

Solving the Puzzle of Mood

Introduction

Recurrent patterns of depression, anger, or anxiety can diminish the quality of the one life you have to live. There is no point in regretting how things have played out up until now, you were not responsible for your genes or early childhood experiences. However, now that you are an adult, you are responsible for the way you react to the events that happen from this point on. To extricate yourself from the recursive trap of a mood disorder so that you can act in accord with your interests and principles, you will have to exercise your will.

Overcoming a mood disorder is trickier than most people realize. The tools and exercises that make up this self-guided kit were developed during the author's 30+-year career as a psychologist. Organization of this kit:

1. Review of how subjective experience relates to objective reality.
2. Summary of the cognitive model of Mood Disorders
3. Invitations in the form of thought experiments and downloadable audio files that give you the opportunity to experience phenomena related to the exercise of will, including.
 - a. Contemplations designed to encourage you to explore what you really want and how to get it.
 - b. Meditations that exercise your faculty of selective attention.
 - c. Hypnotic inductions and suggestions that enhance your ability to intentionally influence your motivational state in real time.

Subjective Reality

Some of life's problems are self-correcting. You catch a cold, and the body's immune system learns to recognize the pathogen and defeat it. A child learning to ride a bicycle may fall a few times but will eventually get it. People who have fallen into a neurotic trap may never get it, because their pathogenic beliefs cause them to act in ways that confirm these beliefs. For example, the belief that you will not be able to cope with a challenge may impair performance and produce the unwanted outcome.

Negative emotional states are not necessarily pathological. Fear, for example, is an adaptive motivational response to threat. The bio-psychological changes that result from an encounter with an objective threat, a dangerous animal for example, are adaptive in that they prepare the individual for fight or flight, and, importantly, the emotional reaction dissipates after the threat has passed.

The fear evoked by worrying about events that may occur in the future is different. Here the emotional state was evoked not by an objective threat, but by the worrier's predictions about a potential threat. The fearful emotional state does not dissipate with time because there are always potential threats in the future. Rather than energizing adaptive behavior, the emotional state evoked by thinking this way depletes the very resources required to deal with objective threats and promote subjective feelings of safety..

We assume that our experience is a natural reflection of objective reality. In fact, the limitations of our sensory apparatus filter what comes through from the objective world to our conscious awareness. The subjective reality we experience is a creative construction of our nervous system. Everything looks differently when we expect success than when we expect failure. We appraise environmental threats and our abilities to cope with them through one set of lenses when we are confident and through another when we are anxious. Because the lenses are invisible to use, we assume that we see the objective truth despite the continual shifting of lenses as our state changes from one situation to another.

Worry does not empty
tomorrow of its
sorrows, only today of
its strength

-Spurgeon

Recursive Structures

Suicide bombers and corporate executives are made of the same biological material, but are biased by different beliefs and hence experience different subjective realities. There are many ways to misperceive, but some distortions are special: They have a recursive structure and so can maintain themselves indefinitely.

Blushing is an example of a recursive structure. If blushing is embarrassing for me, then any feedback that I am blushing enhances the physiological reaction. The more obvious the blush, the more embarrassed I feel, and the more embarrassed I feel, the more I blush, and so on.

Consider how a self-sabotaging recursive structure can continue to diminish the quality of life throughout an individual's biography: Barry, a 31 year-old engineer, has low self-efficacy regarding his social skills, and worries about making a fool of himself at the Friday office party. Thinking about it evoke emotions, appraisals, and behavioral tendencies that impair his social skills. In fact, Barry can be very funny and quick-witted when he is in the right state of mind, but when a co-worker made a joke at his expense at the office party he was inarticulate. Although he would have loved to respond with a clever comeback, his expectation of humiliation determined which state-dependent talents and abilities were available to him at the critical moment.

Barry's story illustrates the cause-and-effect relationships that tend to evoke self-confirmatory bias. Barry's belief that he is socially inept impairs his social performance, which confirms his handicapping belief. His social life is continually influenced by his expectation of social failure, and the objective evidence that Barry does, in fact, perform poorly in social situations continually validates this expectation. Because it has a recursive structure, it can persist indefinitely and continue to have a negative impact on Barry's actions and how his life unfolds. Fortunately, for Barry he had the intellectual gifts to appreciate how this trap works and to change the cognitive structure that maintained it.

Self-Reference and Reciprocal Feedback

Recursion, in mathematics and computer science, is a method of defining functions in which the function being defined is applied within its own definition. The term is more generally used to describe a process of reciprocal feedback; for example, when two mirrors face each other a recurring sequence of nested images appears in each.

In the following examples, positive feedback introduces amplification into the recursive sequence producing spiraling pathology.

- To a person with *Panic Disorder*, the symptoms of anxiety are themselves perceived as threatening and evoke the secretion of additional “fight-or-flight” hormones, which exacerbate the symptoms, thereby making them more threatening and triggering additional secretions and so on.
- Individuals who have become dependent on alcohol, drugs, food, etc. often use the incentive to escape the pain of negative emotional states. While the indulgence may produce immediate relief, there is often a delayed negative reaction, such as shame, self-loathing, or anxiety, which motivates the search for relief through additional indulgence. Moreover, the perceived failure diminishes self-efficacy and supports additional pathogenic beliefs such as: “Why bother fighting this, I’m defective (incompetent, hopeless, weak, etc), I’ll just fail anyway.”

Ruminative Self-Focus

A particular kind of reciprocal feedback forms the core structure of pathological depression, anger, and anxiety: Ruminative self-focus, a thinking strategy in which the focus of attention is the self, how one feels, and why one feels that way, etc.. It is ruminative in the sense that one goes over the same thoughts and images without achieving a resolution or plan of action. It masquerades as a problem-solving orientation, but very little problem solving actually takes place. As a rule of thumb, when the content of the rumination is the past, a depressive disorder is the diagnosis; and when the future provides the content, the rumination is called worrying and shows up as generalized anxiety disorder. Because of its recursive structure, ruminative self-focus maintains itself and can diminish the quality of an entire biography.

