



# It Already Hurts Enough

*Strategies for Stopping Self-Injury*

MAGGIE COALSON



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*For you. Don't give up.*





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# Letter from Maggie

**H**i there. I'm so glad you opened this book. I have no doubt that using the ideas presented here will help you to reclaim yourself from self-sabotage and self-injury. You already know that self-harm isn't a *solution* to what's eating at you. Otherwise, you wouldn't need it to cope. You want something different for yourself, and it can be hard to hold out hope for change.

Maybe you think you *need* self-injury. Maybe you fear that you'll never find a better way to cope with what's inside you. Maybe you fear that you won't change, no matter how or what you try. Start by trying to believe that you *can* change. Though you may not be where you want to be mentally right now, the only way you can fail at stopping self-injury is if you don't try.

It'll have to be OK that you can't really see where you're headed just yet. You may be confused about how to deal with the wounds that tell the story of where you've been. But you're not broken, you're not fatally flawed, and you're not doomed to a life of pain and self-harm. Right this minute, you're on your way to something better. You may be alone, you may be scared, but as of this moment, you have at least one person rooting for you. (Go, you, go!).

The contents of this book come directly from my own experiences with yoga, psychology, self-injury, and a life steeped in advising others on how to treat themselves kindly while relating to their darkest, most confusing internal content. Each section of the book contains insights, questions, self-help tidbits, and personal inquiry suggestions. Every bit of the content is intended to support you as you move beyond self-injury. The material isn't meant to magically whisk you away from self-loathing or extreme reactions, but to start you on a journey—one that will see you take on new ways of thinking and *constructive* ways to cope with your pain and calm chaotic thoughts. This trip is ultimately yours for the making. You alone can choose how you treat yourself. The information in this book is offered for you to dive into or to pick through; to try on, test out, or reject; to take word-for-word; or to modify to suit your current needs. Everything here is intended to make your journey a little smoother and more enjoyable, and to help you navigate the bumps in the road so they can't knock you off course.

On your journey, you'll be saying goodbye to habits and ways of thinking that harm you. Though the comfort provided through self-sabotage or self-injury can feel like your best friend, it isn't the type of comfort you'd get from a *real* friend. Each of our lives hurts in ways that no one else can truly understand, but using self-sabotage or self-harm is not helping you live a life you love. It's time to stop hurting yourself. You know it. And you *can* stop. I know you can find non-harming ways to cope with what has happened to you and what's happening inside you.

*Let's take a moment for a necessary disclaimer:* I am in no way attempting to pass myself off as a doctor, a guru, or any other type of know-it-all. *No one* knows it all. My life experience has taught me all sorts of lessons about finding yourself under layers of identities, experiences, and emotions that are confusing, triggering, and limiting to honest expression. I suggest that you use all the appropriate resources you can identify as you work with the stimuli that lead you to harm yourself willingly. The ideas I offer in this book will change the way you think about your pain and, therefore, how you cope with it. Once you change your thinking, your desire to self-injure will start to fade because you'll have access to more effective coping tools. I know very personally that changing your thinking can change *everything* about your experience of life. I truly believe that the insights and suggestions in this book will compassionately guide you away from self-harm and toward a life—and a *you*—that you love.

Go, you . . . go,

Maggie



# Introduction

## Where We Start

**I**f you've developed a self-injury habit, you're likely trying to manage a host of thoughts and feelings that aren't giving you a great deal of pleasure. It's also likely that your overall enjoyment of life is diminished by the way your brain interprets "you," your experiences, the people in your life, and the painful or shame-triggering things that you or others have done. You may be confused about who you are underneath the thoughts that drive your self-injury habits.

Your self-injury actions don't define who you are. Your extreme emotions don't define who you are either. On the contrary, they obscure the real, deep, core *you* from expressing what's really happening. Self-injury impairs your ability to identify and meet the deeper needs kicking and screaming for your attention. When your mind frequently brings up content that gives you ever-renewing opportunities to suffer from your own thoughts and feelings, self-injury can seem the only way to cope. But using violence as a tool to achieve emotional relief can easily become a habit of self-sabotage. When pain is used as relief without challenging the thinking behind it, it only trains a mind to *avoid* dealing with the triggering content. It makes a habit of coping by *not* coping.

Self-injury is so effective at soothing chaotic thoughts and emotions that despite its downsides, it's a difficult habit to stop. After all, it "works." But what's "working" is a specific and harmful pattern of reactionary thinking. This harmful thinking lets your brain loose to chatter away, twisting your emotions and beliefs in ways that can be a little frightening. One part of you may be arguing with other parts of you, and your capacity for self-governance may get pushed into the background. Some part of your mind may even be able to "watch" the various aspects of your thinking fight for control of decision-making. But even if you see it happening, it can be difficult to stop your brain as it maneuvers in and out of painful, contorted thoughts and emotional content. If you don't know how to kick your pain out of the driver's seat, your actions can result in experiences that just *prove* the messages inside the painful thinking. You can start to believe that you *are* the content of your painful thoughts.

Trying to manage the mental chaos that drives self-injury can feel incredibly isolating, but you're not the only one who knows that struggle. Of course, the knowledge that you aren't alone in using self-injury as a coping habit may provide about a tablespoon of relief when self-injury urges come on. In a very practical sense, you *are* mostly alone with your self-injury habits, and you know it. But what's happening in your head affects your entire life, so other people in your life are impacted by the choices you make inside your isolation. Despite the pain of this simple truth, it's up to you—and you alone—to change what's happening in your head and in your life. Others may help you along the way, but you're the only one who'll create real change in the way you manage your internal experience. You're the one who needs to find the energy to do the mental wrangling by taking advantage of whatever help is available. Whether or not you're really alone with the struggle, it's *your* mind that needs the changing and *you* who will ultimately have to do that work. Try not to lament that the work feels solitary. Instead, embrace the idea that you are your own creation, and take control of your mental state.

## The Journey and the Destination

In those glorious moments when you feel wise and balanced, you may identify with the oft-repeated adage, "Life is about the journey, not the destination." In some contexts, that's fair wisdom. But that kind of New Age thinking applies only when one isn't sliding down the slippery slope to self-destruction. When you're trying to stop self-injuring, it's *all about* the destination.

The book in your hands is about getting somewhere different from where you are now. It's about taking a self-directed journey that clears up chaotic thinking and allows you to live without using pain to punish or soothe yourself. Once you've dealt with some baggage and internal ruff, you may be able to flow with the meandering journey of life with no need for a destination. But until self-injury isn't one of your primary coping tools, your journey is *about* your destination.

You'll know when you've reached this happy destination when your internal voices and most common thoughts sweep in to *calm* and *support* you during stressful situations. Life will throw all sorts of challenges at you, so you may have to work to get back to that happy destination when you feel an inability to cope without the release that comes from self-harm. Though your brain has developed a habit of responding to stress with violence, each time you use tools other than self-injury as a response to your pain, you'll get a bit closer to your destination by developing *new* habits. Your habits will change as you gain the experiential knowledge of your own innate strength and ability to tolerate distress. The new skills you develop can bring you to a stable platform from which to build a life that, while not perfect, will support you in coping with imperfections in a nonviolent way. Then you'll *live* in this destination, noticing that more often than not, you feel an *absence* of the urge to self-injure.

## What This Book Isn't, and What It Is

This book isn't intended to analyze the value of using self-injury as a coping tool or to diagnose some disease that causes urges to self-injure. It isn't intended to teach you just to let go of the experiences and related thoughts that drive you to use violence against yourself. It isn't intended to replace a therapist, the counsel of those trusted people who know you well, or the many valid support tools out there that may apply to your situation.

This book *is* intended to support you as you take the gazillion individual steps that move you toward more skillfully identifying and meeting your needs without self-injury. It's intended to help you go another minute, another hour, another day, another week, or another month without self-injury as you practice taking mindful action during an emotional crisis. It's intended to help you create a solid foundation on which to build a life you actually *like* to live, to help you learn to live *with* your trauma(s) and with the pains of what you've done to yourself or others while you were trying to survive. It's intended to give ideas, hope, and real tools for you to master challenging moments and take advantage of the calm times to make lasting change in your mind and your life.

Though this book could be useful for anyone seeking advice on changing entrenched, harmful coping habits, it's specifically directed toward people who have developed a self-injury habit that has proven difficult to break, despite efforts at treatment and self-help. When a self-harming habit has taken hold, there are specific things you can do to reclaim control over your reactions to your pain. Part of that process is taking a compassionate look at yourself and what's behind your choice to self-injure; part of it is changing the way you think about the content you find inside yourself. All of it is about finding a way to deal effectively with what's happening inside you from moment to moment.

Odds are that you're fully aware of the original trauma(s) that taught you to suffer silently at your own or others' hands. You know how long you've hurt yourself, you know your preferred methods, and you know the cost of hiding or sharing it. You know how it's affected your relationships with others and yourself. And you know that continuing your self-injury habit keeps a vital part of your being in a mind-bendingly agonizing form of hell. You just don't know how to kick the habit. Yet. This book will show you how.

## Primary Goals

The primary ideas behind stopping self-injury are pretty simple to understand, but harder to consistently

enact. To change and/or stop a habit of self-injury as a response to feeling emotionally overwhelmed or as a form of self-punishment, you need to set two main goals:

1. Avoid self-injury or any action that increases your pain
2. Be gentle with yourself when you don't meet Goal #1

Simple, yes? Well, as they say, the devil is in the details. Lucky for you, the details are crammed into this book, so you've got a fighting chance of meeting your two new primary goals. But *how* do you meet them? What frame of mind, what *qualities* do you need to be able to understand the nuances of your experience and use the insight gained to your advantage? Knowledge for its own sake is great, but applied knowledge has far more impact. How do you give yourself permission and the tools to change, and how can you look at what's happening without getting caught up in it all? Meeting your two new goals will be easier and less traumatic if you cultivate two of your natural attributes which may have fallen into disuse: Compassion and patience.

## Compassion and Patience

In difficult times, bringing forward your capability for compassion and patience will calm and support you. These two talents give you a home base to come back to when trying to answer the all-important question, "How should I handle this situation?" Compassion and patience form the foundation for creating the mindset, taking the actions, and the getting the results you're looking for. It may sound simple, but cultivating compassion and patience can be a real challenge when the echoes of anger, shame, or self-hate pulse through your head.

In this context, compassion is similar to how you would orient yourself to a small child becoming frustrated as he fumbles with a new skill. You can completely understand that he's overloaded and why he'd be frustrated, but you can see that he would need to get past the frustration before being able to effectively continue with the task. The frustration would obscure the child's ability to see clearly—just like, sometimes, *your* clear-seeing is obscured by your emotions. Offering yourself compassion *eases* frustration so you can move *beyond* the reaction to the solution. Compassion allows you to say "Wow, this is difficult" without having to judge, analyze, or fight the situation, and without applying self-deprecating meanings to the difficulty.

Another form of compassion is demonstrated in the approach you'd take with a friend working through difficult life circumstances. You'd likely attempt to simply be present with what was happening, without judgment or resistance. You wouldn't attempt to shame or condemn her for her reactions or thoughts about her situation. You'd listen, empathize, and let her work through her internal content as she needed to by simply being *present*. You need to maintain presence with "what is" in order to extend compassion to yourself or others. But it may be difficult to cultivate that presence when a situation triggers negative beliefs and deeply rooted fears.

Tapping into compassion for yourself and others will help relieve emotional tension, leaving you feeling more *open* to remaining present. The feeling of compassion can come as a mental awareness of non-judgment or a softening of the body that radiates from the heart. It can be a thought, an action, an emotion, or a bodily sensation. No matter how compassion comes to you, its greatest gift is a release from judgment. Compassion allows you to be with what's real with an open heart and non-judging mindset. It says "This is" without judging it or setting off negative thinking.

The patience part of the equation is equivalent to allowing: allowing time, allowing reality to exist, allowing for the development of options. Patience allows you to be gentle when you may otherwise move to berate or punish yourself or others. It gives you permission to take your time attending to thoughts or emotions that feel urgent.

You may find it easier to cultivate patience for a puppy or a newborn baby than for yourself. After all, they're unskillful in some ways and learning a vast number of new skills. But so are you. Patience releases pressure on an outcome or a method. It opens you to finding additional options, so that your *reaction* to what's happening doesn't muddy your ability to effectively *deal* with what's happening. Offering yourself the same pup-

py-type patience while you grow your skills will be vital to staying present and dealing with your self-harm urges in a nonviolent way.

You can absolutely change your self-harming habits if you commit to developing these two inherent aspects of your character. Even by *considering* compassion and patience in the face of escalating emotion, you'll reduce the emotional intensity that can lead to self-injury. With your emotional intensity reduced, your mind can remain clear enough to pull a *solution* out of the chaos instead of reinforcing your self-harming tendencies with habitual violence. Compassion and patience open you to possibility. They give you the permission and the space to bring in skills and solutions that ease your mental overwhelm without self-harm.

Try to remember: Compassion and patience. Again and again and again. Compassion and patience—for yourself, for others, for the fact that this life is sometimes blissfully easy and sometimes excruciatingly difficult for everyone. Compassion for the challenges you endure that no one may ever understand, and patience to let yourself deal with what you need to, when you need to. Patience to let time and directed effort change the habits that need changing and to cement the habits that you want to keep, and compassion to treat yourself kindly along the way.

Set this as the overarching ideal during your journey away from self-injury: Remind yourself (and others) to come back to compassion and patience when you start to get entangled in your stories, thoughts, and feelings. Learn to switch *off* the parts of you that run toward drama, amplify pain, and crave escape from reality. It may be one of the hardest challenges you'll ever take on, but the journey will be a lot faster and easier if you give yourself a break and let yourself get to everything in its time.

Remember: Compassion and patience.

## *Tweaking Your Melon*

Since your outlook influences many aspects of your life, one goal of this book is to mess with your melon a little. The first two sections are intended to adjust your thinking about who and what you are so that you can see your pain differently. That'll set you up for success in the third section, using the process of NPLTR (Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding) to identify, interpret, and act on your thoughts and related needs. Section four focuses on specific strategies to change elements of your thinking and lifestyle that support your self-injury habits. The last section offers some suggestions for creating ease in your mind via the body and breath. You may find the reading, personal inquiries, and suggestions uncomfortable at times, but during your explorations, you may dust off some treasure chests of strength and self-love that you haven't opened for a while. You'll connect with the parts of your mind that can manage your pain *without* self-injury.

As you look at your habitual thoughts and actions to determine which bits need adjustment, you'll discern which can be adjusted now and which need to wait. You're not going to dive into your pain or all the content your mind can provide to aid in your suffering. You've already practiced that. You're an expert. It's time to master some new skills by selectively altering the way your brain does its business.

## *What You're Going to Do*

Despite what your brain tells you, it's impossible to see your pain clearly if you're trying to understand your pain *through the lens* of your pain. When you're overwhelmed with internal content and need to figure out what to do, you need to *change your view* of that content so you can access the parts of yourself that *aren't* in pain to do the work of understanding the pain. Through the processes outlined in this book, you're going to learn to live more mindfully of your own needs. You're going to learn how to interact with your thoughts and emotions when you're moving toward self-injury. You'll explore the inner content that drives your beliefs and use of self-injury, and you'll work to create reminders that will get you back on track when you lose clarity. You'll develop a repertoire of new coping tools that work for just about any situation. You'll learn to see yourself more clearly, without harsh judgment, and you'll find precious bits



of your true identity underneath the masks you've put on over the years. All in all, you're going to drop self-injury like a bad habit.

You'll pull this book out when you're fully freaking out, when you're clearheaded, when you're teetering on the edge, and when you just need to remember that you're not really alone, even though you may be very close to alone. There's something here for every day, every situation—until you don't need it anymore. Then, you'll go live your life, happily practicing your new skills so consistently that self-injury will find itself out of a job, collecting dust in your mental closet with all the other habits you've outgrown. You'll have better, quicker, and less painful coping options when it's time to manage your emotions, so you won't need this book anymore.

## Working with This Book

To work most effectively with this book, you'll need your compassion, your patience, and a willingness to try new things. You may also need a truckload of Kleenex, something soft to snuggle, and an ability to recover your sense of humor when you've lost it completely. Consider the points below to determine how ready and willing you are to stop self-injuring.

- Can you *watch* yourself? Is there a part of you that can internally and objectively comment on your own behavior as you're behaving?
- Without creating further mental chaos, is it possible for you to split apart and look at "pieces" of yourself to see how they combine to make up your whole? The point of doing so is not to *maintain* a sense of separation, but to look at and shape each of your individual pieces so they all fit together more seamlessly.
- Are you able to assume various mental postures in relationship to your chronic pains? Do you understand that sometimes the pain hurts, and sometimes it doesn't?
- Are you ready to be honest about where self-injury is coming from and what you're trying to *get* by doing it? You don't have to include anyone else in your process if you're not ready, but if you aren't ready to be honest with yourself about what's motivating you, no amount of work will *work*. What's your motivation to look at the aspects of your own behavior that are creating trouble for you?
- Are you ready to try on different strategies to become stable and happy? It takes commitment, time, and strength to try on new ideas and alter aspects of your mental processes that aren't working toward your good. What do you want for yourself *instead* of self-injury?
- Are you capable of tuning into what's happening in your head without reacting severely toward yourself or others? Can you tell when you'll be able to listen to what your extreme or confusing thoughts and emotions "say" without being triggered toward dangerous behavior? You'll need to know when it's time to dive into distraction techniques and when it's safe to pull apart the tangle of thoughts and feelings that drive your use of self-injury.
- What are the *risks* of being honest about what's happening for you? Do you need help from law enforcement, abuse counselors, or other outside agents?
- Do you have self-sabotaging tendencies other than self-injury that you're trying to address? You need to factor any other harmful coping skills you use into your approach to solutions. Will you require additional support as you learn to look at and change what's happening inside you? Knowing and taking responsibility for your tendencies and preferences is essential to stopping self-harming behavior.

## Consider the Right Counselor

If you don't feel ready for what's presented here yet, consider a counselor. If you are ready to dive into new ideas and deal with what's behind your self-harming habits, consider a counselor. If you still need to do some

work tapping into the source of your suffering before you start unraveling it, consider a counselor. If you just want someone to talk to about what's happening inside you, consider a counselor. No matter how you feel about paying someone to talk to you, a licensed clinical therapist who teaches mindfulness and has experience with clients who use self-injury could be a great resource to have on your team. But consider the right counselor for you.

Many people, even educated psychologists, are squeamish about self-injury or don't accurately understand the habit. They may dole out labels, diagnoses, or mental exercises that increase shame, doing more harm than good. Consider that credentials and degrees are given to *people* who know specific things. People are not perfect, and they have many different interests and specialties. If a counselor hasn't dealt with self-injury before, or has misunderstandings about the habit, their degree won't be enough to help you. Find a counselor who understands self-injury and advises you without rushing into diagnosing, shaming, or condemning you. Counselors who work with bulimia or anorexia typically understand the impulses behind self-injury and may be less squeamish about the realities of your formative experiences and self-injury habits.

It's relatively normal for someone who self-injures to see hope on the horizon, and also to have recurrent thoughts that it would be better to "not be here" or "not have to deal with this." Wanting to have an easier life or feeling desperate to be at ease is not necessarily the same as being suicidal. Know where you are on the suicide issue. Don't take on any counselor that mistakes self-injury as a suicide attempt, but do be honest if you're having suicidal thoughts—even if you don't think you'd act on them. There are instructions for positive action in even the darkest thoughts, so try to be truthful about what you're thinking.

Since every person is different, every counselor is, too. Find a counselor with skills and experience that fit your specific needs and history. Be choosy and find what fits, because you, my friend, need compassion, understanding, and a safe space to find the *real* you underneath the layers you've put on. If your counselor is not teaching you skills that help you make your life less painful, rally the strength to find a more appropriate counselor. You don't need to confirm through (expensive) therapy that you're broken. You're not.

You may not see it right now, but through enduring the pains of your life, you've learned some very valuable lessons. On the surface, the fact that you've been using self-inflicted physical pain to manage emotional pain may not seem like it offers much insight into healthy coping skills. But you'll find that inside the beliefs and thoughts that *drive* self-injury is all the information you need to *stop* the cycle of self-injury. Really, it's true. You may not believe it, but you already possess what you need in order to change your habits. You just need to tweak it a little.

## Consider Journaling

It may be useful for you to start keeping a journal to track the changes in your self-injury habits, work through the personal inquiries in this book, or process content brought up during self-injury episodes. But, like everything in life, there are benefits and pitfalls to journaling. Writing allows you to find words without having to speak them. Though what you write isn't always true, you can look back later to gain insight into what drove your behavior. But writing also opens a portal to internal content that is aching to be heard, though its voice is raw and unpracticed. Raw and tender can quickly turn into angry and reactive.

The one thing to avoid completely in your journal is uncontained venting, angry scrawling, stabbing at the paper with a pen, or using what you're writing to increase your distress. Don't use journaling to *escalate* emotions that may lead to self-injury. The function of your journal is to chronicle your progress as it unfolds and to process your thoughts or feelings in a way that can be turned into meaningful insight. You don't need another avenue for uncontrollable venting. You don't need to spend more time agonizing about the painful mental content that you actually need to disconnect from. Use your journal to support your inquiry and to process complicated feelings—not to obsess about, immortalize, or increase your pain.

## Ground Rules

Before we start messing with your melon, you'll need to read over a few Ground Rules. They're fairly easy to grasp, but much harder to abide by. You don't need to punish yourself if you don't always follow the rules, but do try to keep them in mind. Flag this page, because you'll need to reference these Ground Rules as you work through the book.

### **Rule #1: Lighten up, OK?**

Let's keep all this as light as possible, shall we? This book is not about diving into your pain and rehashing why you somehow deserve to suffer. It's not about wrapping yourself in all the deep and painful stuff of life. It's about opening up different parts of you that *can* be opened, *when* they can be opened, in the safest way possible. The inquiries here will tap into deep thoughts, emotions, and experiences that can be challenging and shifty. You have a better chance of success if you can think or talk about the not-so-pretty stuff without harsh judgment or hiding away. You'll also have a greater chance of eliminating the habits that hold you back from fully living if you can learn to be truthful and compassionate about what you are trying to *gain* by employing those habits. Getting a new perspective on your suffering requires taking some of the heaviness away from a pretty weighty topic so you can look at it with compassion and even a little humor. After all, brains do weird things, and you don't necessarily control it all consciously.

### **Rule #2: Don't knowingly take actions that trigger you.**

One day, you may be able to go into the proverbial lion's den without a single butterfly in your stomach, but don't set yourself up for shame and guilt if you can help it. A big part of reducing self-injury is to initially avoid situations you know will set you off so you don't move toward self-injury in order to cope. Take responsibility for the external suggestions you take on, from this book and from life in general. If you receive suggestions to do something that will drive you over your known edge, don't do it. Seriously. When you think an activity or inquiry in this book (or in life) is likely to cause you to move toward self-injury, it's up to *you* to protect yourself by not taking that action. Perhaps you could revisit the suggestion on a different day or during a different stage in your process, but it's really important to know and respect what you can handle in any given moment. The best way to increase the time between episodes is to avoid situations that trigger you. Your triggers simply aren't as *triggering* if you're not already at your limit, so try to keep yourself away from situations that push the bounds of your emotional tolerance. You won't always need to use avoidance as a coping tool, but, in the beginning, keeping yourself from becoming triggered will make it less likely that you'll *want* to self-injure.

### **Rule #3: If you do become triggered, do your best to avoid or minimize self-injury.**

You don't have permission to do something self-destructive (drink yourself into a stupor, cut yourself, go find a person to use as a sex toy) because of things you think about while reading this book or following its suggestions. If you can't avoid being triggered, do whatever you can to avoid the self-harming or self-sabotaging behavior you're trying to change. If you do self-harm, try to minimize the damage by using a less harmful way of numbing yourself, like pinching instead of cutting or getting a little loopy instead of flat-out bombed. If you're going to hurt yourself, *please* do the least amount of damage possible to get the relief you seek. When you become triggered, see Rule #4 or take the steps in Section Three (NPLTR) to regain control of your emotions and minimize self-destructive action.

