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I
F*cked
Up.

I'm
Sorry.



EXERCISES
ADDENDUM



Exercises Addendum

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Introduction

*I F*cked Up* contains many interventions and related material from my clinical work to help you:

- a) take personal **accountability**,
- b) gain **insight** into yourself and your life,
- c) better understand the people you know and engage with them more effectively,
- d) refine your **perspective** and way of thinking,
- e) enhance your ability to **contain** and regulate your emotions; and
- f) optimize your overall functioning.

However, I couldn't smoothly integrate certain exercises into the main text without making an already substantial book excessively lengthy. Rather than sell those additional resources separately, I decided to make them available as this *free download*.

If you've read the book, you know how much I value and prioritize **proper breathing** and other **grounding** techniques. (You're also aware that words and phrases in **bold** represent critical concepts, phenomena, realities, and sayings that my patients and students have found particularly helpful.) That is why these essential tools play a prominent role in many of the following Exercises—especially the first four. The remaining Exercises build on core themes of *I F*cked Up* and are designed to help you achieve the **goals** listed above.

Please note that some of the explanations may seem long or complex *at first*. That's because, in reviewing countless similar methodologies presented by others, I've encountered many unclear, inconsistent, incomplete, or otherwise unsatisfactory instructions. I wanted to ensure that no one feels that way about *my* work. If you invest a little attention and effort, you should be able to understand and **master** each intervention just as my patients have.

Although I hope you read my book and benefit from the decades of clinical and academic work it contains, you can understand and complete the Exercises that follow on their own. As I frequently emphasize to my patients and students, it is *your* choice whether to act in your own best interests. For *my* part, the goal is straightforward: to motivate you to **commit** to working on and improving yourself in the ways described throughout *I F*cked Up*.



Just Breathe (aka The “Calm Down” That Actually Works...)

Your breath is a direct path to an optimal state of body and mind.

~breathinginnature.com

There are numerous ways to breathe more effectively than the way most people typically do throughout the day and during difficult moments. Before we explore some of these methods, stand or sit in front of a mirror, wearing either nothing on top or clothes that enable you to see your chest and abdomen clearly. Imagine you're feeling stressed or anxious. Take a deep breath that you would ordinarily take if you wanted to calm yourself down in such a state. What do you see in the mirror?

Unless you've already learned to breathe properly, you'll likely notice your chest and shoulders rising when you inhale. And that's the problem, as you'll soon discover through the exercises below.

We will start with what I consider to be the best method for deep and proper breathing, given the relative ease with which most people can master and perform it: **belly breathing** (introduced in Chapter 3). It will ground and calm you, reduce stress, combat anxiety, relax your muscles, help you sleep better, increase mental clarity and focus, and improve your overall health.

After belly breathing, we will cover additional techniques that offer similar benefits, so I hope you try all of them to see what works best for you in different contexts. You might even choose to seek out more information through resources such as online videos or classes that guide you through the process. In the end, you should find that belly breathing is:

- a) the easiest and most effective way to keep you calm, relaxed, and grounded over extended periods of time; and
- b) the easiest to use in conjunction with the many tools in *IF*cked Up* that require you to be in a relaxed and focused state.

I first learned belly breathing while working at an anxiety clinic. I would say to patients:

You are training your brain and body to do the opposite of what they were programmed to do thousands of generations ago.

That is, when our ancestors' **fight-or-flight sympathetic nervous system** was activated, that usually meant they were in danger; or, they were becoming excited in the presence of something worth fighting for or attaining quickly, such as food or a potential mate. Either way, it would be counterproductive—and possibly fatal—for them to suddenly calm down in such circumstances.

In contrast, the contexts in which you'll employ focused breathing are not life-threatening. They are situations where you're best served by overriding your instincts and containing powerful emotional or physiological reactions to uncomfortable, unpleasant, or overwhelming internal and external experiences.

Belly Breathing

Belly (or abdominal) **breathing** is often used interchangeably with **diaphragmatic breathing**, despite differences between them. Confusion arises because both methods actively engage the diaphragm, the dome-shaped muscle located right above your abdomen. Some practitioners argue that diaphragmatic breathing is superior to belly breathing for your physical health. This is true in certain regards, but belly breathing better maintains the optimal oxygen-to-carbon dioxide ratio in your body, producing many health benefits as well. Also, it's easier to do, which is paramount when trying to **contain** powerful inner states, especially in moments of turmoil or distress.

Another difference is that diaphragmatic breathing (described below) causes the chest and rib cage to expand, though this should be minimal, and your shoulders should never rise. With belly breathing, your chest and shoulders shouldn't move at all, even though many who teach it say the chest can move, as long as it does so less than your belly. Please aim for no such movement while performing the following steps, which are first presented in their simplified form from *IF*cked Up*:

- 1) Stand or sit in front of a mirror, ensuring you can see your chest and abdomen clearly. If you sit, you can lean back slightly and relax your shoulders, although many people prefer to sit up straight. You can also lie on your back with your knees bent. Just make sure you're comfortable.
- 2) Take a deep breath **in through the nose**—calmly, slowly, and deeply—while **inflating** your belly like a balloon. Try to **keep your chest and shoulders still**. If they do move a bit at first while you become familiar with the mechanics of **belly breathing**, that's okay.
- 3) Hold the air in your belly for about one second.
- 4) Breathe **out through your mouth**—preferably through pursed lips—slowly, calmly, and steadily until just before you run out of air. As you do this, allow your stomach to **deflate** back to its resting position.

And here is the more detailed explanation:

- 1) Make yourself comfortable in one of the following ways:
 - a) Stand or sit in front of the mirror, which enables you to see and understand the mechanics of breathing via your diaphragm more easily and effectively than if you're looking down while learning this new technique. If sitting, you might want to lean back and slump your shoulders, like you're slouching; this helps prevent them from being tense and facilitates breathing into the belly. Others, however, prefer to stand or sit up straight, which is technically better for breathing.
 - b) Lie on your back on a flat surface with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, as if you're doing old-school sit-ups. Or, you can elevate your legs and rest them on something like a couch, with the bottom half of your legs parallel to the floor and your thighs perpendicular to the floor, creating a 90-degree angle where they connect at the knees. Look at the ceiling so you're not bending your neck; you can place a small rolled-up towel under your neck for support. You should find it easier to do the exercise in this position because if you sleep on your back, you breathe through your belly naturally. This is a reflection of your **parasympathetic nervous system** in action, restoring your health while you sleep.
- 2) You can put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest to help ensure you keep your chest still while expanding and deflating your belly in the following steps. If lying down, placing a book on your belly (over your belly button) really drives home what you're trying to do.
- 3) With your mouth closed, **breathe in through the nose** *calmly, slowly, and deeply*, while **inflating** your belly gently like a balloon.
 - a) This is a sign that the diaphragm is contracting and moving downward, allowing more air to enter the lungs.
 - b) It may take a few tries to get this part right, as you're probably used to doing the *opposite* when taking what you thought were deep breaths: mistakenly drawing air into your chest while your belly gets sucked in (unless lying on your back). You'll eventually get it with a bit of practice.
 - c) Remember, try to **keep your chest and shoulders completely still**. If they move a bit, that's okay at first; but you should eventually be able to breathe without moving them. This is much easier to do while lying down.
- 4) After breathing in, **hold the air in your belly** for about one second. This is not essential, so if it causes any discomfort or difficulty, you can skip this step.
- 5) **Breathe out through the mouth**—preferably through **pursed lips**—slowly, calmly, and steadily until just before you run out of air. As you're doing this, your stomach should **deflate** back to its approximate resting place. To assist in the process, you can push your belly in gently with your hand as you exhale.
- 6) **Pause briefly** after you exhale—about a few seconds, or whatever is comfortable for you—before beginning the next cycle.

That's it. You should take at least 10 of these breaths whenever you can. Ideally, you will belly breathe 2–5 times per day for 5–10 minutes each time (some people go up to 30 minutes). As explained in Chapter 3, if you make a habit of doing this while in a relatively calm state, you'll be far more likely to remember to breathe properly for as long as it takes to calm or ground yourself in challenging situations or when experiencing adverse internal

activity. Also, the more frequently you breathe this way in general, the greater the improvements you’ll notice in your physical energy and mental well-being.

And, unlike meditation, yoga, or **Mindfulness**, which are all valuable practices with numerous benefits when done consistently, you don’t need to do anything special like create a mental or physical space to belly breathe. You can do it anywhere at any time; I always do it when driving, which helps maintain my sanity whilst surrounded by selfish, incompetent, excessively slow, and reckless motorists.

To reiterate an earlier point, belly breathing is the most accessible and sustainable technique in adverse circumstances. It’s also the easiest to coordinate with other tools in *I F*cked Up* because once you get the hang of it, you can perform this breathing with little thought and effort, especially compared with other special breathing methods.

To make things even simpler and easier, you’ll still benefit greatly from belly breathing through only your nose in a calm, slow, deep, and rhythmic manner, with or without the one-second hold. You can do this via only your mouth as well, but aside from certain breathing exercises intended for different purposes than those discussed here, inhaling through the mouth is generally not as good for you as inhaling through the nose. In fact, mouth breathing can activate the **sympathetic nervous system**, which is the opposite of what you want, although that risk is minimal if breathing in softly.

Perhaps the best time to use this simplest form of belly breathing is while you’re trying to fall asleep, as that’s when you want to think as little as possible. You can also combine it with the *Scan Yourself to Sleep* and *Control the Uncontrollable* Exercises, which are designed to help you sleep better.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

After you feel reasonably comfortable with belly breathing, you might want to challenge yourself further and derive even greater benefits by learning the more difficult **diaphragmatic breathing**. The best way to appreciate the main difference between these two techniques is to **visualize** the following contrast between how the diaphragm acts when you inhale:

- a) With **belly breathing**, the diaphragm pushes the air *down into the belly*.
- b) With **diaphragmatic breathing**, the diaphragm pushes the air *not only down but also out toward your sides and back, and even up toward your chest, filling your lungs in all directions* and expanding your rib cage.

Now you know why I stated previously that diaphragmatic breathing causes your chest to expand. However, your chest shouldn’t rise (much) like it does when you take a big breath into your chest, which is usually accompanied by your shoulders lifting. These are signs of *shallow* breathing, which is the opposite of what you want to do.

To transition from **belly breathing** to **diaphragmatic breathing**, do the following:

- 1) *Make yourself comfortable*. You’ll probably do best if you lie down in one of the positions described earlier.
- 2) Perform a few belly breaths until you’re ready to try diaphragmatic breathing.
- 3) On the target breath, pause one or two seconds before you’ve reached maximum inhalation. You can in fact do the next two steps with your abdomen filled completely, but some people find that too uncomfortable and difficult. It’s up to you.
- 4) *Visualize* directing the breath you’re holding *outward and upward, expanding your lungs and rib cage* (as depicted earlier). To help, place your hands on both sides of your body, touching both your ribs and abdomen.
- 5) With the air still in your belly, take one more breath slowly *through your nose*, guiding the air and *expanding your lungs and rib cage* as you’ve just visualized. You should feel your abdomen and ribs gently pressing against your hands.
- 6) Make sure you *don’t raise your chest*. If it expands a bit, that’s fine.
- 7) Exhale as you would with belly breathing, allowing your body to *return to its natural resting position*.
- 8) After you feel comfortable performing Steps 3–6, on your next inhale *direct the air downward, outward, and upward simultaneously*. If you place one of your hands on your belly, while the other one remains on your side, you should feel the expansion happening in unison.
- 9) Aim for about 6–10 *calm, slow, deep, rhythmic* breaths per minute.

If you're having trouble with any of these steps, you can modify your diaphragmatic breathing in the ways indicated for belly breathing, aside from breathing in through your mouth. That's because most people find they inhale more intensely during diaphragmatic breathing to facilitate the multi-directional circulation of air (especially when they first begin practising). There is consequently a greater risk of triggering the **sympathetic nervous system** with mouth breathing.

With regular practice—ideally 3–5 times for 3–10 minutes per session (or longer if you can)—you should be able to perform diaphragmatic breathing reasonably well, if not master it. Then you'll be ready to incorporate it into the following breathing exercises or even more complex methods, such as those associated with various yogic traditions.

4-7-8 Breathing

American physician Andrew Weil developed **4-7-8 breathing**, which he calls a “natural tranquilizer for the nervous system,” based on the ancient yogic practice of pranayama. It is performed in the following manner:

- 1) *Make yourself comfortable* standing, sitting, or lying down, taking into consideration the benefits of each mentioned previously.
- 2) Press the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth, behind your teeth where you can feel a fleshy ridge, and leave it there relaxed throughout the exercise. If you have trouble with this part, you can skip it, although that will reduce the impact of the exercise somewhat.
- 3) With your mouth closed, **inhale through the nose silently** for a count of four, using **diaphragmatic breathing**. You can use whatever pace feels comfortable, as long as it's consistent throughout the exercise; for most people, each count is about one second.
- 4) **Hold your breath** for a seven count.
- 5) **Exhale forcefully through your mouth** for an eight count, making a “whoosh” sound.
- 6) Repeat these steps four times, working up to eight cycles as an eventual target.

Try to perform this exercise at least twice per day. Dr. Weil insists you will notice a significant improvement in your mood—especially anxiety—and physiological state after doing it consistently for four to six weeks. And he's right.

While at the previously mentioned anxiety clinic, I learned a few simplified variations of 4-7-8 breathing. They are somewhat less effective than the original version but still produce an approximation of most of the intended results, especially if you incorporate no more than one (or two) of the following modifications:

- a) You don't need to touch the roof of your mouth with your tongue.
- b) You don't need to exhale forcefully; you can do so softly or “normally.”
- c) You can do belly breathing instead of diaphragmatic breathing.

If you choose to do only belly breathing and not diaphragmatic breathing, why would you not improve your mind and body even more by simply adding the 4-7-8 count? It's pretty easy to master. You can similarly use belly breathing for the following exercise, with the understanding that it will be slightly less effective than what you can achieve with diaphragmatic breathing.

Box Breathing

Box breathing (also known as (four-)square and 4-4-4-4 breathing, as well as other variations) was popularized in modern days by U.S. Navy SEALs. I’ve seen many people perform the exercise improperly, as their chest and shoulders rise. As you know, this indicates that they’re engaging in much shallower breathing than they should. If you follow these steps correctly, you should soon discover the benefits of box breathing:

- 1) Make yourself comfortable, standing or sitting straight up. You should position yourself in front of a mirror to observe your form.
- 2) With your mouth closed, **breathe in through the nose** calmly, slowly, and deeply for a four count; for most people, that’s four seconds. You should employ diaphragmatic breathing because the goal is to **fill the lungs to capacity**. As mentioned, you can use belly breathing instead, but the results are not as impactful.
- 3) **Make sure your chest and shoulders don’t rise**, although you’ll likely see your chest expand, which is fine.
- 4) After inhaling, **hold the air in your lungs** for a four count.
- 5) **Breathe out through the mouth**—preferably through **pursed lips**—slowly, calmly, and steadily for a four count.
- 6) After you exhale, **do not breathe** for a four count before inhaling again and starting the next cycle.

Try to practise box breathing one to three times daily, for 1–5 minutes each session. Once you feel reasonably proficient doing this exercise, you can extend the count to five or six for each component of the cycle.

Physiological Sighs

American neuroscientist Andrew Huberman asserts that you can reduce stress and anxiety even more effectively than belly or diaphragmatic breathing with only one to three **physiological sighs**: a technique from the 1930s, which he popularized more recently. Given how quickly they produce their powerful effects, you should use them whenever needed. As with the other breathing methods described above, the more you practise these specialized sighs, the greater the mental and physical benefits you’ll experience.

After watching multiple videos of Dr. Huberman discussing physiological sighs and reading as much as I could about it, I understand why some people do it improperly. It seems like he’s encouraging you to breathe into your chest, despite instructing you to inhale deeply. The following instructions explain how to perform the exercise properly, although there’s variation in some of the figures due to discrepancies in the information provided by different sources:

- 1) With your mouth closed, **take a slow and deep diaphragmatic breath through the nose** for approximately 2–4 seconds, filling your lungs to about 50–80% capacity.
- 2) About one second or less after the first breath, take a second **shorter and sharper breath through the nose** for about 0.5–1 second, filling the rest of your lungs as much as possible. You should once again aim to **engage your diaphragm**, although this time it will be considerably less pronounced than with the first breath.
- 3) About one second or less after the second breath, **breathe out through the mouth** like a **sigh** for as long as you can, typically anywhere from about three to eight seconds. You will notice this exhale differs significantly from those in the other breathing methods described earlier.

The Proof Is in the Grounding

Are you skeptical of the power of proper breathing? If so, a striking way to convince yourself is to watch a suspenseful or scary scene from a movie or online video after you’ve mastered one of the preceding techniques. The typical response in such contexts is to tense up in anticipation, bracing for whatever is about to happen. This makes sense in real-life dangerous circumstances, as the body is preparing itself to fight or flee from the potential threat. In contrast, a scary video obviously poses no actual danger. The same can be said for most situations in which you’ll employ proper breathing to contain powerful negative internal reactions.

Do the special breathing before watching the scene, ensuring that you feel reasonably relaxed. Then, focus on maintaining proper breathing, slowing down your physiology, and relaxing your body throughout the scene. If you do this correctly, you will notice that whatever you’re watching has far less of an impact than it normally would.

You can achieve a similar effect in a cold environment, in which you ordinarily tense up automatically in preparation for the impending “shiver response.” This reflex is designed to provide your body with heat to combat the cold. It also constricts your blood vessels, limiting the flow of blood to various parts of your body. If you practise resisting the instinct to tense up and instead relax your muscles, you won’t feel as cold. Although belly breathing helps me immensely in this regard, you might find diaphragmatic or box breathing more effective. But you need to be vigilant because your body will keep trying to tense up, as evolution programmed it to do.

If you don’t have easy access to cold spaces, you can do the same exercise while putting your hand or foot in ice water. Try it first without doing anything special, and then do it again after breathing properly for a minute. If you continue to regulate your breath and relax your muscles, you will see that you can tolerate the cold water much more easily and for far longer than the first time. (Wait a few minutes between attempts, so that your body doesn’t simply habituate to the cold water; that would be cheating like “The Human Helicopter” in Chapter 1’s *Raising the Bar and Setting the Stage*.)

The Final Word

I have outlined several breathing techniques that can significantly enhance your cognitive, psychological, emotional, and physical well-being both in the moment and over the long term. Remember, even the simplest form of belly breathing, which takes relatively little effort to master, is an invaluable asset in that regard. And if you want to take things further, there is also breathwork to energize, to access and activate emotions, and to go deep within your **Shadow**. Some breathing practices even make your body release its own DMT and send you on a naturally engineered psychedelic trip!

Scan Yourself to Sleep

It can seem impossible to exercise healthy control over your life if you're constantly exhausted or feeling other ill effects of impaired sleep. Disruptions to your sleep cycle cause some of the greatest harm to your mental and physical health, especially with respect to stress, depression, and anxiety. To help you sleep better, you can combine the various interventions below with the simplest form of **belly breathing** described in the *Just Breathe (aka The "Calm Down" That Actually Works...)* Exercise.