Julius Kuhl’s research¹ on conditioned helplessness¹ shows that when people fail, their focus shifts from figuring out how to be successful (problem solving) to perseverating thoughts about themselves, how they feel, why they feel this way, why they failed, etc. (ruminative self-focus). This turns out to be a poor strategy because the rumination consumes cognitive resources that are then not available for problem solving. Kuhl found that conditioned helplessness appears to be maintained by the reciprocal relationship between failure and ruminative self-focus: Failure leads to ruminative self-focus and ruminative self-focus impairs performance, which increases the likelihood of failure.

Recent research² on depression and the quality of social performance shows that negative mood leads to self-focused rumination and self-focused rumination leads to negative mood. Moreover, the ruminative self-focus and the depressed emotional state it engenders is found to impair subjects’ social problem-solving abilities and to decrease their self-efficacy regarding their social skills, both of which impair social performance. Poor social

¹ Julius Kuhl, Volitional Mediators of Cognition-behavior consistency: self-regulatory processes and action versus state orientation. In *The Psychology of Action*. 1996 The Guilford Press: New York - P. Gollwitzer and J Bargh (Eds)

² Ed Watkins Michelle Moulds. Distinct Modes of Ruminative Self-Focus: Impact of Abstract Versus Concrete Rumination on Problem Solving in Depression. *Emotion* 2005 Vol. 5, 319-328

performance, in turn, may result in loneliness and other negative consequences, which set up higher level recursive structures.

Pathogenic Beliefs

A key to escaping a neurotic trap is to recognize the pathogenic belief that maintains it. The most popular are listed in a separate file. [Note: There are many links embedded throughout the text for you to explore according to your interest. The ability to recognize pathogenic beliefs as they come up is of critical importance—please navigate to the [list of cognitive distortion mechanisms](#) and take this opportunity to study it and identify those that influence your emotional reactions.

You will notice that there is childish quality to many of these distortion mechanisms; from a dispassionate perspective it seems that the individual is "thinking like a child." Cognitive Behavior Therapy [CBT] is a practical and way to habilitate this mentality of childhood.

Because CBT reliably produces good treatment outcome, it is the psychotherapy strategy that is typically used assess the comparative efficacy of various anti-depressant medication. The results of this kind of research generally show that medication alone groups and CBT alone groups both respond well to treatment, with the medication alone group tending to show improvements earlier. The real benefit of CBT shows up later; one and two year outcome—measured long after either treatment was completed—shows a lower rate of relapse among subjects who received CBT, with some subjects continuing to improve.³

The premise of CBT: There are events and there are our reactions to events. Our reactions are determined by what we believe to be true, not by what is objectively true. So, the same antecedent event can evoke very different emotional reactions from different individuals—a social situation that elicits anxiety from Barry may provoke anger in Mr. Hyde and a slick retort from Bill Clinton.

Certain beliefs about the self or the world maintain disorders of mood. Before moving on to the next section it is a good idea to review the list of distortions thoroughly enough to recognize pathogenic, sloppy thinking when it happens. It is easier to recognize when others commit thinking errors, although it is not always a good idea to point it out to them. Far more important and challenging is to recognize when you engage in sloppy thinking and dismiss the error immediately.

Catching and correcting thinking errors is of critical importance, but there is more to the Psyche than its beliefs. During childhood, when the cement was still wet, not only were cognitive skills and beliefs established, conditioning at a nonverbal, primitive level also contributed to the developing Psyche (please see [Two Minds](#)). Recovery from a mood disorder requires that you change both of your minds.

³ Prevention of Relapse/Recurrence in Major Depression by Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy - John D. Teasdale Zindel V. Segal J. Mark G. Williams Valerie A. Ridgeway Judith M. Soulsby Mark A. Lau - Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology August 2000 Vol. 68, No. 4, 615-623

The Unconscious Part of You

Much of your behavior is guided by analyses and decisions that occur outside of your consciousness. Consider a time when you were driving your automotive vehicle along a familiar route. A time when you were so absorbed in your thoughts—perhaps planning some future activity or ruminating on a current concern—that you didn't notice passing a certain landmark along the way, or the music from the vehicle's sound system, or the feel of the steering wheel in your hands. And even though your conscious mind was so completely preoccupied that you didn't notice all these things, a part of you was driving the vehicle and operating it perfectly safely.

Since your conscious mind was preoccupied with its thoughts, who was operating the vehicle? Evidently, the unconscious, experiential processing system is quite capable of guiding complex performance without intruding on your finite conscious resources. Indeed, most of the time you are not consciously operating the bio-psycho-social vehicle you inhabit, because your conscious resources are totally focused on what you are doing, or perhaps focused on nothing at all.

By contrast, “mindful driving” means being fully present in each moment, consciously aware of sights, sounds, thoughts, and bodily sensations as they arise—being awake so you can respond intentionally rather than follow the path of least resistance. When mindful, you can act in accord with your interests and principles despite the influence of local stressors and temptations that would promote relapse.

The historical metaphor of a horse and rider provides a simile for the animal passions—fear and desire. Just as the rider is responsible for keeping the animal calm and coaxing it through scary circumstances or tempting distractions, you are responsible for helping the creature you inhabit to cope with the stressors and temptations it is bound to encounter on the journey ahead. The goal of this kit is to help the user follow the path dictated by his or her core motivation rather than abdicate control to a creature who has no choice but to follow the path of least resistance.