#### **Rule #4: Soothe yourself.**

To stop the cycles of self-sabotage and self-injury, you'll need to learn to take responsibility for how you soothe difficult thoughts or emotions that arise. Once you're triggered, your *sole* job is to use this book or any supports you've placed in your life to avoid self-injury and become calm. After a self-injury episode, you also need to self-soothe while avoiding positive or negative judgments on your behavior. If the results of the personal inquiries outlined in this book become too much to bear emotionally, please change course immediately and find a way to soothe yourself without letting the issue trigger self-injury. Give yourself permission to follow Rule #2 (avoid triggering actions), and then find a way to soothe what's come up, minding Rule #3 (minimize or avoid self-injury). And, always, *always*, try to follow Rule #5.

#### **Rule #5: Be as gentle with yourself as possible.**

Watch your thoughts, because they trigger emotions. Watch your emotions, because they govern your actions. Watch your actions, because they create your reality. Cultivate your compassion and patience. Be as gentle as possible with yourself at all times. If you do self-injure, find tenderness for yourself afterward. Care for yourself as you would care for a beloved friend or a four-year-old just coming out of a tantrum. Find softness by envisioning someone you care greatly about and treat yourself with that same care, no matter what your mind tells you about what you deserve. Remind yourself that you've experienced many difficult situations before and have *not* used self-injury to cope. Know that one day you will once again learn to handle what life throws at you without self-injury. You deserve a less painful life, and that life will be a lot easier to create if you learn to treat yourself gently.

## ***Playing By New Rules***

The rules you operate under help to guide your intentions, your intentions help guide your actions, and your actions form the structure of your life. Moment to moment, you are governing (maybe in absentia) the rules you are applying to your life. Those current rules not only allow for self-injury, but offer up violence as a primary coping protocol. Your new Ground Rules treat self-injury as a last resort, to be avoided at any cost that doesn't increase the likelihood of you self-injuring in the future.

It'll take time to make the Ground Rules a normal part of your life. As your habits change, however, it will become more natural to lighten up, self-soothe, and redirect your thoughts when you feel overwhelmed. When you find compassion and patience and treat yourself gently, you can learn to live *with* the original trauma(s) that led you to self-injury or the pains you've inflicted on yourself. Though you may need to work daily to modify the rules of your life which support deeply entrenched habits, if you do that work, there is no doubt that it *will* work. It has to work, because your intention will come from a new set of rules, and your life will go in the direction of that intention.

Let's get started.

# *What We're Working With*



CHAPTER ONE:

# Self-Injury and Addiction

**S**elf-sabotage can be a form self-injury, and self-injury is, at its core, self-sabotage. However, they are two separate degrees along the gradient of how skillfully you cope with your pain.

Self-sabotaging actions, such as drinking excessively or willingly engaging in risky behavior, undermine your health and wellness. Self-sabotage also diminishes your ability to meet your own goals and impairs your physical, mental, emotional, or social integrity, often causing problems in other areas of your life. Self-sabotage is a uniquely human practice. Though it's sometimes understandable, self-sabotaging actions are considered negative because using them indicates a lack of balance that would be evidenced by the use of other, more skillful problem-solving skills. You know, skills that actually help you feel better—like talking about what's going on or finding a constructive outlet for your fear or frustration instead of getting drunk, distant, or violent.

Self-injury elevates self-sabotage to a whole new level through the use of self-inflicted pain as a punishment, a response to extreme emotional pain, or a distraction from undesirable thoughts or feelings. As an extension of that definition, it's also self-injury if you don't appropriately respond to protect yourself when others use violence or coercive strategies against you. Allowing people to injure you is not quite the same as injuring yourself, but both keep you in a place of mental and emotional turmoil, expecting pain and punishment when you are at your most vulnerable.

## Self-Sabotaging and Self-Injuring Actions

Self-sabotage and self-injury go hand in hand. Are any of these self-harming actions at play in your life?

- Willingly acting contrary to your goals or values**
- Creating unnecessary drama**
- Binge eating or drinking**
- Binge spending or gambling**
- Behaving promiscuously, using pornography or sex as a distraction**
- Abusing drugs, addiction**
- Raging out of control at yourself or someone else**
- Punching walls, pillows, people, self**
- Cutting, burning, abusing yourself or someone else**
- Addiction to self-injury, or violence in general, as a coping tool**

The consequences of self-sabotaging actions can create fertile ground for the thoughts or feelings that lead to self-injury, but self-injury is distinct from self-sabotage in one important way: while self-sabotaging actions are generally taken as a distraction in order to *feel better*, self-injury is used primarily to *stop feeling bad*.

## Addicted to Pain

Regardless the causes and reasons for self-injury, the choice to deliberately hurt one's own body and spirit creates relief from emotional turmoil, as well as a degree of slavery to the habit. Self-injury becomes more and more appealing as a first response to emotional crisis since it provides immediate relief without requiring you to address the issues that brought on the self-injury urges. Self-injury, whether it's judged right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, can *instantly* calm extreme emotions and pull a brain out of a feedback loop of pain. It works in the moment, even if it doesn't solve the problems that caused it and will cause it again. It can help you get on with your day, or trap you in a boxing match with your thoughts. The effectiveness of self-injury is really its lure, but using it creates a cycle of hysteria, violence, release, and euphoria that becomes addictive. Yep: addictive.



### Are You Addicted?

- Has self-injury become a consistent craving when times get hard?**
- Does using it with increasing frequency and intensity make it less likely that you'll try to find another option when intense emotions come up?**
- Has self-injury become both friend and enemy?**
- Is the choice to self-injure always a conscious one?**
- Where is the line between being addicted and having a habit? Is a little self-injury OK?**
- Can you imagine living without self-injury?**

All of us understand addiction on our own personal level. Whether or not we've experienced full-blown addiction, it's likely happened that at one point or another in our lives, to compensate for our pain, suffering, or sheer boredom, we went on an extended bender. We drank, ate, smoked, detached from our lives, hazed out with TV or video games, lied, shopped, criticized, raged too much for our own good for too long—and we got used to it. We liked it. It was comfortable. It was known. The behavior became something we craved, something we made normal, though we could see the downsides. We slid effortlessly into the action, choosing it above all others to distract us, numb us, fill the emptiness, or soothe whatever was wrong, despite internal sensations that told us it wasn't necessarily the best thing for us.

We may have relied on any number of habits to get through or numb ourselves to life's inevitable boredom, pain, or suffering. Until we consciously decided to take action to change the habit (or when the habit somehow transitioned naturally), we couldn't see why or how we'd ever live without it, and we rationalized continuing with our addictive behavior. Or, if we were even more advanced in our addiction, we didn't even think about it before doing it. We just repeated the habitual behavior and took time later, perhaps, to feel guilty about our actions (which may have just triggered a desire for more of the habit we're trying to stop!).

In moments of clarity, an addict—whether addicted to chocolate or self-injury—can understand that life may actually feel better if the power of the addiction were not greater than the power of the will to *choose*. In order to *choose* your fix, *choose* your actions, and kick a habit, you need to find supports for waning willpower and a reliable substitute for the release provided through self-injury. But when you've gotten stuck on self-injury and can't seem to stop, how do you go about changing to a new habit?

By doing something besides self-injuring. Consistently. By seeing your blocks, acknowledging your opportunities, and getting yourself addicted to *not* self-injuring. But, first, you need to overcome a few obstacles.



CHAPTER TWO:

# Understanding the Three Good Reasons

**M**ajor limitations to expression are created by being human and living in an emotionally challenged society. These limitations can affect the development, continuance, and modification of your self-injury habit. The Three Good Reasons for not looking at what's happening or communicating about your experience can affect many aspects of your life. The ways you relate to others and they relate to you are *rooted* in the Three Good Reasons. With these reasons at play, it's easy to understand why it can be so *hard* to understand how you feel, much less communicate those feelings to others. Urges to practice avoidance or self-sabotaging behavior make more sense if you consider these three limitations to expression and connection.

## The Three Good Reasons

We say to friends or loved ones, "I can be myself with you" or "You see the real me," because we don't show our true colors to just anyone. But if you're self-injuring, even friends and loved ones may be unaware of what's happening inside you. Maybe they are "hard to talk to," or maybe you have a hard time looking at and expressing your feelings. It may seem impossible to identify what's happening for you or to communicate honestly about it, and there are at least Three Good Reasons why.

The Three Good Reasons encourage you keep quiet about the confusion or pain you're experiencing. They support you in keeping emotional distance from others and in developing self-sabotaging habits. Maintaining awareness of these reasons for encouraging yourself and others to hide what's real may help you see that it's not just *you* who has a hard time dealing with life challenges and complex emotions. We have built-in limitations to our own expression and our support of other people's expression. There are, of course, many reasons you may keep quiet about something confusing or difficult. But, it will be easier to stop using self-injury if you learn to notice and compensate for these Three Good Reasons that you can't identify your feelings and communicate when you need to.

### Reason #1: *You're an Animal*

*It's not a great idea to demonstrate weakness when you live among others who are willing to take advantage of that weakness.*

Ask any dog in a pack, "Hey, how can I get demoted, maybe even get my ass kicked?" If this dog actually understood your question and could answer you, it would say, "Just demonstrate a little weakness and the pack will take care of that for you." Even dogs know that predators and tough-dogs dominate the limpers, the whiners, the less agile, and the more docile.

Our society, like other animal societies, grew up with the same rule about hiding weakness as a means of self-protection. Keeping weakness and vulnerability to ourselves is very much ingrained in our beings. It makes sense on a primal level. Opening up your deepest, darkest pains or experiences so they can get some light makes you incredibly vulnerable. That opening asks you to admit that you haven't always known how to handle your experiences. It asks you to admit that you have done, thought, or wanted things that you don't understand or that you're not proud of. It requires that you allow others to see the normally-hidden parts of your experience. Thanks to the pack dynamic, being honest with others about your struggles automatically enters you in the "Are you more screwed up than me?" competition, and the one who's more screwed up gets bullied or shamed. It's easy to hold the idea that it's safer to hide confusing, painful, or difficult content inside you, but this also encourages you to lie about your experience and seek relief for your pain through unskillful behavior. Being honest can be difficult, because it challenges your basic tendency to keep others from knowing that you are hurting. But, honesty will be *necessary* if you want to drop the emotional pain you've been stifling with self-harm and stop pretending that everything is fine when it's far from it.

When posturing to maintain an air of dominance, a dog will also act more aggressive than it normally would, and it will hide its pain if it's injured. We humans do the same things in our own ways. We tell people we're fine when it's the furthest thing from the truth. We act tough so no one knows we're about to break into pieces. Sometimes, we just can't help it. Vulnerability is risky for a lot of reasons, and we have learned to hide our jugulars, especially when we're not feeling up to fighting for our lives.

## Reason #2: *You Never Learned to Look*

*There aren't a lot of great role models out there demonstrating the skillful management of intense, confusing, or difficult feelings. You may not have learned to look at, identify, communicate about, or respond effectively to confusing emotional content.*

Human pack dynamics run strong, discouraging the disclosure of what's real in order to avoid showing weakness. With all the hiding of the jugular and pretending everything is fine, human language and interpersonal skills developed in a certain direction. As we've evolved as a society, we've developed the fear of entrusting others, even family or close friends, with the raw stuff that could make us look bad or weak. This left us with a historical lack of experience in effectively handling our own or others' difficult internal content, and this lack of skill has been passed on from generation to generation.

Without experience in handling complex emotional situations, *why would* you feel comfortable unreservedly asking someone who's clearly not fine, "What's happening?" Or *why would* you be skilled at identifying and communicating about what was happening when someone asked you the same question? Without practice, *how could* you feel ready to effectively handle confusing or difficult conversations? It takes experience to learn how to look at your own (let alone others') internal processes, deep feelings, and beliefs without shame, judgment, or resistance. This lack of experience can hold you back when it's time to find words for what's happening inside you.

We learn language skills in school, but we don't typically learn interpersonal communication skills or tools for managing extreme emotions, chaotic thinking, or the results of past trauma. We know "feeling words" from vocabulary practice, and we know how to "be nice," but we don't know how to use feeling words in context when our mental contents threaten to overwhelm us. We don't know how to be *real* when faced with the darker areas of someone else's emotional landscape. We simply haven't developed the skills to understand our complex thoughts and emotions or communicate them. It's far easier to segment, compartmentalize, and edit our experiences for lack of ability to interpret or communicate the complexity inside and around us. We may learn to be functional in many ways, but we're not given much training in handling the normal psychological impacts of life, let alone the impacts of

trauma or abuse. We've compensated for this lack of emotional skill through habits that have allowed us to live our lives passably, so we may not feel all that affected by the impacts of not knowing how to look until we're actually summoned to do so. Then it becomes painfully obvious that the skills we need to access aren't quite as developed as we might like them to be.

Of course, it's a *necessity* in some situations to avoid looking at the needs or emotions that drive your actions or fuel your pain; after all, life must go on. It's not skillful to dive into an analysis of every emotional swirl that comes out of your brain, so you need to learn *which* internal content to pay attention to. Only through a conscious process of *learning to look* can we know what we feel, communicate it, and remain present with others. And there isn't often impetus to do that work until our lives start falling apart.

### Reason #3: *Hiding Feels Better than Looking*

*You don't have much field experience managing emotionally challenging circumstances. Without knowing the right way to look, looking feels bad, and it feels better to hide from, judge, or ignore the stuff that feels bad.*

Turn on a TV these days and you'll see hosts of people being paid tremendous sums of money to joyfully, effortlessly, and sacrificially sabotage themselves, then feign surprise at the consequences their actions have on their overall happiness. It's entertainment. Life becomes dramatic and oddly enjoyable when you shine the spotlight *away* from all the things you don't want to look at. Not many calm, centered people are featured in the media unless the focus is on how different they are from everyone else. But, the media is a reflection of our values and interests, so why is it so popular to tune out by watching content that glorifies and amplifies dysfunction? Maybe it's because others' obvious dysfunction is far more entertaining than your own. If you sat around flipping through your own internal content like TV channels, you might not like any of the shows. Your shows would be too personal, too confusing, and too real. We may be interested in the surface view of others' dysfunction, but to ask what's *behind* it, just like with our own dysfunction, can be incredibly intimidating without solid experience *looking*. It's easy to opt for avoidance or self-sabotage in the face of emotionally challenging territory when we haven't *learned to look*. We just haven't created broad social and personal supports for learning to interact with, and attend to, dysfunction in ways that minimize the negative impacts it brings along. And we (being people with brains) have competing interests—many aspects of ourselves commenting on what we want and what we should show or hide. But few of our mental aspects are interested in looking at what we're doing, why, and if it's really working to get us what we want. That's too confusing, too real, too painful. It just feels better to *not* look.

The parts of your mind that regulate your behavior may say "I've noticed that what you're doing isn't really helping you," but other aspects of your mind may simply say "Oh, well" and dive into the behavior. Questioning what's *behind* the urge for emotional distance or self-sabotage can be challenging. Looking at what you're doing and acknowledging that it comes from a dark or confusing place inside you can activate feelings of shame, fear, guilt, or self-hate. And, no one is *forcing* you to look. You don't *have* to pay attention to your (or others') outward signs of internal discord, and you don't have to address what's behind them. Since you haven't *learned* to look at what's happening without getting swallowed up in it, staying silent about what you're noticing or experiencing just feels better than identifying it, even if staying silent doesn't end up helping you feel *better*.

## Compensating for the Three Good Reasons

With the Three Good Reasons holding you back, you could languish forever in fear and insecurity, self-sabotaging or hiding from life to compensate for your lack of experience or skill handling what's inside your mind. Thankfully, there are ways to compensate for the Three Good Reasons.

## Compensating for Reason #1: *You're an Animal*

*How, as an animal living among other animals, do you learn to be both vulnerable and safe? Find a few safe others.*

Getting over self-injury requires you to share some of your most confusing internal content with at least one safe other. This is not only to allow yourself the relief of letting your pain out, but also to *practice doing it* in a manner that actually helps you ease your pain. The fact that you're self-injuring is evidence that the realities you're not talking about are eating you up. You clearly haven't found a satisfying way to communicate or manage what's happening inside you. Pretending to be fine (or overemphasizing your weakness) won't address your pain. Only through practice will you learn to skillfully express your painful thoughts and feelings. Just make sure you're practicing with people who are able to hear you without judgment and respond to you compassionately. Over time, you'll learn to trust yourself to speak clearly and trust others to listen compassionately. You'll also get used to being vulnerable, no matter how uncomfortable it may feel at first. Expressing what's true for you won't put you in real danger if you do it thoughtfully. Showing your jugular in a *conscious* way may actually protect you.

## Compensating for Reason #2: *You Never Learned to Look*

*How do you learn to look at and communicate what's happening? Develop the patience and tools to look at what's happening for you without becoming triggered.*

It'll take time to develop the patience and tools that allow you to look at what's happening without becoming triggered. You've practiced your ways of thinking for so long that changing the way you relate to yourself and others will be similar to learning a new language. If you look on yourself and others with compassion, it's easier to see how your habits of mind and communication impair your ability to understand and express yourself. You'll need to *learn* to look at and hold your gaze on uncomfortable internal content long enough to Listen, Translate, and Respond (Section Three) without judgment and without self-pity. You'll eventually learn to communicate effectively about how you operate—why you do what you do—and you'll no longer need to resort to violence or self-sabotage to take your mind off what you see when you look inside yourself.

## Compensating for Reason #3: *Hiding Feels Better than Looking*

*How do you choose to engage what's happening when you don't feel like you have the skills and aren't willing to be in uncomfortable emotional territory? You just have to do it enough times (using your new skills) to get used to it.*

Show up and be present with what needs attention so often that you get used to managing conflict or pain without judging your limitations. As you use the steps in this book to move away from self-injury, you'll develop non-harming habits that help you look at and feel the details of life without getting swept away by them. You'll find that you need less soothing from self-injury or other activities that serve to undermine your wellness. When you stop hiding and start to allow for what's real, you'll get better at looking, so it won't be as uncomfortable. You'll learn to create the space you need to attend to what's happening and feel OK about having to do it in the first place.

When you learn what *good* really feels like, you'll also realize that feeling good or better isn't really what comes from self-sabotage, self-injury, or avoidance of what's real. *Good* comes from effectively staying

with the discomfort of looking at painful internal content or maintaining intimacy during conflict. *Good* is the result of being present with what's happening so you can compassionately ferry yourself or someone else from challenge to solution, even if the solution is only a temporary one.

Try to remember that you need to compensate for the Three Good Reasons as they work against your expression of your needs and drive your self-harming habits. Know that you're an animal, but find safe other animals to be vulnerable with. Know that you never learned to look, but learn the skills that allow you to identify and express what's real for you without self-sabotage. Know that looking is uncomfortable at first simply because your skills need some fine-tuning, but do it anyway and watch yourself get better at it through practice. You will never get the relief that comes through expressing yourself if you continue to hide your weakness, choose not to verbalize what's happening, or avoid the discomfort of vulnerability.

## Limitations to Expression

- In what ways do the Three Good Reasons affect your life?
- Do you have other reasons for not expressing yourself or not remaining open to others?
- Does lack of expression turn your painful thoughts or feelings into something *more* painful?
- What consequences have you experienced as a result of hiding your weakness, not verbalizing what's happening, or avoiding the discomfort of vulnerability?
- Which of your feelings or thoughts have been unexpressed for a long time?
- What types of self-sabotage do you employ as a means of diversion from inner turmoil?
- Does self-sabotage or self-injury *resolve* your unexpressed feelings?
- Does self-sabotage or self-injury create *more* unexpressed feelings?



## Safety While You're Looking and Expressing

Your safety is paramount as you deal with the factors that support your use of self-sabotaging or self-harming tactics. Looking at and expressing what's happening can leave you open for more pain if you don't manage your vulnerability thoughtfully. Your family, your community, and your social circle may function in ways that *intensify* your urges to self-injure. They may also isolate you from the compassion you need in order to feel heard and accepted.

There are realities in this world that both create urges to self-injure and make it impossible to be honest about what you're experiencing. For instance, if you're gay in a very small gay-unfriendly-town and can't come out for the legitimate fear that someone might harm you or make your life hell, it isn't really safe to go sharing your truth with everyone in town. Maybe not even with one other person in town since word gets around so quickly in small towns. But, it's not OK to keep your authenticity hidden, especially when doing so creates self-harming (or other-harming) behavior. No matter your situation, you do need to find ways to express your vulnerability and be honest about who you are. You can always find safe ways to express yourself, but you may have to go two towns over to find people, or a LGBT organization, that can treat your truth with compassion and patience.

Build a world around you that supports your authenticity and your journey to become more of all the good things you are. Allow yourself to learn to be authentic and vulnerable and to look at what's happening inside you, and avoid the lure of hiding because looking makes you uncomfortable. Just make sure you do it all safely. It's up to you to protect yourself from the very real threats in your outer and inner world.



## Your Safety

- What factors are at play in your family, community, or social circle that create pressure to self-injure? To hide the realities which lead you to self-injure?
- What safety concerns (physical or emotional) do you have about being authentic or expressing yourself honestly?
- Is there anything you can do to minimize the negative impact your family, community, or social circle have on your self-injury habits?

CHAPTER THREE:

# The Self-Protection Cycle

**S**elf-protection is one of your most basic and continuous needs. Protecting yourself is so automatic that you don't always know when or how you're doing it. In the context of self-injury, self-protection usually occurs in two directions:

1. Protecting yourself from painful or overwhelming mental activity by using self-harm
2. Protecting yourself and others from difficult interaction by not communicating about the realities of what drives your self-injury habits

The use of self-harming coping strategies is solid evidence that your brain's understanding of self-protection has gotten knocked a bit off kilter by your experiences and how you interpreted them. Self-injury does a pretty good job of *pretending* to be self-protection, but *real* self-protection wouldn't leave you alone with painful feelings or a self-injury habit. Once you understand the ways in which you try to protect yourself from pain, truth, or fear, you can start challenging your methods when they aren't really working to *protect* you.

## Self-Protection

- Do you notice when you're trying to protect yourself from your own feelings or reactions?
- Do you notice when you're protecting yourself from others' feelings or reactions by maintaining emotional distance?
- In what kind of situations do you protect yourself by self-harming or cutting off connection to feelings or others? Does it happen automatically, without your explicit consent?
- What are the most common ways you protect yourself, and what exactly are you protecting yourself from?
- What beliefs do you hold, and what situations from your past contribute to your chosen methods of self-protection? What works about these methods and in what situations? In what ways or situations do your methods not work to protect you?
- Do your instincts for self-protection feel protective in a pinch but actually harm you in the long run?



When you purposely harm yourself as a form of protection, you end up isolating yourself when what you really need is contact, leaving your unmet needs to drive impulsive or dangerous behavior.

# Self-Injury and the Self-Protection Cycle

## *Self-Injury Starts with Self-Protection*

After experiences where true self-protection was either not possible or extremely limited, a brain can get a little confused about how to truly self-protect. For instance, if you experienced frequent physical abuse in your past, you may have dealt with it by going numb until it was over; the numbness functioned as emotional protection at a time when you weren't able to protect yourself physically. You may later find that you habitually go numb during conflicts that don't involve physical violence, and it may be difficult to protect yourself with words and presence alone. No matter your life experience, you *can* connect with a healthy self-protection instinct. Self-protection isn't only about safety from physical or environmental threats. It's also about creating a mental and emotional defense against the damaging effects of *your own thoughts*.

In your triggered mind, a serious threat can be created through the fusion of your painful thoughts and emotions, automatic reactions and your brain's recital of what to hope for and believe. Self-protection is absolutely necessary when your mind is chaotic, but self-protection instincts gone awry may offer up self-injury as the best tool to shut down emotional intensity as it builds to a critical mass. Self-injury is one method of protecting yourself from overwhelming emotional escalation around a trigger idea. It's true that the internal chaos created by your thoughts can be quickly squelched by self-applied pain. But using physical violence to protect yourself from emotional pain doesn't address the thoughts, beliefs and habitual reactions that cause you to feel overwhelmed and turn to self-harm in the first place. The beliefs and reactions quieted by self-injury just sit tight and wait for the next trigger so they can come back up. *True* self-protection mindfully addresses what's causing intense emotional reactions and works to soothe inner turmoil *without* self-harming behavior.