Body Scan Meditation

One goal of Mindfulness is to help you become better attuned to your body. **Body scan meditation** is a key way to achieve this and is also associated with many mental and physical health benefits beyond improved sleep. The instructions below guide you through a similar type of practice designed to **enhance awareness of your body, promote physical and mental relaxation, and help you fall asleep**. Please note that a few steps deviate somewhat from Mindfulness principles and practices. If you prefer Mindfulness techniques in those moments, that's perfectly fine.

You might also prefer the simpler variations of the **body scan** exercise described afterward. Perhaps you'll forego the complete exercise and perform only the traditional Mindfulness-based aspects of **focusing on, connecting with, and accepting your body and its functions—including your thoughts and other mental operations—without judgment**. Whichever path you choose, I hope you'll read through all of the following steps to familiarize yourself with the various ways you can exert greater control over your body, mind, and sleep:

- 1) While lying in bed—preferably on your back, but if this is uncomfortable, choose a position that works best for you—begin whichever simple form of **belly breathing** you can perform *easily and with little thought*.
- 2) Close your eyes and **visualize your body**. Some people need to look at their body first in order to initiate the process, which is fine. If you have a hard time doing this, especially if you're too tired and feel like you cannot exert the necessary mental energy, you can proceed to the alternative exercises described afterward. However, you should still incorporate some of the following steps, which help **ground** you.
- 3) Try to **eliminate or minimize the "noise" in your head**, for instance thoughts or songs that keep playing incessantly. One way to do this is to **focus on only the sound of your breath**. You can also **envision a "cartoon version" of your breath** going in and out of you, like a gust of wind.
- 4) To take Step 3 further, **focus on the sensation of your breath** as it enters and exits your nose or mouth. You can heighten this feeling while exhaling if you're able to incorporate any of the following without disrupting your attempt to relax:
 - a) Shape your lips so that you blow downward onto your bottom lip or chin.
 - b) Position your head so that you blow onto your chest or shoulder.
 - c) Place your hand near your nose or mouth and direct your breath toward it.
- 5) Another way to ground yourself in the moment even more is to **focus on how your body feels** lying on and making contact with whatever's beneath you (e.g., mat or sheet and mattress), as well as the blanket on top of you, if there is one. There are two versions of this step, which you can do for as long as you can manage—e.g., for 10 seconds near the beginning, periodically during the exercise, or continuously throughout the process:
 - a) Concentrate on a large body part like your torso, upper back, or whole back.
or
 - b) Direct your attention to smaller body parts, such as a foot, finger, shoulder, etc. **This is the core process of body scan meditation**. You don't need to scan your entire body at this point, as you will be doing that in subsequent steps. However, some people find that simply doing so in a methodical manner—e.g., starting with your toes or feet and slowly working your way up to your head—helps them fall asleep. Others skip this step because they find it interferes with later ones. Or, they perform variations of it in the modified exercises.

- 6) An additional consideration when visualizing is deciding whether to:
 - a) Continue to **picture yourself in your bed**.
 - or
 - b) **Imagine yourself in a soothing, pleasant, calming, and peaceful place**, for instance, lying on the beach or very soft grass, or floating in water or space. A location with personal resonance is usually best.
- 7) If you didn't previously focus on various body parts, you'll do so now, but in a special manner. First, direct your attention toward one of your feet. You can start with a toe, but most people find it easier to use the whole foot, which is assumed for the rest of the instructions. **Visualize and feel your foot physically**, e.g., by slowly rubbing it against the bed or blanket, bending and spreading it out, or wiggling your toes. The goal is to **immerse yourself in this moment of imaging and connecting with your foot**.
- 8) You can **deepen your immersion by imagining your foot getting increasingly warmer**. If done properly, you will actually feel your foot become warmer. Some people can generate the sensation of heat so well this way that they don't need to implement the special technique described in Step 10, but most find greater success using that extra tool.
- 9) **Take your time and don't stress** if it's not going perfectly. You may need to stop and try again at a different time. Just make sure you're always trying to:
 - Take things slowly.
 - Feel comfortable and relaxed.
 - Use as little mental energy as possible.
- 10) Once you feel adequately grounded and connected to the moment, it's time to take your visualization to the next level. First, **imagine that your foot is bathed in heat** from either:
 - a) a sun beam or other source of warm light;
 - or
 - b) an endless stream of warm water, sand, mud, or other substance that can serve the same purpose. I prefer warm mud, like in rejuvenating treatments offered at luxurious spas, which will be used in the subsequent steps.
- 11) **Focus on the feeling of the warm mud as it pours over your foot**. You can let the mud keep flowing for as long as you need in order to feel fully absorbed in the process. When you're ready to move to the next body part (let's say the ankle), visualize the mud having covered and enveloped your entire foot.
- 12) Before proceeding up your leg, **feel the weight of the warm mud on your foot**. Stay with that feeling until you can (almost) feel the weight in real life; if you're under a blanket, this can help create the effect you're trying to produce. If you're using something other than mud, you can try the following:
 - a) With sand, imagine it becoming wet as it piles up on your body, thus making it feel heavier.
 - b) With water, visualize your foot becoming submerged and sinking in it.
 - c) With the sun or other sources of light, envision your foot either melting or simply becoming heavier and heavier.
- 13) **Repeat Steps 7–12** with your ankle and then with your shin, knee, thigh, and so on, making sure you **don't rush the process**.
- 14) Once you reach the top of your leg, do the other leg in the same manner.
- 15) After both legs have been covered, proceed up your groin, torso, chest, and neck, at whatever pace works best for you.
- 16) If you're still awake at this point, continue the process with each arm individually, starting from the shoulder and working your way down to the fingertips, or vice versa.

If you do this exercise properly, there's a good chance you'll fall asleep before reaching your chest or neck. Ironically, you might inadvertently prevent this if you get confused as you begin to drift off and worry that your mind is wandering from the task at hand. Then, you may reflexively try to refocus, jolting yourself out of your

drowsiness. With practice, however, you'll become more adept at recognizing the difference between losing focus and sleep taking over naturally during a **body scan** or the other exercises below.

What if you're not feeling sleepy after scanning most of your body? You may need to work on smaller body parts or remain in each location longer, ensuring that it truly feels heavier before moving on to the next one. You can also begin in different locations (e.g., a fingertip or hand) or progress through your body in a different order; choose whatever is easiest to imagine and enables you to become most absorbed in the moment and in the process.

Alternatively, you might try some of the following modifications and techniques. While they may not always put you to sleep, they do help you relax, centre, and ground yourself: key ingredients for quality sleep.

From Body Scanning to Zeroing in on the Zzzs

When you don't feel capable of expending the mental effort required to scan your entire body in the ways outlined above, especially if you're trying to fall back asleep, you can instead **perform the first 12 steps from above on only one body part**. My preference is the hand, due to its versatility and utility. For example, say you're having difficulty visualizing or maintaining focus during the exercise. In order to help direct your attention toward your hand, make its image clearer, or centre your mind and body, you can:

- wiggle your fingers;
- rub your blanket;
- exert a little pressure on your thigh with one or more fingers; or
- position your hand closer to your head or touch your face (because people tend to find that the closer a body part is to the eyes, the easier it is to envision it).

Even if you have no trouble with the exercise, consider *resting your hand on your leg or belly*, preferably under the weight of a blanket. Enhancing tactile sensations this way, particularly the body-to-body contact, strengthens your physical and psychological connection to your hand, thereby enriching the process.

Of course, you can select any body part you prefer. Just keep in mind the preceding principles. Also, please note that this simplified technique won't necessarily make you feel drowsy. However, focusing on a single body part does help *ground you and settle your mind*, especially if you use your hand to feel the sensation of your belly expand and deflate rhythmically. At the very least, it bolsters the calming effects of belly breathing. And in most instances, it should increase your likelihood of falling asleep.

From Metal Head to Sleepyhead

Another modification of the original exercise is simply to **imagine only your head feeling heavier and heavier, sinking into your pillow**. Of course, you will employ simple **belly breathing**. And each time you exhale, *visualize and experience your head getting heavier and sinking further into your pillow*. Take your time to truly feel and fully immerse yourself in this sensation, which should make you feel at least a bit drowsier. You can also combine this simple method with one of the techniques below to enhance the effect.

Gazing Into the Mindscape

An alternative to focusing on your body in order to control your thoughts while trying to sleep is to **direct your mind's eye outward**. You can use this tool on its own or alongside other steps designed to ground you or to help you fall asleep. We begin with the simplest version, followed by a few modifications that require a bit more effort but can also be effective:

- 1) As with the original **body scan** exercise, close your eyes, lie in a comfortable position, and **perform the simplest type of belly breathing**.
- 2) **Gaze as far as you can into the distance** of your "natural mindscape"—i.e., whatever you see when you close your eyes—and **choose one specific spot**.
- 3) **Keep focusing on that spot** while you continue belly breathing, doing your best to **ignore any changes that may be occurring within your mindscape** outside of the chosen spot.
- 4) If the chosen spot transforms or moves, that is normal. Just "**keep your eyes on it.**"

To ensure proper form during this exercise, please keep in mind these final two points:

- a) Determine which eye position is most effective: looking up, straight ahead, or down. Most people find that looking straight ahead or down is the most natural and comfortable, as these positions put less strain on the eyes. However, some prefer looking up because it makes their eyes feel heavier, which can produce the sensation of sleepiness.
- b) If your mindscape is ever “blank” or completely dark, apply gentle pressure to your eyes to generate patterns, shapes, or colours (called phosphenes), and use one of the resulting images as your focal point. Here are some ways to produce phosphenes:
 - Lay the crook of your arm over your eyes.
 - Cover your eyes with a warm, damp, rolled-up hand towel.
 - Scrunch your eyelids tightly.
 - Roll your eyes upward toward your forehead while keeping your closed eyelids relaxed or “stretched out”; this may also help induce sleepiness.

Inner Space Truckin’

You can **augment your mindscape gazing** by incorporating the following additions:

- a) **Visualize heading slowly toward the spot** you’ve chosen.
- b) If you’re able to do so, you might **envision travelling through a peaceful scene**, such as mountains, a dessert, the sky, or the middle of the ocean.
- c) Alternatively, you can **imagine a dark (enclosed) location**, such as a tunnel, cave, or outer space. The advantage of an enclosed space is that it narrows your visual focus, which in turn can *enhance your mental focus and ability to stay grounded*.
- d) Another engaging option not only capitalizes on the benefits of narrowing your field of vision but also helps **foster a sense of movement**: Visualize travelling along a track, rails, moving sidewalk, tube, vortex, “energy bridge,” flying carpet, or other means of delivering you to your target.

The Ground of Silence

In contrast to the preceding visual techniques, Steps 3 and 4 of the original **body scan** exercise describe how to use the sound and sensation of your breath to quiet your mind and help centre yourself or fall asleep. You can assist this process by **slowly and calmly repeating a simple, single-syllable word in your mind** that you stretch out to match the timing of your breath. Please use whichever of the following methods works best for you with the least mental effort:

- a) Use one word when you inhale (e.g., ooonne, innn, sleeep, peeeacce) and another when you exhale (e.g., twooo, ooouut, nowww, pleeeasse).
- b) Use the same word for *both* the inhale and exhale, or for *only one* of the breaths if you can focus on the sound of air during the other.
- c) Instead of using a word, hum silently in your mind as you breathe in and/or out, or mentally say “Om” [Aaaaummm], drawing the sound out as people often do when meditating.

Frankly Say Relax

One thing that makes it harder to fall asleep or to wake up refreshed is tensing up your body. Whether doing a sleep exercise or not, you should check to see if your body is fully relaxed when trying to sleep. You will usually find one or more body parts—often your jaw—are tensed up or positioned in a way that works against your sleep goals. Simply **loosening your muscles or adjusting your position increases your probability of falling asleep**. Of course, simple **belly breathing** helps in this regard.

Improving Your Sleep Begins with Improving Your Mindset

The final component to better-quality sleep is the *proper mindset*. You might be surprised by the effectiveness of simply telling yourself a few times in a *calm, composed, and confident* manner that you're going to have a solid sleep (or whatever phrasing resonates with you). This can even positively influence your dreams, as you'll see in the *Control the Uncontrollable* Exercise.

Equally important is *maintaining a healthy attitude* if things don't go as planned while using any of the tools from above. Try not to get discouraged, as frustration will only work against you. *Remain calm* and continue to *regulate your breathing* as you repeat any problematic steps, go through an entire exercise again, or try various modifications. If nothing helps you fall asleep, simply **accept** that it didn't work this time and resolve to try again another night. With **consistent** practice and experimentation, you'll discover which techniques maximize your chances of success.

Also try not to dwell on the toll you think your lack of sleep will take. If you make yourself anxious or upset worrying about, for example, exhaustion or a bad mood undermining you the next day, it becomes even harder to relax and fall asleep, creating a vicious cycle. Instead of getting worked up, calmly tell yourself something like, "Okay, it's late and I can't fall (back) asleep. I'll try a few (more) relaxation techniques for the next 15 minutes. If none of them works, I'll try something else such as light reading or doing some work for 30 minutes."

If you do engage in an alternative activity, be careful not to get so engrossed that it counteracts your efforts to become drowsy. For example, instead of reading, you might listen to a podcast (preferably through earbuds), which requires far less mental energy. And when it's two people talking to each other, this has the psychological effect of making you feel less engaged—and thus less need to be alert—than when only one person is speaking to "you." If, however, you'd rather read, avoid electronic devices because blue light from screens is implicated in sleep disturbances and other health complications.¹

However you choose to cope with problems falling (back) asleep, it is important to *keep things in perspective* and *calmly* plan how to get through the next day. If you're too tired to think clearly, commit to coming up with some ideas in the morning. At the very least, you may be able to find some comfort in knowing that, in the worst-case scenario, you can take a sick day. If it's impossible to avoid school, work, or other obligations, give yourself permission to leave early if necessary. Just make sure to consider ways to mitigate or address any issues that might arise from your premature departure.

If you must tend to your commitments all day, can you fit in a power nap at some point? It's usually more feasible for students, but employees can sometimes find ways to achieve this much-needed respite. If that isn't possible, take comfort in knowing that a rough day due to sleep deprivation typically leads to better sleep that night or the next.² Reminding yourself of this while struggling to fall asleep can help ease your mind and prevent you from making things worse.

Some Final Thoughts on Your Final Waking Moments

Sleep experts caution against activities in the bedroom, particularly your bed, that could stimulate you mentally, such as engaging in screen time or work requiring cognitive exertion. Instead, you should condition yourself to **associate this location with only rest and sleep** (with exceptions for behaviours that ordinarily precede sleep, like sex or reading a book that doesn't take much mental effort). You might also consider a quick internet search for recommendations on adjustments to other variables that can improve your sleep hygiene, for example:

- the timing of your sleep routine—not only what time you go to bed and wake up, but also when you last eat, drink, exercise, work, use electronic devices, etc.—as well as relevant specifics of these various factors, for instance your diet, the kinds of drinks you consume, how much stress or excitement you expose yourself to at night, and so on;
- the lighting, noise, temperature, and scents in your room;
- the type and quality of your mattress, pillow, and bedding.

¹ e.g., <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/blue-light-has-a-dark-side>

² Unless you're experiencing insomnia or some other serious chronic sleep disturbance. In that case, you may need the help of a relevant professional, sleep medications, or natural remedies such as CBD/CBN products or melatonin supplements. Please do your due diligence before commencing any of these options to reduce the risk of any potentially harmful outcomes or other unintended consequences.

In the end, while sleep might seem elusive at times, you can facilitate this essential biological function by combining an ***adaptive, proactive, and optimistic mindset*** with the tools above. The next Exercise, *Control the Uncontrollable*, advances your abilities further, teaching you how to **gain a sense of mastery over even your dreams**.

Control the Uncontrollable

A central theme of *I F*cked Up* is *exercising control over yourself and your environment*, with the understanding that **your environment includes your mind**. Building on *Scan Yourself to Sleep*, the following exercises address phenomena typically believed to be beyond conscious influence: disturbing dreams and nightmares. Originally developed to cope with recurring nightmares, these techniques can be applied to any kind of nocturnal intrusions that interfere with quality sleep. As with the breathing and sleep exercises, use whichever methods fit your specific needs, always beginning with these two steps right before trying to fall asleep:

- 1) Engage in **simple belly breathing** from the *Just Breathe (aka The ‘Calm Down’ That Actually Works...)* Exercise until you feel reasonably calm.
- 2) Tell yourself a few times in a *calm, composed*, and **confident** manner that you’re going to have a restful sleep. Here are some examples of things patients say to themselves, deities they worship, their personal higher power, “sleep spirits,” the universe, or other benevolent entities or forces they hope will aid their slumber:
 - I’m going to have a refreshing sleep tonight, without any interruptions.
 - Please let me have a peaceful sleep, free from any scary, upsetting, or troubling dreams that could cause me to wake up prematurely.
 - I’m asking for a solid night of sleep without any dreams involving violence, loss, betrayal, humiliation, intolerable pressure, chaos, helplessness, failure, or any other disturbing themes that might jolt me awake.

Recurring Nightmares

The first technique below trains you to **wake up before your dream turns dark**. But if done properly, it can prevent the nightmare from occurring at all. The key is to **enter sleep in a positive and relaxed frame of mind**—free from fear, anxiety, or concerns about what dreams may come.

- 1) In a *calm* and *confident* tone, tell yourself something like, “I won’t let any nightmare interrupt my sleep,” or “Last night was the last time I’ll ever have that nightmare.”
- 2) Select a scene from your recurring nightmare that consistently appears before things escalate. From that scene, *vividly picture* a specific object, person, landmark, or other distinct element that’s always present and easy to identify as the “marker” of the impending nightmare. As you do this, tell yourself *calmly, confidently*, and *assertively* that **if you see that marker, you will wake up**.

If you would rather not risk struggling to fall back asleep, you can **prime yourself to take control of the nightmare** instead of waking up. Embracing the *calm and confident mindset* from the previous method, *envision an empowering scene* like the ones described below. Repeat this **visualization** several times to reinforce that, as soon as you recognize trouble is looming, **you will take over** the dream in the following manner:

- a) *Visualize* yourself obliterating everything in sight with a powerful weapon like a machinegun, laser, bomb, or EMP blast.
- b) You might prefer a more direct and visceral approach—for example, slashing and hacking away at everything around you with a sword, axe, Wolverine’s adamantium claws, etc., or smashing and tearing everything apart with your bare hands, like the Hulk.
- c) If you dislike violence, take a more comedic approach, for instance absorbing everything with a “proton pack” from *Ghostbusters*.
- d) An even less violent method is to escape the scene dramatically—for example, vanishing in a cloud of smoke or getting whisked away by a tornado you control, like Storm from the X-Men.
- e) You can extend the imagery to give yourself more time to *regulate your emotional and physiological state*. For example, with the first option, you could imagine manifesting a huge arsenal of weapons, like the iconic scene from *The Matrix* when Neo orders “Guns—lots of guns.” Then visualize strolling through the endless rows of gleaming firepower, *calmly* and *confidently* arming every inch of your body, feeling stronger and more in **control** with each weapon you select.