For a well-trained horse, the path of least resistance is often the same as the path of greatest advantage. However, every now and then a situation comes up in which the rider must be in control and perform well.

The horse and rider metaphor is an oversimplification, because in the case of the Psyche the horse and rider are one. The motivations of the horse influence how the rider appraises his choices, and the outcomes of the rider's decisions produce reward or punishment for the creature to experience.

Asleep at the Wheel

During the days and weeks ahead, you will encounter situations that elicit the autonomous reaction we are seeking to change. These high-risk situations are at once moments of danger and moments of opportunity. You either will follow your path of greatest advantage (respond as intended so you can learn what happens when you do), or you will follow the

“Civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can perform without thinking about them. Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in battle - they are strictly limited in number, they require fresh horses, and must only be made at decisive moments.

- Alfred North Whitehead

path of least resistance (respond mindlessly). To refer back to the [Two Minds Model](#), when the rational processing system is "asleep at the wheel" the experience processing is in the driver's seat. In such circumstance the individual has no choice but to follow the path of least resistance, wherever it leads.

Interrupting an autonomous pathogenic sequence requires the awareness that now is the moment to switch from autopilot to conscious performance. Albeit, the intention to snap yourself out of an autonomous sequence is inherently paradoxical: When you are in a mindless state you would not recognize the need to awaken, because at that moment you would be "asleep at the wheel."

Mindfulness & Awakening

There is a particular mental exercise called, "Mindfulness Meditation," which involves paying attention to your experience of the present moment and accepting whatever it is, without evaluation or the motivation to change anything (see [The Enlightened Path](#) for more on this topic). This is not your default way of relating to experience, and like any other non-automatic response it requires willful effort to override the more familiar goal-directed orientation of the default mode of relating to ongoing experience.

When dealing with the world in real time, your attention naturally and automatically parses the stimulation it receives, categorizing it so it can be used in the service of problem solving. Perceiving sensation in a way unfiltered by automatic problem solving perspectives allows you to awaken from the recursive traps that emerge from attachment and self-evaluation.

**When asked, "Are you a god?"
Gautama, the person who
became the Buddha replied,
"No."
"Then what are you?"
he was asked again.
Gautama's answer was,
"I am awake."
Buddha means "Awake."**

Mindfulness exercises the skill of disengaging from bad trances along with their state-dependent filters and response tendencies, and awakening to the experience of unfiltered perception of the present moment. By intending to experience the present moment with acceptance you are setting yourself up for a local failure: You will not be able to maintain the mindful perspective for more than a few moments. The continual shifting of attention from moment to moment will inevitably produce the emotional reactions elicited by Doing Mode. In fact, the frustration that results from falling back into emotional reactivity often elicits a paradoxical smile. Have patience; you will improve with practice.

A good model for developing this skill is the sparring practice a boxer uses to develop his skill of reacting to attacks. Everyday life will give you many opportunities to practice your intended reactions to high-risk situations. The mindfulness approach to pathogenic thinking patterns is to recognize and disengage from self-focused rumination and simply experience in an unfiltered way the present moment, even when it is unpleasant.

Students of mindfulness are taught that whatever their chosen focus of attention is at the moment, to allow, as best they can, thoughts, feelings, and sensations to come and go. The intention is to notice (*just notice*) how the mind is attracted to experiences judged to be positive and is repelled by experiences judged negative. The skill we are seeking is to

purposely let go of attraction and repulsion and instead to simply observe the data of experience dispassionately.

Thought Experiment: Making the Meta-Cognitive Shift. Shift from the perspective of the individual experiencing thoughts and emotions to the perspective of the observer of the individual who is experiencing the thoughts and emotions. You may note that like sounds, experiences such as thoughts and emotions come and go; some are pleasant while others are unpleasant. Observe experiential phenomena such as beliefs and emotional reactions from the perspective that they are merely passing events in the mind that arise, become objects of awareness, and then pass away to be replaced by the next experience and are neither permanent nor the same as objective truth.

Will and the Competitors for your Attention

The invitation to make a Meta-Cognitive Shift provides an opportunity to change your motivational state intentionally. This course offers downloadable media files which also provide opportunities to experience the process of altering your subjective experience on purpose. Concentrating your full cognitive resources on creating the phenomena describe will strengthen the faculties that enable you to perform in accord with your interests and principles.

Self-defeating behavior emerges from a pathogenic cognitive structure—e.g., depression, anger, and anxiety. A robust method to extricate yourself from the recursive trap into which you have fallen (or created) involves repeatedly shifting the focus of your attention from more compelling [salient] stimuli—e.g., local stressors and temptations, ruminative self-focus—to the less salient but more meaningful implementation intentions.⁴ Willpower refers to the strength of will that it takes to shift your attention purposely, despite the pull of highly salient stimuli.

There are many benefits to motivate you to develop this faculty of selective attention, but the primary motivation to develop your capability to focus your attention on what you will is what happens when if you abdicate this responsibility.

If you allow local conditions to determine what you will attend to, you will almost certainly react the way you did the last time you encountered similar conditions. Indeed, you can predict which situations are most likely to elicit a pathogenic reaction from you. These are the very provocations for which you need to prepare.

Like success in other domains of your life, good outcome results from performing well even when it is difficult to do so. This online course will help you develop and exercise the specific overt and covert reactions⁵ to that enable you to respond as intended during high-risk situations. The purpose of many of the exercises ahead is to strengthen adaptive cognitive structures through exercise while leaving the pathology to atrophy with disuse.

⁴ An implementation intention describes the details of an intentional reaction "When X happens, I will respond be Y."

⁵ Overt reactions refer to behaviors and actions. It is your covert reactions that hold the key to exerting will. What you think and what you imagine during the moments of crisis determine how you will perform.