## Self-Protection through Self-Injury

- In moments of extreme stress, do you find yourself enacting behavior that undermines true self-protection?
- Do you tend to reach out when you're struggling, or do you tend to close in?
- When you think about your self-injury habits through the lens of self-protection, do you feel conflicted? Torn by the fact that you are both protecting yourself from your own emotional overwhelm and doing the exact *opposite* of protecting yourself by physically harming your body or remaining in a harmful situation?
- Do you feel that you have been *protected* after you use self-injury? What *would* make you feel truly protected?
- In what ways does self-injury protect you?
- In what ways (other than physically) does self-injury harm you?

## *Self-Protection through Self-Injury Creates Isolation*

In your need to self-protect, you've learned to keep a lot to yourself, and you may not know how to let your guard down and ask for (or receive) help. Sometimes even if you have someone to talk to, you can't find the words to express what's happening! But by holding yourself back from being honest and vulnerable with others or resisting when they ask for (or offer) help, you may be reinforcing your sense of isolation.

When you become triggered and excessively driven by thought or emotion, you are more likely to self-injure. The tendency to protect yourself and others from the realities of your experience might make you seek isola-



tion when connection is what you really need. Withdrawing to isolation and silence can *feel* protective, even though it may not truly be what's best for you, but isolation breeds feelings that self-injury is used to "protect" you from. The Three Good Reasons for not communicating factor in here. (You know, that whole "you're an animal hiding weakness" thing?) Because of collective inexperience managing interactions about emotionally loaded topics, it's more likely that, when you are emotionally unstable, your (and others') reactions will include *detachment from* or *resistance to* the vulnerability of the moment. You (and others) may not be able to rally your resources and create the connection that would *end* your isolation. You may find that trying to connect with someone else can actually feel *more* painful than self-injuring and isolating yourself. You may say exactly what you need to say and receive cliché help, or you may find yourself refusing to engage with others on a meaningful level. But don't you *want* to engage with others on a meaningful level, *especially* during times when you're feeling driven to isolate yourself? Self-injury doesn't protect you, it isolates you, but you do it because you want closeness that you don't know how to create. A contradiction? Yes.

Getting beyond the Three Good Reasons when protecting yourself gives you the freedom to find words for what you're feeling, to ask for and receive patience and compassion, even if just from yourself. Effective expression, not isolation, can eventually become your *source* of self-protection. *True* self-protection allows you to interact in a safe way with at least one other person so that you don't increase your pain with isolation.

## The Ways You Isolate

Stopping self-injury will be easier when you come out of isolation and open yourself up bit by bit to a new way of relating to yourself and others. Self-protection is necessary, but it's a good idea to take some time to look at the ways your self-protective tactics work to encourage your isolation and self-harming behavior.

- What habits do you maintain that encourage isolation?**
- What could you do to encourage yourself to remain open to connection when you feel pulled to isolate yourself?**
- When you're choosing to isolate, what do you really want? Do you really want to "to be alone with it"? Do you want to talk to someone in particular? Do you just want a hug?**
- If you can't have the support you need and you choose to isolate, can you imagine what it would feel like to have, or give yourself, what you need?**
- Can you sense that even *imagining* not being isolated feels better than holding onto the idea that you're alone? If you imagined *not* being isolated, what would that look like? Who would you be with? Where would you be? What would you be doing?**



## Isolation Results in Unmet Needs

A pile of unmet needs and suppressed feelings is created when you add up:

- The use of self-sabotage or violence as a form of self-protection
- The long-term consequences of the Three Good Reasons
- The emotional effects of isolation
- The need for compassion denied through using self-injury
- The many issues created by hiding your reality

Protecting yourself through the isolation of self-harm allows unmet needs and suppressed feelings to gather in

the dark corners of your mind, leaving you *all but* protected. In the recesses of the mind, your pain and unmet needs (to feel safe, interconnected, and free to be honest, among others) become sneaky little children, convincing you to do things that aren't necessarily good for you, as if they'll satisfy your longings. ("Yesssss, you should drink that bottle of wine yourself—maybe two! You're so very lonely . . ." or "Yeaaaaaah, it's a great idea to drive that knife into your arm; that'll take away the sting of lying about what's been happening to you at home!")

If you need closeness and don't find it, if you need softness and don't give it to yourself, if you crave connection and don't create it, those unmet needs won't meet themselves, and they won't go away. No matter your creature comforts or college degrees, if you're self-injuring, your unmet needs are *begging* for your attention. *True* self-protection involves identifying those unmet needs and purposely finding ways to attend to the sense of lack in your life.



## Your Unmet Needs

**What do your unmet needs make you do? (If it's hard to come up with words for your needs, the list on page 59 can help.)**

- Are you often jealous, conniving, grasping, self-loathing, or angry?**
- Do you drink, do drugs, eat, spend money, or have sex to try to cover over the needs that you can't seem to meet in other ways?**
- Are you giving yourself permission to do unhealthy things because you don't have what you want in other areas of your life?**
- If you were to watch your behavior from an outsider's view, what would that observer say that you do to compensate for your unmet needs?**
- Can you attend to some of your unmet needs in ways that truly work? What's in the way of meeting those needs?**
- How can you support yourself better so you can muster up the energy for the work of meeting your own needs?**

## *It All Wreaks Havoc on Relationships*

In the isolation of self-injury for self-protection, it's easy to act ineffectively, driven by inexperience relating to others and the desperation inherent in unmet needs. Life doesn't offer many courses in managing relationships, especially while recovering from trauma or tending a self-injury habit. Those of us with difficulty finding words for intense feelings, or the patience to feel them, may need to work a little harder to build and nourish relationships that offer support and understanding. It may be difficult to build these relationships given the tendency to push others away in order to isolate with tendencies that fuel self-imposed violence. Later, in the Relationships and Communication sections, we'll talk more about how to be real about what's happening without unrealistic expectations of others. For now, consider that all this self-protection effectively keeps others *out*, which makes it harder to ask them *in* when the time comes to talk about something difficult.

Despite the lessons life has taught you that might contradict this fact, you *can* learn to have relationships that allow you to be vulnerable and safe, and you can learn to allow others to be vulnerable and safe with you. You *can* endure the work of changing the relationships worth keeping or ending those that undermine your well-being. When you apply compassion and patience to the goal of maintaining relationships, you change the game. The intention shifts from protecting yourself *through* isolation to protecting yourself *from* isolation. *True* self-protection helps you *relate*—in healthy ways that get to the truth—instead of using diversions that create energetic distance and emotional isolation.

# What Aren't You Relating?



- Do you tend to hide your darkness or your pain from people?**
- Do you also hide that which isn't all that dark, but is simply confusing or overwhelming?**
- What important or painful secrets do you keep to yourself, and (whether helpful or harmful) how does it affect you to do so?**
- What do you do when no one else is around that you would never do if you weren't alone? Some things are better if they're kept private (e.g., masturbating, picking your nose, using the bathroom), but what are you hiding that's hurting you or making you feel a disconnection between your inner persona and the one you present to the world?**
- If you were to make a list of thoughts, experiences, and challenges that seem too much to talk to others about, what would be on that list?**
- What kind of help do you actually want from others? Do you ask for it?**
- If you were to find a way to clearly ask for what you need, what would you say, and to whom would you say it? How do you think they'd respond? What are the best-case and worst-case scenarios?**
- Do you resist coming out of isolation for fear of the potential response of others?**
- In what ways do you resist or accept being present with someone who is emotionally volatile? Do you try to understand what they're feeling? Try to change it? Do you deliver platitudes and cliché advice? In what ways could your own need to be safe and vulnerable guide your actions when others need the same from you? And, in what ways can this information guide you when you need to ask for help?**

## You Need a Plan

When you start to see how many factors contribute to your coping habits—society, family, your own beliefs, and your basic ability to protect or express yourself—making change can seem a little daunting. It may feel like there are too many variables to consider. As you look around your life and discern the ways in which you need to alter your environment or your own tendencies, build an overall strategy that helps you:

- Stand up to self-injury encouragement that may exist in your family, your community, and your social circle
- Withstand incoming messages that diminish positive feelings about yourself or that discourage you from appropriately revealing your deepest truths
- Make necessary changes to your external environment that support you in building a life you actually want to live
- Consider strategies other than self-injury to achieve true self-protection
- Overcome your fears and limitations to expression that encourage isolation; allow yourself to connect with others and them to connect with you
- Commit to identifying your needs and attempting to meet them; not allowing them to go unmet to a point of desperation

- Approach relationships in a way that facilitates honesty and safety in intimate communication; learn to encourage yourself and others to be real

You don't have to figure out a strategy for managing all your variables right now. Just know that, through practice, you'll develop a general plan that minimizes the effects of the learned and external factors that support your self-injury habits. With time, you'll find that you're relatively impervious to the collective emotional dysfunction of society, the negative messages floating around in your community or family, and your own self-limiting tactics for self-protection. You'll also find ways to change the habits of your mind that undermine your wellness.

CHAPTER FOUR:

# Who Are You?

## We, Us, It, You

**T**he human brain differs from the brains of other animals in many ways, including its ability to obsess about itself. Relating past to present to anticipated future, predicting and recollecting—our brains are astonishing in their ability to consider different (or obsessively similar) perspectives on any real or imagined situation. Many different aspects of being simultaneously reside in the brain. Talents, abilities, interests, skills, emotions, consciousness—we're capable of identifying ourselves and our experiences on many levels. However, the habits we've made that help us function in the world allow our brains to function so seamlessly within us that we're often unaware of any separation between *It* and *Us*. Sometimes, we don't know which aspects of ourselves we're utilizing to interpret our experience. *We* are often one unit, with a preprogrammed brain running the show, for good or ill.

But in other moments, our experience of ourselves is far beyond the systems of the brain and body. There is something essential, energetic, and alive at work *inside* the physical systems. Parts of the brain that relate to awareness can *watch* other parts of the brain at work, sometimes fully aware that what *the brain does* is most definitely *not Us*. Sometimes that aspect of energetic awareness can step in and become the circus master, directing the movement of thoughts, emotions, and actions. At other times, our awareness can feel *forbidden* from controlling the circus of thoughts the brain is currently running through. *We* can watch our brain trotting along in unconscious action, yet feel unable to change *its* course. *We* can think about our own brain while simultaneously being controlled by *its* habitual patterns and reactions. *We* can watch our brains cling to the lessons of trauma, or rehash the same pains over and over. *We* can watch self-harm happening and not realize that the real aggressor of the moment is *It*. The brain.

It's sometimes difficult to tell that the thoughts and needs driving your behavior are directed by confused thinking and reactionary coping habits. You can misidentify yourself as "one being", one constant that's seemingly in flux, rather than a host of variables interacting to create a momentary experience of yourself. You can misidentify *yourself* as the habits and abilities of *your brain*. As various aspects of your thinking give voice to your thoughts and fuel your needs, the noise of these often-contradictory thoughts can easily drown out the aspects of you that *aren't* conflicted. It's easy to go back and forth between the one idea, that *you are* what your brain is doing and thinking, and another idea, that what *the brain does* is most definitely *not You*.

Choosing a skillful course of action often relies on acknowledging the internal competition between aspects of your mind and separating these aspects of yourself from your *awareness* of them. With that awareness, you have a better chance at retaining a sense of yourself that is *separate* from your brain's mental processes. When you see your *awareness* of your brain and thoughts as separate from the *process* of your brain and your thoughts, you realize that your brain is just doing what it's supposed to do: it's thinking, even if it's doing it chaotically. But the ability to think doesn't make your brain *right*, and it doesn't make your thoughts *you*. It does, however, make it important to learn which of your thoughts you should believe, since your brain often incorrectly identifies your thoughts and actions as *you*. Somewhere in that brain, an enduring and stabilizing aspect of your mind is available. It's there even when other parts of your brain are reeling with painful thoughts and mental associations. By identifying the various aspects of yourself at work, you can more consciously control your reactions when your confused brain tries to tell you that *you are* what *It* thinks.

# Body, Brain, Mind, Soul, You

When thinking about what and who you are, it's important to recognize that you are a multilayered, multifaceted individual. You're a vastly complex, thinking, and feeling creature. There are many ways to identify and connect with your varied aspects and many levels to identify yourself on. You could zoom in to look at the details of your essence, tendencies, or abilities, as if attempting to understand each star in a galaxy. You could also step back and look at overall trends in your habits, as if you were trying to understand how constellations move. There are many ways to look at your own depths. For now, let's assume that there are five basic aspects of your existence cohabitating in that marvelously complicated body and brain of yours.

Note that there are places in this book that reference the aspect of your being that connects your actions to your spirit, values and morality. In these cases, the capitalization and emphasis on the terms *You*, *Your*, or *Yourself* is to make the distinction between *you* (your brain, mind, idea of "self," or a mental state when your brain is running on autopilot) and *You* (your self-governing connection to your higher wisdom or purpose, your ability to consciously control your thoughts and actions to get to a goal that meets your deepest, essential needs).

FIGURE 1:

## Aspects of You

Aspect	Basic Idea	Experience of It	How It's Connected to Other Aspects
<b>Soul</b>	Essence; energetic animation of existence; energy beyond the physical form	Whatever you believe yourself to be beyond this human life; energetic connection with all that is; <i>Your</i> deepest life-affirming desires, motivations, dreams	You don't need to incorporate the idea of a soul into the view of who you are, but the idea here is that since the Soul doesn't speak the language of the brain, it needs a liaison to relay its desires for action to the brain and body ( <i>You</i> ).
<b>You</b>	Interpreting entity; part of the brain capable of relaying Soul's purposes to mind's capability for self-governance	Your most balanced state where you can watch the movements of the mind while directing them with a deeper purpose than the mind itself may be able to grasp	<i>You</i> is of the mind, but above it and other elements of your basic humanity. <i>You</i> speak the languages of the deeper Soul and of the mind. <i>You're</i> self-knowledge, a part of the mind that acts as a bridge between the mental abilities that can take action in the world and the messages from the deeper parts of your being about what's best for you. <i>You</i> can watch thoughts and act as a referee using deep self-knowledge as a basis for decision making.
<b>Mind</b>	The faculty of your brain that enables you to be aware of the world and your experiences, to think, and to feel; the ability for consciousness and thought	Thoughts, feelings, ideas, needs, overall idea of self, personality, identity; mental activity	Functions of the mind are housed by the body inside the brain. Some aspects of mind are fixed; some are flexible. Some are governed by the physical functions of the brain (detecting hunger); some are governed by <i>You</i> (meeting goals). The functions of the mind create the idea you have of "you"—your basic human nature, instincts, habits, and reactions; your personality, identity, and idea of self. The abilities of the mind can be improved with training.
<b>Brain</b>	Physical vehicle for aspects of mind, identities, thoughts, emotions, needs	Brain as separate from body; the operating system and automatic functions that run programs (individual abilities and aspects of mind)	The brain supports thought and maintains bodily processes. The physical function of the brain can affect the workings of the mind and can be improved with nutritional supplementation or brain-training therapies focused on the synapses and structures of the brain.
<b>Body</b>	Physical vehicle for brain, mind, <i>You</i> , and Soul	Physical sensations and systems, including but separate from the brain	A shell that is wired to work with a brain. Many systems of the body are triggered by thoughts, which is why you can work with the body to calm thoughts or work with the thoughts to calm the body.

# Who Are You?



When the urge to self-injure comes on, it's important to realize that the functions and habits of your body, brain, and mind are separate from *Your* ability to *watch* and *govern* the actions of your body, brain, and mind. Getting familiar with your own experience of *We*, *Us*, *It*, and *You* will help you identify and change the aspect of you at work in a given moment.

- Feel the distinction between your body and your brain. Can you feel where your brain sits inside your skull? Can you sense that the brain is separate in character and function from the rest of your body? Is the brain driving the body around, or is the body driving the brain around? Who's in control of the brain? Who's in control of the body?**
- Feel the difference between the physical mass or synaptic pathways of the brain and the functions of the *mind* inside the brain. Can you feel a distinction between the mind and the brain? Can you tune into the physical nature of your brain as a structure that *houses* the mind? Can you tune into the nature of the mind and your own ability to *know* that you're thinking? Can you feel that the mind is *of the brain* but is not the brain itself?**
- Feel the difference between your mind and your idea of "self." Can you sense that your mind is separate from your idea of your "self"? The mind is capable of thinking many things and utilizing the talents of the brain, but the mind is not your "self." What is your sensation of "self"?**
- Can you sense how the "self" you identify with is impacted by, but remains distinct from, the part of you (*You*) that's *aware* of your "self"? Can you tune into a view of your existence that *isn't* filtered by the body, the brain, the mind, or the "self"? Your capacity for self-awareness—the ability to watch your body, brain, mind, and "self" in action while comparing those actions to the aims of your essence—is *You*.**
- If you strip away all the labels you could use to describe yourself, what's left at your core? Without identifying yourself as a body, a brain, a mind, a "self," or *You*, what is left to identify with? What are you at your most basic, essential level? Is this *essence of you* capable of action, or is it *beyond* action? Can it interact with *You*, your mind, your brain, or your body?**

Work through the questions below and notice the instant thought-response you receive.

- Ask your brain, "Who are you?" and "What's your function in my life?"**
- Ask your mind, "Who are you?" and "What's your function in my life?"**
- Ask your "self," "Who are you?" and "What's your function in my life?"**
- Ask Yourself, "Who are You?" and "What's Your function in my life?"**
- Ask your deepest sense of life essence, soul, or spirit, "Who are you?" and "What's your function in my life?"**
- Are all the answers exactly the same?**
- Can you feel that answers came from different places inside you?**

If your *essence* is trying to be expressed by the way *You* direct the activities of your brain and body, it's possible that your brain's current habits are getting in the way. Consider the various ways your unguided mind dulls your awareness of a deeper wisdom. Self-harm is fed by the disconnection between *you* and *Yourself*. *You* have something greater to express than the simple whims and urges your mind comes up with. *Especially* when self-injury comes on, it's *critical* to separate *Yourself* from the content of your mind and your internal *reactions* to your experience.

# You're Not What You Think

Aristotle said that “we are what we repeatedly do.” On the surface, that makes sense, but related to self-injury and self-knowledge, it needs an edit: “What we do and think repeatedly determines our *habits*.” But what we do or what we think is not *Us*. We can *change* what we think and do, using the deeper level of our being that’s beyond habits and mindless reactions.

Your most frequent actions and thoughts—whatever you obsess about, whatever your pain, whatever you’ve done to compensate for or forget your history—those things aren’t *You*. Thoughts may be your brain’s current perspective on the *meanings* you’ve made of your experiences, but they aren’t *You*. Habitual actions may shape your reality and limit the ways in which you can express yourself, but they aren’t *You*. Chattering voices in your head may be evidence of a battle between parts of your mind, but neither the thoughts nor the mind are *You*. Even a brain that may be a little dysfunctional is not *You*.

*You* is not a specific part of your brain, but more of a *concept* that’s understood by your brain. *You* is the part of your being that watches your entire life, even if it wasn’t actively in control of the body, brain, or mind that was taking action. It’s the part of you that has the ability to report back on your dreams in the morning. It’s always on, even if your mind doesn’t recognize it. *You* is able to watch your behavior and indicate when your actions aren’t in alignment with your deepest-held values and beliefs. But since thoughts are constantly changing, as directed by your brain’s *reactions* to your experience, it’s easy to confuse what you think, feel and believe about yourself with who *You* are.

## Thoughts

Making decisions can be difficult inside a frazzled mind. In general, you can’t trust your thoughts until they’ve been examined. Thoughts aren’t always deliberately generated, and they can easily be the byproduct of an overstimulated mind, a hormonal issue, or a B-vitamin deficiency. To understand which aspect of your being is performing assessments of a situation or driving your decision-making, it’s important to learn to shift your awareness. Learn to recognize the sensations of being driven by your thoughts or supported by self-knowledge. Emotionally difficult content is easier to manage if you see that your current *experience* is not *You*. From there, you are more able to call up the parts of yourself that are calm and stable.

Consider your thoughts as clouds. Clouds have mass and energy, but that mass and energy is infinitely malleable. Clouds can form any shape as they pass across the ever-present, fixed, and vast sky (*You*). Some parts of your mind may be captivated by or ignore certain clouds, depending on the beliefs you hold or the kind of day you’re having. Some thoughts are lovely, white, puffy clouds that feel nice to stare at as they float by. Some thoughts are dark, electrified thunderheads that occasionally dominate the view, making it hard to look at anything else. Peaceful or sinister, the clouds are just ideas, but *You* are not the ideas or their actions. *You* are more like the unchanging field where the action is happening. *You* can direct and control the energy and movement of the clouds in the sky by changing the way your mind forms and moves your thoughts.

The fact that you use self-injury means that you have some nasty-looking clouds in your view. There may be so many storm clouds and lightning bolts in your sky that you hardly identify with anything other than the storms of pain, shame, or anger. It may have become habitual to stare at the handful of nasty clouds that won’t seem to blow on through and lose focus on the sky or the puffy, white clouds. But the clouds/thoughts aren’t *real*: they aren’t *solid*, everlasting, non-changing, or in any way permanent. They’re governed by the movements of the wind (mind), and *You* can control that wind. Even if some clouds won’t go away, *You* can choose how to *respond* to the presence of those clouds.

Thoughts can be pretty believable, especially when they trigger your deepest fears and beliefs about what’s possible in life or what’s true about you. Through your self-injury habits, you almost *become* your thoughts. The fears, regretful actions, and questionable ideas created by your thoughts may be overwhelming or distracting, but they aren’t *You*.



# Tied Up in Thoughts



- Do you find that you don't have much to say, or that you have little interest in what others have to say? Is your mind focused primarily on your own painful experience?
- The darkest clouds in your sky, the most painful habitual thoughts your mind ruminates on—what are they *made of*? What experiences, beliefs, or thoughts form the storm clouds? Can you imagine your sky without them? Are *You* those experiences, thoughts, or beliefs?
- If you could bring in truckloads of white clouds and let them loose on your sky, would those thoughts be *You*?
- Do you feel as if you're constantly trying to cope because just about everything is difficult, as if *You* are the storm that your brain has been creating and focusing on?
- Have you started to think that all those dark clouds are going to stick around?
- How does that feel? How does it feel to visualize a strong, steady wind blowing the clouds away and leaving only *You* as a clear, blue sky?

*You're* not a brain, the various functions and perspectives inside it, the thoughts produced by those perspectives, or the actions taken based on those thoughts. *You're* not the thought-reactions you can't seem to control when you're triggered. Whatever words can be used to define *You*, they define something far greater than your mental habits, thoughts, and your emotions.

## Emotions

If you're actively self-injuring, your brain has learned to turn painful thoughts into painful emotions that spur actions to hurt your body, which ultimately denies you *freedom* from your pain. A brain that's thinking itself into extreme emotions and then calming itself with self-injury is simply confused. And, if you mistake *Yourself* for your confused brain, you can easily be convinced that the thoughts and emotions produced by your brain are *logical* and should be taken as literal truth. If your brain is twisting itself up and then calming with violence, someone needs to step in and change its course. That someone is *You*.

It's easy to believe your feelings and value the unbridled expression of emotion as if the act is therapeutic or healthy. But try not to make a habit of diving into your emotions. Instead, watch the thoughts that trigger them. If you allow the drama of your dreamy highs and deep, dark lows to trick your brain into thinking that something worthwhile is going on, you may actually miss what's happening. While you're on an emotional roller coaster, you're just being taken for a ride. Your emotions function to offer *insight* into your thoughts. Working with the thoughts behind your emotions helps you come up with constructive responses that *balance* your emotions.