To clarify, you are not expected to act out any of the preceding scenes in your nightmare. That would be lucid dreaming, a complex technique involving conscious awareness and intentional control during sleep, which is beyond the scope of *I F*cked Up*.¹ Fortunately, most patients indicate that simply establishing a *calm* and *confident* mental state before falling asleep is sufficient to ward off problematic dream content—often after only one attempt.

Unpredictable Bedtime Bedlam

If your unwelcome dream content occurs randomly, or you simply want more restful sleep, you can still use the same methods designed for recurring nightmares, with these modifications:

- a) There are obviously no “markers” of looming unpleasanties to use to wake yourself up or to prepare yourself for what’s to come, so you’ll skip Step 2 from the *Recurring Nightmare* exercise.
- b) You can still engage in the alternative pre-sleep visualization of **taking control of potential nightmares** in one of the violent, non-violent, or humourous ways described above. Although you won’t have a recurring scene to draw from, you can use either a recent or particularly memorable upsetting dream, or create your own scenario with generic antagonists.

Once again, you are not preparing for an actual dreamscape conflict. Rather, you are helping cultivate a *calm, relaxed, confident, and positive* mindset: the kind that greatly increases your chances of an uninterrupted, refreshing night’s sleep.

Intrusive Visitors of the Night

Another common type of sleep disturbance is the appearance of particular individuals in your dreams. Common examples include people or animals you wish were still in your life—like deceased loved ones or the one that got away (I’ll refer to only humans below)—or those you wish you had never met, such as a narcissistic ex or a boss from hell.

Although some might appreciate seeing the former type of guest in their sleep, those who bring it up in therapy find their presence unsettling or even distressing. That’s because their re-emergence serves as a painful reminder of what the patient has lost and interferes with their efforts to move on without them. They typically express guilt or shame over their understandable desire to avoid the emotional torment these dreams provoke.

The following guidelines describe how to manage such apparitions calmly and respectfully before you go to sleep (followed by instructions on how to deal with past or present hostile visitors). Throughout the exercise, feel free to express yourself either aloud or in your head—whatever feels right to you:

- a) Remember to begin with simple *belly breathing* and a *reassuring message* to yourself about the positive sleep experience that awaits you. Maintain this breathing for the duration of the exercise and repeat the soothing message once or twice, including at the conclusion of these steps.
- b) In a *calm, composed, and confident* manner, *thank the person* for wanting to remain in your life.
- c) *Reminisce* over a few things you *appreciated* about them or a particularly enjoyable memory—only if doing so evokes positive feelings as opposed to painful ones.
- d) *Gently and lovingly* let them know they no longer need to reach out to you in this fashion, as you’d rather honour their memory and your connection with them *in your own way*.
- e) Further explain in the same tone that if they do visit you again, you will *respectfully disengage* by either waking up or vanishing from your dream (but not in the dramatic fashion described for recurring nightmares).
- f) Consider *incorporating a meaningful object* into your pre-sleep ritual, such as a photograph of the person. Look at the object as you thank them for wanting to remain in your life, while *embracing positive memories and feelings*.
- g) Maintaining the same *calm, composed, and confident* tone from the beginning, *thank them* for understanding your need to move forward *on your own terms*.
- h) *Bid them farewell*, assuring them and yourself that your request in no way diminishes your feelings toward them.
- i) If you’re using a memento, gently put it away as a *symbolic act of closure*.

¹ If you’re interested in learning about or trying to master lucid dreaming, you can start with Stephen LaBerge, one of the most prominent names in the field—e.g., his 2009 book, *Lucid Dreaming: A Concise Guide to Awakening in your Dreams and in your Life*.

As with recurring nightmares, the key to ridding your dreams of unwelcome guests is to fall asleep in the right mental and physical state. To reinforce this goal, you can supplement the preceding steps with relaxation techniques from the *Scan Yourself to Sleep* Exercise.

If the nocturnal interloper is a current or former adversary, you still perform the first two of nine steps from above, with the following modifications:

- a) You say something like, “Thanks for appearing in my dreams, Bob. Just so you know, the next time I see you, I’ll cut your head off; I have no more use for you.”
- b) Make sure to deliver your message in a *calm* and *pleasant* manner, no matter how harsh the words may be.
- c) If it helps you stay composed, you might opt for a more *amicable tone*. As an example: “Good evening, Bob. Maybe you feel you have unfinished business with me, but I disagree. Please stay away from my dreams because I’ve moved on and see no need for further communication. Thank you for understanding.”
- d) If you’re concerned about maintaining your composure or heart rate, *speak as briefly as possible* and *avoid saying anything that could rile you up*. It can be something as simple as, “Hi Bob, I have to get ready for bed now.” Or, “Good evening, Bob. Please pay close attention to what I’m about to do.” You then proceed to one of both of the final two steps.
- e) If you can remain calm while doing so, *visualize taking control* of the interaction with your visitor in one of the violent, non-violent, or humorous ways you learned for recurring nightmares. Politely say something along the lines of, “Good night for the final time. Have a great life (or death, if they’ve already passed).”
- f) Conclude the exercise by repeating to yourself a *reassuring message* similar to what you said at the outset about having a pleasant sleep.

Lessons My Nightmare Taught Me

In addition to the techniques described above, you can transform unpleasant dreams into productive experiences in the same way I help patients derive value from even the scariest nightmares. I apply the same process to enjoyable dreams when someone asks me to analyze them. I begin by claiming:

I’m going to give you the best interpretation of your dream. It may not be the most accurate or correct interpretation, but it will be the best.

Can you reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements and understand how I can make such a hyperbolic assertion?

I explain that regardless of what happened in their dream or nightmare, my goal is to help them access and harness as many of the following benefits as possible—whether relating to themselves, their circumstances, people and events in their life, or any other aspect of their internal and external experiences:

- fresh **insights**
- positive messages
- more adaptive **perspectives**
- sources of inspiration and motivation
- previously unknown information or other **psychic** (i.e., cognitive, emotional, or unconscious) material
- new or deeper understandings
- opportunities to process problematic psychological or emotional issues
- pathways to **personal growth**

To illustrate my approach, consider my patient “Bob,” who reported recurring nightmares featuring disturbing ghosts in various frightening locations. While recounting one scenario, he became visibly distraught. He described feeling compelled to enter a haunted mine, despite feeling terrified. He interpreted this as a taunting reminder that he had no control over any aspect of his life. He also expressed shame over approaching a menacing ghost deep in the mine because he similarly felt powerless to resist the urge. Although he couldn’t remember what the ghost said to him, he assumed it threatened him before he suddenly woke up in a panic.

There are myriad ways to analyze that nightmare, especially given the many potential symbols in addition to the mine and the ghost, which I've omitted for brevity. However, I focused on only one: Bob's decision to enter the mine. He resisted my framing, insisting that he felt forced to go. In fact, he added that he felt paralyzed, essentially being dragged into the mine against his will.

Invoking "the master" of dream analysis himself—Carl Jung—I countered Bob's objection by explaining that dream interpretation is a highly personalized and subjective process, aimed at **personal growth** and self-improvement, rather than a rigorous scientific discipline. As long as we respected the principles of the methodology, we had considerable latitude in interpreting his dream.

Bob agreed to hear me out with an **open mind**. I first reiterated my assertion that, regardless of how the dream felt, we should view his decision to enter the mine and approach the ghost as signs of courage and a willingness to learn. I further explained that, although he might consciously feel fear, his **unconscious** was urging him to confront and overcome that fear. Combining these two ideas, I encouraged Bob not to fear the ghosts but rather to actively seek them out in his dreams—because they held valuable messages to share with him.

Though skeptical, Bob did **commit** to this **reframe** and incorporated it into his pre-sleep ritual, welcoming the ghosts and the wisdom they offered. I count him among my greatest successes in dream work, as he soon reported that:

- a) The nightmares stopped.
- b) His "relationship" with the ghosts turned positive, and he looked forward to the insights they provided.
- c) He frequently drew inspiration from his dreams and grew more ambitious, focused, and engaged in his waking life.
- d) His outlook, psychological well-being, and physical health improved markedly.

When I share Bob's story with other patients, many are as skeptical as he was at first about the possibility of such a transformation. Some even seem to question the veracity of my claims. I do not begrudge you if you share similar doubts. I will simply ask if you're willing to adopt the same open-minded, inquisitive, and self-empowered stance as Bob and the many patients after him. If you do engage with your dreams in the ways described above, I am confident that you too will discover how profoundly they can challenge, guide, and change you.

Final Notes on Ending the Night on a Positive Note

At the risk of belabouring the point, remember that the goal of all of these exercises is to relax your mind and body as you drift off to sleep in a calm, optimistic state. This significantly reduces the likelihood of nightmares or other threats to a restful night. Most people complete their pre-sleep ritual in less than a minute, especially after the first few tries. Even if it takes a bit longer or requires some trial and error to find what works best for you, is that not a reasonable investment, given the payoff? If you commit to the process and trust in it, you will soon be able to exert control over your nightly journey along what Freud called "the royal road to the unconscious."

Snap Out of It

Many of the interventions in *I F*cked Up* involve **controlling** or altering your mental, emotional, or physiological state. One simple but effective method is to keep a thick elastic band around your wrist that you snap when necessary. This produces brief, stinging pain that can:

- jolt you out of an undesirable or **maladaptive** state;
- short-circuit unhealthy or unproductive thought patterns such as excessive **self-criticism**, harsh **self-narratives**, obsessions, rumination, and intrusive ideation;
- trigger endorphins that help counteract or mitigate emotional pain or other distressing feelings;
- interrupt **reflexive** or seemingly uncontrollable maladaptive behaviours aimed at reducing **anxiety** or distracting you from unwanted cognitions, memories, feelings, urges, impulses, or physical sensations;
- disrupt dissociative episodes (described below), if applied early enough.

Some patients are able to produce these benefits without even snapping the band. Simply seeing it serves as a visual cue to **contain** their maladaptive internal processes or to resist their conditioned avoidant, self-limiting, or harmful behavioural tendencies.

Unfortunately, when such issues are linked to **obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**, they are typically too powerful to overcome with a mere visual prompt. However, a few patients have been able to use the desire to avoid physical pain as a deterrent against giving in to destructive OCD urges. So, if you are burdened by this debilitating mental health condition, take heart in knowing that you may be able to manage your symptoms without “snapping yourself out of it.” If not, I hope you’ll accept that **committing** to this technique makes far more sense than continuing to be ruled by the malevolent force that is OCD.

An even more challenging psychological phenomenon to combat is dissociation, whereby you feel disconnected psychologically and/or physically from your sense of self, inner experiences, or surroundings. In such a compromised state, you should not expect the sight of an elastic band to spur you into mentally muscling your way back to reality. But it might remind you to “snap yourself out of it,” with the sharp pain creating a temporary buffer against the psychological forces at play, providing an opportunity to **ground** yourself in the moment.

Grounds for Relief

Grounding yourself—staying anchored in the present—is one of the most effective ways to cope with anxiety, which often stems from and fuels escalating fears and catastrophic projections about the future. It is also the primary goal of **Mindfulness**, with **proper breathing** (described in the *Just Breathe (aka The ‘Calm Down’ That Actually Works...)* Exercise) serving as the most important technique. Most grounding methods involve physical touch or intentional focus on something, like the examples below:

- Squeeze a flat, smooth stone in the palm of your hand or between your fingers. (Or use a small object that holds special meaning for you, either organically or through techniques discussed in the *Man, Those Symbols...* Exercise.)
- Pinch or squeeze your ear lobe.
- Stare at your hand, another body part, or a nearby object.
- Sit down and focus on the feeling of your bare feet flat on the floor.
- Scrunch your toes repeatedly on a plush carpet (thank you, *Die Hand*).
- Gently stroke your forearm or another body part.
- Slowly and gently sniff a soothing fragrance like a scented candle or something that reminds you of a time you were in a calm, comforted, or pleasant state.
- Slowly and calmly recite something meaningful, like a mantra (e.g., “I am calm; I am present; I am fine”), or repeat your name, the current date, your exact location, what you’re doing at that exact moment, etc.

You can also use the **5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique** to ground yourself:

- 1) *Look around* and identify **five** things you can *see*.
- 2) *Touch or feel* **four** things around you (e.g., the fabric of your chair) or on your body (e.g., your arm or socks).
- 3) *Listen* for **three** distinct sounds. (You can also make sounds if you cannot find three different ones—for instance, hum or clap.)
- 4) *Perceive* **two** *smells/ scents/ odours* in your environment. (If you have difficulty with this step, you can take a deep breath and focus on the sensation of breathing, as described in *Body Scan Meditation* from the *Scan Yourself to Sleep* Exercise.)
- 5) *Notice* **one** thing you can *taste*, whether something currently in your mouth (you can eat or drink something in the moment) or the aftertaste of something you ate or drank earlier. (If you absolutely cannot do this, *imagine* your favourite taste.)

Tolerate the Intolerable

As noted earlier, **grounding** is an essential component of Mindfulness. Another integral element of Mindfulness, as well as Acceptance-based interventions, is that you **observe and analyze your internal and external experiences in a non-judgemental manner**, as emphasized throughout *I F*cked Up*. Doing so requires you to **tolerate the discomfort** of the myriad unpleasant realities that life throws your way, along with the thoughts and feelings they trigger—rather than avoiding, ignoring, denying, or lying to yourself about them.

This goal is embodied in the following **Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)** intervention designed to demonstrate and build distress tolerance, particularly for individuals with **borderline personality disorder (BPD)**:

- 1) **Breathe deeply and steadily** for 10–30 seconds, and then do your best to maintain that rhythm during the next two steps.
- 2) Place an ice cube in your hand and *direct your attention* to the uncomfortable—and probably painful—sensation it creates.
- 3) No matter how much you want to drop the cube, *keep holding it* until your hand **habituates** to the cold and you barely notice it as the ice melts away completely.

I like this ice exercise because:

- a) It serves as a visceral, powerful metaphor for your capacity to endure psychological or emotional pain, or any other unpleasant internal and external experiences.
- b) It helps you develop the ability to tolerate such unpleasant inner states rather than instinctively trying to avoid or escape them.
- c) It is a highly effective technique to **ground** yourself in the present moment.
- d) It can deliver a “shock to your system,” much like snapping the rubber band on your wrist or splashing cold water on your face, especially if you grab one or more cubes without bracing yourself or breathing properly.

Oh Snap! I Can Use These Techniques Even for That?

Although the preceding interventions were discussed in the context of serious mental health issues such as dissociation, OCD, BPD, and anxiety, their utility extends far beyond managing debilitating symptoms. At their core, these techniques are designed to trigger a rapid change in your internal state to help you function more effectively or resist maladaptive motives, inclinations, or drives.

For example, if you’re “stuck in your head,” ruminating or obsessing over something, *shift your focus to physical sensations* such as the feeling of your breath on your hand or your feet on the ground. This can redirect your attention away from the all-consuming thoughts and reorient you to the present moment. You can also engage with your immediate environment to *stimulate your physical senses*: for instance, by asking your partner for a quick shoulder rub, petting your dog, taking a shower, or using the techniques below.

As another example, suppose you plan to exercise after work but feel tired when you get home. You consequently want to lie down, scroll through social media, snack on junk food, drink, get high, or do something

else far less productive than exerting yourself physically. In such moments, snapping a rubber band, grabbing some ice, splashing cold water on your face, or doing something physical on the spot such as a few squats or jumping jacks can disrupt the urge to give in to those lazy or hedonistic impulses.

Often, resisting such temptations for only a few seconds is enough to override a self-defeating tendency. Perhaps the most extreme illustration of this principle can be found at bridges known for suicides: Barriers, signage, and crisis phones are installed in order to interrupt the urge to jump. The obstruction, distraction, or prompt to consider alternative actions is sometimes sufficient to shift the person away from overwhelming despair or a seemingly irresistible determination to die long enough—which might be no more than a few seconds—to prevent them from carrying out an irreversible act in that moment.

Returning to the more common contexts above, the brief pause gives you the opportunity to initiate a more adaptive behaviour. With **consistent** repetition, this healthier action—and its accompanying cognitive, emotional, and physiological processes—creates new neural pathways that gradually solidify into lasting habits, ultimately replacing the counterproductive automatic responses you’ve chosen to interrupt.

The ability to redirect your attention and connect with the present moment in order to enhance your well-being truly is a “**superpower**.” If you want to develop this invaluable skill, a quick search online will reveal a variety of grounding techniques to supplement the methods described above. Choose those that resonate with you, but keep an **open mind**; you may be surprised by which ones prove to be most effective.

Freeze the Scene

As discussed throughout *IF*cked Up*, many of our behaviours are **reflexive** or **unconscious**. Fortunately, you can often avoid **maladaptive** tendencies by exerting a bit more effort to **contain** problematic impulses or other potentially destructive inner forces. To do this, you must be prepared to *acknowledge and take full responsibility* for your feelings, motives, intentions, words, and actions. The following example illustrates a method I use to help patients arrive at such a state of **genuine acceptance** and **accountability**:

In the middle of a minor argument with his girlfriend about her wanting to borrow his car, Bob suddenly mentioned that one of her friends had an amazing ass. Based on his telling of the story, he could not justify bringing up the bodacious butt in question, as it had nothing to do with their dispute.

I told Bob that we were going to explore what had happened in an unusual way, but he should play along. The following setup and questions serve as a template for this exercise, which you will learn to apply to yourself with any necessary modifications. You can also use it with others, if you want to be known as someone who can get people to examine their actions like no one else:

- 1) Imagine we can go back in time and **freeze the scene** right before you mention your girlfriend's friend's butt. I ask what you're thinking and feeling in that exact moment. What's your *honest* answer?
- 2) I know your comment wasn't premeditated; you just blurted it out. But let's pretend now that you do intentionally decide to say it. **What are you hoping to achieve?**

During the intervention, I *speak slowly*, using the *present tense*, and adopt a "hypnotic" voice to help the patient reexperience the moment rather than merely think about it superficially. If they struggle to "return to the scene" in earnest, I borrow from the Emotion-Focused Therapy technique of **Systematic Evocative Unfolding** mentioned in the *What am I Thinking?* Exercise. Namely, I prompt them to **visualize** the incident by asking the following in the *present tense*, explaining that they don't need to answer me; they just need to recall the scenario in question as vividly as possible:

- As you look around your surroundings, what do you see?
- What time of day is it? How bright or dark is it?
- Who else is there? Where are they? What are they wearing? What are they doing? What emotions, intentions, or other such things are they conveying through their facial expressions or body language?
- Do you hear any background noise or other particular sounds?
- Do you smell anything that stands out?
- Is there any taste in your mouth?