The challenge presented by an enemy who can capture your attention with highly salient stimuli is to develop the strength to override the pull of local conditions and purposely focus your attention on the intended target. During encounters with high-risk situations, the primary objective is to keep your head—that is, to willfully influence the contents of your consciousness so that you maintain access to your adaptive state-dependent faculties (including the rational processing system)—through the crisis. The alternative—allowing your attention to be captured by the most salient local stimuli—will tend to elicit the default reaction sequence (including ruminative self-focus) that we are working to change.

Resistance training metaphor – How the conflict among the competitors for your attention plays out determines your subjective reality. For your intentions to be effective in real-time you will have to be able to override the pull of highly salient stimuli. Just as you would strengthen your muscle power by lifting weights against the downward pull of gravity, so you can strengthen your willpower by aiming your attention to a particular target and keeping it there, despite the pull of distracting stimuli.

Thought Experiment: Counting your breaths meditation. Tonight, when you go to bed, turn off the lights, and close your eyes, instead of going to sleep count your breaths. Visualize or sub-vocalize the number “1” during your first exhale, the number “2” during your second exhale, and so on. You will find that your attention tends to wander away. The exercise is to escort your attention gently back to the intended target. Sound easy? The PIG bets that you don’t make it to #4—your mind will wander to other stimuli and you will forget what number you are up to (if this happens, just start at #1). Now that you have been tipped off, the PIG might raise his estimate—but not by much. Having an intentional influence on the contents of your consciousness is effortful, which is why it is an exercise. When you are not performing an exercise such as this, your attention is bound to be captured by the most salient, not the most meaningful stimulus. Counting your breaths is an exercise in which you re-direct your attention back to the intended target each time it is distracted away. Each repetition of returning your attention to the target is analogous to lifting a dumbbell. The goal is to exercise your ability to aim your attention purposely, so that when you encounter a highly salient stimulus that would evoke a pathogenic trance, you will have the strength to override its influence and direct your attention in the most advantageous way.

Meditation exercises are analogous to weight training in that the effort it takes to move attention against the pull of salient distractions strengthens one's future ability. If meditation is analogous to lifting weights then hypnosis is analogous to a collaboration with a personal trainer. To continue the metaphor, high-risk situations are your sparring partners whose job is to help you develop the skills you need to perform effectively in real time.

Training the puppy

Meditation refers to thinking in a controlled manner. Through the practice of meditation you can develop advanced cognitive strategies that enable you to transcend the ways of thinking you learned as a child.

Both meditation and puppy training involve repeated, kindly redirections. Just as a puppy is not born with a set of rules about where to pee, you are not born with a set of rule about how to think. And, just as it would be counterproductive to beat the puppy when she had a lapse, beating yourself for a lapse in thinking would only slow your progress. In both cases,

the kindly correction of the lapse by the trainer is the key to good outcome. The prime directive in meditation training is to notice when the mind has wandered and then return your focus of attention to the intended target in a kindly, nonjudgmental way.

Subjective phenomena such as thinking, appraising, and reacting emotionally are continually present, and so we take them for granted. Our first task in acquiring the ability to influence subjective phenomena is learning how not to take them for granted. The meditation exercises described below will give you the opportunity to observe your thought processes and other subjective experiences from a novel, and perhaps eye opening, perspective.

Thought Experiment: Meditating on a Mantra. A mantra is a stimulus—often auditory—this is repeated over and over until it you become so habituated to it that you no longer attend to it. This process has the effect of clearing the mind of mundane thought so as to free it for transcendent experience. Some examples of a mantra: Whisper the word, “one,” each time you exhale; whisper the phrase, “calm and tranquil” on each exhale; on alternating exhales whisper the sound, “mmmm” (a sound of coherence like a sine wave) or the sound, “sssss” (the sound of chaos like white noise). **While repeating the mantra, pay attention to the images formed in your mind's eye. As the mind quiets down, the images will become more vivid, and you will be able to hold them in mind for longer periods.**

Thought Experiment: Tolerating Discomfort¹. Eat an amount of hot sauce or hot pepper that produces a *slightly* greater reaction than you are used to and focus on the sensation of pain. Simply investigate the experience and how you react to it. Later, after the hotness recedes try it again and see if you can push your limits while maintaining a clear, focused mind. Important note: don't cause tissue damage or hurt yourself; be compassionate and only push the limits to the extent that you can do so without being self-punishing. You can also experiment with a cold shower, or alternate the shower temperature between a bit too hot and a bit too cold. A goal of these exercises is to experience the sensations while maintaining a clear and focused mind and without tightening up mentally or physically.

Through meditation, you can learn to accept thoughts, emotions, pleasure and pain for what they are: Momentary subjective phenomena. How you react to these phenomena is more important than their content. You will discover that the learning to tolerate whatever comes up is more important than attempting to control the outcome of whatever comes up—because you don't control outcomes.

Thought Experiment: Worry catching. When you catch yourself worrying (thinking of possible future threats without effective problem solving), label the catch by silently saying something like: "Ah yes, there's worry again" No need to judge the experience, analyze it, or try to change it, just label it as soon as you've identified it—nimbleness is important. The key, of course, is to observe the experience of worry without being taken in by it. You may find it helpful to assume the perspective of an anthropologist observing the strange customs of a primitive society without taking their beliefs and experiences too seriously.