A life of primarily-creamy middles would be nice, but that life is hard to imagine when extreme emotions and confused thinking leave you in a cycle of self-sabotage or self-harm. Clear, productive action seldom comes from extreme emotion. Action based on emotional highs or lows is usually dramatic and impulsive. When something is *right*, there tends to be an *absence* of bells and whistles—it's more like a calm resonance. When you're trying to get your mind *out* of a cycle of pain, it's important to avoid diving *into* your emotions. That's the time to use your best discernment skills to understand what your painful emotions say about your thoughts, and what your thoughts say about the truly self-*protective* actions you could take. Believing or diving into your emotions is a sure way to give your *painful thoughts* control of the action without actually acknowledging them. Doing so allows your brain to create habitual responses based on dramatic internal experiences and unconsidered reactions.

*You* are not your emotions. Your emotions are generated by your thoughts—thoughts that are relished, fought, or simply believed. Emotion, in itself, is not *truth*. Emotion is a *reaction* to thought. Your reactions to your

thoughts are based on many factors and won't necessarily be consistent. It's not that you shouldn't *feel*, but recognize that extreme emotions, especially painful ones, are indications of *thoughts* that need addressing. To change your emotions, you need to work with your thoughts. This means that buying into your emotions or focusing solely on how things feel *limits your ability to feel differently*. Addressing the *thoughts* that trigger your painful emotions will calm those emotions down faster than focusing on the painful *feeling* of the emotions.



## Emotions and You

- What emotions do you most commonly feel when you're about to self-injure? What about when your intense and painful feelings are absent? (If it's hard to come up with words for your feelings, try the lists in Chapter 14, figures 9 and 10.)**
- Is it easier to identify with painful emotions than with pleasant ones?**
- When you look at the world through your emotions, do you identify so closely with them that you lose a sense of *You*?**
- Do the pleasant or painful feelings happen to *You*, or do they happen on a level that's distinct from *You*?**
- Who are *You* relative to your emotions?**

## Identity

Since your concept of your "self" is a product of a mind that is driven by thoughts and emotions, it's important to realize that *You* are also separate from your identity. An identity is an image of you that your brain creates in order to function within, and make decisions about, your world. The identity your brain allows for your private understanding may be vastly different from the identity your brain suggests that you use with others. Every person is much more than a single identity. After all, you need a specific type of face to put on your vastness when you have to engage with various aspects of the world. But, no matter the identity you put out into the world or the identity you keep to yourself, *You* are more than that identity. *You're* really the *governor* of a multifaceted being that requires an adaptable identity to function as a human being.

You do need an identity to walk around in, so you may as well pick it carefully. You'll need to identify the various identities you've created and how they align with your values and your *most peaceful* identity. Your current identity may allow for behaviors that don't really fit *Your* deepest desires in life. The identity you wear from moment to moment can limit your ability to express *Yourself* authentically, and that identity can instantly change as your situation changes. By altering the way you think about your thoughts and your identity, your idea of "self" can come into alignment with your *most peaceful* identity—even when times are hard.

Remember this: Your identity is not *You*. Like your thoughts and emotions, it is a necessary aspect of life and simply makes up one facet of your being. *You* can learn to adapt your identity by guiding your thoughts. *You* can create an identity you feel aligned with while also realizing that *You're* so much more than one little ol' identity.

It's going to be essential to learn to distinguish *Yourself* from the chatter and habits of your mind. If you can't feel this part of your existence yet, be patient. There *is* a watcher, an organizer, a governor of the self inside you that can understand and control other parts of you in healthy ways. This watcher is able to interpret your desires and direct the talents of the mind toward actions that are truly fulfilling. Over time, you'll gain more access to this font of internal stability. Staying in touch with the deeper aspects of your being will help you more consistently choose compassionate strategies to cope with painful thoughts, emotions, or the consequences of wearing false identities. As you cultivate your ability to use this wisdom to translate your thoughts, you'll be better able to reject thoughts that harm you and more skillfully direct your thoughts, emotions, and the creation of your identity.

# Versions of You

Each person possesses a vast array of attributes, personality traits, perspectives, and conflicting interests. Consider how many aspects create your character and how they're applied differently to different situations. You're lazy in some ways and hardworking in others; you're frugal at times and see no problem being frivolous in other ways; you may be antisocial in public but openhearted in safer circumstances, and you may be a wonderful parent but sometimes resent parenthood because you wanted to be a world traveler. You have a need to be seen by others but hide because you don't want to be attacked while you're vulnerable; you want to be left alone with some elements of your pain but also want to be understood. You are a lot of "yous" at once, a million versions of yourself living inside one brain, one body. Your values are demonstrated by the personality traits you embody. You can reassign your values by selecting the personality traits you most want display. But values, like personality traits are not steadfast "always on" characteristics.

Each of your aspects exists moment to moment in some ratio, creating a recipe of who you are at the moment: a version of you. The current version of yourself you're embodying is what others may relate to as your personality. But your personality isn't fixed. In some ways you're consistent, but in many ways you're far from it. Each of the possible versions of yourself that you *can be* shift around, dancing with your present stimulus and personal constitution—energized by your memories, emotions, and habits, creating the person you *are being*. You produce varied reactions to the world around you and can be so different from moment to moment because of the incredible capability of your brain. But, as often as possible, *You* need to choose which version of yourself to be.

It's easy to let your brain simply drive your body around, but doing so makes it difficult to stay in touch with your deeper priorities and needs. Sometimes it doesn't affect you negatively to move from one version or personality to another without being aware of the characteristics that are coming into play solely as a reaction to your circumstances. But in crisis moments, it's helpful to realize that the recipe of the moment needs to be changed. *You* can change it by calling forward the aspects of your personality and mind that cultivate calm or healthy self-governance. Choosing the abilities and traits you embody can become a habit that stabilizes the expression of your personality. *You* get to *choose* which of your available traits to live through most often if your brain isn't driving you around on autopilot.

By sliding between your various versions and personalities, you aren't really becoming a different person. Your deeper essence doesn't change. You're just putting a different *mask* on your essence as your perspective shifts and your thoughts and tendencies call up various personality traits and habits. To stop self-injuring, you'll need to learn to consciously select the version of yourself or the identity you put on. That way, you're calling up an authentic version of yourself that can handle difficult situations without detachment, self-sabotage or self-injury. The version of yourself you choose to be is often interpreted as your personality, but neither the versions of yourself you can be or the personality you choose to take on are *You*.

## Personality

There are various ways you can analyze personality, the abilities of the mind, and the tendencies you have toward expressing certain (and potentially imbalanced) aspects of yourself. No matter the terms you use for these aspects, the version of yourself you are being—the personality you're expressing—is largely dependent on the situation. Different characteristics are called forth in various circumstances. The particular combination you employ creates your momentary personality. This is why your personality can change depending on where you are and whom you're with, and why you can change yourself over time by balancing the expression of your many traits. You can alter your mind with experience just like a weight lifter alters muscles. You change simply by learning to consciously develop or embody the aspects of yourself that help you create the version of yourself you want to be or the life you want to live.

The traits that make up your personality describe actions, behaviors, and attitudes, all of which are aspects of expressed character. As you glance over the following list, take at least one message to heart: You're capable of expressing a great many traits, even if learning how to call them up and apply them consciously may be a challenge.

FIGURE 2:

## Personality Traits

Abrasive	Charismatic	Earthy	Forceful	Hurried	Knowledgeable
Abrupt	Charming	Ebullient	Forgetful	Hypnotic	Lazy
Absentminded	Cheerful	Educated	Forgiving	Idealistic	Leaderly
Accessible	Clean	Effeminate	Formal	Idiosyncratic	Leisurely
Active	Clearheaded	Efficient	Forthright	Ignorant	Liberal
Adaptable	Clever	Egocentric	Frank	Imaginative	Logical
Admirable	Cowardly	Elegant	Fraudulent	Imitative	Loquacious
Adventurous	Crafty	Eloquent	Freethinking	Impartial	Lovable
Affable	Crass	Emotional	Freewheeling	Impassive	Loyal
Aggressive	Crazy	Empathetic	Friendly	Impatient	Lyrical
Agonizing	Criminal	Encouraging	Frightening	Impersonal	Magnanimous
Agreeable	Critical	Energetic	Frivolous	Impractical	Malicious
Aimless	Crude	Enduring	Frugal	Impressionable	Mannered
Airy	Cruel	Enthusiastic	Fun-loving	Impressive	Mannerless
Alert	Cynical	Envious	Gallant	Imprudent	Many-sided
Aloof	Decadent	Erratic	Generous	Impulsive	Masculine
Ambitious	Deceitful	Escapist	Gentle	Incisive	Maternal
Amiable	Delicate	Esthetic	Genuine	Inconsiderate	Meticulous
Amoral	Demanding	Excitable	Glamorous	Incorruptible	Mature
Amusing	Dependent	Exciting	Gloomy	Incurious	Mawkish
Angry	Desperate	Expedient	Good-natured	Indecisive	Mechanical
Anticipative	Destructive	Experimental	Graceless	Independent	Meddlesome
Anxious	Devious	Extraordinary	Gracious	Individualistic	Melancholic
Apathetic	Difficult	Extravagant	Gregarious	Indulgent	Mellow
Appreciative	Dirty	Extreme	Grand	Inert	Meretricious
Argumentative	Disconcerting	Exuberant	Greedy	Inhibited	Messy
Arrogant	Discontented	Fair	Grim	Innovative	Methodical
Artful	Discouraging	Faithful	Guileless	Inoffensive	Meticulous
Articulate	Discourteous	Faithless	Gullible	Insecure	Miserable
Aspiring	Dishonest	Familial	Hardworking	Insensitive	Miserly
Athletic	Disloyal	Fanatical	Hateful	Insightful	Misguided
Attractive	Disobedient	Farsighted	Haughty	Insincere	Mistaken
Authoritarian	Disorderly	Fatalistic	Healthy	Insulting	Moderate
Balanced	Disorganized	Fawning	Hearty	Intelligent	Modern
Benevolent	Disputatious	Fearful	Hedonistic	Intense	Modest
Big-thinking	Disrespectful	Fearless	Helpful	Intolerant	Money-minded
Boyish	Disruptive	Feminine	Heroic	Intuitive	Monstrous
Breezy	Dissonant	Fickle	Hesitant	Invisible	Moody
Brilliant	Distractible	Fiery	Hidebound	Invulnerable	Moralistic
Businesslike	Disturbing	Finicky	High-handed	Irascible	Morbid
Busy	Dogmatic	Firm	High-minded	Irrational	Muddleheaded
Calm	Domineering	Fixed	High-spirited	Irreligious	Multi-leveled
Capable	Dreamy	Flamboyant	Honest	Irresponsible	Mystical
Captivating	Driving	Flexible	Honorable	Irreverent	Naive
Caring	Droll	Focused	Hostile	Irritable	Narcissistic
Casual	Dry	Folksy	Humble	Keen	Narrow
Challenging	Dull	Foolish	Humorous	Kind	Narrow-minded

Natty	Persuasive	Realistic	Self-sufficient	Stupid	Undisciplined
Natural	Perverse	Reflective	Sensitive	Stylish	Undogmatic
Neat	Petty	Regimental	Sensual	Suave	Unfathomable
Negativistic	Physical	Regretful	Sentimental	Subjective	Unfoolable
Neglectful	Picky	Relaxed	Serious	Submissive	Unfriendly
Neurotic	Placid	Reliable	Sexy	Subtle	Ungrateful
Neutral	Playful	Religious	Shallow	Sullen	Unhealthy
Nihilistic	Plodding	Repentant	Sharing	Superficial	Unhurried
Nonauthoritarian	Polished	Repressed	Shortsighted	Superstitious	Unimaginative
Noncommittal	Political	Resentful	Shrewd	Surly	Unimpressive
Noncompetitive	Pompous	Reserved	Shy	Surprising	Uninhibited
Obedient	Popular	Resourceful	Silly	Suspicious	Unlovable
Objective	Possessive	Respectful	Simple	Sweet	Unpatriotic
Obnoxious	Power-hungry	Responsible	Single-minded	Sympathetic	Unpolished
Observant	Practical	Responsive	Skeptical	Systematic	Unpredictable
Obsessive	Precise	Restrained	Skillful	Tactless	Unprincipled
Obvious	Predatory	Retiring	Sloppy	Tasteful	Unrealistic
Odd	Predictable	Reverential	Slovenly	Tasteless	Unreflective
Offhand	Prejudiced	Ridiculous	Slow	Teacherly	Unreliable
Old-fashioned	Preoccupied	Rigid	Sly	Tense	Unrestrained
One-dimensional	Presumptuous	Ritualistic	Small-thinking	Thievish	Unruly
One-sided	Pretentious	Romantic	Smooth	Thorough	Unsentimental
Open	Prim	Rowdy	Sneaky	Thoughtless	Unstable
Opinionated	Principled	Rude	Sober	Tidy	Upright
Opportunistic	Private	Ruined	Sociable	Timid	Vacuous
Oppressed	Procrastinating	Rustic	Soft	Tolerant	Vague
Optimistic	Profligate	Sadistic	Softheaded	Tough	Venomous
Orderly	Profound	Sage	Solemn	Tractable	Venturesome
Ordinary	Progressive	Sanctimonious	Solid	Transparent	Vindictive
Organized	Protean	Sane	Solitary	Treacherous	Vivacious
Original	Protective	Sarcastic	Sophisticated	Trendy	Vulgar
Outrageous	Proud	Scheming	Sordid	Troublesome	Vulnerable
Outspoken	Providential	Scholarly	Spontaneous	Trusting	Warm
Over imaginative	Provocative	Scornful	Sporting	Unaggressive	Weak
Painstaking	Prudent	Scrupulous	Stable	Unambitious	Weak-willed
Paranoid	Purposeful	Secretive	Steadfast	Unappreciative	Well-meaning
Passionate	Pugnacious	Secure	Steady	Uncaring	Well-read
Passive	Punctual	Sedentary	Steely	Unceremonious	Whimsical
Paternalistic	Pure	Self-centered	Stern	Unchanging	Willful
Patient	Puritanical	Self-conscious	Stiff	Uncharitable	Wise
Patriotic	Quarrelsome	Self-critical	Stingy	Uncomplaining	Wishful
Peaceful	Questioning	Self-defacing	Stoic	Unconvincing	Youthful
Pedantic	Quiet	Self-denying	Strict	Uncooperative	Zany
Perceptive	Quirky	Self-indulgent	Strong	Uncreative	
Perfectionist	Rational	Selfish	Strong-willed	Uncritical	
Persistent	Reactionary	Selfless	Stubborn	Undemanding	
Personable	Reactive	Self-reliant	Studious	Understanding	



## Personality

Glance over the list of personality traits in figure 2, identifying terms you'd use to describe yourself in general and in this particular moment. Jot down at least ten traits you typically express in your journal, making notes on how those traits factor into the maintenance or deconstruction of your self-injury habits.

- What do the terms you used to describe yourself mean about the aspects of yourself you most often tap into? Are those aspects of yourself that you want to keep active?**
- What aspects of your personality do you show *privately* most often?**
- What aspects of your personality do you show *others* most often?**
- Do you sometimes notice that you're a different convergence of thoughts, emotions, and personality traits when you self-injure than when you're able to react to your challenges without violence or self-sabotage?**
- Which of your personality traits come out when you're mindfully handling your challenges or free from extreme reactions?**
- Which of your personality traits come out when you're obsessing over answers to, or a cure for, your challenges? When you're self-sabotaging or self-injuring?**

Recovering and rejuvenating the version of yourself that's been injured with self-harm requires that you continually come back to the questions, "Who are *You*, really?" and "Which versions of yourself do *You* want to be?"

- What ten traits would you *like to be able to use* to describe your personality?**
- What abilities would you need to utilize or develop to express those traits? For example, to be more enduring, you could develop your abilities for stress tolerance or patience.**
- Can you sense that the part of your personality currently allowing self-harm has the power to undermine your efforts to stop using it?**
- What traits would be most useful to call up when your brain suggests self-sabotage or self-injury? List them and keep them with you as a reminder.**
- When you were a kid, what did think you'd be when you grew up? What personality traits would you have been embodying if you lived into that imagined life? Do you still have an interest in expressing those traits?**

## Self-Governance

A direct way to change the expression of your identity and to choose which personality traits to embody is to develop your capability for self-governance. Self-governance is something like the filter formed by *You*, a connection between your essence and your actions, separate from the chatter of thoughts and emotions. This filter helps interpret and direct the many processes of the mind in order to select appropriate action. The ability to do this filtering is always present, though close identification with your thoughts and feelings may allow your brain to lose connection to self-governance.

Self-understanding and self-observation are important elements of self-governance. The governing self is

doing its job when it's observing your actions, inferring about the nature of the outside world, and planning courses of action based on information the various senses and mental acuties contribute. Healthy self-governance calls into action the specific traits and abilities that are most effective at engaging the current situation, while observing the consequences of your thoughts and actions.

There's usually little reason to notice that various traits and aspects of your mind are switching in and out based on your circumstances, but there's a point when it is absolutely necessary to become conscious of the processes of your mind and begin to direct them. Self-governance is a means of *directing the movements of your mind*. Being aware of your actions and their consequences is a far superior position to allowing undirected thoughts and feelings to control you. Without the contributions of self-governance, your thoughts and beliefs are left to clamor and fight for control, with the strongest ones winning. By using your capacity for self-governance when thoughts are chaotic, you call up the skills that address the situation and put the fight to rest, making a verdict on what you believe based on self-understanding and self-observation.

## Self-Governance

- What's the current state of your talent for self-governance?**
- Do you feel connected to your capacity for self-observation (in a way that doesn't result in self-injury)?**
- If you could "control yourself," what would you control? Which of your behaviors would you change?**
- Are you willing to develop your ability to observe what's happening without reacting to it? What are the benefits of continuing to *not* self-govern, or of using self-injury as a *harmful* form of self-governance?**
- When you're moving toward using self-injury, what holds back *healthy* self-governance? Why govern with *pain*? What part of your being decides that pain is an appropriate response?**



## Occupy Yourself

It can be hard to make conscious choices, let alone access a part of your mind or skillset that has checked out while self-injury rages about. Questions of who you are, who you want to be, and the terms under which you'll live your life can be triggers on their own. Finding a way out of self-injury will require that you either *stop looking* at the ways you're failing to meet your own or others' expectations or *learn to engage* what isn't working in your life without self-injuring. To kick the habit, you have to ground yourself in self-knowledge as *You* choose the version of yourself that will attend to your situation. When you're not able to connect with the version of yourself that you want to be, *imagine it*. Generate a vision of what your best self is, how that version of you behaves, what it does, and what it thinks. Continue to envision it while you align your deepest interests, values, and actions. Until you can make your vision a reality, *visualize* how it would feel to inhabit the space you want to reside in.

Occupy yourself. Rally for the development of the versions of yourself you like best, the personality traits *You'd* like to use frequently to define yourself. Use the abilities of your brain, your body, your mind, your identity, and your essence in concert. Let the different parts of your mind and personality do what they do best, but train them to do it *better*. And try to change yourself while remaining compassionate and patient with your innate . . . well, humanness, and the ways in which you fall short of your best intentions

when your brain gets in the way. Forgive yourself for the times you can't be all you want to be, and keep coming back to the visual of where you're headed—where *You* want to go with this life. On your way, remember to interject some compassion for yourself into your thoughts—otherwise you could just punish yourself for not being “there.” And when you're not there, you may feel graspy and desperate, so you may not see things clearly or act skillfully. Always follow your Ground Rules.

Working to turn up the parts of you that make your life better naturally turns down the chatter of your brain and pain. Once you separate *You* from your thoughts, you can start looking at what's happening on a broader scale and slowly zoom in on specific details. Just take care not to throw judgments around about how things got where they are, or level predictions about all the misery your future holds. Occupy the body, the brain, the mind, the you, and the *You* that you are. Let yourself exist on many levels, but choose the most peaceful ways to exist.



## What You Are, What You're Not

Take a few minutes to consider all the real stuff you're good at—knitting, making potato salad, wiggling your nose, playing the washboard. There are things you do well and could teach to others, though you could also stand to learn some new things.

- What are you naturally best at?**
- What do you do just because you like to, with no one forcing you to do it?**
- What skills could you learn that would make you more of the person you want to be?**
- What *have you learned* purely because you're interested in it? What *would you like to learn* just for the sake of knowing it?**
- What could you teach to others?**
- In what important ways have you grown your coping skills, even if you're not where you want to be yet?**
- In what positive ways do you focus on what you *have* and *are*?**
- In what negative ways do you focus on what you *don't have* and *aren't*?**

Take some more time to think about how you've expressed your interests and the person you *are*. Think realistically about yourself—what you are and what you're not, what you've chosen *to be* and what you've chosen *not to be*.

In your journal, make notes about the important skills or wisdom you've learned to date. Consider the changes you've gone through as you've grown into the person you are, the ways you've *purposefully* evolved. Pay attention to which specific talents and skills you embody naturally and which you purposefully *don't* develop. As you consider a variety of your interests and skills, notice that you are the combination of an essence, a group of interests, and conglomeration of traits that *no one else can be*.

Notice your capacity to change and grow in the directions you choose, even if those choices didn't necessarily bring you where you wanted to be. Notice that when you direct your attention and energy, you can express who you are in ways you feel aligned with, learning and growing while standing firm in your deepest core interests and values.

When your brain is bringing self-injury out of the toolbox, the simplest response is to remember the distinction between *You* and *It*. Remember that your brain, your pain, your thoughts, emotions, experiences, identities, and personalities are not *You*—and that you don't have to believe everything your brain thinks about who you are, especially when it results in feeling terrible. Dig deeper to find the person you are beyond self-injury.



## More Of, Same As, Less Of

To stop self-injuring, it's going to be important that you continually ground yourself in the realities of who *You* are and what *You* really want in your life. One way to conceptualize this is to think about the changes you want to make in terms of "more of," "less of," and "same as." When you wish things were different or want change in your life, quantify it in those terms.

- What do you want more of in your life?**
- What do you want less of?**
- What would you like to stay the same?**



## Looking at Your Vastness

There are so many ways to survey your vastness. Take some time to list the habits, characteristics, traits or skills that you've purposely cultivated in yourself or that you appreciate in others. Then create a list of those habits, traits, or personality quirks that you tend to avoid in others or don't like in yourself, even if those traits can't necessarily be changed. With that insight, consider the following questions.

- What type of person do you naturally feel at ease with?**
- What colors, foods, textures, or energy do you gravitate toward, and which do you avoid?**
- What is life *about* (in fifteen words or less)?**
- What's worthwhile?**
- What's not worthwhile?**
- What's important?**
- What's not important?**
- When are you truly happiest?**
- What makes you perpetually dissatisfied or unhappy enough to use self-injury?**



## Taking a Title

You may have been labeled with, or personally taken on, a title as you've grown to habitually use self-injury.

- Are you a "self-injurer"?**
- How do you feel about the term "self-injurer," even if you don't apply the title to yourself?**

To take on any title is to distill oneself to a particular interest or characteristic, and any title you apply to yourself tends to stick. If you use the title "self-injurer", or if someone uses it for you, try to come up with a more creative and positive title, like Coper with All Things Painful or One Who Hasn't Given Up. The title "self-injurer" doesn't come anywhere *close* to describing your vastness, but it does have a ring of "broken" to it. No single term can describe an entire person, and taking on a label like "self-injurer" or "cutter" can alter the way you create your identity and how other people see you. You're *so much more* than someone who self-injures. Don't call yourself a self-injurer if you can help it. If you're going to distill yourself down to one title, give yourself a little more credit. Take the time to come up with titles that are true, non-shaming, or even positive. Be the Keeper of Trying.



# The Characters in Your Mind

There's the you that *You* want to be, and there's the you that you're being, and there are a myriad of stages in between, one for each possible different version of yourself that you could embody. And there's really no way to be the very same day to day, because time, life, brain chemicals, and other people act on you, and you act on them. Accept that you can't be the best version of yourself all the time, and that your vastness includes many characteristics and energies. It may be necessary to give yourself a variety of ways to look at yourself in any given moment, so you can respond appropriately to the moment-to-moment thoughts that obscure your deeper wisdom.