With the patient immersed in the memory, speaking as if it's happening now, we examine their misstep *without judgment*. I foster this mindset by highlighting that at least some of what we're dealing with is **unconscious**. And as explained in Chapters 11–16, **the unconscious is often irrational and is always beyond our control**—until we learn to engage it effectively. I emphasize that **we should not blame ourselves for what transpires in the unconscious**. But we must find the courage and resolve to:

- 1) **Accept** that these **psychic** processes are occurring for a reason.
- 2) Endeavour to benefit from the previously unacknowledged thoughts, feelings, and memories we discover through *honest self-reflection*.

In Bob's case, returning to the scene enabled him to remember something he had forgotten when initially recalling his transgression: Shortly before he made the problematic comment, his girlfriend had said something he perceived as an insult to his intelligence. When we examined what she actually said, Bob was able to admit that he had been oversensitive. He further acknowledged that he was insecure about his intelligence because his older brother was extremely smart, excelled in school, and had forged a very successful career. Making matters worse, their parents often compared the two. Bob was consequently self-conscious and touchy about anything even hinting at his own limitations in these areas.

Trusting my repeated assurances that **this exercise is not about blame or judgment**, Bob tentatively lowered his defences further and prepared for the next stage of the exercise: confronting his true motive for making the comment. When asked, he **introspected** and reluctantly admitted that he must have wanted to get back at his girlfriend for what was likely an unintentional minor slight. He added that he would never admit this to anyone else, as he didn't want to be seen as insecure, petty, mean-spirited, or cruel.

I assured Bob that he was under no obligation to disclose such things to anyone. Fully admitting them to himself, however, was essential. It was then *his decision* whether to summon the courage and integrity to apologize to his girlfriend and try to make up for his **resentment**-fuelled comment. I added that he had the option to acknowledge his wrongdoing and make **amends** without being entirely honest.

Honesty for Me, But Not (Necessarily) for Thee

Do you take issue with that last part? If so, please reflect on why that is. I am not claiming you're wrong if you don't like my comment about (mild) deception. But please try to infer why I said it.

I made that statement based on the way Bob described his relationship with his girlfriend, especially after the incident in question. There was a high risk that admitting the real reason for his comment could jeopardize his efforts to make things right. So, is it wrong for him to present a believable—but partially false—narrative that effectively addresses and assuages her concerns, makes her feel better, and mends and ultimately improves their relationship? Recall from Chapter 17's section on apologies, *The 17th Key: Saying Those Three Magic Words*, that **what you say to someone is irrelevant; what matters is what they hear (or see)**.

I stressed that if Bob decided to go down the path of deception, *he would need to be completely honest with himself* regarding his motives for doing so. Although the following two goals are not mutually exclusive, there is a huge difference between misleading someone in order to:

a) avoid upsetting or harming them in some way

versus

b) serving your own interests.

If you can't tell the difference, or **if you (unconsciously) rationalize your reasons for being dishonest, you are not taking accountability and are thus impeding personal growth**.

How would you characterize leaving out certain details that could plausibly be considered not (absolutely) essential to the matter at hand, in order to avoid complicating things and potentially causing unnecessary stress, conflict, or other negative outcomes for the other person? In most such cases, an honest appraisal of the situation would likely reveal that the deceiver benefits nearly as much as, if not more than, the person they are ostensibly protecting—by minimizing problems for themselves. That is fine, as long as they don't deceive themselves into believing their motives for withholding the information are purely selfless.

Remember, **the purpose of freezing the scene is to improve yourself** by gaining a better understanding of the reasons behind your words and actions, and taking full responsibility for them. That can happen only if you embrace total **self-honesty**, whether you're analyzing a problematic interpersonal interaction or you wish to gain some **insight** into your social functioning.

As an example of the latter goal, you can freeze the scene to examine particular tendencies from childhood by following these steps:

- 1) **Breathe properly**, as instructed in the *Just Breathe (aka The “Calm Down” That Actually Works...)* Exercise.
- 2) Tell yourself that you’re adopting the neutral or “objective” **scientist-based perspective** and approach (from Chapters 7, 11, 15) in order to explore certain aspects of yourself *without judgment*.
- 3) Remind yourself that everyone has numerous maladaptive traits and tendencies that were conditioned or “programmed” into them from a young age, so there is no need to be overly critical of yourself. Most importantly, very few people have the courage to take the kind of **personal accountability** you’re embodying in this exercise, so you should embrace **self-compassion** throughout the process.
- 4) Close your eyes and think back to an incident you can remember reasonably well. (Although most scenarios involve other people, that does not need to be the case.)
- 5) If you are having difficulty visualizing the scene, ask yourself the questions from above to help evoke and revive it in your mind:
 - As I look around my surroundings, what do I see?
 - What time of day is it? How bright or dark is it?
 - Who else is there? Where are they? What are they wearing? What are they doing? What emotions, intentions, or other such things are they conveying through their facial expressions or body language?
 - Do I hear any background noise or other particular sounds?
 - Do I smell anything that stands out?
 - Is there any taste in my mouth?
- 6) Once you feel sufficiently immersed in the scene, ask yourself the following two questions in the *present tense*—answering in the two different ways described in step 7:
 - a) Right before I say or do the thing I’m examining here, what am I thinking and feeling?
 - b) What am I hoping to achieve through my words or actions? You ask this question under the pretense that you acted with intention in that moment, even if that was not really the case.
- 7) When answering those two questions in the *present tense*:
 - i) First, try to imagine what you would say as the child you were back then, even if you were quite young.
 - ii) Next, infuse the child you were back then with your current intelligence, knowledge, experience, and maturity to provide a presumably different response.

Answering the same questions from two radically different ages usually reveals, for instance, underlying issues you have with another person, with people in general, or within yourself that you have not addressed (adequately). That’s because, as with other techniques such as the *What am I Thinking?* Exercise, it produces insights by getting you to **take a different perspective from your own**. You can build on this self-awareness by repeating the process during different periods of your life, either choosing unrelated events or focusing on particular themes: e.g., dealing with authority figures, coping with failure, handling rejection, or other forms of **challenges** and adversity.

When performing the exercise, pay close attention to your thoughts and emotional reactions to the answers you provide as a child, adolescent, and adult. All else being equal, you should be more understanding and forgiving of yourself at younger ages with respect to questionable motives or other unproductive internal operations, as well as the associated behaviours—because you are obviously less mature, experienced, and capable in your earlier years. If you do not distinguish between your functioning at earlier versus later years, this is an indication that you harbour unhealthy beliefs and expectations toward yourself that you can explore further with the tools in *I F*cked Up*.

Strip Freeze

Some people find the exercise’s multiple steps daunting. Fair enough. Would you be willing to try a stripped-down version instead? If so, ask yourself (soon) after you say or do something:

What was I hoping to achieve?

You’d be surprised at how much you can benefit from reflecting on your everyday experiences through such a basic, yet important, question—a question few people ask themselves. To gain invaluable personal insights in the simplest manner possible, make sure you:

- a) Embody the **success-oriented mindset** of curiosity and self-improvement.
- b) Answer *honestly*.
- c) *Do not judge yourself harshly*—no matter how petty, immature, self-destructive, vindictive, ridiculous, shameful, or otherwise maladaptive your motives might be.
- d) Grant yourself *compassion* and *forgiveness*.
- e) **(Re)frame** negative or even mortifying experiences as an **opportunity** to *learn, grow, and improve your functioning*.

Wrapping Up the Scene

Whichever version of the preceding techniques you use, sometimes a few additional questions are required to uncover the most revelatory insights. This typically occurs when you truly can't find any reasonable explanation or justification for your actions.

For example, my patient (Bob) was out drinking with his friends one night. He had promised his girlfriend he would be home by 11 p.m., as they had plans the next morning. He also assured her he wouldn't repeat his bad habit of drinking too much and getting into various kinds of trouble, which his girlfriend usually found out about—often to her shame or embarrassment, for instance when he'd flirt with other women. Although Bob didn't drink excessively that night, nor did he make a fool of himself, he did stay out two hours later than promised without letting his girlfriend know. He also failed to answer his phone or respond to her texts when she tried repeatedly to reach him.

During the exercise, based on what I knew about Bob's situation, I said:

You're not drunk, and you can see your girlfriend calling and texting you many times. You promised to keep an eye on your phone in case she tries to reach you, so you know she'll be either very worried or furious if you don't respond. *What are you hoping to achieve* by avoiding her?

When Bob answered, "I just want to hang out with my boys a bit longer," I responded:

You know she'll likely be okay with that if you simply let her know, especially since you're not drunk and can reassure her that you'll still fulfill your commitments in the morning.

After a few more unproductive exchanges, I changed gears and, drawing further on what I knew about Bob and his girlfriend, said:

Okay, maybe it's not really about what you're hoping to achieve. Could it be that, deep down, you don't really care what your girlfriend thinks or how she might react? After so many warnings from her without any real consequences, maybe you're simply not afraid to defy, disappoint, or upset her?

Bob reflexively tried to deny that at first. I looked at him without judgment and gently asked him to take a moment to consider that there may be some truth to my speculation. In the safe environment created through the exercise, he was able to reflect more honestly. He admitted that he'd taken his girlfriend for granted and often didn't take her feelings into consideration, especially when her needs conflicted with his own, or even with just his selfish desires.

Such an insight would ordinarily lead to a discussion about the role **resentment** played in my patient's blatant disregard for his girlfriend. (Recall from Chapters 12 and 14 that resentment is both "*relationship cancer*" and the most important **Plinko** "bottom slot" in relationships.) However, Bob had entered such a state of introspection that he was fully engaged in the process of exploring his "**narcissistic**" traits and behaviours. (To be clear, he was not a narcissist and did not meet criteria for **Narcissistic Personality Disorder**: topics discussed extensively in *Volume 2*.)

If you embrace the same kind of determined and **open-minded** mentality Bob did—as do other patients who **commit** to freezing the scene properly—you should soon recognize a core Truth emphasized throughout *IF*cked Up*, particularly in the *100% Responsibility Exercise*: **Self-honesty is liberating, empowering, and the key to a much more fulfilling life.**

Non-Binary Thinking

*I F*cked Up* contains numerous references to the **maladaptive** nature of *dichotomous* or *binary* thinking, particularly **all-or-nothing/black-and-white thinking** and **splitting**, covered in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively. These **cognitive distortions** involve seeing things in rigid, absolute, or extreme terms—e.g., as “all good” or “all bad”—with no nuance, middle ground, or “grey areas” in between.

Another stark illustration of how binary-type thinking can compromise functioning is people’s tendency to act as if only one thing can be true at once, despite logically understanding otherwise (discussed in Chapter 11’s *Mutually Exclusive Destruction*). This often manifests as a reluctance or inability to acknowledge a particular fact, reality, or possibility due to an irrational, and perhaps **unconscious**, fear that doing so will negate or diminish something else they want to believe.

As one such example, my patient “Lola” was upset that her boss had humiliated her in front of colleagues. He reportedly went far beyond singling her out for a mistake. He was unnecessarily rude, condescending, and insulting, making numerous derogatory comments and insinuations not only about her work ethic but also about her character. Yet, the fact remained: She did make a mistake—a serious one that was in her best interest to analyze and learn from. However, she was so caught up in her understandable hurt, shame, and anger that she did not seem to appreciate that her recent misstep could be grounds for termination if she didn’t “shape up and play nice.”

Appreciating that **timing is everything** when dealing with such matters (covered in *Volume 2*), I first responded with **empathy**. Later, when Lola appeared to be more receptive to discussing her blunder, I broached the issue by saying:

One of the most common logical fallacies is that, despite understanding that **more than one thing can be true at once**, people often act as if this isn’t the case.

I next explained that nothing I was about to say would take away from the terrible way her boss had treated her.

How do you think Lola would have reacted if I had raised the topic without that preamble? Keep in mind that she was no longer in the same negative mood state as when she had initially described the incident.

Most likely, Lola would have reflexively become defensive and disregarded or forgotten about my earlier support, irrationally feeling I was siding with her boss. That’s because her “**child brain**”—the emotional, instinctive, irrational, or unconscious part of the mind—would have taken over the moment I mentioned her mistake, triggered by the emotionally charged memory of her boss humiliating her.

By beginning with a general observation about *other people* falling prey to a logical fallacy, a topic that had nothing to do with Lola and thus would not set off her defenses, I was engaging Lola’s “**adult brain**.” This is the mature, rational, analytical part of the mind that operates based on facts, logic, and reality.

I was also priming Lola not to react poorly to what she was about to hear. Otherwise, she would be demonstrating the same flawed thinking she had just acknowledged as nonsensical and thus undesirable in others. (This priming technique is discussed in *Volume 2*.)

Notwithstanding these strategies, I had to stay alert for any signs that Lola was starting to feel criticized or “attacked.” Even in safe, nonjudgmental environments, **the child brain can be activated easily**, especially when long-standing emotional wounds, personal insecurities, or neuroses are involved.

Lola’s story highlights perhaps the greatest problem with binary thinking:

- 1) It is often fuelled by an inability to take full **personal accountability**.
- 2) It prevents you from being able to take full personal accountability.

Fortunately, *I F*cked Up* describes various ways to own your flaws and missteps, beginning with putting yourself in the right frame of mind. As you may recall, most of those techniques involve **containing or creating psychological distance from unpleasant or disturbing thoughts and mental images, so that your emotions and physiology do not overpower rational thought**.

As a fan of irony, I enjoy achieving similar goals by transforming binary-type thinking into a powerful therapeutic tool, when applicable. Specifically, I construct and present binary comparisons that **constrain an issue to only two manageable components at a time**. This framing prevents you from getting caught up or lost in,

and potentially overwhelmed by, other factors that may or may not be relevant. This can be seen most directly with:

- **A or B decisions** (from Chapter 8's *Narrowing the Path to Freedom and Success*), and
- **Dichotomous containment** (from Chapter 14's *The Plinko Perspective*).

I also use binary comparisons to help people gain new or deeper perspectives on important issues.

For example, imagine you recently turned down a promotion at work. Most people would simply ask why you did that. While that's a fair question, there's a good chance that your response will be a surface-level **Plinko** "peg" rather than a "bottom slot," making it less insightful or beneficial than it could be.

If I were discussing the situation with you, I would borrow from **What was/is the worst part of that?** in Chapter 15's *Putting the EQ into Empathy* and ask, "What was *the main reason* you didn't accept the promotion?" This phrasing is more likely to elicit a meaningful answer we can work with and learn from.

However, you might have difficulty arriving at the most valid answer to an open-ended question like that. If so, and assuming you've previously mentioned several factors that could have contributed to your decision, what do you think about the following type of question regarding one of those factors:

Did you refuse the promotion because you were concerned about the extra responsibilities?

Although that seems like a reasonable inquiry, many people will acquiesce and automatically respond with "Yes" to such leading questions, even when other answers may be more accurate.

Accordingly, when I have enough information, I frame the question like this:

What was the main reason you didn't take the promotion: You thought you couldn't handle the extra responsibilities, **or** you were planning on quitting soon and didn't want to leave your boss in a lurch?

In contrast to the previous yes/no question, which can prompt uncritical agreement, this "**A or B**" format tends to facilitate thoughtful analysis before people respond. If neither option is the best answer, they typically provide the correct one—a far less common outcome with other types of questions.

This enhanced processing and engagement results from the question's structure, which directs the person to **hone in and reflect on two specific aspects of the context in question**. Also, comparing these two elements creates a different kind of **perspective** than if they were to consider only one factor, whether that factor is asked about explicitly or arises as their answer to an open-ended question such as "What's the main reason you ____?"

I most frequently apply binary comparisons to situations that patients have struggled with or are currently facing, eliciting the aforementioned superior perspectives by asking:

What is/was worse about [the problem]: **A or B?**

One common context for this question is ugly breakups. I have compared, for example:

- Lack of closure versus having wasted so much time remaining in the relationship.
- Loss of personal support versus loss of financial support.
- Losing the relationship with the other person's family versus hearing "I told you so" from multiple friends and family members.
- Failing to break up with the other person first versus intrusive memories of being humiliated publicly.

As before, patients readily let me know if either of the options does not resonate with them. In such cases, the *forced choice framing* (i.e., "A or B") usually prompts them to identify more impactful and insightful factors. When the choices presented do represent the two worst aspects of the issue, comparing them the way I do promotes better processing and exploration of not only each factor but also other relevant elements of their experience. Again, these positive outcomes are less typical with other types of questions.

Another technique I use with two factors is asking patients to **assign weights** to each of them (as described in Chapter 13's *Weight, What?*), which leads to further examination of the issue. Staying with the present example, I would say:

Pretend these are the only two reasons you didn't accept the promotion; or, if there are better reasons, use those instead. To represent **how much each of them influenced your decision**, divide 100 points between:

- a) You thought you couldn't handle the extra responsibilities.
- and
- b) You didn't want to leave your boss in a lurch.

The values patients provide are entirely subjective and can fluctuate from day to day. However, an answer like "85:15" is meaningfully different from "50:50" or "60:40." Whatever answer they give sets the stage for further exploration, whether about a single dominant factor or other relevant variables they mention during the discussion. And this usually leads to one or more critical Plinko "bottom slots."

To Compare is Human

In addition to what's explained above, why do you think binary comparisons enhance our ability to deal with complex matters? The reality is that **comparisons, contrasts, and context shape much of how we perceive and process our experiences** mentally, psychologically, and emotionally (as discussed in Chapter 4's *Self-Interested Perspectives from the Podium and Platform* and elsewhere). This also occurs on neurological and physiological levels, as many of the receptors in our brain and sense organs are designed to detect *changes* in stimuli—e.g., their intensity, activity, position, or movement—as opposed to the stimuli themselves.

To illustrate these principles, consider the following:

- A sound seems louder or quieter depending on how noisy the surrounding environment is.
- You can easily distinguish between a 1 kg and 5 kg weight, whereas you probably cannot tell whether a 200 kg object weighs more than a 192 kg one, even though the 8 kg discrepancy is twice as large as in the first comparison.
- A 5°C (40°F) day in the summer in Toronto will seem freezing cold, while the same temperature in the middle of winter will feel mild or balmy.
- An unexpected \$1 surcharge on your coffee will likely upset you more than a \$10 increase on a ticket for an international flight.

The converse of these examples is also true: **Thinking about your experiences without a point of comparison can lead to a skewed perspective.** That is why I often share stories in therapy about other patients (always ensuring confidentiality). Making sure not to sound like I am directly comparing or minimizing the patient's issue, I recount the other person's story as compellingly as possible. The goal is to pique the patient's interest, draw them out of their own head, and encourage them to consider someone else's predicament. This **perspective shift** helps them return to their own experience with fresh insights, much like the *What Am I Thinking?* Exercise.

Another benefit of these disclosures is that when hearing other people's stories, patients do not feel personally targeted. They consequently have no reason to raise their psychological defences consciously or unconsciously. This enables them to truly absorb information they might otherwise avoid, resist, dismiss, or distort if they believed it was about them. In fact, when I don't explicitly introduce the story as an analogy, they often discuss it enthusiastically without recognizing the relevance to their own situation, until I draw the connection for them.