Hypnosis and Ordinary Trances

The hypnotic state clients experience in my office as a result of a formal trance induction is just one of the many different trances they experience throughout their day. There is nothing unusual about hypnosis—everything we experience is trance. You can evoke one kind of trance by listening to a trance formation audio file on the enclosed CD-ROM, but you don't need a formal hypnotic induction to change your experiential state. Consider the following thought experiment:

Thought Experiment: The Emergency. Imagine that you just got a message that someone in your family had been seriously hurt in an automobile accident and you must get to the emergency room right away. Your biological state would change immediately and you would run or drive there as fast as you could, heart pounding, thoughts racing, experiencing great distress. When you got there and discovered the report was untrue, you would experience relief, a very different trance. Objectively, the report was never true, yet it had a great impact on your physical and emotional state. State-dependent phenomena—including motivation, perceptual bias and response probability distribution—are determined by the subjective reality that existed only in your mind, not by what was objectively true.

Your subjective reality is a creative fiction that you are continually inventing. To be sure, your overt behavior becomes part of world history (and so can never be undone), but the trance that gives rise to it is purely subjective and does not exist outside your consciousness.

Suggestions are invitations to explore a particular subjective reality. Whether the entity that creates it is a hypnotist, salesman, or you, the suggestion is always a creative fiction rather than a valid representation of objective reality. Typically, the suggestion is designed to promote the interests of its creator, unless that entity is neurotic. The interests of the stage hypnotist are served when he can get the subject to perform foolishly in order to make the audience laugh; the interests of the salesman are served when the customer buys. Your interests are served when you get yourself to perform well during a high-risk situation.

The method of hypnotic suggestion, demonstrated by stage hypnotists, can be a powerful tool in the service of behavior change. But because the procedure is portrayed as comedy the public has developed the wrong idea of how it works. The popular misconception that hypnosis compels the mindless subject to obey the suggestion of the controlling hypnotist probably results from the stage demonstration called, the *challenge*—for example: “Your leg is getting heavier and heavier/you can try to lift your leg/but it will be so heavy/that you won't be able to do it.” This sounds like a battle of wills between the hypnotist and the subject, but it is not. In fact whatever happens is produced completely by the subject and is an intra-personal rather than an inter-personal phenomenon. After you have read the explanation, you can experience this classic hypnotic phenomenon by exercising your faculty of imagination with the [Heavy Shoe](#) audio invitation.

As you will see, the script is full of lies, such as “your shoe is made of lead.” In fact your shoe is not made of lead. Scripts such as this are used to demonstrate that simple verbal suggestions can influence the experience and behavior of a cooperative subject. The demonstration is easy to produce, yet can produce humorous or shocking consequences when the subject *acts as if* the reality suggested by the hypnotist were true. Acting as though

an objectively false suggestion were true—e.g., your shoe is made of lead—produces behavior that would appear absurd to an observer, which is why stage hypnosis often produces laughter from the audience who are not asked to buy into the false suggestion.

Barry's Neurotic Trance

But some things are neither true nor false. Are you a hero or a loser? There is no objective answer to that question. Concepts like that exist only within your mind. But how you perform in real-time depends to a large extent upon your subjective reality at that moment—the heroic version of you would react differently than your loser persona. Consider Barry's predicament, he wants, very badly, to perform well, but his self-evaluative perspective evokes the wrong trance:

Barry exhibits a much sharper wit in social environments where he expects to perform well than in situations that evoke his "loser" persona. The appraisal: "I'm a loser," or the expectation: "I will perform well" exists only in Barry's mind and not in the objective world. Nevertheless, his subjective reality influences how he will behave in the objective world. Whether or not he reacts to the snide insult at the office party with a witty come back or humiliation depends to a large extent on his subjective reality at the time. His retort is more likely to be clever if he is in a confident trance than if he is in his "loser" trance. He wants to bring on the clever version of himself and enjoy a social victory for a change, but he expects to be weak and intimidated as usual. Observers who know Barry have their predictions—one expected an embarrassing pause and another expected him to say something stupid. But these expectations exist only in their minds. Whatever Barry actually does becomes part of objective reality, while all the other possibilities fade into oblivion.

It would be good for Barry if he performs well during his crisis. But there is a conflict between his intentions—to be the cool and clever Barry—and his expectation of once again playing the part of the humiliated Barry. Will his expectations or his intentions determine which Barry shows up at the critical moment?

Expectations have the advantage—both Barry and his friends believe them to be objectively true. In fact, from our dispassionate perspective we can see they are merely creative fictions which are neither true nor false. In fact, from my clinical perspective, it is obvious that Barry's only limitation is an artificial one that he created.

Unlike insults and injuries that come from outside and tend to heal with time, Barry's recursive problem has been with him for a long time and continually diminishes his fun, increases his misery, and prevents him from establishing an intimate partnership. Such problems tend not to go away by themselves but strengthen with exercise.

*Be who you are and say what you feel,
because those who mind don't matter,
and those who matter don't mind.*

—Dr. Seuss

A primary goal of the collaboration formed by Barry and his therapist is to help him develop a cognitive structure that is no less representative of the objective world but which elicits a trance that serves Barry better than the one he tends to fall into. Likewise, a primary goal of this collaboration, formed by you, the material in this course, and our staff should you choose to use us, is the same

To review: Mood Disorders are recursive traps, which result from certain perceptual distortions. Depression, Anxiety, and Anger tend to become chronic, because each is based on a thinking error that produces emotional and behavioral consequences that are not only harmful to the self, but reinforce the thinking error.

Meta-cognitive awareness is the technical term for a milestone in personal development, and refers to the appreciation that beliefs and emotions are not expressions of objective truth, but merely passing experiences that are likely to be biased by local conditions. While essential to unraveling the recursive knots of a Mood Disorder, rational understanding is not sufficient. This is the great limitation of all abstract modes of communication about experience, including this course as well as conventional psychotherapy.

The communication between therapist and client is often between the rational processing systems of each. When discussing them, the emotional systems make little rational sense to each. It is clear to both that the client's emotional reactions are often excessive and he or she should change and behave more sensibly. Moreover, it is easy for the client to recognize and dispute pathogenic beliefs with me sitting across the room as a reminder of where to focus attention and with the luxury of sufficient time to think things through. Neither the clinician nor the luxuries of time and cognitive surplus will be available during a high-risk situation.