Following is another way to think about the inner aspects that make you up (as they relate to self-injury). It considers your vastness as a simplified combination of different characters. Each character has its role, its benefits, and its limitations. After all, your glorious magnificence can't be expressed with one trait or one part of your character, since so many parts of you act at once. As you read over the descriptions of the internal characters below, identify the names or roles of your own internal cast of characters and in what situations they're likely to come up. Note any insights in your journal.

## *The Controller*

When using self-harm, your Controller is negatively controlling your outlets for expression and the health of your emotional life. Your Controller is there to keep things in order. It tells you when, where, why and how and asks you to follow its rules. You couldn't function in the world without your Controller, but in people who self-injure, the Controller is behaving more like a Dictator. When the Controller is balanced, it suggests *effective* ways to control your actions or reactions.

## *The Skeptic*

Your Skeptic doubts. When self-injuring, the Skeptic doubts that you can ever be free of your pain, because it knows you can't be free of your knowledge of some of your most painful experiences and feelings. Your Skeptic has a healthy role when it's determining if someone else is intending to harm you or is telling you the truth, but the Skeptic in people who self-injure has turned on them, and it keeps them hostage with the belief that change is impossible. The Skeptic, when off its game, allows unsavory people to cross your boundaries and then leaves you with the emotional memory of not protecting yourself as if it were evidence that true self-protection is impossible. The Skeptic has a close tie to addiction, because addiction (to self-injury or anything else) can only continue if you believe you *need* it. The Skeptic convinces you of the hopelessness of change. Once *You* retrain the Skeptic, you'll find it doubting any tactic that doesn't truly protect you.

## *The Vulnerable Child*

If you do the Inner Child work you'll find in Section Two, you'll likely have an intimate understanding of the vulnerabilities of your Inner Child. Suffice it to say that we each have a Vulnerable Child that behaves in, well. . . *childish* ways. After all, it doesn't know how to protect itself, so we must find other aspects of our character to fill that role. The Vulnerable Child, when healthy, is innocent and a little naïve, but it is pure and undamaged. It doesn't have the skills to handle major distress or to ask clearly for what it needs, so it may become volatile when it feels mistreated, taking us over in tantrums and extreme emotions when painful or fearful internal content arises.

## *The Protector*

The Protector, when balanced, is our superhero. It swoops in at just the right time to save us from ourselves or others, motivating truly protective action. For people who self-injure, the Protector is flying a little off course as it allows for (or suggests) self-injury as a means of protection. And the Confused Protector is right, in a sense: Emotional pain truly can be diminished through the release provided by self-harm. But that isn't true self-protection. When the Healthy Protector comes around, you find effective solutions to problems that don't create more pain.

## *The Damaged Self*

You know about this part, don't you? You likely spend much of your time focusing on this aspect of yourself or believing that the Damaged Self is all that exists. There are parts of you that can be damaged—such as your ability to trust, to love, to persevere—but most of the damage can be repaired, because the effects are all in your mind, not in your essence. You're not fatally flawed because you've had some damage done to you or done some damage to yourself. But to get out from under self-injury, you have to exert some compassion and patience, get out the first-aid kit, and get to work healing the Damaged Self so it can function, even if it's a little dinged up.

## *The Open Heart*

Your Open Heart has its own way of responding when you or others are hurting. Though it is open, it also has limits to giving. It's the part of you where compassion resides, where patience and love can be cultivated, where connection to a feeling of spirit, essence, or soul resides. The kindness you need to overcome self-injury is there—perhaps underneath some weighty baggage, but it's there.

## *The Seeking Mind*

Your Seeking Mind craves freedom from self-injury, among other things. It's the part of you that goes to church, to temple, to yoga; that reads, creates, and yearns. The Seeking Mind may be a little overactive in those who self-injure, as the want for things to be different is rooted here. Balancing the Seeking Mind is a challenging task, because by its very nature, it can't be satisfied.

## *The Non-Seeking Mind*

Your Non-Seeking Mind is something like joy playing in an open field even while bombs are being dropped. There's no seeking, no self-betterment, and no change of reality necessary for the Non-Seeking Mind to exist and be just fine. It's the part of you beyond want, beyond pain. For those who self-injure, the Non-Seeking Mind can feel a world away, but awareness of this aspect of Self can be cultivated through mindfulness and inner inquiry.

## *The Vast Mind*

Your Vast Mind is closest to the idea of a soul. It's neither seeking nor not-seeking; it has no agenda but to exist. It has no beginning and no end; it contains everything at once and can hold it all without flinching in the slightest. It's unchangeable, unable to be hurt, diminished, or compromised. It's your most essential, basic nature, and a connection with this part of you in the face of your pain can help you overcome any oppression, because there's a part of you that simply cannot be oppressed. Your job is to continually reconnect with that unending strength so that over time, even when you're in deep despair, you are able to avoid the lure of the misguided aspects of your being that suggest self-injury as a soothing tactic.

The Seeking Mind combines with Non-Seeking Mind and Vast Mind as the longtime concept of *You* (what you want, and what you are beyond your want—your very essence). Once you know your vastness more intimately, and by maintaining an awareness of the Seeking Mind, the Non-Seeking Mind, and the Vast Mind, you'll be able to train the characters that govern your actions to approach your experiences in ways that solve your dilemmas without self-harm.



## Playing with the Characters of the Mind

Consult the list of personality traits in figure 2 and those traits you've identified in yourself through previous inquiries. Then, link up a few personality traits you most commonly express with the different characters.

- Which of your personality traits would be part of your Controller?
- Which would be part of your Skeptic?
- Your Vulnerable Child?
- What about your Protector?
- Your Damaged Self?
- Which traits would be represented in your Open Heart?
- What about the Seeking Mind?
- The Non-Seeking Mind?
- The Vast Mind?

OK, first step done. You've linked your most commonly expressed personality traits with the inner character that may be governing each trait. Now, take some time and gain access to the insight and perspective of your inner characters by asking each of them:

- Who are you?
- What's your job; what do you do?
- What are you searching for?
- What do you want from me?
- How can you help me stop resorting to self-injury?
- What's my purpose here?
- Can you tell me more about who I am and about the qualities I'm here to embody?
- Notice if there are other characters or aspects of your being at play. If so, ask what their roles are in your life and self-injury habits. How do they dictate the personality traits that you are expressing? How do they affect your habitual actions and reactions?
- Which characters are most often in control when you're being triggered toward self-injury, and what is their demeanor? Are the characters themselves the "problem," or is the problem that the characters are behaving in riotous, self-deprecating, or hopeless ways?
- Can any of these aspects of you be anything other than they are? Can the Seeking Mind stop seeking? Can the Vulnerable Child stop being vulnerable? If so, how can they be changed? If not, how can you adapt to that inner character and live in a type of harmony that allows each of your aspects to be what they are, without allowing them to undermine your stability?

**When you're using self-injury, are you identifying so closely with the Vulnerable Child that you *become* the Vulnerable Child? Is it difficult to retain an *adult* perspective that would come to the aid of your Vulnerable aspects? Why do you associate with the Vulnerable Child so closely that you become it? When your Vulnerable Child is throwing tantrums, what does it want from the world or from you?**



Your job isn't necessarily to *change* the nature of these characters, but to hear them and, at the same time, to train them to do their job in a balanced way. It's better for all aspects of your being if *You* retain conscious control of the actions and training of your inner characters—filtering their impulses and messages through the Non-Seeking and Vast Minds.

Compassion asks you to notice the various parts of yourself that are trying to dominate the moment and to respond to each of them purposefully. This happens by practicing the art of keeping in touch with who *You* are when those separate aspects try to convince you that they are *You*, suggesting that you act in pain-inducing ways. Start to notice the various characters or aspects of you alive during self-injury episodes, and determine which of your dominant characters fuel your use of self-injury. Then, have a talk with them and ask what needs to change for them to support you without self-harm when you're in crisis.

You're constantly evolving in some ways and steadfastly unchangeable in others. Self-injury often tells you that you're a small piece of what *You* really are—and it's usually calling out the nasty stuff, which, even if it were true, certainly isn't the whole *You*. You're vast, and you've only touched the surface; you've only begun to use the resources you have inside you. You can learn to access your inner characters and life experience in more ways than by diving into, or being motivated by, painful thoughts. But to do so will require that you take a look at how your brain is working against you.



CHAPTER FIVE:

# It's All in Your Brain

I can still remember having one of the most startling realizations in my life. It came while reading a book called *Stumbling on Happiness*, and it went like this:

This self-injury thing is all in my brain.

Accepting that thought as true *instantly* changed my perspective on the challenges I was dealing with. Suddenly, I had permission to stop beating myself up for the ways others had affected my ability to feel self-loving, secure and stable. I started seeing my issues as the product of a mind that had gone in the wrong direction. But, my brain was *changeable*—which meant that all I had to do to decrease my pain was to take steps to change the way my brain processed information. And with that knowledge, all the challenges ahead of me seemed so much easier to take on. I felt like I could actually change my self-injury habits, maybe even repair some of the damage life (and the lack of a User Manual for my brain) had left me with.

I don't know why it wasn't always obvious that my suffering was directly related to how I was thinking about and orienting myself to my past and my pain, or why I didn't see the ways I was *amplifying* my pain through my actions and my reactions to it. This new realization, however, set me on the path to changing the ways I had allowed my brain to work against me. I knew I could rewrite the script that retold all my most shameful experiences in the most hurtful ways possible. I could change the effect the traumas of the past were having on how I lived my life. And I could wager some hope that I wasn't actually doomed to a life of just getting by while managing intense emotional pain, fearing my overreaction to the challenges of my life.

Believing that my self-injury habit was simply evidence of a brain that needed tending gave me permission to stop trying to kill the terribleness within me. I wasn't living a life sentence of numbing feelings, trying to transcend or forget my past. I just had to learn to live *with* it all. I just had to *change my brain*. I decided to try different methods of altering the way my brain *thought*. I stepped in to govern how fast I let my thoughts spin and changed how I related to my brain, my mind, my body, and my life experience.

From that moment of realization on, my brain was simply a physical system whose functions could be modified. I no longer doubted that I could stop self-injuring. I just didn't know how long it would take. But I knew in a visceral way that every day, every week that self-injury went unchecked would just make it harder to stop and undo the damage I'd been doing. I knew I had to attend to my brain and change the way it was controlling my outlook on what was possible in life. I realized it was "all in my brain"—and I knew I could *change* my brain.

## Your Outlook Determines Your Inner Reality

The statement that "it's all in your mind/brain" isn't a suggestion that you're making up your pain. The trauma and pain life has handed you to deal with is not imaginary. But your *reactions* to that pain, and the ways your reactions govern your outlook on life, are *very much* in your mind and habits of thinking. This doesn't mean that if you're in a situation that contributes to your suffering, you should just think yourself happy. But, as a human being driven around in a physical body by a brain, you may not give proper credit to the power your own thoughts have to create your outlook on reality, or the power your thoughts have to unnecessarily amplify your pain.

Much of your life happens inside your mind and the physical systems of the brain. You're driven by the thoughts your brain creates and the meanings it applies to each of your experiences. Your reality is drawn and colored in by your beliefs and past experiences. Your outlook is not only determined by internal or external forces, but by your brain's ability to give you realistic, actionable messages that allow you to protect yourself from harm when those forces threaten your stability. It's quite a trick to learn to save yourself mentally during difficult life circumstances, especially when it's your own brain causing you harm. But as you learn to own responsibility for your outlook on life and your relationship with yourself, you'll develop your own natural ability to remain self-loving and resilient.

There are many stories of human triumph to demonstrate that we humans are defined by an enduring nature. People survive and find ways to thrive—even in the most desperate external circumstances. We overcome our *internal* reactions to the pain of the world only when we choose how we want to think and behave regardless of the *external* circumstances. There is no doubt that the impacts of difficult experiences and extreme feelings like fear or deprivation will be remembered. However, those who overcome don't just *forget* their pasts or their pain, they find ways to generally keep the relationship between them and the pain of life balanced in their favor. It may take deliberate, continual effort, but directing your thoughts away from the stuff that fuels self-injury gets easier when you stop using the past as a basis for determining what to expect from life.

An untended brain can prolong trauma by connecting past experiences to the present or mindlessly applying ineffective or wrong thinking to the current situation. Your outlook on and expectations of life determine, to a large degree, how successfully you orient yourself to the pains of your past. It also affects how completely you accept your own culpability in your present situation. Changing your outlook on your pain can enhance your ability to live *with* pain without paying undue *homage* to it.

Working to change your outlook in a positive way will help you to psychologically endure painful experiences. It will allow you to overcome the impacts of that pain so you can go on with your life, as free from the effects of the pain as possible. Life offers plenty of situations that challenge your emotional tolerance. Learning how to bring forward the clearest, most patient and compassionate outlook possible can help you determine if the "problem" you're experiencing is caused by your own perspective or if the situation you're in is actually the issue. Creating a positive outlook on life and getting a view of your pain that isn't so *painful* isn't about seeing how long you can endure situations that tax you, but preserving your mental integrity and making skillful decisions. If you're not overwhelmed by a fatalistic attitude about life, you can more easily take yourself out of situations that really harm you, and you can keep your sanity while you're adjusting painful life circumstances.

Keep in mind that there are some situations where your particular triggers are *sure* to be tripped. No matter how you try to cope, you won't always be able to do so, and maybe it's not a good idea to stay in those situations. For instance, if you self-injure to cope with previous sexual abuse, a relationship with someone who willingly violates your personal boundaries isn't helpful. Trying to maintain a positive outlook on your ability to cope without self-harm in that situation may help to keep you mentally intact, but safely removing yourself from the situation would be the best application of your energy regardless of your outlook.

Overcoming challenges starts with taking on an outlook that *doesn't* believe that the future is destined to be more of the same pain of the past. Once you take on an outlook that sees the possibility of *change*, you can start creating experiences that prove you to be capable of stability, self-care, and true self-protection. You start to believe in more than the inevitability of pain. If you can continue to develop a sense of trust that your brain can learn new coping skills, and notice your successes as you grow those skills, you'll be more likely to endure situations that are worth enduring and to leave situations (ones you actually can leave) that cause you harm. Even if you're stuck in a place where pain is all around you, the one thing you can do is change your outlook on that pain and how it affects the way you treat yourself and others.

You've practiced enduring through the use of self-harm. But, what you're going for now is discriminatory thinking—seeing how your perspective on your situation is affecting your situation—and realizing that the only way to change both your perspective and your situation is to take responsibility for how your brain



behaves. Even though an awful lot happens in the external world to mess with your brain, subtleties in how you allow yourself to think make all the difference in how your world feels to you. The patterns you've developed over time have been established in your brain, and they have altered your body, your mind, and your vision of yourself. These patterns will take time to change because they're so deeply ingrained in your thought processes. But by learning to control your outlook on life or a particular situation, you can learn to endure what is healthy to endure even though it may be uncomfortable. And, you can develop the will and presence of mind to build a life that doesn't leave you struggling in situations that undermine your stability.

## Don't Expect Your Brain to Be Right

You know personally that the instigators of self-harm reside in your brain—until, of course, you act on what's in your brain, thereby putting it into the world. As you learn to sift through the chatter of your thoughts and the contents of your past as they affect your current life, don't expect your brain to be honest with you. Don't expect your brain to be right all the time. Your poor brain is really confused about a lot of things. It needs you to give it compassion and patience so it can return that compassion and patience when your painful emotions are triggered. Over time, you can learn to trust your brain, so that all aspects of you can work together to make decisions. Until you get to that point, there are three points about your brain to keep in mind:

1. Be careful what you let your brain tell you about how the world works when you're triggered, because your brain doesn't know all it thinks it knows. You'll have to endure the thoughts, emotions, and consequences of actions generated by your confused brain.
2. Be careful what you let your brain tell you to do about your problems when you're triggered, especially if it feels like you're grasping for solutions rather than self-aware and clear about the best course of action. If your body-sense and intuition don't agree with an action your brain is suggesting, don't take that action.
3. "It's all in your brain," which means *you can change it*. You're not doomed to repeat painful cycles forever. Take a second to thank your brain for being adaptable, because you can learn to change the way your mind works and live *with* your past and your pain in a way that doesn't continue to make you a *victim* of your past and pain. Actually, your brain is changing right this minute. Hear the crackle?

## Big Ideas

Have you ever considered how much of your life is governed by your ideas? Much of what you think of your life, of yourself, and of others is really just an idea, whose content is based on how your brain has processed the information available through your experiences. Your decisions are based on these ideas, so your life is, in part, a representation of your ideas. If your thoughts are creating elements in your life that are painful, the only thing to do is change your ideas, even if you do it by implanting other ideas specifically to override those you currently hold.

Your physical reality actually changes based on your ideas. Consider how it would affect your outlook and decision making if you held the idea, "One day, I won't use self-injury." Would that thought create a different set of feelings and actions compared to thinking, "My life sucks and I'll always be in pain"? The ideas you carry guide your thoughts and decisions and, therefore, the experiences of your life.

Try to cultivate the idea that things will be different eventually. Even if eventually never comes, your day-to-day life will be far different if you live toward creating a life you like instead of lying on the couch with a gallon of ice cream, ensuring that happier days will never come. The way to create a life without self-injury is to first generate the idea that it's possible, and then to work to control your thoughts when your brain tells you it's not. If you allow yourself to buy into the idea that you can't be happy and can't stop the pain . . . well, then you can't. It may sound trite, but positive thinking is a powerful tool for change, even if it takes a lot of effort to create a spark of light in a very dark mind.

Understand that thoughts of compassion and patience yield different emotions and actions than thoughts

of pain and violence. We'll talk more about implanting positive ideas, but keep in mind that the ideas with the greatest traction are the ones you actually *believe*. In the throes of self-loathing trying to overwrite the idea "I'm worthless" with "I love myself" won't convince your brain as effectively as a *true* idea, like "There are things I like about myself that I wouldn't change."



## Your Ideas

- How would things be different for you if you could fill yourself with encouraging ideas about what you want to grow to be and to do with your life instead of spending so much time thinking about what hurts?
- What specific ideas typically lead to your use of self-injury?
- Do these painful thoughts cause other types of trouble in your life? What types of self-sabotaging action do you take as a result of your painful ideas?
- What specific, positive, and true ideas could serve as an antidote to your painful thoughts?
- Why are your negative ideas about yourself so believable? What could you do to make space inside those negative ideas for the new and positive idea that you are capable of taking your life in a new direction?



## How Ideas Feel

- How does it feel in your body when you think about really ugly and painful ideas, like the ideas you exposed in the last inquiry? Do you notice increased tension when thinking particular thoughts?
- How does it feel when you think about something pleasant or calming? Does the space around your heart settle, or does your body relax as you focus on ideas or images that you find beautiful or nurturing?
- As you alternate between thinking painful and soothing thoughts, can you get a sense of your ability to control your level of physical stress with your thoughts alone?
- Can you sense how quickly your ideas are registered in your body and emotions? When your self-injury triggering thoughts come up, do you notice how fast the thoughts activate an emotional response?

When you feel your brain getting caught up in thoughts that lead to self-injury, purposely inject calming thoughts into the mix to soothe your body and mind. This won't necessarily stop the episode, but with practice, you'll start to learn that you can direct your emotions and body sensations simply by directing your thoughts. *Consciously* directing your thoughts is essential to taming the chaos in your mind and controlling your reactions to emotional pain.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Taking some time to consider the realities of cognitive dissonance might demystify how various parts of your mind can produce vastly contradictory thoughts and solutions to your challenges. You can easily forget how many functions (programs) your brain (computer) runs at one time. Each function, talent, and ability possesses specific aims, and sometimes those aims are in competition. When the different functions of the mind

aren't in harmony, you end up with a mental state called cognitive dissonance. In a person who uses self-injury, the battles occurring between thoughts tend to play out in frightening and damaging ways. Though the warring between ideas is quite normal, how you work with that dissonance can dramatically impact your outlook on life. It may take some of the pain out of cognitive dissonance to consider what's really happening when you're experiencing competing or chaotic thoughts.

Cognitive dissonance is simply the simultaneous action of your many traits and aspects—different parts of your brain commenting on reality and pulling for control of your decision making. It's something like having too many programs running on your brain without any particular program that *decides* between ideas; or like not being able to call up the *right* programs in a particular situation.

We don't always (or even often) know exactly what we think or believe. It can be hard to identify which programs are running on, or competing for control of, a chaotic mind. We can pin one belief down as the one we hold on a topic, even while other parts of us don't agree. We decide between ideas using whatever forms of discernment or self-regulation we have available at the moment. During self-injury, you may feel intense cognitive dissonance as your mind tries to sort out your thoughts and beliefs on "what you are" or what kind of treatment you deserve. Trying to achieve some consistency of thought by comparing the various aspects of the mind to one another is natural when you try to resolve cognitive dissonance. After all, you have to ask yourself which of your thoughts you believe, and you do so by comparing one thought to another through the lens of your emotional state. But during a self-injury episode, that kind of comparison can *escalate* painful emotions, when you find yourself unable to interpret your thoughts with anything but self-loathing and condemnation.

When a brain is trying to reduce dissonance between thoughts, it can do so in one of three ways.

1. *Changing* one of the competing ideas or beliefs so there is no longer an inconsistency
2. Attempting to *reduce the importance* of one of the ideas or beliefs to allow the other to triumph
3. *Adding ideas* that are consistent with one of the beliefs to support the triumph of that idea

When your brain is spinning with cognitive dissonance and you feel you may resort to self-injury, there are two basic scenarios that can result. One allows self-injury to triumph, and the other allows the mental programs that govern compassion to triumph.

FIGURE 3:

## Cognitive Dissonance

Self-Injury Triumphs	Compassion Triumphs
1. Self-injury thoughts can work to change the competing (nonviolent) idea by convincing the parts of the mind that hold supportive and compassionate ideas that they're wrong and should reconsider their faith in your ability to cope without violence.	1. You change the idea that self-injury is a solution by recognizing the impact it has on your life and by considering it an urge and coping ability that doesn't deserve control over your actions.
2. Self-injury thoughts can reduce the importance of the competing (nonviolent) idea by convincing the parts of the mind that wish to be free from abuse that it's really not that important—and besides, you deserve to be punished anyway.	2. You reduce the importance of the idea that self-injury is the way to go, saying to self-injury urges, "Yeah, it hurts, but it's not worth self-injuring over. I need compassion right now."
3. Self-injury urges can add myriad ideas to the mix in support of self-injury, self-loathing, or increased pain, and they can bully down any part of you that suggests you can or should live without self-injury.	3. You add ideas that support the parts of you that are working toward a productive course of action, so they can kick the self-injury urges to the background. You invalidate self-injury as an option by adding an idea that it's not an option, because you have other, more productive options.

The mental habits around self-injury can be so conditioned that they instantly take over your thinking, creating resistance to any belief that claims you are capable, strong, or adaptable. Breaking the habit of self-injury will be easier if you realize that when cognitive dissonance is threatening to overwhelm you, that is *precisely* the time you need to call up your abilities for self-governance. *You* have to become your own inner referee. It will take less energy to self-injure or tune out than it will to uncover the *You* that can compassionately referee your chaotic thoughts. It may be tricky to generate the energy to do that refereeing, and you may not yet have access to a quality inner referee. Your thoughts have been fighting each other for dominance and your current referee has been suggesting that you interrupt that cognitive dissonance with physical pain or self-sabotage. That choice makes sense, because without the clarity *You* bring to decision making you are torn between the various perspectives of your mind as they chatter back and forth. That dissonance only makes it harder to turn your attention *away from* the chatter and get in touch with the *You* that can make a clear choice.

Try to relieve the pain of cognitive dissonance without self-harm. First by seeing it, and then by calling up the parts of your mind that are able to calm and support you while you work to either step away from or resolve the internal struggle. To stop self-injuring, *You* need to actively choose which aspects of your mind play, and win, the cognitive dissonance battle.