I do state my intentions from the outset when presenting a comparison that's considerably more extreme than the patient's circumstances. I explain that such dramatic examples help highlight the point I'm making, like "shouting" or magnifying it, metaphorically speaking. Equally important is that I explicitly remind them several times that the person or scenario I'm describing is a significantly exaggerated version of their situation, which makes them far more receptive to what follows.

I advise that although they are "several degrees below" the example I've given, they are on the same spectrum and trajectory. In other words, if they don't address the matter now, they may soon find themselves in circumstances they readily acknowledge are undesirable. They seem willing to accept such uncomfortable truths because my repeated emphasis on the large discrepancy between them and the people in the other story creates a psychological distance from what they're hearing. This emotional buffer allows them to engage with the

information without feeling threatened, thereby improving their ability to understand how it applies to them and what they must do to remedy their own issue.

Comparing Apples and Orangutans

I use a similar kind of comparison when patients are either struggling to make a decision or ruminating over something they've already done. It does not involve other people, though. Rather, I contrast their situation with another one that would elicit a very different response from me. This technique helps them **contain** their thoughts and prevents them from either psyching themselves out before taking action or torturing themselves afterward with **anxiety** or **neurotic guilt**.

To demonstrate how this works, consider “Bob,” a 35-year-old patient. He was afraid his girlfriend of nearly one year would leave him if he admitted that he had once been arrested for possession of stolen property at 19. As a result, he kept making excuses for not introducing her to his friends and family, for fear that one of them might tell her about his brief criminal history.

Unsurprisingly, their relationship was now in trouble, even though she reportedly loved him very much and was hoping to start a family with him. She believed he was reluctant to let her into important aspects of his life because he was embarrassed of her, or he was hiding a huge secret like another girlfriend or even a wife. Despite realizing he was close to losing someone he claimed to love, Bob couldn't bring himself to either:

a) Disclose his criminal past.

or

b) Introduce her to people in his life and hope they don't say anything.

If you were trying to help Bob take action here, what would you ask him? Most therapists would say: “What are you afraid will happen if you tell your girlfriend about your past?” Bob would presumably reply, “She will leave me.” Virtually all **Cognitive Behavioural (CBT)** therapists (and many others) would then ask him how realistic such an outcome is. Ideally, he would recognize that his girlfriend would probably not break up over a relatively minor criminal infraction.

A CBT therapist would likely follow up with further **Socratic questioning**—targeted, open-ended questions intended to encourage deeper reflection and promote critical thinking—or similar methods. This approach can be highly effective under optimal conditions, helping patients uncover, recognize, question, and challenge their cognitive distortions or other maladaptive tendencies themselves.

Unfortunately, gains made in session do not always transfer to the outside world. Low self-esteem or longstanding dysfunctional thought patterns can hijack progress after patients leave the supportive and often rejuvenating therapeutic space. This is especially true when they are tired, stressed, struggling to cope with intense feelings, or triggered by personally relevant stimuli. At such times, they are far less likely to remember the rational points discussed with their therapist or to push themselves to use the more adaptive ways of thinking they're developing in therapy.

Even if they do recall what they learned in treatment, personal insecurities or harsh self-judgments may make them question why they should trust the balanced, realistic, and adaptive conclusions they themselves reached. And if the therapist has ever pointed out any irrational statements, the patient can use that to dismiss the therapist as unkind or unable to understand them and their situation, even if the therapist acted appropriately and empathetically. Such distortions provide the patient with a convenient excuse to avoid uncomfortable realities or challenging decisions. (This does not mean that therapists never screw up or act unprofessionally, as highlighted in *I F*cked Up*.)

In Bob's case, it is understandable that he might question why he should be certain his girlfriend won't leave if she finds out about his criminal past. If anyone had ever treated him differently after his arrest, he can use such experiences as evidence that his girlfriend will break up with him. It doesn't matter whether she is anything like those other people, or even whether they actually abandoned him; **an unconscious compulsion to see things a certain way usually overrides objective reality or a realistic appraisal of the situation**.

Flooded with anxiety, Bob would be vulnerable to excessively negative or distorted beliefs that could lead him to generate various reasons to fear an imminent breakup. In such a state, he would be unable to distinguish which concerns are valid and which are exaggerated or irrational. As a result, he could spiral further into panic or despair.

Recognizing such risks, I used my “exaggerated contrast” technique and said:

If you tell your girlfriend you were arrested for murdering your last partner, yes, she’ll most likely leave you. Bob looked shocked and offended, as if I were accusing him of such a heinous crime.

Such reactions are not uncommon when I use this tool, even though the examples I provide for comparison are usually quite different from the patient’s own circumstances. Some try to correct me, explaining that they’ve never done, nor are they ever planning to do, what I just described. A few have even assumed I’m being sarcastic, despite my calm, respectful, and supportive demeanour. They are often so stressed or ashamed of their dilemma that they can’t think clearly or rationally, which is understandable.

As with most of my interventions, tone and delivery are crucial if you plan to use this technique with others. Even so, people can still take the contrast the wrong way, like Bob did. Because I’m trying to evoke an emotional response, for reasons explained in Chapter 8’s *I Can Predict Your Miserable Future*, I typically do not explain what I’m about to say beforehand, unless I sense that the patient’s reaction might be counterproductive. (If *you* use this technique, however, it’s probably best to play it safe and make it clear from the outset that you know what you’re about to say does not reflect their actual situation.)

After reassuring the patient that I heard and understood what they said, I explain the purpose of my statement: If their situation were like what I just mentioned, I would understand why they don’t want to take the action they’re afraid to take—or why they feel so terrible about what they did, or why they are worried about some awful outcome. However, the reality is that their circumstances are quite different from my example. Accordingly, **it is in their best interest to adopt a different perspective from the unproductive one they are currently demonstrating.**

The reason I present examples far outside the patient’s actual experience is to jolt them out of whatever mental trap is preventing them from thinking or doing things adaptively. This is similar to what is explained in Chapter 1, as well as *Volume 2*: Sometimes **the phrasing or framing of an idea can break through rigid thinking or a stuck mindset**. Also, the stark juxtapositions serve as a kind of “anchor to reality” that is absent from the interventions mentioned above. The following “formulae,” using Bob’s situation, should make the differences between my approach and those techniques clear.

With Socratic questioning or the therapist’s own opinion regarding whether Bob’s girlfriend will leave him if she learns about his past, he is faced with two competing realities:

A: She will leave.

versus

Not A: She will not leave.

Outside of therapy, Bob has no one to help contain his thoughts or guide him back to the rational arguments that led him to accept that his girlfriend will probably not leave him. It consequently takes little mental effort to ignore or simply choose not to believe **Not A**. He can just as easily reject **Not A** by focusing on reasons to believe she *will* break up (**A**).

In contrast, my comparisons implant ideas in the patient’s mind that are not easy to disregard or contradict without considerable contemplation and analysis:

A: She would likely leave if Bob murdered his last partner—which he did not do.

versus

B: She will leave, even though his crime is nothing like murdering his last partner.

Of course, Bob’s girlfriend might not want to stay with a convicted criminal. But by framing things this way, I direct his attention to the huge discrepancy between petty theft and murder. I also raise several points that highlight how irrational it is to equate his crime with homicide in any way. This includes:

- 1) Expected legal consequences for each transgression.
- and
- 2) The vastly different ways people perceive:
 - i) petty theft versus murder,
 - and
 - ii) individuals who commit each of these offences.

The biggest difference between my approach and more traditional ones is the absence of an explicit **Not A**, even though I'm obviously making the same point: She (likely) will not leave. In my version, though, **there is nothing for the patient to reject, contradict, or choose between**. Both **A** and **B** can be true.

Let's recap: With standard techniques, patients are prone to simply dismissing rational realities or logically derived conclusions when they are emotionally overwhelmed or otherwise not functioning optimally. By contrast, my vivid example gets embedded in their mind and intertwined with the feared belief, making it difficult to forget or ignore. As a result, when they start worrying about the problem, the dramatic comparison should also be triggered.

You might be thinking, "Since **A** and **B** can both be true, can't Bob still believe his girlfriend will leave him for stealing, just as she would if he had intentionally killed someone?" That is where the *anchor to reality* comes in. Once the idea of homicide is evoked, it becomes almost impossible not to recall:

- a) how absurd it is to equate stealing a few items with murder;
- and
- b) the logical, supportive, and calming points we discussed in therapy—each of which helps keep him grounded in more realistic thinking.

Another benefit of my approach is that, as long as the patient trusts my knowledge and judgment, it's hard for them to discredit my efforts to contain their fear. That's because I make it clear that I understand and empathize with their concerns, like any good therapist. The difference is that most therapists only try to help the patient see that their worries are not logical or applicable to their particular situation. My intervention goes further: I infuse the narrative with an extreme example of when their concerns *would* make sense. The striking discrepancy between that scenario and their exaggerated or irrational fear helps them maintain a more realistic perspective.

My juxtaposition method also acts as a mild disruption to maladaptive cognitive patterns. It is based on the same principle as **proper breathing** and other **grounding** exercises, as well as my simple yet effective tools such as **The Flashlight in a dark room** metaphor from Chapter 2 and **The Reflex** from Chapter 14. Namely, they all momentarily "short-circuit" conditioned internal responses. This helps prevent you from becoming overwhelmed, succumbing to irrationality, or spiralling (further) when anxiety, shame, anger, or other powerful emotions begin to take hold.

Barriers, signage, and crisis phones are installed at bridges known for suicides for similar reasons: to interrupt the urge to jump. Even if the diversion is brief, these interventions can prevent desperate people from acting on that fatal impulse in the moment. This, in turn, affords them the opportunity to make more adaptive decisions when they are in a better state of mind.

Whether you're grappling with life-and-death decisions or other mentally and emotionally challenging predicaments, the techniques described above help you contain your inner experience and respond more effectively. They serve as valuable additions to your repertoire of perspectives and strategies, many of which similarly leverage the productive use of binary framing, comparisons, and contrasts, including:

- **The Practical vs. The Psychological** (introduced in Chapter 4).
- The difference between knowing something intellectually versus fully acknowledging and internalizing it (mentioned in Chapter 8's *I Can Predict Your Miserable Future*).
- The conscious versus the **unconscious** (covered extensively in Chapters 11–16).
- **Plinko** "pegs" versus "bottom slots" (described in Chapter 14).
- The **adult-brain** versus the **child-brain** (presented earlier and discussed further in *Volume 2*).

What am I Thinking?

When patients share an incident, problem, or concern, I often ask:

What do you think I'm thinking about what you just told me?

My opinion, or whether they guess it correctly, is irrelevant. The purpose of the question is to get them to *step outside of their own head*. This is the first step to gaining a new **perspective**. Once they do that, they can unhook themselves from whatever unproductive mindset is keeping them stuck in their ineffective or **maladaptive** state.

Another simple way I get patients to shift perspective is by asking what other people in their story are thinking. For example, if they tell me about an unpleasant interaction with their father, I'll say something like:

If I ask your father about what happened, what will he say?

I sometimes have to reassure them that I'm not actually going to reach out to the other person, especially since I do not ask my question in the hypothetical: "If I asked...what would she say?" My phrasing is a subtle way to get the person to think about their experience *in the now*, as opposed to in a more hypothetical, abstract, and thus psychologically distant or disconnected manner.

I also emphasize that I am not disputing or minimizing the patient's experience, nor am I taking the other person's side. Rather, the goal is to help them view the situation from a different perspective so they are in a better psychological position to resolve it. Sometimes this means changing how they think or feel about the matter instead of addressing it with the other person.

For example, one patient (Bob) was furious at his mother because he believed she had rudely dismissed his recent accomplishment at work a few days before the session. As I asked Bob about the incident, I got him to vividly imagine and place himself back in the scene. This was to help him remember and focus on what had actually happened, instead of getting caught up in his feelings about the incident, his mother, or their relationship.

Revisiting a situation is a key aspect of the powerful **Emotion-Focused Therapy** technique called **Systematic Evocative Unfolding**. This intervention helps people better understand and create healthier narratives about themselves by examining problematic or perplexing reactions in particular circumstances. Instead of merely talking about what happened, however, they are guided to *re-experience* and reprocess it.

As Bob reflected on the troubling interaction with his mother, he recalled that she had been talking with his older sister right before. When he first told me the story, he made no mention of his sister, who apparently felt terrible about herself at the time due to a serious mistake she had made at work. Simply shifting his attention away from his needs and feelings, so that he could focus on the details of the scene, provided him an entirely different perspective. He realized that his mother may have been trying to avoid making his sister feel even worse about herself in that moment by not praising him in front of her. In fact, he came to appreciate that he was actually being insensitive to his sister, who likely felt he was bragging about his good fortune or maybe even rubbing salt in her wounds.

While discussing the incident, Bob admitted that he had stormed out of his mother's house, not listened to any of her voice messages afterward, and refused to read her texts. He therefore had no idea what her motives were for not engaging in the topic he had tried to introduce. Feeling bad about his possible overreaction and subsequent rudeness in not getting back to her, he **committed** to calling her right after our session.

When I next saw Bob, he confirmed that his mother had indeed tried to spare his sister further pain; if he had listened to or read her messages, he would have known that, instead of stewing in anger and resentment for several days. That simple intervention led to a few important insights. First, he was susceptible to reacting explosively and bearing grudges whenever he felt slighted or disregarded. He also came to recognize that he was often more selfish and inconsiderate than he had wanted to believe. Lastly, he realized that he still harboured unhealthy and immature sibling rivalry from childhood.

Even if you do not make the kinds of profound discoveries Bob did by trying to understand another person's perspective, it is still an extremely useful and relatively easy exercise. As always, you should think of this technique in terms of *how it will benefit you*, rather than mistakenly believing you're prioritizing someone else's position or needs over your own. As long as you keep in mind the other **self-interested** points emphasized in *I F*cked Up* (recall

from Chapter 1 that you can be self-interested without being selfish), you will find that being more empathetic improves your personal and social well-being.

The preceding principles underlie the extremely powerful **Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) Empty Chair** technique (adapted from **Gestalt Therapy**, which derived it from **Psychodrama**). As the name suggests, it involves talking to an empty chair: The patient imagines someone with whom they have *unfinished business* sitting in it and expresses unresolved thoughts and feelings toward them. They then switch chairs, assume the role of the other person, and respond as that person to what they just said. The patient continues switching between chairs and **perspectives** in an *experiential* way that is far more effective than merely telling the therapist about their problems with the individual in question.

Having personally experienced the Empty Chair process several times under the guidance of one of EFT's founders, Les Greenberg, and having used it myself with many patients, I can attest that it is as profoundly impactful as it is unconventional-looking. While I can't do justice to this transformative intervention here, I want to highlight its main goal. Namely, after a number of rounds of switching roles, the patient ordinarily either:

a) gains some sympathy or compassion for the other person—only if warranted;

or

b) realizes that the other person is, for instance, a weak or otherwise seriously flawed individual whom they will no longer allow to harm, haunt, or hold them back (especially if they are no longer in their life).

Either way, they end up seeing that individual in a new light, which in turn causes them to view themselves and their past or current relationship to that person in a more realistic, **adaptive**, and empowering manner.

On a final note, the importance of my own simple exercise is reflected in what I tell the many couples and families with whom I work:

One of the first goals of therapy is to *truly bear and understand what each other is saying*, even if you don't like or agree with it. If you can't do that, how do you expect to improve—or even salvage—your relationship?

Although no patient has ever challenged such a basic and undeniable premise, many of them do not realize that they've reached the point of no longer being willing or able to extend this essential element of healthy relationships to the other person.

Remember, **we tend to see and frame things in ways that serve our own *self-interest***. It is therefore not surprising that most people are unable to recognize or admit when they fail to muster something so fundamental to social dynamics as **empathy**.

Patients typically become highly motivated to step up their interpersonal game once they see firsthand the profound impact that taking another's perspective can have on both parties. Few things are more rewarding, interpersonally speaking, than feeling that someone gets you. And the person showing empathy experiences a huge relief when they can let go of unnecessary hurt, anger, **resentment** or other self-limiting feelings. From this healthier emotional state, it is much easier to cultivate deeper and broader empathy for the other person—who should, in turn, become more inclined to reciprocate such goodwill—and to mend and grow the relationship.

Jump Them!

This exercise, which illustrates the **Plinko** metaphor from Chapter 14, may seem unusual or off-putting. However, it is actually fun and engaging. More importantly, it can reveal fascinating insights into your motives, beliefs, insecurities, neuroses, upbringing, conditioning, and more. To begin, read the following scenario and answer the question at the end as quickly as possible, without overthinking it; go with your gut. Then answer the follow-up question before proceeding further.

Imagine you're sitting in class, at work, in a food court, or anywhere else with many people around that you can easily visualize. Suddenly, the most attractive person you've ever seen sits down next to you. Your heart is racing and your blood is flowing to all the right places. Your "dark side" (i.e., **the Shadow** from Chapter 11) is compelling you to "Jump them! Jump them!!!" The urge is irresistible; your mind and body are almost forcing you to act and have the wildest sex of your life *right now*.

Answer quickly: Why don't you jump the person right there and have your way with them sexually?

Whatever your answer, please ask yourself why *that reason* would stop you from acting in the moment. Even if you think your original response was clear, try to give a more specific, concrete, or thorough answer.

There is a strong chance that neither your first nor second answer is adequate. If we were doing this in my class, I would keep asking, "Why would that stop you from jumping them?" in an assertive and puzzled tone, implying that you're missing the mark, until you finally gave one of the seven ultimate reasons listed below.

I have done this exercise with thousands of people, and most react with a mix of confusion and amusement—and sometimes shock, dismay, or even disgust. I eventually describe the rationale behind my approach, starting by explaining that their initial answers were unsatisfactory because they represent "pegs" on the Plinko board that could mean many different things. I further explain that my goal was to keep probing until they reached the Plinko "bottom slot": their *primary underlying reason* for not jumping the imaginary person.

Let's go through the various elements of "Jump Them!" to elucidate its process, purpose, and value. To begin, most people provide the following types of answers, either in their original or subsequent responses:

- It's wrong.
- It's not (socially) acceptable.
- It's illegal.
- There are other people around.
- The bystanders would judge me.
- The other person would think I'm a terrible person.
- It's a classroom.
- It's the wrong location/context.
- I'd be embarrassed.
- The other person might not/wouldn't want me to do that.
- The other person might say "no" (or reject me).
- It could/would hurt (or upset/bother) the other person.
- I could/might/would get in trouble.
- I'm in a relationship.
- I love my partner.

Which of these reasons most closely align with your own answer?

If your response centres on the action being harmful, unwanted, or illegal, you'd probably think I'm a monster during the exercise. That's because I'd persistently ask, in a perplexed and condescending manner, why that would stop you—as if you're strange for not wanting to commit sexual assault. As explained in *Volume 2's Establish the*

Narrative, if you adopt a **confident** and unwavering tone, you can often get others to go along with what you're saying, even if it's absurd, and to question whether *they* are wrong or aren't getting something.