The "*illusion of state permanence*" refers to the tacit premise that one will always be in the same motivational state as now. As it is for my clients during their therapy sessions, at this moment you probably have access to excellent cognitive skills. If only you had to these gifts when you encounter a high-risk situation in real time, but this is not to be. According to the great American psychologist, Edwin Ray Guthrie, the best predictor of what you will do the next time you encounter a high-risk situation is what you did the last time you encountered similar circumstance. Overcome autonomous pathogenic sequences requires the procedural skill of shifting to a mindful perspective so you can operate the vehicle as intended.

The first thing Barry had to do to extricate himself from his neurotic trap was to question the tacit premise that there is a real Barry. I, personally, have met several versions of Barry, including the clever one and the intimidated one. The particular version that shows up at a given time is the one elicited by the stimulus that has captured his attention at that moment.

Saliency and Suggestion

There are events and there are our reactions to events. Anger is an emotional reaction that prepares the body to fight or flee. The subjective experience that evoked the anger is a creative construction of the limited information our sensory organs provide and is often biased by a habitual mind set. Consider this report by an individual who was working on an anger problem:

During a chaotic situation at an airport ticket counter, someone kicked me in the back of the leg. When I turned around to “confront the asshole,” I confronted a handicapped girl in a wheelchair, which had, evidently, rolled, out of control, down a ramp and hit me. The rage she saw on my face had obviously terrified her. When I realized what had happened, and how my anger had frightened this little girl I instantly felt contrite.

Notice how each of the emotional reactions described above resulted from a creative and biased interpretation of sensory input. An important observation for my client who has a history of getting in trouble when he is angry and feels ashamed of himself when he is contrite.

Your motivational state is largely determined by the stimulus that captures your attention. Some stimuli are more attention grabbing than others. Stimuli that are particularly salient can elicit a state change without your conscious intention. *Stimulus Saliency* refers to how bright or attention grabbing a stimulus is, not necessarily how valid it is. Perceiving a rattle snake at your feet would likely change your motivational state. Even if you really wanted to maintain your focus on this text, it would be difficult to ignore the snake.

The fact that threatening stimuli are highly salient is adaptive. Indeed, we are descended from the organisms that *noticed* threatening stimuli; those who did not react quickly and powerfully are not our ancestors. So a rattle snake in the room with you is both salient and meaningful. But for an individual with snake phobia even the thought of a snake—which is not objectively dangerous—can elicit a powerful motivational state. In this case the snake is salient, but meaningless.

Reward refers to the pleasurable aspects of using an incentive. Reinforcement refers to the effect using the incentive has on future behavior. Reinforcement not only increases the habit strength of the behavioral sequence that produced the incentive, but also enhances the saliency of stimuli associated with the payoff. The Karma of repeatedly experiencing powerful reinforcement is not only the creation of autonomous paths to relapse, but that stimuli associated with getting or using the incentive become increasingly capable of capturing your attention and eliciting unintended trance formation. As a result of their association with the incentive, certain stimuli—persons, places or things—become quite salient. If you allow them to capture your attention they can elicit trances that will distort your perception, motivation and other state-dependent phenomena in ways that are counter to your interests.

Your biology, past reinforcement history, and current social environment determines what is salient. You get to determine what is meaningful. To follow the path of greatest advantage you will have to develop the competence to aim your attention despite the pull of highly salient stimuli that would elicit a pathogenic trance if they captured your attention.

Will's Question

Thinking about yourself and how you feel is likely to evoke state-dependent appraisals that promote negative emotional states. Self-focused thinking is the recursive link between thought and emotions that maintains, disorders of depression, anxiety and anger. It would be better if you did not think so much about yourself. Unfortunately this is difficult to do. Thoughts about yourself and how you are being treated are highly salient. To re-focus the contents of your consciousness toward something that will serve you better ask, **Will's Question: "What is the best use of my attention right now?"**

Whenever you ask Will's Question you create the opportunity to exercise your will by giving yourself the choice of continuing to follow the path of least resistance or to exert the effort required to follow the path of greatest advantage. The effort involves doing what it take for the answer to Will's Question to be the stimulus that influences your current motivational state; this usually involves continuing to redirect your attention back to the target. For example, if I was upset and decided that the best use of my attention right now was to engage in a physical or mental exercise, the decision would not change my current trance. I would have to continually re-direct my attention back to the exercise until I could get into it, because during the first few minutes my thoughts would drift back to whatever was making me upset. There are many possible answers to Will's Question, and you are the best one to choose the target for your attention, and hence the intended direction for state change.

*The education of the will is the
object of our existence.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Intentional Trance Formation

A change in the focus of attention evokes trance formation. The change may occur as a result of the appearance of a highly salient stimulus or because you intentionally changed it by asking Will's Question.

The method of *Intentional Trance Formation* has two parts: The intentional part—that is, deciding what trance is intended—is determined by asking Will's Question; the trance formation part requires continually re-directing your attention back to the answer until trance formation is achieved.

Intentional Trance Formation is one approach to escaping traps that result from the [Soul Illusion](#). The method is simple to describe: To escape motivational states that may promote relapse or to elicit motivational states that promote rational process and behaviors consistent with your core motivation, dissociate from what is going on in the here and now and ask Will's Question. Then focus on and get involved in activities suggested by the answer

Your interests are served when your overt behaviors, as well as your motivation, thinking patterns and other state-dependent phenomena are influenced by your core motivation, rather than by the most salient aspect of your local environment. Purposely aiming your attention to the answer to Will's Question is a robust method for facilitating beneficial trance formation.