## Cognitive Dissonance

- Do you ever self-injure to stop the feelings that arise as you try to sort through or compare thoughts and beliefs?**
- What competing ideas most often arise when you near self-injury?**
- What thoughts can you add or take away from competing thoughts to decrease the turmoil associated with the dissonance?**
- When you're experiencing dissonance and chaotic thinking, can you call up the self-governing part of your mind to act as a referee between warring ideas? Can you tap into the *You* that can compassionately referee the match from the sidelines?**
- If you consider *Yourself* as separate from the thoughts you're thinking, does it change the emotional impact of your thoughts?**

## Choosing What You Think About

Every moment holds the potential for just about every possible emotion. Even when it happens without conscious choice, your brain instantly selects among available emotions the ones it will identify with, using beliefs and experiences as reference points. A brain in pain is going to look closely at the things that *cause* pain or will long for something to *ease* the pain, all the while believing pain is *all there is* to think about. Thoughts move so quickly and so convincingly that *not* believing what you think or diving into your feelings requires conscious choice.

When you buy into your thoughts without discernment, you basically affirm the idea that what you think is true. That view can make you believe that what you're currently thinking about is *all there is* to think about, or the *only way* to think about it. Thinking about everything that causes you pain may simply be a habit of yielding to negative thinking, but on some level, a habit is still a choice. When what you're thinking about causes you pain enough to self-injure, it's important to recognize that those thoughts should not be believed—even if just on principle. *Any* thought that suggests you should harm yourself willingly should be questioned. Carefully select which thoughts you think and which you believe. When thoughts that spur self-injury come up, purposefully question their motives or counter them with supportive thoughts.

When you habitually react with violence to the emotions that your own thoughts create, it's important to

take back your choice. Don't believe what your brain perceives as true if it results in you wanting to punish yourself. Conjure up supportive or calming thoughts in the face of negative thoughts. It's your brain. They're your thoughts. *You* can select the thoughts to think when your brain isn't doing a stellar job on its own. Actively choosing your outlook and how you'll use your thoughts during your most challenging moments can be a learned habit, just like self-injury was a learned habit. This type of choosing has a lot to do with watching what's happening in your mind when you're feeling an urge to self-injure, and not buying into your thoughts without discernment. Emotional storms pass more quickly and with less damage when you're able to challenge your own thoughts or redirect painful thinking. It's not necessary to *disprove* your painful thoughts, only to acknowledge that not everything you think is true. Inject *compassionate* responses to your pain as countermeasures to the painful thinking that leads to self-injury.

## Looking Back with Compassion

It's natural to not always be able to maintain yourself as you wish in the face of challenges. Try to look back on your life with compassion for the person who endured your life circumstances.

- What does it feel like when you try to cultivate compassion for the person who experienced your life?**
- Are there particular thoughts you could inject into your crisis times to remind you to find compassion for yourself?**
- What thoughts or emotions stand in the way of you accepting your past, your choices, or your experiences without shame or judgment?**
- What opinions or judgments keep you from extending compassion to yourself? Are there particular thoughts you could inject into your thinking to soften the effects of those specific opinions or judgments?**

Spend some time marinating in the knowledge that even though its effects are lingering, the past is *over*. All that pain and damage has already happened. You've gotten through it. Today, the only thing you have control over is your ability to *choose*. Choose to look on yourself with compassion. Choose to love, accept, and forgive yourself.



## Talking to Your Brain

In moments of intense pain, it can be useful to talk to your brain. When your thoughts are running you through the wringer, statements like "Hey, brain, I need you to get on my side here" or "I need you to help me figure out what to do" will help you more than "Yep, brain, you're right, I'm a terrible person." Consider your most common self-injury circumstances and answer the questions below.

- What would you say to your brain if it would do exactly what *You* told it to do?**
- What could you try to tell your brain to do when it's not acting in a way *You* want it to?**
- What could you ask your brain for when it's deciding whether or not to punish you? When it wants to dive into self-sabotage?**
- How will you help yourself *remember* that you can ask your brain for help and not just be taken along for the ride as it runs its normal shaming and punishing routine?**

Connect to the part of *Yourself* that can bypass the self-injury urges for compassionate action. When you're in the middle of an episode, remember that you need to stop believing the thoughts your mind is producing and access the parts of your being that aren't in a tizzy. Ask your brain to work with *You* to use your abilities and resources toward skillful action.



## A New View

Sometimes self-injury urges come on when your view of your challenges becomes so overwhelmingly complex that you have to stop the thoughts entirely to get a short vacation from the internal chaos. Your relationship with that chaos is a *view*; it's the way you, the viewer, are seeing the situation. In moments of confused thinking, you need to learn to purposely *change your view*.

What would it be like to interpret what's happening inside your brain and body from *outside of the action*, instead of at its center? One way to think of this is as if you could step outside your experience and comment on your behavior, as if you're a character in a movie. Another way is to treat yourself like your own friend. Either way, it boils down to getting out of the story your thoughts are telling and watching that story as if it were happening to someone else.



### Going to the Movies

Try to remember a time when you were descending into self-injury (Ground Rules, please). You know what it was like to be in the participant role in the chaos, but now, try to get into a viewer's seat. Imagine you're watching that scene as if it were a movie, and you're viewing someone else—the character in the movie—as he lives your experiences. Analyze your scene with the same detachment you'd have when interpreting a movie based on experiences like yours. Ask yourself:

- What's the content of the characters' chaos?**
- What does the character in the story need right now?**
- How is the character responding to his internal chaos?**
- Does he have response options he doesn't recognize?**
- Why does the character step into his chaos and attempt to engage it?**
- Is there a message for the character swirling around in the chaos, telling him what effective action can be taken? Does he hear that message? Is he acting on it?**
- How would you interrupt and ease the character's chaos if you stepped into the movie to help?**
- When you're having trouble coping or experiencing cognitive dissonance, how can you remind yourself to *take yourself out of the experience and change your view*?**



### A Close Friend

Let's bring this view-changing thing closer to home. Consider the course of action you'd take if a friend were experiencing your life.

- How would you advise your friend if she began struggling with self-injury urges, extreme or painful thoughts?**
- If mental chaos increased and self-injury was coming out of your friend's coping-toolbox, what would you say to her or do for her?**
- If you were talking to your friend about what happened when the episode was over, what course of action would you suggest so that she could avoid the same situation in the future?**
- What advice would you give your friend about handling her self-injury urges without taking self-harming action? Have you followed that advice yourself? If not, why not?**
- How can you be a better friend to yourself when you're in crisis?**

There are a lot of views you can take on when you're struggling, but many of your most habitual views likely pull you right into the center of the action. It's understandably difficult to create an exit strategy from that vantage point. In both clear and difficult times, try to get used to changing your view. Shift the view from *inside* your brain's chaos to a comfortable seat in the movie theater, or to a chat with yourself as your best friend.

It may take time and practice, but changing your view on your pain changes everything.

## Lessons Learned

When you're craving self-injury, it may seem impossible to change your brain, your habits, or your ideas, but it's important not to believe thoughts and emotions produced by a turbulent brain. Once clarity comes, you can look at what you think and determine the truth of it, but when your brain is actively revolting, it's time to enlist all your other assets as brain wranglers.

You can't know what to do every time trouble arises, and you likely won't have the energy to rise to the occasion every time you struggle, but you *can* learn to see which aspects of your being are affecting your behavior, enforcing a status quo that might be livable but isn't much fun for you or the people who love you. No matter where your suffering comes from—real or self-amplified—you need to choose how to approach the challenge of changing your self-injury habit.

That doesn't mean you need to wage a war on yourself, attack your "bad" parts, or try to rid yourself of all sources of misery that trip you up. It's not an existential quest to let go of everything that hurts so it never touches you again. It's more like a brain training challenge, where all parts of you are called in to hone their talents and contribute to the creation of your life. You haven't been sentenced to a life formed by the limitations of a confused brain's dissonance. Considering that your memories and experiences are part of you, your primary job is to *change your relationship* to them, replacing painful thoughts with compassionate and self-supportive ones. You can change how your past experiences and your thoughts act on you—and how you act in the world based on the lessons of those experiences. You don't have to fight your life. You can change it by changing your *view* of it, even when that process feels difficult, triggering and lonely.

It's a little sad, but no one will ever truly understand what you have gone through, how your brain interprets the world, or what you'll have to go through to change your mental habits. We have all lived (and some of us have barely lived) though experiences no one else will ever really "get." But even if others can't truly understand you, it's true that you want to feel fulfilled and to resonate with the life you live. No matter what you've experienced, either your pain can take over your life, or *You* can take your life back from the pain. Do the work of changing the way you think about your pain and chaos, and at some point, your renewed capacity for self-governance will erode the painful habits and thoughts that dominate your thinking and hold you back today. One morning, you'll wake up to realize you spend more time at ease than in chaos. A few months later, you'll realize you can't remember the last time you had urges to self-injure. And even if the urges or the actions never totally go away, you will see real improvement in your experience of your life.

You may be misunderstood, and to some degree alone with your struggles, but there are also a few standard truths about being a human with a brain that might take the sting out of your isolation. Read over the statements below, then make notes in your journal about any "truths" about life or your brain that you'd add to the list.

- Life involves pain, trauma, and challenging experiences, and a brain doesn't always know how to deal with those experiences.
- You'll have less trouble handling pain, trauma, and challenging experiences if you teach your brain *how* to handle them.
- You will have less brain-repair work to do if you don't create or reinforce habits that you know you'll have to stop someday.

- Your impulses, actions, or feelings may not always make sense to the brain interpreting them.
- It's understandable to be triggered and dive into self-sabotage as a solution, but it's not training your brain to cope effectively.

Sometimes it's hard to take yourself out of the movie or give yourself advice you'd give a friend, and even if you did, the advice you'd give others can be difficult to follow. Sometimes trying to apply your own advice demonstrates just how hard it is to change. Brains do strange things in response, and reaction, to experience. Life isn't easy for anyone, despite how it may seem on the surface. Applying compassionate understanding of life's built-in limitations and your own humanness can change both the solutions available to you and the expectations you have of yourself.

## About Disorder

Disorders such as bipolar, OCD, and ADHD are pretty common these days; psychiatrists dole out labels that make a lasting statement about the ways your brain is damaged. When you're diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, it suggests that there's a basic level of mental functioning of which a person should be capable, and that you don't meet the standard due to the functioning of one or another of your mental systems. You aren't mentally healthy. Your brain is therefore broken, and while it might be medicated, it can't be fixed. You have to live with the diagnosis and adapt your expectations of life accordingly. The shrinks may not know *why* you're so messed up, but because you react to life in ways their books deem incorrect, they can confirm that you *are* messed up.

The expression of many disorders and mental illnesses might change if the disordered or ill mental systems were trained to function *more effectively*. A development issue may set the foundation for your most habitual responses, the limitations in your ability to process information, or your tendencies when pushed beyond your limits of stress tolerance. But whether or not your brain is physically limited, the *way you use your brain* makes a significant difference in how disorder is expressed.

Do you know anyone who received an instruction manual for his or her brain? Were you ever tutored in how to compensate for the ways in which your manner of thinking affects your ability to understand and relate to yourself and others? Did you ever learn *how* to think about the painful things that have happened in your life? You've probably spent some time learning how your computer works, but have you spent much time learning how your *brain* works? After spending years of your life without the skills to express yourself or relate to pain effectively, couldn't that in itself naturally *create* mental illness? Is this like the chicken and the egg? Does ineffectively using your mental capital create some expressions of mental illness, or does built-in mental illness determine the ways in which you use your mental capital? Likely, it's both, but it brings up one point I want you to remember: The system itself may not be the only problem. It may be the way you're using it.

As experts try to nail down the genetic, social, or environmental causes of mental illness and psychiatric disorder, they may be leaving out a key factor in the development of and treatment for disordered thinking: How you use your brain determines how it functions, and you can change how your brain functions based on how you use it. Manifestations of mental illness vary widely, not just based on the structural limitations of a brain, but on how that brain is used to process information. Brains don't come into the world knowing how to control interpretations of and reactions to the external and internal world. Brains have to learn self-awareness and self-control and how to maintain a cohesive identity while *being* a brain—an entity that's anything but cohesive. The degree to which a mental illness or disorder is expressed day to day isn't exactly hardwired; it's affected by the skills a brain has to apply to life.

One bipolar person can express greater or fewer symptoms based solely on how that person is using his brain. People react in various ways to the same types of stresses. What if some diagnoses didn't actually indicate that the basic functioning of the brain was different from someone without the disorder? The *way the brain is being used* could amplify the naturally competing qualities of thought, essentially *creating* disorder in a brain that's just as capable of stability as one without disordered thinking. In that light, two brains could be



equally functional, but one could express disorder simply based on the way the brain is used and the range of personal skills that are available to apply to life. Reactions to life would then be the *cause* of disorder, not the result of a physical impairment of the brain. But even if limitations were physical, they can be compensated for in some ways. (See the Resources chapter for *The Brain that Changes Itself*.)

Pharmaceutical salesmen might love it if you could be made to look at disorder simply as a fundamental flaw in your brain that will never be cured. That way, you'd be tempted to just take a pill and roll with a life that assumes you'll be forever chaotic without that pill. But if you look at clearing up chaotic thinking like cleaning a seriously disordered bedroom, a pill might make that work feel less traumatic, but it wouldn't be all you'd need. You'd need some cleaning supplies and elbow grease to put the room back in order.

You're going to need to clean up your thinking in order to stop self-injuring. If you doubt your ability to tidy up disordered thinking or change your habits, look into neuroplasticity. You can control your mind and diminish the effects of your pain just by changing the way your brain makes connections. There are lots of good sources of information on neuroplasticity and some very specific therapies that can change the way a brain does its business. Start with the Resources section (or search online) for undeniable proof that your very ownership of a brain makes you a highly adaptive person.

Organize your brain. Don't give yourself over to an idea that your brain is basically messed up and there's nothing you can do about it. The brain is extremely trainable. There's no medication that teaches you how to think, and there's no diagnosis that can't be bettered if you understand some basic instructions for using your brain. Even if your brain really is a little messed up structurally, you can still choose how to use it.

## Disorder

- Have you been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder? If so, did you receive instruction for adapting your thinking to minimize the disruptive aspects of the disorder?**
- Have you taken steps to learn to work with your disordered thinking?**
- Have you accepted that while medication might be necessary (even temporarily), training your brain is *essential*?**
- Do elements of your disordered thinking cause you shame or anxiety?**
- If you could snap your fingers and change anything about your thinking, what would you change?**
- Does your diagnosis guide the creation or expression of your identity?**
- Do you feel held back in life by your diagnosis? Does the "fact" that you're "disordered" stand in the way of your expressing your interests?**
- What would you do with your energy and time if you weren't being held up by disorganized thinking?**

As you notice ways in which you'd like to change your disordered thinking, keep an eye out for resources that can help you implement those changes. Often, when we start to identify what we need, we tend to find it.

You may be stuck with some painful memories and, until you change, some messed-up thinking. All your life is inside you, and your experiences are not going away. But the pain, the reactions, the mixed-up thoughts and interpretations can change. You can be released from the hold your self-injurious thoughts have on your life. Sidestepping self-injury begins with changing the way you look at what's happening in any given moment of challenge. And all the ways you can change your view of the world, your thoughts, and your behavior start with changing what your brain does in response to your pain.





CHAPTER SIX:

# What Is Pain?

## Pain Hurts

**W**e all have pain. We all suffer. From our internal perspectives, pain is pain, and we don't like it. We fight it. We try to change it, even if our success is limited because our worlds are dominated by people who distribute pain without thought, or worse, on purpose. But your pain is no less than mine. Mine is no more than yours. We each have our individual pain, and that pain is what we have to deal with.

Right now, there are people (and other animals) suffering in terrible ways. Billions of people are living their own individual journeys of pain and triumph, doing whatever they can to live with or try to ease their suffering. Each one of us has the ability to dive so fully into feeling our pain that it could wash away all of our happiness. We also have the ability to overcome our suffering or find ways to live a valued life despite our pain.

Become conscious of times when you compare your pain to others' as a means to minimize or question the validity of attending to your own suffering. Is your pain really less important or less valid than someone experiencing a different type of pain? Not to you, and it's not productive to qualify your pain by thinking, "I shouldn't feel so bad; my life is essentially good. There are so many more desperate tragedies in the world, why should I have so many problems facing life just because of some mental instability?" This is your life. This is your pain. This is your work. Help ease others' suffering if you can, but don't consider your suffering less important than theirs; you must also help yourself. No one truly wants to linger in a painful situation, and each of us is more effective in the world if our pain isn't blinding us to the many other aspects of reality.

## Uniquely Common Pain

Throughout the process of letting go of your self-injury habits, you're also working to gain mastery over your painful thoughts, so that your reactions to those thoughts don't lead to extreme emotions that fuel violence. As you work with your bound-up thoughts and years of emotional content, understand that your pain is full of messages and actually trying to tell you how to *minimize* your pain. To begin to interpret the messages clearly, it's important to learn to stay present when suffering so you can hear the wisdom in your pain.

We all feel unique because of our particular pains, but though our experiences can differ dramatically, we're really not all that different from one another in regard to our pain. We hurt. We want. We fail to meet our own and others' expectations, and we have wavering energy to stay present and act appropriately in trying situations. And, thanks to the Three Good Reasons for not relating honestly, we all think that hiding our pain may reduce the discomfort of vulnerability. We hide as best we can, not sharing our painful little secrets, while in that silent shelter, the secrets gang up on us and turn into powerful monsters.

If you're self-injuring, then you've demonstrated that you have a certain type of pain and a certain type of strength. You have pain so strong it overwhelms you, and you have the strength to suffer violence and emotional abuse in relative silence. Those things speak about your health, happiness, and the way you've aligned your actions and values. It's not that you *want* to suffer; it's just that, in some ways, it's easier to keep hiding and holding onto your silence or suffering, because it can be so difficult to understand and change your relationship with your thoughts, pain, past and future.

You've actually demonstrated that you are *stronger* than your pain, because you can essentially go on with life, pretending everything is fine. Your pain is a houseguest that you simply take care not to mention. But if you did mention the pain you're quelling with self-injury, you'd say something like, "I have this really brutal visitor—messy, smashing up the place, basically wrecking everything I've worked to have and become. I try to keep him/her locked in the attic, but sometimes she/he comes out and smashes up the house while I hide in the corner." The houseguest—who's been rattling around, shaking the rafters, enraged, shouting, venting the pain, growing and sulking inside the comfy little isolation chamber of the attic—comes barreling down the stairs while you shudder, consumed by echoing screams and sobs to be held, to be heard, to be seen. At some point, to stop self-injury, you need to vent the house and tip the balance of your relationship to pain in your favor. After all, a house feels more stable if you don't smash it up regularly. Maybe you could ask the houseguest to talk over tea instead of wrecking the place? You may be strong enough to live with the turmoil, using self-injury to keep things in check, but you don't *need* the turmoil. Your strength could be applied to *venting* what's real instead of hiding it and suffering the consequences.



## Holding and Hiding

- Do you hold your pain in or hide what's real for you? Why? Is it out of fear of being rejected, misunderstood, or seen clearly?**
- Have you considered that others would understand you better if they heard clear, accurate words for what's really happening for you? Do you feel intimidated by the thought of verbalizing what's happening for you? What stands in your way of communicating your experience clearly?**
- What are you trying to communicate through the messages conveyed by your wounds and emotional distance?**
- When the houseguest of pain is smashing up the place, what does it do? Does it yell? Berate you? Undermine you by destroying things you've worked for? What is the personality or character of this houseguest? What does it want you to do, say or be?**
- Is there any way you can relate to your pain and calm down so you can be in the same room together without violence or victimization?**

## Where Pain Comes From

Just when you think you've 'let go', put it aside or gotten control, pain—new or old—can descend out of the blue and take over your moment, your day, your ability to think clearly or relate to others. Self-injury as a response to painful thoughts can happen inside milliseconds. Unrelieved, the same old pains can pop up over and over again, and your solution could be forever the same: hurt the pain away. But understanding the pain and seeing it for what it is can relieve it to a degree where you can actually live *with* it.

The funny thing about pain is that it's so very subjective. Have you ever noticed that the same

painful content doesn't always cause the same degree of pain or cause you to respond in the same way? The pain resulting from your thoughts and your ability to handle that pain change, and the process of growing out of self-injury requires you to take advantage of that happy fact. Some pains are more predictable. You likely feel impacted by certain thoughts, situations or actions, and the resulting experience may trigger emotional pain, self-sabotage or self-injury. But I'll bet that your response to your most triggering triggers wavers in intensity. Sometimes you're just more *OK* than others. Some days a common pain may feel tolerable; some days that same pain might create self-harming urges.

Emotional pain that results in self-injury is often created by how your brain is connecting past and current events. Violence or self-sabotage can seem to be the most direct way to end that pain, to quell the torrential emotional impact of those mental connections. It's easy for your brain to assume that it understands what's happening inside and outside you in any given moment, or that your current judgments aren't faulty or based on habitual thinking. But brains aren't very good at seeing exactly what's happening in the moment or predicting what's truly possible in the future, especially when they're in pain. Let's be honest: The ways you interpret the nature of your pain, its causes, or its solutions aren't all that accurate once you're triggered and your emotions are flaring. Your interpretations of your pain and what you should do to ease it are based on a handful of factors that change moment to moment, so it's possible to be triggered differently by the same pain at different times.

## Sometimes It Hurts, Sometimes It Doesn't

- Have you noticed days when you're somehow beyond *feeling* the same old pain? Are there times when you're able to handle common triggers with a type of detachment that allows you to manage the pain without becoming subjugated by it?**
- What's your relationship to your pain? Is it your master? Do you trade control? In some situations, are you the master of the pain, and in other circumstances, is the pain in control? Why does the pain take you over some times but not others? What's different about you in situations where pain takes over and when you are less *moved* by the effects of pain?**
- Have you ever noticed that the instigators of your pain haven't necessarily changed, but your *relationship* to the pain has? What actions, thoughts or circumstances change that relationship? Can you consciously control your relationship to your pain, or do your reactions seem out of your control?**
- When self-injury urges come on, what can you do to remind yourself that it's time to consciously *change your relationship* to your pain?**



When pain comes on and your brain is making painful connections out of your thoughts and experiences, the only thing to do is *notice* you're in pain and work to change your relationship to it. Your *actions* change, no matter the content of the pain. *You* establish that *You're* not pain's plaything. Your experience becomes that of an explorer, bent on labeling pain and understanding its cries as a request for action; simply *observing* the pain and your reactions to it. Or, you act as a moderator who uses *compassion* to keep pains you don't feel up to observing from guiding your actions toward self-harm.

You're less likely to self-injure if you learn to hold your pain away from yourself, look at it, and react to it in very intentional ways. Your recurrent pains really aren't all that special. By observing your pain, you learn over time that it's just pain. That same old pain. Ol' reliable. Nothing is new. Nothing is extraordinary about having pain, but once you change your *relationship* to it, your urges to self-injure will change. And that will be extraordinary.

# The Pain of What You've Got and the Pain of What You Haven't Got

Pain isn't all that special because, at its root, it's so very *simple*. Odds are that your pain falls into two pretty broad categories: the pain of what you *have* but don't want (Pain of What's Present) and the pain of what you *want* but don't have (Pain of What's Absent). Depending on how you word it, the pain can really be in both categories at the same time. (For more work on this topic, see the Resources section for *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*. It's a great mind-tweaking book.)

Look over the examples below and consider that you either hurt because you want something you *don't have* or you hurt because you *don't want* something you have. The two views can be applied to almost any pain. If you start to think of your pain in these terms, you'll start to see pain for what it is: a longing for things to be different than they are. Once you've identified what you want to be different, you can start acting to change what you can and learn to live more skillfully with what you can't change.

FIGURE 4:  
**Pain of What's Present**

Pain	Looking at the Pain
I was sexually assaulted and it messed with my mind and body; I don't like what it has left behind for me to deal with.	What specific feelings, habits, or thoughts have been left behind? Which parts of "it" can you work to change or minimize, and which may be here to stay? If parts of "it" are here to stay, how can you support yourself to limit the day-to-day trouble created by your pain?
I am schizophrenic, bipolar, or otherwise "diagnosed" and have a hard time living with the label and the future it predicts for me.	What does the label mean? What's the hardest part about living with it? List how the diagnosis and the condition affect your life, and consider what can be done to minimize the damage caused by those pains. How does your handling of the pain amplify the pain?

