what happens after we die. Similarly, the fear of nonexistence and of eternal punishment also drives the fear of death. Surprisingly, the fear of eternal punishment is as common among religious and spiritual practices as it is among those who do not believe in a higher power. As we've discussed, it is human nature to fear uncertainty. Most people would probably rather know that when you die, you spend the rest of eternity inside the stomach of a whale than knowing nothing at all. Fear of pain and suffering is another way that thanatophobia can

be broken down. This is very common in healthy people, as well as individuals with terminal illnesses like cancer patients. Although many of us can never empathize with the pain of a terminal illness, there are ways to alleviate the pain and symptoms associated with terminal care. The fear of loss of control is another way that fear of death can be broken down where humans desire control in situations, some more than others, and death is one thing that people cannot control. Individuals often attempt to alleviate this fear by staying inside or avoiding 'dangerous' situations. Lastly, not knowing what will become of our loved ones is a large part of our fear of death. This is common among parents with newborns, early adults watching their parents get older, and elders watching their spouses show signs of aging. In the wise words of Morrie from the novel *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitchell Albom, "death ends a life, not a relationship" (1997).

### ***It Happens Fast***

From personal experience, the fear of death seems to decrease as you age because you are satisfied with what you have seen and done, the people you've met and the people you've loved. The biggest regrets are always the things we did not do, the chances we didn't take and the things we didn't say. We've discussed many ways that your mind could hold you back in life in an attempt to show you how you can stop this from happening. From the day you are born to the day you die, you have a choice about who you want to be; choose to be someone who, when they grow old, will be satisfied with the experiences they've had. If you have graduated from school, you already know how fast things happen. One day you were moving into your freshman dorm or walking your high school hallways for the first time, and then you blinked and suddenly you're walking across the stage at graduation. It all happened so fast and the only thing we can do to slow it down is to live every moment of it. Before you know it, you will be watching your kids walk across that graduation stage or you will be the one handing out the diplomas, shaking the hands of bright faces.

To quote Morrie one last time, "the truth is, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live" (Albom, 1997). In this case, take this as your opportunity to learn how to die, combat your fears and you will learn how to live. There's no need to wait until it is too late.

### **Embrace Your Way**



It all comes down to what you are willing to do for yourself. Everyone will have different routine preferences, scheduling strategies, and relaxation methods. It's important to find what works for you. We have preached this from the beginning but it is time to take the information that you have learned here and apply it to your life.

The best strategy is to start with the basics and build up, like building a house. You have to build the foundation first before you start getting fancy. Look at your habits, separate the negative from the positive, and determine how you would like to replace the negative ones. Use your habits and your prospective habits to create routines. Yes, the word routine is plural because as we discussed, they can be effective in many aspects of your life. Good routines will provide structural integrity to your house, keeping everything in its place so you don't need to worry about it later.

Once your house is built, you'll want to decorate and maintain it. Self-care and meditation can help you do that; sometimes however, the fix is too big a job so you will need to call in a specialist, a plumber or electrician or a therapist. We never shy away from getting help on repairs around our homes, so why should you do so when it comes to yourself?

Regular maintenance will lessen long-term costs from fixing bigger damages, so please take yourself seriously and treat yourself as you would your own home. Be proud.

### ***Sometimes Not Knowing is Good***

There are so many things in life that we each have to look forward to. Embrace that fact and run with the idea that sometimes not knowing everything is a good thing. If we did, there would be no surprise birthday parties, no gender reveals, extravagant wedding proposals, unexpected job promotions, and no experiencing new things for the first time. Could you imagine how dull life would be if we simply knew everything that was going to happen to us?

There will always be bad things in life; without them, there would be no good things and I promise you, the good always outweighs the bad. Don't ruin your chance at enjoying life by worrying about the uncertainty of the future.

## **A Letter, a Portrait, and a Plan**

Your body is your first home, your only forever home; take care of its interior, decorate its exterior and have pride in it all. By having more compassion towards yourself and investing in the little things like untying your shoelaces instead of slipping your foot out of the shoe so it is easier to put them on the next time, a lot of stress and negative emotions that you have built up will eventually begin melting away. The work that you put in on improving yourself will reflect in other aspects of your life. By defining your roles, goals, values, and purpose in life, you will begin spreading your time effectively among the people and practices that mean the most to you. Your productivity will increase at work and home, providing you with a sense of security. It all becomes a positive feedback loop with one benefit leading to another and another and so on.

Your journey begins with the concrete foundations of daily schedules and routines, then introduces variety because who doesn't love options? Then it finishes with how to protect it all from yourself and your relationships. We often do not notice the causes of stress and anxiety in our lives because they fly under the radar for so long—autopilot can do that. By becoming the pilot of your own life again, you will become more aware of future stressors as they arise and can shut them down right away.

Challenge yourself today by starting a new way of living. It is time to get out of your head and open your heart to enjoyment of the world that is awaiting you. Start today by writing a letter to yourself about why you need this. Start today by creating a piece of artwork based on your feelings right now. Start today by setting your next steps in stone. All it takes is one courageous step and you're on your way.

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