Suggestion

Your state-dependent faculties are always biased by your current motivational state, which in turn is largely determined by the stimulus that has captured your attention. Suggestion, the

use of imagination to change your current trance is a method to counter this and other traps caused by the soul illusion. Developing this capability to use the most powerful version of this tool—self-suggestion—requires a creative imagination and the ability to focus your attention for a long enough period to achieve the intended result. The payoff for investing effort to develop the skill and the stamina by working with the trance formation exercises described in this section is escape from the recursive patterns that maintain mood disorders.

When you tell yourself to raise your hand it goes up, but when you tell yourself to calm down, become sexually aroused, or to salivate, you may not get the desired response. This is because consciousness is a property of the Central Nervous System, which operates your skeletal muscles, so you can raise your hand at will, but your passions (specifically the “four Fs of survival, fighting, fleeing, feeding, and sexual reproduction) are controlled by your hypothalamus, which is not subject to direct conscious control.

There is, however, an indirect method by which you can exert conscious influence on your biological responses: Instead of willing the response, aim your attention to the stimulus that elicits the intended response. For example if you want to salivate, instead of telling yourself to salivate, imagine licking a juicy but sour lemon (the same cause-and-effect principle applies to sexual arousal).

Thought Experiment: Evoking a cringe – Take a few moments to relive a time when you embarrassed yourself, you will find that the more vivid the image and the more detail you can conjure up, the greater the cringe effect.

If you were able to experience the cringe, then you successfully initiated *trance formation*—that is, you willfully aimed your attention to a particular stimulus—in this case, an embarrassing moment—in order to produce the intended state change.

Because this is an early exercise and I wanted to make it easy, I used cringe imagery rather than efficacy enhancing imagery, which would have been more useful for our purposes. Special exercises designed to strengthen your ability to use your imagination in an intended way are included in this kit precisely because most people actively resist positive, efficacy enhancing imagery. Some people actually *suppress* images of themselves as competent or successful because they were specifically trained to be modest or self-deprecating. For those who have it, this is a major obstacle to overcome. Below are two sources of bias:

- Asymmetry of Positive and Negative Imagery: Because it is more dramatic and threatening, negative, efficacy deflating imagery is more salient than positive, efficacy enhancing imagery. Moreover, stimuli that promote emotional reaction are more intrinsically salient (hotter) than stimuli that promote self-determination—especially during high-risk situations.
- Bias Against Self-Suggestion: Paradoxically, it is easier to accept a suggestion from a hypnotist—who may know nothing about you or your situation—than it is to accept your own suggestion. Giving positive suggestions to yourself seems like self-delusion. A popular misconception is that there is an authentic you and pretending to be better than you are would simply be an attempt to make yourself feel better at the expense of the truth. In fact, there is no authentic you. The one that shows up at any given

time is the one that is elicited by the local situation. However, if the suggestion comes from the outside—from a stage hypnotist for example—the person may readily accept the suggestion and perform *as if* it were true. It would be beneficial if Barry would accept positive suggestions from the self (that are actually more valid than the negative suggestions he so easily accepts). Sadly, suggestion does not work as well if you believe that positive ideas are just lies you are telling yourself to deny the authentic truth about what a shame-worthy person you really are or how hopeless your situation really is.

Links to audio files that invite you to experience hypnotic and other trance formative phenomena are offered in the hypnotic methods section. Even though you will perform these exercises in a relaxed environment and have the aid of an audio specifically designed to elicit the intended phenomenon, maintaining your focus on the target stimuli—despite internal and external pulls on your attention—requires a kind of mental strength.

Using this method to escape pathogenic trances in real time is considerably more difficult than evoking the intended phenomenon during practice. The high-risk situation will contain salient stimuli that have the power to distort your perception and judgment, and make you vulnerable to relapse. Willfully influencing the course of events during a crisis requires the strength to resist the pull of salient local stimuli and focus your attention in a way that evokes trances consistent with your core motivation. Exercising your faculty of aiming attention as described in the thought experiments listed below will strengthen your ability to resist the pull of salient distracting stimuli.

Exercising your cognitive faculties through selective attention training sculpts your soul in the same way that exercising your muscles through resistance training sculpts your body. In both cases, the desire for good outcome motivates the hard work, and in both cases the progress is often so gradual that the changes are not obvious from one day to the next. Most people find it difficult to tolerate the delay of gratification characteristic of this kind of challenge.

You are not the passenger, you are the ride.

There are many advantages to developing your cognitive and imaginative faculties. For one, covert experience is cheap; real experience is expensive. Thinking through and imagining what would happen if you drove too fast on a slippery road is less costly than learning from direct experience. Taking the time to purposely engage your gifts of rational analysis and creative imagination can prepare you to cope with some of the predictable crises that lie ahead.

The audio and other media included in this online course provide invitations to transformative experiences that will help you change your life's course. The method of Intentional Trance Formation will be described later in this chapter, but first please take some time to gain some familiarity with some classical methods of trance formation. The audio files may be copied to a format that will be convenient for you to play in an environment appropriate for the purpose of the exercise.

Hypnotic Inductions:

[Generic induction.](#) This lengthy induction (about 25 minutes) emphasizes the visual modality. For example, you will create a visual image of a pebble drifting down through a calm and peaceful lake. This is an invitation to intentionally influence the contents of your consciousness. Using your memory and imagination, your task is to create, out of nothing, an image capable of evoking an experiential response. The more vivid and detailed the imagery, the greater its trance forming power. So create a image of this underwater scene with texture and colors and details. Imagine the pebble drifting past the fish and water plants. If your mind wanders away, just bring it back and get into the imagery with as much detail as you can.