FIGURE 5:  
**Pain of What's Absent**

Pain	Looking at the Pain
I don't feel ownership of my body or mind and feel incapable of living a self-directed life.	What would it take to make you feel capable? To feel self-directed? What could you do to feel a greater degree of self-direction? What compassionate actions would demonstrate self-ownership and self-direction? What's keeping you from taking those actions?
I may never have freedom from my "diagnosis," and I may never be normal; my life feels hopeless.	What is freedom? What freedoms do you lack? In what ways can you increase your feeling of freedom? What's normal? In what ways do you see yourself as normal, and in what ways abnormal? What skills could you learn that would make you feel more normal?

The idea is to actually name your pains, to see where they come from and identify what, if anything, you can do about them. You don't just listen to the voices of pain and ride the resulting emotional rollercoaster—you ask what the pain is, what it wants, and what you can do about it. Some aspects of your pain can disappear entirely if the source issues are addressed; but learning how to live with what's here to stay (even if it's just here to stay for now) is crucial to stopping self-injury.

# What We Need

There are some things people need. We just do. There's no way to live as a truly happy person on this planet if these needs are unmet. You may need to start finding ways to inject these qualities into your experience as a support for what your life has become while self-injuring. Changing your relationship to your pain requires you to do a number of things, but one of them is to purposely create supports in your life, so you can generate and come back to real feelings *other than pain*. One way to do that is by acknowledging your needs and finding ways to meet them.

## Needs

- **Peace:** Beauty, harmony, inspiration, order, presence, awareness, ease.
- **Belonging:** Love, acceptance, appreciation, community, consideration, interdependence, understanding, support, respect.
- **Contact:** Closeness, connection, trust, support, being known and seen.
- **Joy:** Play, fun, laughter, pleasure, celebration.
- **Safety:** Emotional and physical safety, protection.
- **Creativity:** Passion, expression, choosing dreams, meaning, purpose, knowing and seeing.
- **Physical:** Shelter, food, water, clothing, restoration.

## What You Need

- Pick at least three of the items above (or add your own) that you know you need more of. Then consider, and list in your journal, ways you can meet those needs. This exercise alone won't stop your use of self-harm, but recognizing what you need and if you're getting it and putting things you need in your life that *aren't painful* help set the foundation for letting go of self-injury. For example, if you're in the grip of self-injury urges, finding a connection to expression, emotional safety, and beauty may take away the power of internal voices which say you need self-injury to feel better. Odds are you really need compassion, patience, and support, not violence.**



## Desire Exposes Need

Take a minute to sit in silence and ask yourself, "What are my desires? What do I want to do, be, or have that I am not doing, being, or having?" Write your thoughts down in your journal.

Consider how your desires can be translated from a fantasy "I want" into an expression of your current needs: "I want . . . therefore I must need . . ."

Consider how you can meet the needs expressed by your desires, even if the desire itself isn't attainable. How can you put some of what you *need* back into your life while you're working to fulfil your desires?

Here's an example:

A desire for fame may be related to needs for being seen and feeling free to express your creativity. The need to feel seen and free to express creatively can be met in ways other than fame.

A desire to have a lasting impact on the world may be related to a need to share your special talents with others and to feel self-directed. A need to share your skills with others or to feel self-directed can be met without changing the way the world works.

A desire for perfection may be a need for positive self-image and skill growth. The need for positive self-image and skill building can be met without having to attain perfection.



When you feel likely to be triggered, looking at your needs other than pain management can broaden your view and remind your brain that there's so much more that you have, that you want, that you need, and that you can do to minimize your pain besides using self-injury. Meeting your needs may delay or replace the need to self-injure, or it may not, but you need at least some stable, connective qualities in your life. It's likely you know intimately which of your needs are going unmet; and it's in your power to meet those needs.

Find ways to give yourself more of what nourishes you and less of what erodes you. Continually remind yourself to find beauty or to find support (or anything else on your list of needs) *before* self-injury becomes the only way to quell the feelings that result from unmet needs.

## Common Pains of Life

You're not alone if these things contribute to your pain:

- What you are
- What you're not
- What you may never be
- What you've done
- What you haven't done
- What you may never do
- What others have done to you
- What you have done with what others have done to you
- How well or poorly you've been loved
- How well or poorly you've loved others
- Doubts about if you can create the love, the life you want
- How to be *still* in the aching heart of a world constantly torn between suffering and joy
- How to convey and work with thoughts you have that you don't understand or can't seem to communicate effectively
- Doubts about if you can express your needs at all
- Your memories of pain, shame, regret
- Knowing what you have to work with, but still not taking full advantage of available opportunities for change
- The inherent weakness and limitations of being human



### Your Pain

Time to take a closer look at your pain. Remember the Ground Rules. This is an exploration, not an invitation to suffer.

Write five short sentences that describe your most pressing pains. Try to avoid blaming words, being a victim, or ruminating, just evaluate where the pain comes from (what's absent or what's present). Identify if there's a mix of the two types of pain involved, and write about action steps that you may be able to take to ease your pain. Accept that you can't just get *rid* of all the pain. Even so, label it, dissect it, and determine which of your needs are not being met. Listen mindfully to the truth in your pain. Seeing the pain for what it is will guide you in meeting your needs.



### Life without Pain?

Imagine yourself with a life that fits *You* perfectly—the healthiest you, not the lustful, wanting, raging, angry parts. A life that fits the person *You* want to be.

- What pains would be absent in this life?**
- What pains would be present, but simply more tolerable?**
- Would pain be totally absent?**
- Do you want a life *without* pain, or do you want the ability to *cope effectively* with the pain your life includes?**



# When You're in Pain and When You're Not

Using the information you've generated about your pain, consider:

- When you're in pain, what do you want most for yourself?**
- When you're clear, what do you want most?**
- Are the wants fundamentally the same, or are they different depending on your degree of mental clarity?**

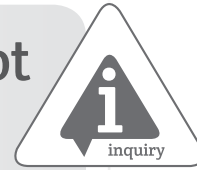


FIGURE 6:

## What You Want

*What I Want When I'm...*

<i>In Pain</i>	<i>Free from Pain</i>
<i>To feel hopeful</i>	<i>To be truthful</i>
<i>To be patient</i>	<i>To be patient with my path</i>
<i>To be mindful</i>	<i>To be forgiving</i>
<i>To remember who I am</i>	<i>To be playful</i>
<i>To continually define my character through loving action, not violence</i>	<i>To be responsible</i>
<i>To be aware of my ability to direct my growth</i>	<i>To feel engaged</i>

To change your relationship to pain, you can alter your perspective (movie theater view, friend view), determine what's present or absent, identify your unmet needs and place supports in your life that remind you that life isn't *only* pain. When pain hurts, ask the pain what it needs from you to resolve it so it doesn't hurt so much. It's time to find ways to manage your pain without self-injury or creating *more* pain for your body and mind to deal with. Be compassionate with yourself when you're hurting, and you'll start to take power away from your pain.

# Section One Wrap-Up

If self-injury has become your most common coping strategy, you're not alone. You are, however, at the mercy of your brain's view of life, and that's a very different power dynamic than if *You* were in control. *You* can change the way your thoughts move and the impact they have on your emotions and actions. Start by planting positive and true thoughts in your mind and avoid situations that trigger you. In moments of calm and stress, try to identify and relate to a compassionate voice inside your mind—one that intends to nourish, not destroy, you. With time and daily effort, you will learn to hear and act on the advice of internal voice that truly knows what you need. You'll enjoy an internal sense of stability that exists *despite* the painful experiences that are inherent in life.

It's possible that no one will ever understand what you've gone through—or what you'll have to go through to overcome self-injury. Cradled inside a self-harming habit is a type of loneliness that may never fully abate, even if you relate to others who use the same damaging coping strategies. Do the work anyway. Do it alone, if you have to. Do it while no one knows what you're going through, and while no one asks how it's going. Or step up and make use of the help you have, if you're ready to include trusted others in your journey out of self-injury. This is your process, and in order for you to truly own it, you need to take responsibility for using every tool you can identify to give yourself generous self-care.

I don't doubt that you've done all you can to cope, survive, cover up, change, let go, or "get over it." I don't doubt that you've had the darkest of dark moments, or that you've had at least a few memorable experiences of inner stillness and strength despite trying circumstances. I have no doubt that you can come out the other side of your intense darkness more illuminated, more aware of what you really need to thrive, more educated about how to support yourself, and more willing to rise to that ever-changing challenge. I don't doubt for a second that you can create a life that fits *You* so perfectly it's as if there never was a time when you struggled daily to hold all your pieces together. Even so, these changes will take time. Learn to make friends with your brain, your pain, and your experiences so that every beautiful, ugly, complicated facet of your being can enjoy an ever-increasing experience of self-generated compassion and joy.

Remember that if you want to be balanced and deeply happy, you have to work for it. Happiness is not a chalice you fill once and cover, never to be diminished or spilled. You have to drink it down, wash your pain in it, and find new ways to refill it. Living with the intention of supporting yourself while deconstructing the barriers you've put up and finding tools to work constructively with your pain will keep your cup o' joy from draining too quickly or coming up empty when you need a drink.

Continue to let go of what you can, work with what you have access to in this moment, and move toward the life you want for yourself. Try to forgive yourself and others for the pains of the past, and for being where you are now. Start again each time you go off course and find your brain suggesting the same old habits that *You* know erode your deeper stability. Continue to define who *You* are and who *You* want to be, and work to be that version of yourself simply because that's what *You* want. Remember that your pain is not *You*, and that there's a deeper perspective that can help you change how your mind relates to your pain. Continue to try to find a way to live your (sometimes disappointing) life in a way that allows the most freedom possible from the influence of the pains of the past. Try to live without thinking you need to *cure* yourself of your inherent human weakness, because you have strengths to build on that more than compensate for your limitations. And know that, with directed effort, you have the ability to change.

You're changing right now.

# *Visualizing Your Inner Characters*



CHAPTER SEVEN:

# Introduction to Visualizations

**Y**ou can assign a face, voice, or name to aspects of your mind which are trying to be heard through self-inflicted violence, and that interaction doesn't have to overwhelm you. As you begin to see how your many mental aspects interact, you'll also learn to identify the voices of your mind that *are* anger, *are* pain. Seeing these parts of you for what they are and calling up other, supportive aspects of yourself will help you change your self-harming actions. Changing your interactions with your thoughts will take some skills in changing your perspective, especially when your mind is convincing you to use self-harming tactics. Visualization is a great way to change your perspective.

Visualization is a word loaded with New Age connotations, but we're going to simplify it into one basic idea: You can consciously control the way you relate to the activity of your thoughts and emotions, even if it's on the movie theater screen of your imagination. To a large degree, life happens in your mind, and you can change what's in your mind, and in your life, through your ability to *imagine*. In our context, creating visualizations helps give *form* to something that's essentially *formless*; making it easier to wrap your mind around complex internal activity. Visualization also helps your brain tell its story and work with its current state of dysfunction in a metaphorical—and surprisingly effective—way.

You already know that you've been the victim of your own thoughts, driven to extreme actions to soothe the resulting emotions of those thoughts. But have you extended that knowledge and realized just how powerful your own thoughts (i.e. *visualizations*) can be? What your brain thinks, even if it's not factually accurate, governs what you believe and how you behave. Because your brain is so convincing, many of the ideas around 'what you are' and 'what your pain is' may seem concrete. It may take a little time using the specifically-directed thinking of visualization to adapt your ideas and change your brain's perspective on what's real. This section of the book is an invitation to play with your ideas and inner cast of characters in a way that will allow you to lessen your own suffering. Generating and working inside these visualizations will help you change your view, giving you another strategy to use when attending to difficult or confusing internal experiences.

Before we proceed, let's go over a little warning. Since your brain sometimes dominates your actions by soothing itself with self-injury, it's very important that you learn to mentally go wherever you need to go to feel self-contained and safe when you feel triggered. Don't give your brain a chance to go down the same old road that leads to self-injury. If certain metaphors for your thoughts trigger you and make it more difficult to maintain a cohesive sense of self, or if the idea of "splitting yourself up" into different pieces to look at what's going on inside you creates more mental chaos, for Pete's sake (and yours), don't do it. See the aspects of yourself however you need to in order to feel the stillness and truth of your depths, not to make more demons to fight. The point with all of the metaphors in this section is to gain a new view of how different parts of your being interact to create your pain or pleasure. When you learn to interact with yourself differently, you'll also learn to control your self-injury episodes.


Alrighty. Assuming you're following all the Ground Rules and taking good care of yourself while we mess with your brain, let's get to it.

# Playing with Your Ideas

If you were to search online or go to any bookstore, you'd find a zillion suggestions for how to look at and change what's happening inside you. In this book, every one of the methods relies on one underlying idea: You are a seriously complex, variable, and experienced individual. There is no *one* way to look at you, no *one* person you are all the time, so we can't distill you down to one metaphor. You're gloriously, maddeningly complicated. And, so is self-injury.

Since self-injury comes on from a variety of painful internal experiences, it's helpful to have access to a variety of metaphors for what you're thinking and feeling so you can work effectively with the complex ideas and thoughts you're processing. Using visualization can change the way your brain relates thoughts, take the sting out of difficult emotions, and give you the mental space to make choices that won't lead you toward self-injury.

Following are a few examples of how a simple series of thoughts can affect your brain and body, as well as a suggestion for how to get yourself ready to work with the ideas. These simple visualizations can give you a sense of how powerful your thoughts are and how easily they can be controlled.

*Reading* these ideas will feel different than *listening* to them, so please note that in this section and throughout the book, activities denoted with  are available online as audio files at [www.stopsselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopsselfinjuring.com).



*Get Ready: Sit in a comfortable position and allow the sitting bones to release into the support of your seat. Let the spine lengthen and drop the chin slightly as the crown of the head floats toward the ceiling. Feel the length of your spine, base to crown. Open and release the shoulders to broaden the collarbones, and allow the hands to rest gently in the lap. Let the eyes rest in the sockets and gaze from the back of the eye as you soften the face and jaw. Allow your breath to be easy and flow freely, and maintain an easy, relaxed posture as you read (or listen to) the visualizations below.*

## A Summer Day

*You're standing in the center of a bright, airy kitchen. It's a sunny summer day, the perfect temperature. You love days like this. Sunlight and a soft breeze spill into the room from an open window. You decide to make lemonade. You notice that everything you need is already on the counter next to the sink: a bowl stacked with fresh lemons, a clean cutting board, a sharp knife, an empty pitcher, a long-handled spoon, and a package of your favorite sweetener. You walk over to the counter, select a lemon, and place it on the cutting board. You take the knife in one hand and the lemon in the other; you can hear the lemon rind separate as you slice the lemon in half. The smell of citrus reaches your nose, and you examine the small pool of juice on the cutting board. Feeling the lightly textured rind under your fingertips, you cut a wedge off one of the lemon halves. You bring the lemon slice closer, inhaling the sweet, floral essence while the summer breeze plays on your skin. You open your mouth and take a bite.*

Did you feel any of that? Did your mind allow you to be in the kitchen? Did your mouth water at the thought of biting into the lemon?

This example, though funny and a bit disturbing to the taste buds, demonstrates the power of your thoughts. If told right, this little visualization can make many a mouth pucker and drool. Even if you've never bitten into a lemon, just smelling a lemon tells your brain what it would taste like, and just thinking about it produces a bodily reaction similar to actually biting into it.

Think for a minute about how this relates to your thoughts—and the ways you visualize your future, your pain, and your story. Your brain believes what you tell it (or what it tells itself). If you visualize a negative story about yourself and your life, your brain sees that visualization as truth. Life *becomes* pain and negativity (stomach aches and stress). But if you visualize your progress, your goals, or your strengths, you give your

brain and body a different reality to identify with. It's all in your brain, remember? Choose carefully which ideas to hold close and which ideas to reject. If you let your brain play with mental images, you might as well make them positive—or at least not overwhelmingly painful.

## Water in the Well



*Maintaining an easy sitting posture, imagine now that you're standing at the site of a water well. This well is deep inside you, a metaphor for the source of internal clarity and replenishment you have access to when your soul gets "thirsty." You know just by looking at the well that the water within is made up of all the experiences you've ever had, all the thoughts you've ever thought, and all the feelings you've ever felt. The well is what you have to fall back on when you need to tap into what you believe can be, or is, true.*

*Notice the landscape around the well. Where is the well? What does the surrounding environment look like? What does the sky look like? How does the air around you feel? Is the sun shining? Is the well clear of foliage, or is it overgrown? The location, appearance, and contents of the well are all determined by your reactions to your life's experiences so far.*

*As you stand next to your well, gaze over the edge of the well at the water. What does the surface of the water look like? Can you tell how deep the well goes? If you call "echo," do you get an echoed response?*

*Take a penny from your pocket and drop it into the well, watching as it falls through the air toward the water's surface. As it breaks the surface of the water, you can see the water's consistency. How does the water in your well respond to the penny? Does the water hold the penny on the surface and slowly allow it to drop into thick and goopy depths? Does the penny quickly drop into clear water with a "plunk"? Notice the consistency of the water in your well. This is the well of your experience.*

*Imagine now that beside you is a bucket filled with the painful thoughts you currently hold, based on extreme self-loathing or recurrently negative thinking habits. What color is the substance in the bucket? What's the consistency of the substance? Pick up the bucket and pour it into the well. Notice how the painful thoughts affect the overall consistency of the water in the well.*

*Now imagine there's another bucket by your feet, this one filled with thoughts and feelings you'd have experienced if you were really, truly content. What's the consistency of the matter inside the bucket? (If your bucket's empty, think back to a time when you were aware of just how peaceful you were—how excited, happy, or joyful you were about something you were doing or someone you loved—then put those thoughts into the bucket.)*

*Pick up the bucket and pour the nurturing thoughts into the well, noticing that the pure nature of those thoughts can dilute some of the contamination left by painful thoughts. Become aware that by generating enough joyful thoughts and experiences, you can eventually change the nature of the contents of the well. The more you pour your visions of hope and of joy into the well, the clearer the water and the more refreshing the drink when you need to access your beliefs.*

*Consider for a moment: what toxic thoughts, fears, feelings, or beliefs do you most commonly add to your well? What positive thoughts do you routinely add to the well? What positive thoughts would need to be added to the well to clean up some of the darker, more toxic thoughts?*

*Stand at your well for a while and intentionally pour memories, thoughts, or feelings into it, or consider the thoughts or feelings that are already there. It's your well, so you can fill it or siphon it out as you like. Whether the water in the well is dark, clear, or somewhere in between, this is the reservoir you drink from when you need to cultivate inner strength and believe in the possibilities of your future. Your job is not only to see what your well contains but to realize that you have the power to change the quality of the water with the experiences, thoughts, and feelings you add to it.*



*Notice that you've been drinking from this well when you need inspiration or rejuvenation. You've drunk in the thoughts of the well every time you've asked, "What should I feel?" or "What should I think?" or "What should I do?" Drinking from a well tainted by dark thoughts never will feel as refreshing as drinking from a well that's been cleaned with hopeful, self-loving thoughts. How has it felt to drink from this well when you're thirsty?*

*Create a mental space here that you can keep coming back to. Since you may need to get iodine, bleach, or some scrubbing tools to clean your well, you need to be able to come back here to tend it. When you're ready, slowly turn and walk away from the well, back into the room you're sitting in.*

One way to restore balance to the well inside you is to purposely create more positive experiences and think more positive thoughts than negative ones. Purposely remember good times and good feelings, and remember that you are capable of feeling great joy, just as you are capable of feeling great pain. You are responsible for controlling the outlook you approach life with. See the positive in life by focusing on the joyful, serene, or beautiful opportunities of the moment. It isn't pretending to decide to see the good of the moment, or to purposely conjure up positive feelings. It's consciously choosing what you look at when chronic pain could trick you into believing that life is only pain.

## Tipping the Balance

If you're going to stop self-injuring, your efforts need to include purposefully tipping the balance of your thoughts and your pain by changing the overall chemistry of your mental waters.

Visualization helps you do just that by using metaphors or personification to relate to difficult inner content in a focused way. You can use simple visualizations that turn off mental action, like imagining yourself in a dark, quiet room or in your favorite place. You can also use more complex visualizations, where you relate to your competing thoughts or your pain as distinct voices inside your mind. Visualization can help you undo negative associations with your internal content as you demystify your thoughts and experiences by looking at them in new ways. Much of the negative content in your mind can be rewritten by constructively working with your pain and longing. As you willfully tap into and create a supportive dialogue with aspects of yourself, you'll train your brain to go somewhere better than it has been going when it's overwhelmed.

After you've worked with visualization for a while, you'll notice that it becomes more natural to create calming, supportive thoughts and that life becomes easier overall. Life tends to mirror what you think. You know this from experience. If you're suffering and just barely getting through life, this reality is mirrored in your experiences and your mucky energetic exchanges with the world: everything is harder and uglier. If you visualize your life without self-injury or visualize being heard, held, or valued, your life may not mirror that visualization right away, but it will be a lot easier to live through than if you're doggie-paddling in a well of dark thoughts.

It's likely that your life will grow to mirror aspects of your positive visualizations; your energetic exchange with the world will be more focused on positive experiences and possibilities than ruminations on pain and lack. Even if the thoughts you're implanting are total fabrications designed simply to convince yourself not to self-injure (like relating to yourself as an overstimulated four-year-old), it's better for your brain, your heart, and your spirit to visualize ease, support, and what you want than to ruminate on what you don't have and what hurts.

This, of course, is not an invitation to stay in a situation that undermines your well-being and simply visualize yourself out of it, or to randomly implant dreamy, unrealistic thoughts. The application of any visualization is to purposely step into your own head and create a stronger association with the positive aspects of your life, your imagination, and what you really want out of living.



# What's Here

The chapters in this section contain a handful of metaphors for your thoughts and emotions, each with different applications. The visualization ideas presented here are open invitations for the parts of you that need attention to find a voice, so they can tell you what you need to do to get away from self-injury. You'll have better results with these visualizations if you get acquainted with them during your clear times. That way, when you're in crisis, the visualizations will come to you more naturally, acting as alternative views that can help you make sense of or simply stop the chaos in your brain.

- **The Incredible Hulk in You:** Use this to remind yourself that your urges to self-injure are caused by external triggers acting on your internal chemistry (and the fact that you created a habit in the first place). When you're about to go into self-injury mode, or after an episode when you're able to look back and evaluate what happened, try this visualization on for size.
- **Kids on the Bus** 🎧: Use this when you need to slow down, deconstruct, and relate to chaotic thoughts. This concept is related to an exercise from *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* (see Resources) but has been modified to suit strategies specific to self-injury. When you're feeling pulled in different directions by your thoughts, you need to get the unruly passengers on your Bus on your side.
- **Inner Child** 🎧: Use this when you have the capacity to be gentle with yourself. You'll access your most vulnerable aspects to understand and reclaim the "lost" parts of you. Getting to know your Inner Child and gaining its trust can be quite cathartic. Accessing your Inner Child during crisis will help you make decisions that honor your deepest needs. Just be sure to go gently with this one.

Play with these visualizations and metaphors for what's happening inside you. Make them your own. Change the wording of ideas and twist them around in the service of making yourself stronger, calmer, and more empowered. Go to [www.stopsselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopsselfinjuring.com) and listen to the audio recordings on headphones while you nap. All of these visualizations are intended to support your growth and enable compassionate self-identification—not to help you find creative new ways to punish your flaws or weaknesses. They are meant to give you, as the viewer, a different view of yourself, your pain, and the way you tend to think (or how you need to *start* thinking) during clear or crisis times.

If any thoughts generated by your visualizations start you down the road to self-injury, it's time to remember your Ground Rules and do whatever is necessary to avoid that trip. Put aside the things that trigger you until you're in a more stable place. Then, come back to the work of changing your brain. Little by little, day by day, it will get easier to visualize (and live) a life that *feels better* without self-inflicted pain.