That's exactly what happens in class. Students visibly second-guess themselves as I reject most answers through my insistent repetition of the same question in the same puzzled and nearly disdainful manner. Can you guess why I act that way?

The main purpose of this exercise, as mentioned at the start, is to discover important truths about your inner workings. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through **Psychodynamic**-based *projective methods* such as the *Rorschach Psychodiagnostic [Inkblot] Test* (notwithstanding any criticisms against these tools, which can be invaluable when **mastered** and used correctly). And I consider *Jump Them!* to be like a projective test for the reasons explained below.

To get a sense of who you truly are at the deepest level—namely, the **unconscious** and related constructs covered in Chapters 11–16—I must circumvent your **persona** or “public mask.” One way to do that is to put you in a situation that's completely disconnected from your everyday experience, which I trust you'll agree describes the ridiculous scenario in the *Jump Them!* exercise. And when I ramp things up with my provocative questions and unexpected demeanour, you have even more difficulty finding your footing and engaging with me in the “socially acceptable” manner you ordinarily would.

In such odd or novel contexts like the *Rorschach Inkblot Test* or *Jump Them!*, you can't rely on your previous experiences, knowledge, or **schemata** and **scripts** (from Chapter 6). As a result, the way you interpret, process, and navigate the situation reflects some of the core features of your personality, psychological functioning, and inner life. As an example, think back to a time you were with others in a totally unfamiliar setting, such as a foreign country whose language and culture were nothing like your own. There's a strong likelihood that at least one of you began to display aspects of yourself that are not usually observable in more familiar surroundings.

I'm not claiming this exercise alone can determine unequivocally “the real you.” However, no one to date has disagreed with my descriptions of their internal operations based on knowing only their “bottom-slot” final answer. With these points in mind, let's keep exploring the *Jump Them!* technique, including its secondary purpose. (No, it's not to flabbergast, frustrate, or torment hapless victims.)

Specifically, the exercise underscores the need for precision, clarity, and nuance when discussing complex, controversial, or ambiguous issues. Otherwise, what you might believe is an obvious statement can easily be misconstrued by the other person, and vice versa. For example, *you* know what you meant when you answered why you wouldn't jump the attractive stranger. You also likely made certain assumptions about why each response in the list above would stop someone from acting on their sexual impulses. Such assumptions, however, can lead you astray.

For instance, do you believe that not jumping the other person because it's illegal, wrong, or inappropriate represents a Plinko *peg* or rather a *bottom-slot* deterrent? The reality is that, with proper probing, the vast majority of people who provide those answers explain that they'd ultimately be worried about:

- a) being rejected by the other person,
- b) being judged negatively by the other person or by any witnesses to the assault, or
- c) being arrested or expelled (I use the classroom setting in my scenario).

Would you not agree that those are three distinct reasons? Also, it's not the illegality, wrongness, or inappropriateness of the action itself that stops the respondent. Something else underlies their reluctance, and the *Jump Them!* methodology uncovers the most relevant and impactful bottom-slot factors, which I group into the following seven categories (this is the list I mentioned near the start):

- Brainwashing
- Ego driven
- Empathy
- Fidelity/loyalty to a partner
- Negative judgement by others
- Punishment
- Rejection

Before we examine each of these reasons, which do you think is the *most common* and *least common* provided by the many people I've asked? If you consider how humans and all other animals operate on the most fundamental level, you should be able to guess the most popular answer. But the least typical one might surprise you, unless you remember the central takeaway of Chapter 4.

Let's begin with the *most common* bottom-slot motive, provided by the vast majority of people either initially or after probing: the fear of negative consequences. This connects back to the preceding hint: Across all sentient species, avoiding harm, punishment, or other undesirable outcomes is one of our two primary motives or drives (the other being the pursuit of "rewards" or benefits). But do you see any problem with this claim?

From the list of seven bottom-slot motives, *punishment* is not the only negative consequence. The two other reasons mentioned earlier alongside being arrested or expelled (i.e., *rejection* and *negative judgment by others*) also represent negative consequences. In fact, you could reasonably argue that every bottom-slot motive—even *empathy*—ultimately involves avoiding negative outcomes in some way, as explained below. But let's focus on the most obvious three first.

What distinguishes *punishment* from *rejection* and *negative judgment by others* (and the other answers)? The answer lies in whether the feared outcome is **practical** or **psychological**, as per **The Practical vs The Psychological** from Chapter 4. Punishment, such as arrest or expulsion, is clearly a *practical* consequence, whereas the other bottom-slot answers seem to represent *psychological* concerns. However, remember that these distinctions are not always clear-cut.

For instance, rejection is usually considered a *psychological* concern because it evokes embarrassment or shame. Yet, it can also have *practical* implications because it signals that *you won't achieve your goal* with the other person. Similarly, being judged negatively by others is typically associated with embarrassment or shame, but it could also lead to a *practical* setback. For example, one of the people critical of your assault might be a professor you were counting on for a graduate school recommendation, or a classmate who could one day be in a position to hire you and happens to remember your transgression.

On another note, what inferences would you make about people whose final answer pertains to rejection or negative judgment by others? Perhaps not surprisingly, they tend to be more insecure than average. Many rarely take chances because they harbour an excessive fear of being turned down or perceived poorly, whether in romantic pursuits or most other contexts.

The reason any of this is important is that ***Jump Them!* is designed to provide *insights* into how you operate.** And The Practical vs The Psychological is one of the most valuable lenses through which you can view yourself and understand how you process and deal with your experiences. Examining your motives with complete honesty and recognizing what really drives some of your decisions is a **superpower** that this exercise can help you cultivate.

With that in mind, can you think of how even empathy can be fuelled (at least in part) by fear of negative consequences? If empathy is one of your **values**, failing to uphold it will produce some degree of psychological discomfort. More simply, empathetic people don't want to cause anyone to suffer, so doing so would make them feel terrible. Would you agree that these are both negative outcomes that empathy helps prevent?

I'm not suggesting that empathy plays no role in some people's decision not to assault a stranger. I *am* encouraging you to explore and question what may be overly favourable or unrealistic aspects of your self-image, and to challenge the **self-narratives** (from Chapter 6) you've learned or created. As explained in *I F*cked Up*, **it can be liberating and empowering to acknowledge unflattering realities about yourself**—in this case, that you:

- a) possess a "dark side" or Shadow that craves things you would never want anyone to know about; and
- b) usually refrain from acting on those "unacceptable" urges for self-serving reasons, primarily to avoid negative consequences.

Put another way, there's no shame in admitting that *you are human*, just like everyone else.

Speaking of which, recall that when I asked you to think about the *least common* bottom-slot reason for not jumping the hot stranger, I noted that the answer might surprise you if you forgot the main point of Chapter 4. To refresh your memory, that chapter emphasized that **all living creatures are fundamentally motivated by self-interest**. Have you figured out where I'm going with this?

In any given class, no more than 1 or 2 out of 50–60 students are motivated by empathy: that is, not wanting to harm the other person. That is a sad but unsurprising indictment of society, as discussed in *Volume 2*. Don't get me wrong—several students in each class do respond in ways that suggest concern for the other person's well-being. However, only a small fraction stay on the “empathy path” all the way down the Plinko board to the bottom slot throughout the exercise. For everyone else whose initial answer appears to reflect empathy, probing uncovers their true primary concern.

Most of these individuals are worried about some adverse outcome if they were to hurt the other person—for instance, getting arrested, expelled, or physically assaulted by their target or bystanders. In other words, they're motivated not by the admirable quality of empathy but rather by the most basic factor: avoidance of negative consequences, specifically punishment.

Others who initially seem empathetic end up explaining that jumping the stranger would ruin their chances of having sex or forming a rewarding relationship. They tend to be **pragmatic**, as do the relatively few whose first answer likewise focuses on not wanting to jeopardize future sexual or romantic opportunities. When asked, all confirm that they generally demonstrate good impulse control and take a methodical or well-planned approach to dealing with things. To which of the preceding seven bottom-slot categories would you assign these students?

Before providing the answer, I want to acknowledge that they might not know themselves well or may be engaging in *impression management*: the conscious or unconscious effort to present oneself favourably (a concept first articulated by Canadian social psychologist and sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1956 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). However, my interactions with them during the exercise and at other times suggest they are being genuine and reasonably accurate when discussing how they conduct themselves.

I label their underlying motive as “*ego driven*,” which means something different from what you're probably thinking. In Freudian **Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic** theory, the *id* is the unconscious, instinctual, primal part of the mind that would drive you to selfishly satisfy your sexual urges. Opposing these primitive forces is the unconscious *superego*, which represents your conscience: the internalized rules and norms of your culture, conveyed to you primarily through your parents (and other authority figures). The *ego* is the conscious part of the mind that tries to satisfy the *id*'s impulses and desires while not running afoul of the *superego*.

Accordingly, I coined the term “ego driven” as a tongue-in-cheek homage to the psychological orientation that inspired the *Jump Them!* Exercise. And, to add to what I stated earlier, everyone whose bottom-slot answer falls into this category appears to be practical, pragmatic, conscientious, methodical, sensible, and/or level-headed.

What would you infer about someone who cannot say anything beyond “It's wrong” (or something similar, like “It's immoral”) or “I just wouldn't do it,” even after diligent probing? Everyone who's demonstrated this response tendency has acknowledged being raised in a very religious, strict, or authoritarian household. Many also report that their early cultural or societal influences were oppressive or restrictive. Such individuals essentially learned from a young age never to dare question or oppose authority, nor to do anything “improper” or “out of bounds.” I call their bottom-slot answer “*brainwashing*.”

To be clear, I use “brainwashing” loosely and do not intend to offend any religion or culture. But the impact of the upbringing I'm describing is undeniable. For most people raised that way, it's virtually impossible to resist the beliefs, rules, expectations, and other self-narratives imposed on them relentlessly—and often forcefully—with the implicit or explicit warning that this messaging should never be questioned or challenged.

The final bottom-slot category is *fidelity/loyalty to a partner*. What do you surmise about someone who gives this answer? You might see them as empathetic or noble, which does seem to apply to a small fraction, judging from their responses to probing. However, the underlying motive revealed by the vast majority of these students, with no close second, is their inability to handle the guilt after cheating, either internally or in interactions with their partner. While the outcome may be the same, understanding what truly causes you to (not) act in particular ways and circumstances enables you to make the most **adaptive** decisions or adjustments to how you function.

Concluding the Jump

An exercise like *Jump Them!* shows that even bizarre or silly experiences can offer opportunities for learning and self-improvement. To reiterate, **self-honesty is a value you should embrace** because, as emphasized throughout *I F*cked Up*, **knowledge is power**. And what could be more important to understand than:

- who you are,
- how you think and feel, and
- what drives your (in)actions?

Jump Them! also serves as a fun way to improve and enliven your interpersonal dynamics, alongside the many other strategies and techniques presented in *I F*cked Up*, and especially *Volume 2*. If you perform the exercise exactly as described earlier, you should spark some fascinating discussions and earn the respect of those who appreciate a truly unique experience. But only if you can keep a straight face and tolerate the discomfort of stunned, resentful, or even repulsed or hostile expressions as you guide them to their true bottom-slot answer.

Can you picture yourself doing something like that on a first date? As risky as it may seem, showing that you have the balls or ovaries to attempt such an outlandish and brazen “stunt” signals the kind of healthy dominance you should want to establish in such contexts (as discussed at length in *Volume 2*). Or, if that framing doesn’t appeal to you, it should demonstrate **confidence**, a sense of humour, and **open-mindedness**. With such a winning combination, you probably won’t need to resort to jumping your date to satisfy your urges.

100% Responsibility

This exercise is designed primarily for people who believe they take adequate responsibility for their issues, but who could benefit from even more **accountability** or a different **perspective** on things. I've also modified it to help people with an **external locus of control** (discussed in Chapter 3).

The Backstory

I developed the **100% Responsibility** technique in my late 20s, after experiencing four unexpected major setbacks within a matter of weeks. Aside from the serious bike accident described in Chapter 3, the other three incidents were largely the result of my own character flaws: namely, hubris, arrogance, poor judgment, a **maladaptive** mentality, mishandling of the accident's impact on my health and academics, and ineffective ways of dealing with interpersonal challenges.

The fallout of these significant events, and the way they converged at the time, left me feeling doomed. I saw no viable future, as it seemed I could no longer pursue my academic aspirations and future career in clinical psychology, rendering everything I had worked so hard to accomplish at university up to that point a complete waste. Compounding my despair, I was suddenly terminated from my job, leaving me with no income to support myself or my wife. I had failed us both.

Desperate, I sought the help of a psychologist I knew of. On the one hand, I'm grateful that "Dr. Bob" generously agreed to a discounted rate so that I could attend five sessions through my wife's meager insurance coverage. On the other hand, he exhibited such shockingly unprofessional and unethical behaviour that I wouldn't begrudge you for doubting my account of what happened. I assure you, however, that what follows—limited to only what's relevant for explaining the origin of the **100% Responsibility** exercise—is entirely accurate. And I am not omitting any actions on my part that might help justify his conduct (which would be ironic).

To begin, Dr. Bob was defensive, dismissive, and hostile toward me from the start. During our third meeting, I was **neurotically** intent on winning him over, excited to show how thoughtfully and diligently I had completed the homework he had assigned at the end of our last session. This assignment required me to reflect on the numerous conflicts with my family, friends, professors, and classmates I had disclosed to him. He was not impressed by my efforts, to put it mildly. He was extremely critical of my beliefs about my interpersonal difficulties. Fair enough. But as I tried to explain and defend my answers, he suddenly shrieked, "You're a fucking delusional asshole!"

I do not remember the rest of the session, but I do remember feeling physically agitated after leaving Dr. Bob's office, to the point that I was almost shaking. I had experienced interpersonal strife with many people throughout my life, but this felt different. At least that's what I thought until moments later, when I was struck by an "**Aha!**" **moment**—and nearly by one of the cars I obstructed as I froze in the middle of the street I was crossing.

I realized that the one person who had ever made me feel exactly the way Dr. Bob did was my mother. Although it may seem obvious or unremarkable, I was overtaken by a seismic shift in perspective: I could not deny that the one common denominator in myriad scenarios that produced identical negative outcomes and feelings with two very different individuals—a psychologist who had known me for only three sessions and the person who had known me my entire life—was me.

In fairness to me, most fights with my mother took place when I was a child or teen, so she held all the power in the relationship and could thus be assigned the bulk of responsibility for our unhealthy dynamics. Similarly, given the power imbalance inherent in the psychologist–patient context, together with Dr. Bob's spectacularly unprofessional conduct, I would be justified in focusing on *his* role in our difficulties.

I did not allow myself to fall back into familiar patterns, however. Instead of deflecting responsibility for my misconduct, I opened myself to the surge of memories and realizations flooding my mind as I scrambled out of traffic. The most prominent **insight** in that moment was that I had provoked numerous teachers and professors who were usually calm or gentle into yelling at me, just as Dr. Bob had (although they did refrain from using the kind of language he did). Something "clicked," and I was overtaken by a sudden, almost electric sense of excitement.

The 100% Responsibility Exercise

I rushed home and devised a thought experiment based on the homework Dr. Bob had assigned me. Although his meltdown in response to my answers was grossly disproportionate to any flaws in my thinking or judgment, I began to reflect on what I might have got wrong. The original task was to identify better ways to have handled my recent conflicts, which I did. However, I followed each answer with an explanation for why those alternative approaches would *not* have worked.

I still believe my reasoning in each case was valid, given the individuals and circumstances involved. However, what I had not considered previously was that my answers served to absolve me of responsibility for how things turned out, despite my longstanding, and apparently mistaken, belief that I always took full accountability for my interpersonal problems.

Inspired by this newfound insight, I revisited each of the examples I had worked through for the homework. But this time, rather than thinking of reasons for why I did or didn't—or supposedly couldn't—do certain things, **I focused solely on achieving the desired outcome.** Irrespective of the context or other people's actions, expectations, or standpoints, **the onus was on me to find a solution.** In other words, I treated each situation as though **I was 100% responsible for ensuring things worked out the way I wanted.**

Of course, this intervention isn't grounded in reality. Rarely is anyone entirely responsible for how interactions with others unfold. However, it does help you discover important insights into yourself, especially if you believe you already take full ownership of your actions, because it takes you to an even greater level of accountability.

Forcing yourself to find a solution, regardless of any excuses you might otherwise lean on or genuine obstacles that may exist, causes you to see things differently from how you ordinarily would. And, as should be clear by now, **an integral part of *personal growth* is gaining new perspectives.**

In my case, I believed I had not dealt with certain issues related to my studies out of fear that I might upset people whose impression of me could either help or hinder my chances of getting into graduate school. But after doing the exercise, I realized I had been lying to myself about those motives. If that concern were truly driving me, why had I never worried about the poor impression I was making on numerous other potentially important people at the university through my bad attitude and questionable behaviour? How convenient for me that this fear applied only to the people with whom I was unable to resolve problems.

Finally recognizing that I had constructed a self-serving excuse for my ineffectiveness in dealing with certain professors and students led me to discover other uncomfortable truths about myself. For example, despite being assertive, or even combative, with professors—as well as lawyers, politicians, and others in positions of authority through my work—I apparently struggled to express my needs and concerns to *friends*. This realization shocked me because **it revealed a stark discrepancy between how I wanted to see myself and who I actually was.**

Another reality this exercise uncovered was that I often showed poor judgment when dealing with conflict. To be sure, there were legitimate reasons for some of the decisions I had made when trying to address the issues in question. And other people's bias, selfishness, dishonesty, defensiveness, incompetence, irrationality, or other negative attributes had certainly contributed to each problem. However, focusing solely on *my role* in the conflicts, and **framing things as though I were 100% responsible for the outcome,** made me view my actions in an entirely different light. It also forced me to acknowledge the many ways I could have handled things better.

Although my **locus of control** falls on the *internal* side, this exercise pushed me to the extreme end of that spectrum. From that vantage point, I could see that if my beliefs about my locus of control, as well as my **self-efficacy**, had been more accurate, I would have advocated for myself far more persistently and effectively. Instead, I found seemingly credible reasons to **rationalize** my inaction or ineffectual attempts to resolve certain matters. In turn, my **resentment** over perceived **injustices**, which were in fact due in large part to my own flaws and failures, presumably led me to react **unconsciously** in ways that undermined my efforts.

The most incredible aspect of my breakthrough was something I never could've predicted: Instead of feeling deflated or ashamed with each new damning discovery about myself, **I was enveloped by a sense of excitement and empowerment.** I felt lighter and freer than I had in a long time, as if a massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The truth is, **distorting reality is exhausting.**

Finally liberated from the shackles of self-serving “delusions,” **I vowed to never again succumb to defence mechanisms or any other psychological restraints.** The power, buoyancy, energy, and motivation I felt upon

embracing my flaws outweighed—and even negated—any fear or shame that might have otherwise inhibited further self-exploration, **insight**, and **personal growth**.