[Progressive muscle relaxation.](#) This induction emphasizes the kinesthetic modality. Rather than using your imagination to create visualizations, here you can use your imagination to create physical sensations. We are particularly interested in the sensations of relaxation, because focusing on that **causes** the body to relax.

[Sleep.](#) Hypnosis means sleep. This is an invitation to explore deep trance states including somnambulism. This is a good bedtime induction for those who have sleep difficulties (approximately 21 minutes).

[Clarity.](#) This relatively short (5 minute) induction can be used as an introduction to some of the exercises ahead.

Hypnotic Tools

[Suggestion.](#) This classic hypnotic challenge is useful to practice influencing your subjective reality. This exercise gives you the opportunity to develop the ability to override that natural resistance to self-suggestion and strengthen your ability to actualize your intentions.

[Affirmations](#). Your ability to influence the objective world according to your interests and principles is related to your ability to create a subjective reality that evokes the state-dependent resources required for success. “Psyching yourself up” with affirmations can dramatically improve your ability to cope with crises. This efficacy enhancing audio is a direct appeal to the unconscious to accept the responsibility for the passage from dependence to self-determination.

[Post-hypnotic suggestion](#). This is an imagination enhanced implementation intention (when X, I will Y). A generic example is offered here (When I see the color red, I will revisit my core motivation). Individualized versions are available by contacting our office.

Contemplations

[Ask Alice](#) – Accessing your core motivation through goal identification (Flash media)

[A Dickensian Exercise](#) – Ebenezer Scrooge had an experience one night that changed him forever. A similar experience may change you forever.

[Corruption](#) – A contemplation on the corruptive nature of an incentive that offers pleasure or relief from distress.

Hypnotic Suggestions for Specific Incentives

- [Nicotine](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Substance Use](#)
- [All Incentives](#)

Transformative Audio for Generic Incentive Use Disorders

- [The Journey Begins](#) – This audio uses hypnotic methods to describe to the unconscious the nature of the task ahead and what it will take to achieve good outcome.
- [Red](#) - Post-hypnotic suggestion involving the color: Red.

Transformative Audio for Weight Management

- [The Journey Begins](#) – This audio uses hypnotic methods to describe to the unconscious the nature of the task ahead and what it will take to achieve good outcome.
- [Axioms](#) – Suggestions to elicit realistic motivation regarding unhealthy eating
- [Affirmations](#) – Develop respect for this challenge and for your abilities to accomplish what you set out to accomplish.
- [Post-Hypnotic Suggestions](#) – Implementation triggers set during trance that are to be evoke when specified conditions occur in real time
- [Red](#) - Post-hypnotic suggestion involving the color: Red.

Transformative Audio for Substance Use Disorders

- [The Journey Begins](#) – This audio uses hypnotic methods to describe to the unconscious the nature of the task ahead and what it will take to achieve good outcome.
- [Axioms](#) – Suggestions to enhance the motivation to do what needs to be done.
- [Post-Hypnotic Suggestions](#) – Implementation triggers set during trance that are to be evoke when specified conditions occur in real time.
- [Worry](#) – Post-hypnotic suggestions specifically for problem drinkers.
- [Red](#) - Post-hypnotic suggestion involving the color: Red.

Transformative Audio to Promote Nicotine Cessation

- [The Journey Begins](#) – This audio uses hypnotic methods to describe to the unconscious the nature of the task ahead and what it will take to achieve good outcome.
- [Red](#) - Post-hypnotic suggestion involving the color: Red

The End

Death says, "I'm coming, so live!"
- Virgil

Deathbed interviews suggest that people regret their sins of omission more than their sins of commission. The great tragedy of a neurotic disorder is that it distracts your energies and focus from what is meaningful to you. To explore your core motivation and exercises that promote the emergence of meaning, please [click here](#).

Lost opportunities cannot be recovered. However, you do not have to continue to follow a self-sabotaging path; you can choose a more advantageous direction for your future. Your heroic responsibility is to get yourself to respond to the events that happen in ways that produce good outcomes for you. Paradoxically, this often means to forget about outcomes and focus on performing in accord with your principles in the here and now.

While you are not responsible for falling into this trap or acting in ways that strengthened it (a devilish attribute of recursive traps), now that you are an adult and have the tools you are responsible for acting in accord with your interests and principles regardless of local circumstance. Completing this passage requires that you be both the agent of change [the entity responsible for planning and executing the change protocol] and of the object of change [the entity who is to change as a result of the treatment].

The kit described two complementary sets of tools to help you through the passage: Cognitive methods to help you recognize and expose pathogenic beliefs, and experiential methods, including: *Meta-Cognitive Awareness*, *Mindfulness*, and *Intentional Trance Formation*, will enable you to intentionally influence state-dependent phenomena.

The challenge that faces you is not constant. There will be periods when doing the right thing is effortless. However, you will encounter crises, and performing well at these times is of critical importance. Your task is analogous to a martial artist who must perform well in the ring. In this metaphor your encounters with high-risk situations are your sparring partners, which give you opportunities to test and exercise your intended reactions. Sparring sessions may be exhausting and painful, but their function is to enhance one's ability to perform during the critical moments when good performance is important. Like the martial artist, one of the few things that you can control is how much energy you invest in your preparation.

We are nearly at the end of the text, and there will soon be an opportunity for trance formation as you switch from the intellectual state elicited by reading this material to a different state as you move on to your next activity. If you will it, you can, for a few moments take a meta-cognitive perspective and notice the thoughts and local motivations of this creature you inhabit and observe how they change as you select and get into your next activity. If you will it, you can, for a few moments, awaken from the mindless sequence of cause-and-effect and mindfully follow a path that you create. The author, as well as everyone who loves you, is hoping that you follow your path of greatest advantage rather than yield in the direction of least resistance.