This won't surprise anyone who's experienced the immense relief and rejuvenation that can follow Confession, completing certain "steps" of Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-Step Programs, or finally admitting a terrible secret to someone you trust. If done without harsh self-judgment, you're essentially granting yourself absolution for your "sins" or shortcomings. And when you're working through these realizations on your own, there's no risk of practical or real-life harm from sorting out your metaphorical closet or purging it of skeletons.

Reducing Social Anxiety by Increasing Personal Accountability

I subsequently modified the **100% Responsibility** exercise for other purposes, particularly for patients struggling with **social anxiety**; this most commonly occurs within the realm of dating. If you came to me for help with this issue, here is how I would prepare you for your next date (as always, the context of the example is inconsequential; apply the following steps to whatever situation is relevant to *you*):

- 1) The first step is to **pretend you are completely responsible for whatever happens during the date**. While that's obviously unrealistic, it will help you adopt a far more productive mindset than your typical fearful, passive, helpless, distorted, or defeatist way of approaching such encounters.
- 2) Prior to the date, **reflect on several possible unfavourable scenarios** based on past experiences or anticipated challenges, given what you know about yourself.
- 3) Next, **imagine how you would prevent or remedy these issues**, usually by *simply avoiding the kinds of behaviours that have previously sabotaged your goals* in other social situations. This part of the process helps you **acknowledge and take accountability** for your own interpersonal deficits.
- 4) Immediately before and during the date, **keep telling yourself you're 100% responsible for how things turn out**. Again, although this isn't true, the point is to **disrupt and shift away from your self-limiting beliefs and counterproductive thought patterns** that fuel self-doubt, fear, **anxiety**, or other maladaptive internal states that contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

This simple yet valuable intervention is based on the principle described in *What Is Perspective Without Focus?* from Chapter 2: **By choosing to focus on certain aspects of a situation instead of others, you can improve your emotional, physiological, and mental state**. In such a frame of mind—aided by **proper breathing**, of course—you have the best chance to capitalize on your interpersonal skills, which you can hone using the information and techniques presented in *I F*cked Up* and *Volume 2*.

More broadly, both the original and modified version of the **100% Responsibility** exercise, which can be applied to other social contexts such as a job interview or dinner party, promote an **adaptive** mentality that fosters personal and social **mastery**. Specifically, imagining being in **total control**, which is obviously unrealistic, acts as a catalyst to marshal and direct your attention and energy toward internal or external resources you can access and influence. And the first step in actualizing this **success-oriented mindset** is to embrace the two critical resources of **self-honesty** and **personal accountability**.

From Excess to Success

Even people who take too much responsibility or blame, including when they're not at fault, can benefit from the exercise. That's because they're choosing to view their circumstances through a completely unrealistic lens, rather than reflexively burdening themselves with excessive accountability and the negative consequences of this conditioned response. Such intentional **mentalization** and **reframing**, in turn, helps them gain insight into the roots of their distorted perspective, together with any associated harmful thought processes and unproductive social tendencies.

These individuals usually come to recognize or admit that they harbour profound personal insecurities and are driven by an unhealthy pursuit of the *illusion of control*. They're also prone to frequent bouts of extreme anxiety and **neurotic guilt** (discussed in Chapter 11), along with harsh self-blame and, in many cases, deeply damaging **self-criticism** (from Chapter 6). Because such realizations emerge within a safe, non-judgmental, encouraging therapeutic space, patients are better able to **contain** their negative internal operations, allowing them to **accept** and work with these new insights.

Pushing Beyond 100%

If you choose to practise either version of the exercise, ideally you will experience the kind of transformative motivation I did decades ago, as have many of the patients who've subsequently engaged in the process. I was inspired to make lasting, positive changes that extended beyond adopting a more realistic and adaptive perspective on, and relationship with, personal accountability. This began with being completely honest with myself about who I am and what I do, no matter how “unacceptable” or shameful my thoughts, motives, impulses, urges, intentions, or actions might be.

More importantly, I've committed to never stop being vigilant against, addressing, and striving to improve these ugly realities about myself and my life. With the proper mindset, I do not find this lifelong endeavour difficult at all. On the contrary, it's an endless source of motivation to live in alignment with my **values**.

Man, Those Symbols...

Despite any flaws in Carl Jung or his work, I've found considerable merit in some of his theories and foundational premises, several of which are mentioned in *I F*cked Up*. Most importantly, I value the idea of finding or assigning meaning to our experiences, as long as it does not involve **maladaptive** self-deception.

In this spirit, I love the notion of **synchronicity**: making meaningful connections between phenomena or events that seem merely coincidental or unrelated.¹ Unlike Jungians, though, I don't try to discover or formulate any deep meanings or metaphysical truths behind these synchronous occurrences. Instead, I simply acknowledge them and enjoy the thought that some cosmic design could underlie what just transpired.

Knowing I can effortlessly create a positive mood by, for instance, coincidentally reading that a politician was called a "chicken" at the very moment my wife asks if I want chicken for dinner, *why would I deny myself that simple pleasure?* The alternative is what most people do at such times: ignore or dismiss the coincidence, or perhaps smile for a moment without feeling anything. For me, synchronous moments have a profoundly uplifting effect precisely because **I choose to imbue them with special meaning that brings such gratification.**

In fact, synchronicity often evokes an almost childlike sense of wonder and joy that keeps me feeling young at heart. Some students thought I was strange whenever I made a big deal out of those experiences in class, but their skeptical looks or judgmental reactions only amplified my silly enjoyment.

My fondness for synchronicity underscores perhaps the most crucial of Jung's insights: **the power of symbols and mental symbolism.** Most people don't recognize or harness the significance of these phenomena, which include rituals and ceremonies. Some rituals are universal, such as celebrating or commemorating births, deaths, adulthood, and intimate unions (e.g., weddings). They symbolize beginnings or endings, marking *transitions* from one stage of life to the next.

Failing to recognize and act in line with the fact that you've moved beyond a particular stage or context will hinder your functioning, as discussed in Chapter 4's *Transitioning Into Reality*. Can you think of anyone in your life who remains stuck in a particular mindset, for example by:

- continuing to behave like they're still a student years after graduating high school or college;
- not being able to come to terms with a breakup;
- demonstrating deference or even reverence toward someone who once held power or authority over them, despite that dynamic no longer existing?

Sometimes, all it takes to free yourself from an outdated perspective is to remind yourself a few times that things have changed, and then to **commit** to thinking and living accordingly. Most people require a more deliberate effort to move forward from such entrenched positions, however. One method, which can be profoundly transformative, is to perform a *personal ceremony* to signify the conclusion of one chapter and the commencement of another, even if it's months or years later. When doing so, it's essential to:

- 1) **act with full intention** (as explained in Chapter 3's *Confidence* and Chapter 14's *The Plinko Perspective*), and
- 2) **assign personal meaning and value** to the activity and to anything of importance associated with it.

These rituals—which are designed to help you process, let go of, and gain distance from past experiences, while ideally fostering learning and growth—can be simple, such as tearing up photos of a toxic person. One patient took this further, setting up a dartboard near the foot of her bed and, every morning, throwing a dart she kept in her nightstand at a picture of her ex while saying, "Good morning, fuckface!" Another patient placed photos of his former house, which held terrible memories, into a black box that he buried in the yard of his new home.

The critical distinction between these **intentional** actions and what most people might do in similar circumstances is the complete **control** my patients maintain. They do not lash out in rage or succumb to disempowering emotions like hurt, betrayal, or bitterness. Instead, they perform their rituals deliberately, aware that they're generating not only immediate relief but also, more importantly, lasting psychological and emotional benefits.

¹ Jung expounded on this concept most comprehensively in 1960's *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*.

My favourite example of such symbolic rituals comes from “Bob,” who couldn’t stop thinking about his ex-girlfriend (“Margaret”) many months after she left him. I explained empathetically that, as morbid as it may sound, it would’ve been easier for him to move on if she had died instead of breaking up. That’s because he would then have no reason to keep torturing himself, hoping for reconciliation. Although she had made it exceedingly clear that she wanted nothing to do with him ever again, he couldn’t unhook himself from his futile fantasy that she might one day reconsider and return to him.

Accordingly, I recommended that Bob hold a symbolic funeral for Margaret and their relationship. The ritual needed to be as visual, dramatic, personally meaningful, and memorable as possible. That’s because **the goal of such exercises is to disrupt the existing emotional connection to a problematic memory or thought.**

Bob chose to stage a “Viking funeral” like he’d seen in movies, whereby the deceased is placed on a raft stacked with hay or straw, pushed toward the middle of a lake, and set ablaze with a flaming arrow shot from shore. He made a paper boat, in which he placed a photograph of Margaret he’d cut out from his favourite picture of them together, and put it in his bathtub filled with water. His plan was to set the boat on fire by casting a lit match at it like an arrow.

Unfortunately, Bob kept missing! He went through dozens of matches before one finally landed in the boat and completed the ceremony.

When recounting the story, Bob laughed in embarrassment at the absurdity of the scene. In response, I commended him for his success. The aim of the exercise was to create new feelings, along with new mental, psychological, and physiological associations, to replace the old ones tied to the memory of Margaret.

Prior to the ritual, even the slightest reminder of her would automatically trigger pain, loss, distress, and hopelessness. Bob would either spiral into misery or exhaust himself trying to avoid or suppress such memories. Although his negative reactions didn’t disappear completely or transform into positive ones after the symbolic funeral, they were significantly muted. This **containment**—bolstered by **proper breathing**—enabled him to engage with his inner experiences in a far more composed and **adaptive** manner than before.

Bob soon reported a significant shift: Whenever Margaret came to mind, his newfound composure allowed him to *manage the **psychic** intrusion through effective **humour*** (see Chapter 11’s *Shining a Light on the Shadow*). He’d look back at the ridiculous spectacle of tossing match after match in vain at the paper boat in his bathtub and smile to himself. That brief moment of mild amusement served as a “circuit-breaker,” providing Bob the opportunity to *resist and detach from any emerging thoughts, memories, or feelings*. This, in turn, prevented him from descending into unpleasant recollections and debilitating regrets.

Bob enhanced his efforts by telling “his mind” in a neutral, **confident** tone something like, “Thank you, but I’ve already held a funeral for Margaret, so there’s no need to waste any more time mourning her or agonizing over the break up.” He’d sometimes add, “I’m now going to do something more productive (or enjoyable),” and then proceed in a calm, controlled, and intentional manner. Even if he simply distracted himself on his phone or computer, this was markedly different from before, when he’d frantically grab his device in a desperate attempt to escape his thoughts and memories.

You might recognize these strategies and the principle behind them from Chapter 10’s *OCD? GTFO!* and especially the *Intrusive Visitors of the Night* section of the *Control the Uncontrollable* Exercise. Namely, **containing your emotions and physiology is far superior to trying to avoid unpleasant or distressing internal experiences in an agitated, fearful, or frenzied state.** The former approach empowers you to apply the techniques described in *I F*cked Up* (as well as those used in **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy** or similar treatments), whereas the latter grants unwanted mental material even more power over you.

Frothy Milk Coffee

Please keep in mind that symbolism and rituals aren’t restricted to only negative experiences. In addition to the pleasure I derive from observing moments of synchronicity, one of the most favourable cost-benefits outcomes I’ve ever experienced comes from a simple morning routine I initiated years ago. It produces instantaneous gratification with no effort at all.

For context, I was basking in the beauty of a perfect summer weekday afternoon on my friend’s patio, which felt like an oasis in the midst of my incredibly busy schedule. My enjoyment of the day deepened as I reflected on recent successes I had achieved in my personal, professional, and media endeavours. At one point, my friend

brought me a cup of coffee topped with frothy milk, made with a simple device I hadn't seen before. Loving coffee as much as I do, I promptly bought an inexpensive frother for myself, unaware of just how much it would improve my life.

Making coffee with frothy milk became a morning ritual that helped ensure I start each day off right. It might seem unbelievable, but this simple drink continues to elevate my mood, even many years later. Its power extends beyond merely triggering the memory of that amazing day when I first had it. It also evokes a broader sense of that period, when I felt like a master of multiple important domains in my life.

The frothy milk coffee also serves as an inspirational reminder that **I choose to live life on my own terms** (as much as possible, at least).

To explain, I usually drink coffee out of necessity, to keep me going throughout the day. This was particularly true during my 100-hour workweeks, when I'd sometimes see patients for up to 14 hours straight, fuelled by six thermoses of coffee I brought to my office.

My frothy milk version is a completely different experience, especially after I chose to work far less (and drink much less coffee) than before. At that time, I decided to start my workday relatively late and to keep my mornings light. I also timed things so that I'd avoid traffic or crowds if I needed to go out. This comfortable schedule made my morning frothy milk coffee feel special because I could savour it at a leisurely pace, in stark contrast to my typical utilitarian consumption. Enjoying my coffee while relaxed and doing nothing of consequence serves as a daily reminder that **I've structured my life in alignment with my own values and preferences**. That recognition, in turn, activates memories of the chances I've taken and the effort I've invested in *actualizing my goals*, thus affording me my present lifestyle.

I enhance the resonance and value of these memories by capitalizing on a lesson from Chapter 14's *The Plinko Perspective*: **Acting with intention and full awareness significantly increases the impact of whatever you are doing**. Although it's after the fact, I acknowledge and express **gratitude** for my **self-agency** and willingness to take **calculated risks**—qualities that have got me where I am. The resulting rewarding feelings become linked to and reinforce the mindsets and behaviours that have enabled my success, amplifying my motivation to continue embodying them. Can you think of any other activity that yields such a profound payoff with so little time and effort?

Around the start of 2022, I had to modify my frothy milk coffee ritual because I began intermittent fasting, along with several other changes aimed at improving my health. This dietary practice requires me to consume nothing but water or black coffee until about 10:30 a.m., 16 hours after my last meal the previous day. By that time, I'm usually engaged in some kind of work, so I obviously cannot drink my special coffee in the same way as before.

Fortunately, **we can imbue any object, person, event, or activity with whatever meaning we choose, and thereby generate whatever feelings we desire from that symbolism**. Heeding a wise friend's advice, I **reframed** my frothy milk coffee, which I still manage to drink most days, as:

- a) a reward for refraining from eating for at least 16 hours,
- b) a reminder of the healthy lifestyle decision that's enhancing my well-being, and
- c) a symbol of my ability to commit to and follow through on whatever I choose to do in my best interests.

I also reframed and symbolized black coffee, whose taste I used to dislike. Now, it carries a kind of "romanticized flavour," after I repeatedly heard Joe Rogan describe enjoying black coffee before breaking his own fast. It also serves as a powerful daily reminder that **I have chosen to prioritize my health**. To this end, aside from my one symbolic frothy milk coffee most mornings (or later in the day, depending on my schedule), I usually don't put anything in my coffee. And, being the **adaptable** person I am, I've come to appreciate this healthier version.

It may seem silly to assign so much significance to a simple beverage. But that's the main point of this entire exercise: **We are endowed with the unique capacity to infuse the ordinary with extraordinary meaning through the power of symbolism**, and to harvest infinite enrichment from this remarkable ability. Why deprive yourself of such a gift?

Movie Theatre Mentalization

The **Movie Theatre Mentalization** exercise is designed to “rewire” your limbic system’s automatic reactions to painful or disturbing memories and related cognitions you’ve been unable to contain properly. Based on a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) technique, this tool helps you exert greater **control** over your thoughts, feelings, and physiology, in part by leveraging the power of **humour** (as discussed in Chapter 11).

Unfortunately, NLP has earned a poor reputation due to unfounded and sometimes ridiculous claims about its applications and effectiveness, as well as some questionable theories regarding its purported mechanisms of change. Moreover, despite its explosion in popularity in the 1990s, largely propelled by self-help guru Tony Robbins, NLP now seems to be most commonly promoted among “pickup artists.” Perhaps its most common use within that realm is “mirroring,” whereby you mimic someone’s behaviour to “match their energy” and to create rapport with them—and, in the case of “pickup artists,” to manipulate the other person.

Despite valid criticisms of NLP, certain premises and techniques do appear to offer value, particularly those that align with **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)** and **hypnotherapy**, both of which are well-supported by empirical research and practised by regulated professionals. Having used some of those interventions on myself, I can attest to their benefits firsthand.

When learning and using the *Movie Theatre Mentalization* technique, it’s best to do so in a private space, free from interruptions or distractions. This is especially true if you keep your eyes closed to enhance your engagement in the absurd **visualization** you’ll be doing, so you don’t feel self-conscious. As you move through the following steps, take your time to perform each activity **mindfully** and properly. Also, you should repeat the exercise several times, not only to refine your technique but also to deepen the processing, thereby consolidating and reinforcing the results.

- 1) **Imagine sitting in a movie theatre**; it should be one you know and can visualize clearly. Ideally, it’s large, with tiered seating, making it easier to see other patrons. Although the theatre can be empty or sparsely populated, it’s best if packed. Take a few moments to **take in your surroundings**.
- 2) Recall that **perspective** is one of the foundational elements of *I F*cked Up*. In this exercise, literal perspective is equally important, beginning with this step. **Imagine yourself in the projection booth**, from where you’ll play the problematic scene. You want to visualize the room in such a way that you can look down and see the audience clearly, particularly where “the other you” is sitting. You can switch between *being* the person in the projector room and *seeing* that person. Likewise, you can observe “**audience you**” from the vantage point of the **projectionist**, or you can watch the **projectionist** looking down at “**audience you**.” Still following?
- 3) As the **projectionist**, **play the scene that has been troubling you**. The “camera perspective” can be:
 - a) *first-person*, as if you’re seeing everything through your own eyes,
or
 - b) *third-person*, as if you’re watching yourself in the scene, from whichever angle you prefer (e.g., behind, overhead, sideways)—as long as all important details remain visible.
- 4) Once the scene begins, **shift to the role of audience member** for the next two steps. If this switch is too difficult, skip the previous step (3) and simply be “**audience you**” when the scene starts; right before that, you can look back and up at “**projectionist you**” preparing to play the movie.
- 5) **Watch the scene play out from start to finish**—unless it’s a traumatic memory that feels too intense or distressing to process properly. In that case, begin the scene a little earlier than you ordinarily would and stop before the overwhelming part. Then, you can choose either to:
 - a) apply this exercise to *the events leading up to* the traumatic incident and hope to derive partial benefit,
or
 - b) gradually build your way up to the traumatic memory, as illustrated in the following example:

One patient who'd been traumatized by a violent mugging in her workplace garage opened the scene with her leaving the office, followed by taking the elevator to that garage—but stopping before she reached the parking level. Each time she repeated the exercise, she started from the same point and eventually became **habituated** to it. The familiarity of this “safe zone” increased her confidence and allowed her to extend the scene gradually, until she could finally include the assault. After that, she set to work on shortening the beginning of the scene, to the point that it started with her leaving the elevator and entering the garage. She was then ready to perform the next steps.

- 6) As challenging as it may be, **sit through the unpleasant or distressing scene**. If you feel excessive discomfort, **breathe properly** (see *Just Breathe (aka The “Calm Down” That Actually Works...)*) before and during the exercise. Aim to **immerse yourself in the moment, reexperiencing even the feelings** you'd rather avoid. If that's too difficult, you can skip it for now; but it's advisable to do so at some point. Should you find the target memory too powerful to tolerate, even without fully engaging in it, perhaps begin with a more manageable one.
- 7) Next, **do one or more of the following warm-up exercises** to help you gain control over your mental operations in preparation for the subsequent steps. As with all aspects of *Movie Theatre Mentalization*, *take your time and don't push the process*. You want to truly experience the changes in your perception of various features of the movie, the theatre, and your role as **audience member** and **projectionist** while performing the following visualization manipulations:
 - Adjust the lighting in the theatre, making it brighter and darker.
 - Make the screen larger and smaller.
 - Move yourself closer to and farther from the screen.
 - Increase and decrease the size of the audience.
 - While playing any part of the scene for about 10 to 60 seconds,
 - ☞ Increase, decrease, and mute the volume.
 - ☞ Make the scene brighter and darker.
 - ☞ Switch between colour and black-and-white.
 - ☞ Speed up and slow down the action.
 - You can combine the movie and theatre modifications, e.g., making the screen larger and the scene brighter, or turning down the volume of the scene while making the audience grow louder.
 - While doing any of these warm-ups, switch between the “**audience you**” and “**projectionist you**” perspective—and look at “the other” you, as well as anywhere else you want.
- 8) Once you feel reasonably **confident** manipulating the different elements of your imagined theatre experience, **play the troubling scene again from the beginning**. As before, use either the first- or third-person perspective. This time, you're going to **make the scene—especially its worst parts and any problematic people within it—as ridiculous, graphic, and funny as possible**.
- 9) For example, say the memory involves a teacher humiliating you in class. As they approach you, each step produces a farting noise; or, when they try to speak, farts come out of their mouth. (Yes, fart humour is immature, but it's effective in many cultures.) **Incorporate all kinds of silly or strange sound effects and music, as well as cartoon-like visual effects** such as eyes popping out of the head, heads exploding, feces coming out of the mouth when people speak, etc. You could also make the teacher walk in a bizarre manner, become naked, or turn into a crying baby or a pile of crap. You get the idea.
- 10) To enhance the effect further, **picture the audience laughing hysterically**: falling out of their seats, rolling in the aisles, tossing bags of popcorn, snorting drinks through their nose, or other slapstick actions. It's best to **crank up the silliness as much as possible**, for instance by imagining people laughing so hard that their heads fall off or explode, or their guts burst open (look up the “wafer-thin mint” restaurant scene from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* for inspiration).
- 11) Aim to **repeat this exercise at least once or twice soon after the first successful attempt**, and then several more times over the next few days or weeks. *Each repetition weakens the memory's hold on you.*

- 12) You can also **reduce the memory's impact by systematically distancing yourself from it even without humour**. Perform and combine as many of the following manipulations as you can to create the greatest detachment:
- Gradually shrink the scene until it becomes a dot on the screen.
 - Gradually fade the colour until the scene is black-and-white.
 - Gradually blur the image until the scene becomes completely fuzzy.
 - Gradually lower the volume until the scene becomes silent.
 - Play the entire scene from *first-person* perspective and then replay it from *third-person*.
 - Start from first-person perspective and switch to third-person mid-scene.
 - Shift from **audience you** watching the scene to **projectionist you** watching the scene, to **projectionist you** watching **audience you**.
 - Gradually move **audience you** from the front row to the back, eventually walking out of the theatre backwards, still watching the screen as the doors close behind you.

Having tried all of the preceding techniques, I believe harnessing the power of humour is more effective than distancing. That's because transforming an unpleasant memory into a comically absurd movie scene prevents it from provoking the same reflexive emotional and physiological reaction that had been plaguing you. Repeating the exercise several times helps disrupt or "short-circuit" any disturbing thoughts and feelings tied to the problematic event. You should eventually find that thinking about the experience no longer triggers fear, shame, humiliation, impotent rage, or other distressing responses.

To be clear, ridiculous visualization isn't expected to make you laugh or smile the next time the troubling **psychic** material surfaces. Rather, the goal is to no longer experience excessive stress, discomfort, or panic when thinking about or remembering that mental content—nor frantically try to avoid, suppress, or flee from it. Instead, your (somewhat) subdued internal reaction will allow you to create the psychological space needed to apply the techniques in *I F*cked Up* to deal with the modified, much tamer cognitions.

Director's Cut: Remixing Your Visualization

You can adapt the *Movie Theatre Mentalization* exercise to suit your needs. For example, instead of—or in addition to—making the scene amusing, you might do something terrible to someone who wronged you, as described below. You can also make yourself huge, muscular, and powerful, while adding dramatic or heroic music, to help counteract any fear, embarrassment, or other disempowering emotions the memory evokes.

As with the humorous version, these kinds of scenes should be as dramatic, graphic, and memorable as possible. For instance, you might imagine cutting off a "villain's" head with a giant sword, causing blood to spurt everywhere as the decapitated head smashes into the wall and explodes on impact. Or, to maintain a comedic tone, something silly can happen after you sever the head, such as spaghetti shooting out of the neck while the head makes weird faces and spits out gibberish.

I understand that some people may not feel comfortable using violent imagery to reprocess an undesirable memory, especially in cases like the one mentioned below. However, as with the *Control the Uncontrollable* Exercise (especially the *Recurring Nightmares* section), this strategy can help you *gain a sense of control* and transform negative neurological and emotional associations with the incident into **adaptive** ones. By engaging your imagination and creativity in the ways described here, you're shifting from inhibitory feelings of, for instance, fear, weakness, or helplessness to a sense of **agency** and *being in charge of your mind*.

No More Sequels!

One of the more common applications of *Movie Theatre Mentalization* is letting go of a former partner. For example, "Bob" used to go to a local coffee shop with his girlfriend every weekend. After she left him, he couldn't avoid passing the place every day on his way to and from work, as it was next to the subway. Unfortunately, he never became **habituated** or desensitized to the shop. Instead, he kept feeling just as nostalgic and awful as the first time he passed it following the breakup.

To break free from the grip of loss, longing, and regret, Bob decided to recast the positive memories associated with the coffee shop into a horror movie. From a first-person perspective, he watched his ex laugh maniacally as she blew up the coffee shop—with him inside it. He intensified the scene by turning her into a ghoulish who gleefully cannibalized his dying body, slurping his blood and rolling around in it like a wild animal.

Although the intervention was effective, Bob felt a little “off” each time he passed the shop. Inferring that this was due to the scene’s ending, I suggested that he change it to his ex choking on his flesh and blood, dying while his spirit rose to the Heavens. I further advised him to switch to the third-person perspective in that final moment so he could see his spirit hovering above her corpse. In line with what was explained earlier, this perspective shift was meant to help him detach from the experience even more. After modifying the imagery, Bob reported that he was able to let go of his ex more “cleanly,” without feeling unsettled or experiencing other lingering discomfort.

You should similarly monitor your reactions during and after the exercise so you can make any necessary adjustments. For instance, some patients don’t want to imagine hurting the person they’re trying to forget because they’d feel guilty, even though it’s just a fantasy. Others hesitate to tarnish their fond recollections of the individual.

While you shouldn’t act against your **values**, *pragmatism* is *paramount*—as long as it doesn’t cause unnecessary, unwarranted, or disproportionate harm. Remember **The Practical vs The Psychological**: If supposedly positive thoughts or memories are in fact causing extreme hurt, sadness, loneliness, or other distressing feelings, why hold on to them? And **why feel bad if you’re not harming anyone in real life**, only in your visualization?

I advocate a “whatever works” approach, as long as the benefits outweigh the costs in *practical, real-life* terms (again, assuming this doesn’t violate your values or harm others). *Movie Theatre Mentalization* and other interventions in *I F*cked Up* help you unhook yourself from **maladaptive** internal processes and external realities. No matter how silly, off-putting, or embarrassing some of them may seem, they get the job done. And no one needs to know what kind of path you took to success—only that you arrived.

Post Credits

In line with my “whatever works” approach, if you truly cannot bring yourself to subject your problematic psychic content to the kinds of ridiculous visualization techniques described above, you do have a few options. One is the *distancing* method detailed in Step 12. It might not be as effective, but it *can* help mitigate the impact of unsettling memories. In addition, Steven C. Hayes, the co-developer of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), designed a related exercise he calls “Leaves on a Stream,” which you can find online or in one of his books.

That said, as alluded to in Step 5 of the *Movie Theatre Mentalization*, traumatic memories are often too intense and distressing to apply these kinds of interventions, especially Step 6, whereby you immerse yourself in the moment. Many people accordingly skip that step altogether with respect to trauma-based imagery. And for those who are unable to perform the *Movie Theatre Mentalization* at all with such memories, I recommend using it with less troubling material, with the hope that the increased ability to **compartmentalize** (discussed in Chapter 3) it fosters will produce a spillover effect.

From my own personal experience, I can attest to this enhanced capacity for compartmentalization. I first performed a variation of the *Movie Theatre Mentalization* in my early 20s, targeting two unsettling memories—one of which was what most people would consider traumatic. From that moment forward, I have been able to compartmentalize and handle even the most horrific thoughts, images, memories, and feelings. This was particularly helpful when I conducted about 500 assessments for the courts and Child Protective Services, during which I was exposed to some of the worst cases of child abuse and maltreatment imaginable. And among the thousands of patients I have treated over the past three decades, many have disclosed horrific internal and external experiences that would haunt me were I not able to compartmentalize what they shared following each session.

One final point to keep in mind: This ability is truly a **superpower**. As discussed in Chapter 3’s *Compartmentalization*, instead of protecting yourself by shutting down or closing yourself off emotionally and interpersonally when discussing or engaging with distressing or otherwise challenging matters, it enables you to be *fully present* without becoming psychologically or physiologically overwhelmed. Afterward, you are able to **contain** the experience and continue with the rest of your day, being fully present in whatever activity you choose.

What's Your Theme Song?

A novel way to gain interesting **insights** into yourself is to come up with your personal **Theme Song**. I define this as the music you'd play in your head, or in real life, when you want to:

- a) motivate yourself,
- b) get into the right headspace in the moment or for upcoming situations,
- c) improve your mood, or
- d) feel like the best version of yourself.

To enhance the exercise, also consider *what song(s) you would want played at your funeral*. You can limit yourself to one track each for the theme song and funeral, but it's better to pick more, for reasons explained later. Accordingly, the rest of this section assumes multiple songs.

Before reading further, please take a moment to select your *Theme Songs* and **Funeral Setlist**. Think about why you chose the *Theme Songs* you did. Beyond the reasons listed above, do they:

- reflect aspects of your personality;
- correspond to the image you'd like to have of yourself and/or present to others;
- remind you of certain people, places, events, or periods of your life;
- contain lyrics that depict appealing themes; or
- come from a program or movie that meant something important to you, or that contained a compelling and memorable character or scene?

For many years, my two primary *Theme Songs* have been Judas Priest's "Riding on the Wind" and Joe Satriani's "Back to Shalla-Bal." Both are powerful, fast-paced, hard-rocking, melodic anthems that fire me up from the first thunderous riff and drumbeat right to the end, never losing momentum. They capture my approach to life and inspire me to keep pushing forward no matter what. I frequently play them in my head or on my laptop, particularly when I'm feeling down, tired, or unmotivated. Such negative or self-limiting states don't stand a chance against the sonic onslaught of my *Theme Songs*.

I have one other *Theme Song* I play in my head when I need to feel calm and in control: Monster Magnet's "God Says No." I imagine myself walking into whatever situation awaits—in slow motion, perfectly in sync with the rhythm of this hypnotically cool track.

These three tunes will definitely be played at my funeral (the *Funeral Setlist* exercise is described below), with the rest of the playlist reflecting various other facets of my personality and life experiences that hold special meaning for me. For example, I'll include "Sweet Transvestite" from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I love this song for its subversive qualities, which resonate with my rebellious and irreverent nature. Also, watching the movie and joining in the audience participation countless times—especially at a theatre where my friends worked, and I occasionally got to co-host the screening—was an exceptionally fun and memorable part of my teens and 20s.

Knowing that simply thinking about your *Theme Songs* and *Funeral Setlist* can evoke positive memories and associated moods is one reason I promote these exercises. I further explain to patients that research shows that listening to the right tunes or playing them in your head can help shift you into a more **adaptive** mental, emotional, or physiological state.

My approach stands in stark contrast to the irrational way people (predominantly females) are apt to misuse music. Can you guess what I'm about to describe? Here's a hint: What do many girls and women (and far fewer males) listen to when they're in a low mood, especially after a breakup or other interpersonal hardship? Melancholy or somber songs! It makes no sense to worsen an already demotivating or depressing emotional state—unless the goal is to immerse yourself in grieving as a way to work through a profound loss, facilitating the healing process and eventually moving forward.

Aside from that one exception, wouldn't you agree it's illogical and self-defeating to deny yourself such an easy way to improve your energy and mental health simply by playing the right music? Even a few notes can

improve your mood or boost productivity, whether the music resonates deeply with you or triggers a psychological and emotional connection to an inspirational or uplifting memory.

If you doubt the power of music, watch the 2014 documentary, *Alive Inside: A Story of Music and Memory*. To quote the website for this touching film, it explores “music’s capacity to reawaken our souls and uncover the deepest parts of our humanity.” The movie “chronicles the astonishing experiences of individuals around the country who have been revitalized through the simple experience of listening to music.” It “reveals the uniquely human connection we find in music and how its healing power can triumph where prescription medication falls short,” demonstrating “music’s ability to combat memory loss and restore a deep sense of self to those suffering from it”—including people with dementia and Alzheimer’s.

I find it hard to ignore such compelling—almost miraculous—evidence for the benefits of music. And today we have unprecedented access to virtually any song that can enrich our lives, whether through the ways discussed above or in other ways personally meaningful to you. Of all the exercises and interventions described in *I F*cked Up*, **harnessing the magic of music offers perhaps the best effort-to-benefit ratio, making it a true no-brainer.**

Funeral Setlist

Building on the preceding benefits, recall that I introduced the *Theme Song* exercise by mentioning the insights it can provide. The *Funeral Setlist* enhances this in two key ways:

- a) It requires more songs, which prompts you to think more deeply or extensively about the challenge, thereby generating more detailed and varied information.
- b) It shifts your **perspective** toward the people who might attend and the various roles you play in relation to each of them, or within the contexts you and they share.

With regard to (a), the advantages of multiple tracks in the *Funeral Setlist* should motivate you to come up with more than one *Theme Song* as well. As for (b), incorporating people from different areas of your life can spark reflections on how you want them to remember you, which may in turn inspire you to consider and maybe reevaluate your current relationships with them. You might also imagine how they’d interact with each other and what they might say about you. These additional elements deepen and broaden the exercise, cultivating more diverse insights and richer self-awareness.

The Social Soundtrack

As valuable as these activities are with respect to your functioning in the moment or **personal growth**, they also serve as effective interpersonal tools. As noted elsewhere, providing unique experiences to others is a powerful way to impress and connect with them. If delivered with the right blend of **confidence** and playfulness, the *Theme Song* and *Funeral Setlist* can be great ways to:

- 1) break the ice with others,
- 2) discover distinctive and sometimes profound sides of them in a fun and novel way, and
- 3) win them over.

As explained throughout *Volume 2*, one of our most prized resources as social animals is interpersonal savvy. Whether meeting new people, hanging out with friends and family, or engaging with colleagues, you will be held in high regard and reap the benefits of elevated social status if you can foster harmonious and rewarding interactions.

To be sure, not everyone can appreciate the creativity and payoffs of the **Theme Song** and **Funeral Setlist**. But most people do value and fondly remember mildly challenging, yet enjoyable, moments that pleasantly defy their expectations. Doesn’t it seem irrational not to provide and benefit from such experiences through these novel activities that are incredibly easy to execute?

High Fidelity

One variation of **The Survey** from Chapter 4's *The Fourth Key: Distinguishing The Practical from The Psychological* is what I call the “**High Fidelity**” approach. I named it after the John Cusack movie of the same title, based on a central element of its plot: After his latest relationship falls apart, Cusack's character decides to investigate his recurrent self-destructive interpersonal patterns by contacting the ex-girlfriends from his “Top 5 Most Memorable Breakups” list and asking them what went wrong.

In the same vein, I encourage patients to ask several people they trust—trust is essential—for feedback on an important aspect of themselves. Depending on how safe or comfortable they feel with each person, they decide what, if anything, to disclose about why they're making the request. Some explain that it's part of therapy, while others simply say they're trying to learn more about themselves; in the latter case, they might say they came across the idea somewhere, for instance claiming it was a personal development exercise at work.

Some questions my patients have asked, which I tell them to phrase bluntly, include:

- What traits or behaviours of mine do you find annoying, troubling, or problematic?
- Are there any ways I behave with friends, colleagues, or new people that I might not be aware of?
- Why can't I ever get a second date?
- Why do you think I have such a hard time maintaining long-term relationships?
- What is it about me or how I act that makes people think they can disregard or take advantage of me?
- Why don't people take me seriously?
- Why do most of my friends never ask to spend time with me one-on-one?
- Why am I always the one who has to reach out to others to talk or go out?
- How can I make a better first impression?
- What might cause me to do poorly in job interviews?
- What do you think is holding me back at work?
- How can I advocate for myself more effectively at work or in my personal relationships?

People may be reluctant to provide honest answers because they don't want to upset or hurt you. Explain that you really want to gain some important **insights** so you can improve yourself. Make it clear that you want candid answers, assuring them that *you won't take offence*. You should also give them room to decline, so they don't feel unduly pressured and possibly end up **resenting** you.

Those who do participate will likely say mostly things you already know. However, you'll probably also:

- a) *confirm* certain realities about yourself because a number of people provide the same response; and
- b) receive feedback you didn't expect, which can be invaluable because **knowledge is power, especially when that knowledge is about yourself**.

Either way, this is only the first step—albeit a significant one. The next step is to consider the information with an **open mind**, especially any blind spots it may reveal. Then, **commit** to making the necessary improvements using the principles and techniques detailed in *I F*cked Up*, particularly Chapters 4 and 6–9.

One critical caveat to keep in mind: Most people can't help but become **resentful** when being told things about themselves they don't like. Getting upset at someone for doing what you asked, especially after promising you wouldn't hold it against them, is obviously both irrational and unfair.

Accordingly, if you choose to do the exercise, the onus is on you to rise above any hurt or other negative feelings so you don't dismiss the feedback. To help you achieve this, **embrace self-discovery and self-honesty as core values**, and then **frame the experience as an opportunity to learn new things about yourself: an opportunity for which you are grateful**. You should also approach this task with the neutral, **scientist-based** mindset described in Chapters 7 and 11. Adopting these **adaptive perspectives** will enhance your capacity to **embody the spirit of personal accountability, personal growth, and optimal functioning** facilitated by the *High Fidelity* method.