CHAPTER EIGHT:

# The Incredible Hulk in You

*“Within each of us, oft times, there dwells  
a mighty and raging fury.”*

—THE INCREDIBLE HULK PILOT EPISODE

**L**et’s take some time to appreciate 1980s television, shall we? At the center of our inquiry is the fictional but strangely relevant story of David Banner (“Bruce” in other iterations) and his big, green, very-hard-to-hide rage-monster, the Incredible Hulk. We’re going to have a look at the pilot episode and the series in general, which tells the story of how David Banner became the Hulk and the journey he took to undo what he had done to himself. You may be surprised how many parallels there are with your self-injury rage-monster.

## David’s Pain

David Banner, a mild-mannered scientist, was a happily married man until a car crash trapped his wife in an overturned car after ejecting him through his open window. Despite David’s attempts to strong-arm the stuck car door and free his wife, he wasn’t able to save her. He watched, helpless, as the car burst into flames and she was killed. David had a powerfully painful experience, to say the least, and he carried complex emotions about the experience.

Through his work as a researcher, David knew of people who had summoned super-human strength in extreme circumstances to save the life of someone they loved. David wanted to understand why those people had mastered terrific feats but he’d been unable to find the strength to free his wife in her time of need. David was so impacted by recurring dreams and haunting feelings of weakness that he was relentlessly focused in his search for the genetic link to that tremendous strength, striving to cure the weakness inside him that he blamed for the loss of his wife.

David’s pain permeated every corner of his life. He couldn’t find a way to move on or allow the trauma to exist within him without debilitating him. He spent his time diving into his pain and longing for things to be different, his anger and regret simmering in his research into a cure for human weakness. He was so affected by his wife’s death and his own failure that he didn’t even notice that his cute lab partner was growing to love him. She was willing to support him, despite how tortured he was, but he was so blinded and isolated by his pain that he just didn’t see it.

As he became obsessive about trying to cure his weakness, loss, and regret, David was also blind to the danger of the tools he was using to find resolution. One late night, after a significant discovery, David attempted to call Cute Lab Partner and get her assistance for a test. It had to be done immediately; he was sure he’d found

what he'd been looking for. Cute Lab Partner didn't answer, and David was antsy. Throwing caution to the wind, David took the only step that he could at that moment to feel as if he was moving forward: He zapped himself with a go-gillion kilowatts of gamma radiation, unknowingly creating a monster deep within his cells.

## A Bigger Problem

Poor David. Through it took a Hulking episode to realize it had happened, his attempts to fix his frailty *created* the Hulk. Instead of easing his pain, he created an additional problem—one that would be even harder to solve. Once the Hulk took up residence within his cells, David would forever be doomed to turn into a big-green-*rage-monster* when he lost control of his emotions—smashing useful things and frightening the people around him. David was doomed to spend his life (and a long TV run) seeking cures for both his original emotional trauma (the loss of the wife and his inability to change it) and the physical changes to his body made by his desperation to cure his weakness (that whole Hulking-out thing). Now he had to live with the pain of each physical transformation into the Hulk, and with the pain of knowing that, until he found a cure, he would harbor the Hulk's destructive power.

During his Hulking episodes, David would struggle to retain his true persona. No matter how hard he tried to contain himself, when he was triggered, David transformed, painfully, into Lou Ferrigno . . . I mean, the Hulk. David was lost inside the fury, unable to control the Hulk's actions (unless it was convenient, since this is TV). And, because his big-green-*rage-monster* is even more easily triggered than David Banner was in his non-Hulking form, others don't want to come closer when he's Hulking to ask how he's feeling or what he needs. They don't ask the Hulk if he needs a hug. They shoot. Or they run.

The Hulk controlled David's mind and body until a seemingly random combination of circumstances allowed the Hulk to calm down enough for David to come back. And poor, exhausted David walked off into the sunset—having found fresh pants—fated to continue his parallel quests of stopping the Hulk from emerging day to day and finding a permanent cure, so that he could retain his true persona even when he was triggered. For David to truly succeed, he'd have to control his temper when he sensed that the big-green-*rage-monster* could come on, limiting the number of Hulking events he went through—and he'd have to deal with the deeper emotional trauma that started the whole series of events that turned him into the Hulk.

To tame the Hulk of self-injury, you have to do the same things David Banner had to do—work with the original trauma that created the Hulk, and try to find ways to put the Hulk away until you can experience your feelings without losing control.

## The Hulking Cycle

One thing David learned during the series was that he'd have to be really careful to keep potentially frustrating situations from escalating. The first time David's emotional tension escalated to the point where he turned into the Hulk, it went something like the sequence below. Every other Hulking episode would follow the same basic course. See if you can identify with his "Hulking Cycle."

### *Haunted by Pain and Hunting for a Cure*

David is in his lab doing his usual: agonizing over the answer to his lousy human weakness. Suddenly, a discovery! He feels hopeful that he's found the answer he's been losing sleep over. In order to test his hypothesis, David will have to zap himself with those go-gillion-kilowatts of gamma radiation to cure his inherent weakness. He's thinking the amount of radiation isn't going to give him tumors or anything; it's just enough to make his cells *stronger*. (Remember, this is 1980s American TV loosely based on a comic book.) Since David is antsy and can't reach Cute Lab Partner on the phone, he doesn't wait until morning to perform a controlled test. He goes ahead and zaps himself, fully saturated in the belief that this time—

*this* time—he's found the cure to his pain. This is going to be the thing that makes it all feel better. Why should he wait or consider his actions when a cure for his weakness is at hand? No matter the tool, if it was going to break the connection to his pain, he'd use it.

## *The Striking of the Match*

David's risky radiation experiment doesn't seem to work. He becomes frustrated. What happened? He had it—the science was right there! All he wanted was to make himself so strong he could pull doors off cars, but the radiation didn't seem to do a thing to him. He becomes seriously annoyed at his lack of success, so he decides to crank up the knob on the Radiation-Dispense-O-Meter (whose output is professionally denoted in marker on a strip of masking tape). He zaps himself again, thinking that if once didn't do it, maybe another round would. Again, the blast seems to have no effect. David will later learn that some silly fool in the lab has mislabeled the radiation output levels that were taped onto the Radiation-Dispense-O-Meter! David has dramatically underestimated the amount of radiation he's taken in. Concerned, but still pressing for the cure he thought was at hand, his frustration increases. He's not really seeing clearly, so he doesn't realize that the intense frustration after his perceived failure could be a warning that he's likely to make stupid decisions. He presses on, possessed.

## *Gettin' Hot in Here*

David's frustration at the seemingly failed experiment transforms into an amplified version of his habitual rumination on the painful thoughts and feelings that first drove him to the experiment. He relives his past trauma, remembering his weakness, his failure, his pain, his loss. Tonight's failure just amplifies all the other pains. Packing it up for the night, David is fuming, but he can't possibly know how much worse it's going to get. His internal signals are telling him it's time to take care of himself, but he's still not responding effectively to those signals. He's motivated by emotional urgency, not by clear thinking.

## *Adding Fuel to the Fire*

David is not about to stop to take a deep breath and care for himself before pressing on. Already hot from his failed experiment, he makes everything harder on himself simply because of the way he's coming to it. He keeps acting from the perspective of his anger and, as tends to happen in real life, things just get worse. David becomes increasingly infuriated while putting himself through a succession of annoyance-guaranteed events—relatively small things that, if he were clearheaded, wouldn't ordinarily cause a serious reaction. They only become fuel for his fire because he's already carrying a heavy emotional load.

- He leaves work feeling immense failure. ("Stupid experiment!")
- He goes outside and it's pouring rain. ("Stupid rain!")
- His car just barely starts. ("Stupid car!")
- He runs over something on the road that flattens his tire. ("Stupid road hazard!")
- He's in the rain changing the tire. ("Stupid tire!")
- His hands repeatedly slip off the tire iron, smashing into the pavement. ("Stupid tire iron!")
- His hands bleed and hurt. ("Stupid hands!")

One annoyance after another is added to the emotional load he's already barely able to manage. And since this is television, they weren't about to show David Banner stopping to take a breather, think things through, or come back to his senses; he needed to keep pushing like this so we could see him Hulk out.

## *About to Explode*

David can feel himself transitioning from intense anger to the point of losing it completely. His mind

is spinning out of control and the rage-monster starts to come on: his eyes change, his thinking mind recedes. Despite efforts to control his rage, David can't help himself now. He's crossing over a point of no return. His painful moment of being overwhelmed is about to claim him—he's losing connection with his real self and any other parts of him that would allow for rational decision making. If David has a chance to change the course of action, now is the very last available moment.

### *Hulking Out!*

The Hulk has overtaken David, sending him to wherever the sane parts of us go when the chaos takes over and we can no longer think clearly or act skillfully. David all but disappears, and in his place is left a big-green-*rage-monster*, roaring like an angry animal, smashing perfectly useful things. We viewers have compassion for the Hulk, because we can see that he's not simply a monster—he's a manifestation of the pain inside David. Though we may have been nice to the Hulk, seeing him for what he is, the people in TV Land prove dangerous for the Hulk, because they're afraid of the rage and don't know how to relate to the Hulk. They usually start screaming or shooting, which only fuels the Hulk's urge to smash things and escape.

### *Expending the Energy*

Though he's angry, running, and confused, Hulk is nice enough to use his Hulk-strength to save a little girl, even as she's screaming wildly and her father is shooting at him. Despite his HULKING, the mind inside the Hulk is still capable of being directed by nonviolent aims. He's not *only* a monster. During the run of the TV series, the Hulk usually ends up using his amazing strength to save an ungrateful child or building or city. And after his good deed gets done, after he expels the energy inherent in HULKING, an inexplicable combination of events allows the Hulk to recede and David to come back to himself. When David comes back, he's naked, confused, and barefoot, and he doesn't know how he got where he is. He always needs to take care of himself after he comes down, to tend to injuries that he didn't really feel when he was HULKING out. And he always has to find new pants.

### *Hazy Recollection*

After David comes back, he has a hard time remembering what happened when his brain and body went all fritz and he HULKED out. At first, he doesn't connect with the fact that he *did* Hulk out, or that the Hulk is even inside him. It all feels far away from him, but he feels the lingering of "something" inside. After he comes down from his first HULKING experience, David goes to the lab and talks with Cute Lab Partner. They have a decent conversation that supports him in digging into what he experienced, and he's able to recollect what initially triggered him, what he did while he was HULKING out, and what allowed him to come back to his senses.

## The HULKING Cycle Mirrors the Self-Injury Cycle

Your life is definitely not made for TV. But your self-injury cycle likely mirrors David Banner's HULKING Cycle.

### *Haunted by Pain and Hunting for a Cure*

We might think David would have been better off if he'd found a way to live a life he loved even though his wife died. Even though it hurt terribly sometimes and took a lot of work to redirect his thoughts when the pain came up. Even while remembering how it had happened and enduring the repeated pain of the memories. It may have been worth the effort to keep the painful experience from destroying his chance at future happiness rather than wallowing in the pain of the past. What's the correlation to your self-injury? The pain of life is real, but when you're *ruminating* on that pain, you're *guaranteeing* your own suffering. Making efforts to distract yourself or work with your thoughts may be difficult, but will ultimately allow for better decision making than wallowing in what ails you.

## *The Striking of the Match*

It would be easy to notice that David was acting obsessively, possessed by his pursuit of understanding, thinking, figuring things out, and getting to his stress-inducing goal. It's harder to see what's happening when you're the one becoming motivated by a sense of self-imposed urgency. But that is the precise time to stop and relax your mind as much as possible. *That's* the time to try to stop acting obsessively, driven by emotional urgency that can start calling up material that triggers you. You're far more likely to move toward self-harm if you don't notice and stop your own emotional escalation.

## *Gettin' Hot in Here*

When David started reliving his past pain and mentally connecting his previous pains to the pain of the moment, he had precious little time to care for himself before things went downhill. If you tune into your sensations, you can feel when your brain is starting to access your darker material and when negative messages start coming to the forefront of your thoughts. You can sense when you're starting to get swallowed up in your emotions. You can tell when you're ripe to be triggered toward self-injury. But, even as you notice those sensations, you still have a choice to ruminate and get angrier or to take calming actions that don't amplify your anger or lead to self-injury. If you don't contain your brain and access more effective coping tools you, like David, may engage in unskillful, even downright stupid tactics to ease the pain that dominates your life. You're also likely to engage in these tactics in isolation, which sets you up to melt down without support.

## *Adding Fuel to the Fire*

David was nearly at his limit, and he decided it was a good idea to get out of the car in the rain. He didn't consider taking five minutes to cool down and get his head straight. Figuratively speaking, you may make exactly the same choice. You may decide to take your frustrated self out into the rain to change your tire before you calm down, telling yourself that it's the best choice when another part of you knows it may bring out the Hulk. This choice isn't going to lead you to happy places. The lesson here is to avoid complex decisions or "pushing through" when you're near your limit of tolerance. Don't add more fuel to your fire when you're already triggered. Until you learn to calm down and get control of your complicated feelings, don't give yourself more to fume about. Taking a breather and getting your head straight can change everything about your experience.

## *About to Explode*

The correlation here? Once you've gotten to this point there are only two ways it can go: Hulk out or save yourself from HULKING. You know what will happen if you don't find a tool *other* than self-harm to reduce your mental agitation. You're the only one who's going to use that tool, with or without help.

When you're about to Hulk out, people can be onto you and not tell you. They can see it, feel it, hear it in your voice, but they may not say a word about it. They may not ask about what's happening, because they can sense something brewing deep inside you, and they're afraid of unleashing whatever they sense is there. (Remember the Three Good Reasons?) People who love you may be afraid of your Hulk, afraid they won't know what to do when faced with your feelings. When you're in the "Oh, no . . . here it comes . . . what do I do?" moment—in a panic, eyes darting, thoughts scrambling to come up with some idea for action other than the inevitable HULKING out—you need to stick to a strategy of *calming* yourself. If you decide to let the Hulk out, try to remember that you will eventually have to come back to yourself, and you'll be the one left with the damage the Hulk has done while smashing you and your world.

## *Hulking Out!*

Your HULKING experience can be just like David's. When primitive emotions took David over, he became a childish subhuman—a segmented human, without access to skills other than smashing and hollering. When you're HULKING out, your non-HULKING self is sent to the depths of your being, while your rage takes over and

acts unskillfully. The ultimate goal is to *not get to this point* in your self-injury cycle. Can you realistically expect yourself or others to handle this HULKING OUT thing gracefully? Nope. There's no grace here. But if you do HULK OUT, your need for softness doesn't disappear, so your job becomes one of finding compassion and patience, *despite* the urges to smash. Over time, you'll learn that HULKING OUT doesn't mean you have to self-injure. You can fly into a rage and then calm down *without* self-injury. Or you can skip the rage part entirely.

## Expending the Energy

When David was HULKING, it didn't help him when people yelled or shot at him. With the right touch, the right tone of voice, and the right energy, the Hulk was able to calm down and transform back into David Banner. This is true for you too. The desire for smashing can be soothed simply by the energy of compassion and calm. It's hard to find the right help when you're HULKING OUT, but releasing the energy behind your HULKY RAGE without smashing anything or anyone is ideal. Even if you do go about smashing things, your anger will eventually be expended. You will eventually come back to yourself. Of course, you'll also get to clean up the mess your Hulk made while you were "away." Expending the Hulk energy can be accomplished without using violence or self-sabotage. If you want to calm the energy behind self-injury, you'll have to talk to your Hulk nicely, and avoid shooting at it.

## Hazy Recollection

After self-injury, it's sometimes difficult to reconnect with what the fuss was all about. After the Hulk is gone, *David* is the one left judging the experience even though he wasn't really *there*. He has a hard time remembering clearly what caused the episode, how the action unfolded, or how intense it was. After your brain chemistry changes from using self-injury, memories of the experience can be hazy, otherworldly, dreamlike. In the moment of self-injury, you may feel stronger because of the power you're asserting over your emotional pain. But afterward, it's hard to connect with the *absence* of strength that allowed the self-injury. Your violent reactions don't usually help others to act compassionately toward you when you're struggling, so they can't really tell the tale of the episode clearly either. Once clarity comes, it's hard to talk about what happened without the benefit of a really patient conversational partner.

Since self-injury can come on very quickly with the right combination of thoughts, emotions, and brain chemicals, it can be difficult to recreate or understand the reaction afterwards because the emotional mix has changed. But, no matter the situations that lead to self-injury, the HULKING REACTION usually accesses the same historical content and beliefs. After an episode, it's important to find a friend or a notebook, recollect what you can about what happened, and build an understanding of how your HULKING CYCLE works, and how you can respond more skillfully to your triggers without calling out your HULKING HABITS.

Holding your pain as closely as David Banner did creates an internal condition where you are more likely to be moved to rage when triggered. The pent-up fury, the rage, the pain that hasn't been cured yet—this is your Hulk. If you can learn to keep your Hulk from coming out in the first place and learn to talk nicely to your Hulk when it's triggered, you'll be less likely to self-injure.

In the end, it was David's lack of skill managing his original pain—a desire for the ability to change the way it felt and to understand what happened—that caused him to become the Hulk. He didn't learn to live *with* his pain or try to see *beyond* what hurt so he ultimately sentenced himself to hard time as the Hulk. He could have tried instead to find support while *changing his relationship* to his pain. Like David, you've created your own monster, and you must keep on searching until you find a way to calm the beast.

## You and Your Hulk

How did that go for you? Do you see any correlations to your own situation? The point of looking at yourself through the lens of the Hulk metaphor is to see that there are times when you're simply follow-



ing a script. Your miniseries will replay the same basic story again and again until you're able to intervene and learn either to stop the Hulk from coming out or to control what the Hulk does and how long he gets to rampage.

You will eventually need to identify and name the recurrent thoughts or pains that trigger your Hulk. For now try to understand that your pain and the power it has over your decision making directly relate to your self-injury urges. As you change the way you think about your pain, you'll find that it won't necessarily trigger the Hulk or get in the way of talking the Hulk down.

If you set a goal to continually learn how to live the life that fits you best, you can slowly grow out of habits that keep you from living a life you resonate with. You wouldn't consciously choose a life dominated by covering up, hiding the past, diving into your pain and frustration, or putting your pain on someone else. You just don't know yet which life-affirming, supportive actions will create harmony in your mind and life.

You *can* learn to live with your pain and change what it means to you—what it does to you. With time and practice, you can learn to keep the Hulk at bay, to deal with it lovingly when it comes on, and to strive for minimal damage when the Hulk is out on the town. And after an episode, when the Hulk goes away you can find ways to support yourself in getting back to finding a cure for your original pains. You can tame the monster you've created.

If part of you is a Hulk, which of your other aspects need to be called up so you can calm down and endure the struggles of this life without Hulking? Compassion and patience. Start with compassion and patience and getting all worked up when triggered won't seem so attractive.

## You and Your Hulk

It may be TV, but the Incredible Hulk was written by people who use visual metaphors to relate the stories of humanity.

- Do you identify with David Banner? How much of this storyline—"decent person struggling with difficult emotions creates larger problem for himself"—can you relate to?**

The trauma David was trying to cure was related to his wife's death.

- What's your trauma?**

David was furious that he wasn't able to save his wife; it burned in him, and he punished himself for not being stronger.

- What's your fury/anger about? How do you punish yourself?**

David used gamma radiation in an attempt to cure his fury and pain.

- What methods have you used to try to ease your anger or cure the pain of your original trauma(s)?**

The efforts David made to ease his pain didn't make that pain easier to live with.

- Have your efforts at changing your ties to your original trauma(s) worked?**

After using the gamma radiation and creating a new challenge to overcome that big-green-rage-monster issue, David found that his life purpose would now revolve around controlling his emotional overreactions and keeping the Hulk at bay.

- Have the coping skills you've developed created an additional challenge for you to deal with? Are you on a quest to find a cure for the pains you've endured while trying to address your original trauma(s)?**





David pretty much guaranteed his own suffering when he had the flat tire and pushed on despite indications that he was about to lose it. He couldn't have known the first time after the experiment that the Hulk would result if he got upset. But, once he saw the effects of his anger, David would have to learn which struggles to take on in the future and which to avoid so he wouldn't push himself into an episode.

Take a minute and remember a time when everything you had to do was made harder by your own pushing—when you weren't in a clear enough mindset to make the decisions you were making, but you tried anyway.

- Did you escalate your suffering through your will to keep going, rather than take some time and calm down? Did you sense your own need for ease and ignore it?**
- Does your self-injury cycle sometimes take a similar course—where fuel keeps getting added to the fire and you feel you might Hulk out, but you press on anyway?**
- What can you do to remind yourself to stop pushing and take time to quell the rising tide of anger or pain, so it doesn't escalate to HULKING out or self-injuring?**
- What's your experience when you become upset or triggered? How long does it normally take to bring out the Hulk after you're triggered?**
- What's your Hulk like? If you were going to recast Lou Ferrigno with your Hulk—after all, your Hulk could whoop Lou Ferrigno any day—how would your Hulk look, communicate, and behave?**
- When you Hulk out, how does your Hulk act toward you and the world around you?**
- When you're HULKING out, do others come closer? Do they run? Do they shoot?**
- When HULKING out, what does your Hulk actually want? Just to smash? To be talked down? A hug? A fresh pair of pants?**
- When you're HULKING out, where does your "real" self go? Is it watching the episode? Are *You* able to comment and redirect the script, or is the Hulk ad-libbing while *You're* stuck in the background unable to get the Hulk under control?**
- What does it normally take to end a HULKING episode and bring your real self back?**
- Do you have any ideas how you can end your HULKING episodes (gently) and bring your real self back faster? If you do, how can you remind yourself to use those ideas when the Hulk threatens to take you over?**

If you're David Banner thinking about yourself, you know that you have the capacity to Hulk. The time to look at what causes it, what soothes it, and what keeps it at bay is when you're *David Banner*. When you're the Hulk, it's not the time to sit down and try to analyze what's making you Hulk or understand yourself as the Hulk. It's time to use what you've learned as David Banner to get the Hulk going in a different direction, to pull out a skill that replaces smashing and brings *You* back as quickly and safely as possible. *You're* more than a Hulk. And *You* don't need to communicate your rage through smashing.

CHAPTER NINE:

# The Kids on the Bus

**S**o you're just about to Hulk out and your mind is reeling with memories and thoughts, fears, and feelings that threaten you so forcefully that the Hulk is the only tool you think you have to quell your pain. Your ability to decide on a course of action is diminished because of the scattered and chaotic clamor of thoughts in your head. How do you pull all that chaos apart and understand what each perspective inside you is saying? How do you cut through the chatter of mental competition and hear the parts of yourself that can make a skillful decision?

When the chaos of competing aspects of your mind drowns out any coherent thinking, change the visualization you use to separate and interact with the individual voices that comprise the chaos. Engage with the cacophony selectively. Talk to the Kids on your Bus.

This metaphor for your inner workings can be incredibly useful when trying to sort out complex, competing, and violent thoughts. Here's the basic idea:

You're driving a bus toward a destination. On the front of the bus is the sign stating your destination, which, for the sake of example, we'll call "Coping without Self-Injury." In general, you want *You*—the part of you that directs healthy life choices—to be the driver, because that aspect of you is more likely to keep the bus on the road toward your happy destination than, say, your self-loathing. If your self-loathing were driving the bus, it might just lose sight of the destination and drive the bus into a ditch from which you'd never be rescued.

Your passengers are your many aspects and the parts of your mind—your specific memories of shame, the pains and habitual ideas you ruminate on (all the lessons you learned through your experiences), and the core beliefs you hold onto. Each of the passengers on your bus currently has the ability to take over the driver's seat, even if they can't really drive. They can also conspire with the other passengers to kick *You* out of the driver's seat and route the bus through all levels of hell. Though the passengers have competing functions, desires, and perspectives, they can each help *You* reach your destination. It's all in how you interact with them.

Often, passengers clamor for control of the bus, whining about the trip, questioning *Your* motives, reminding you how useless the trip is, banging their heads on the seat in front of them. They may even set off fireworks to try to get *You* to stop focusing on the destination and turn around to engage them so they can have their say. For a while, *You* may need to stop the bus in order to understand what's happening. *You* may need to walk down the aisle and talk to each of the Kids on the Bus, asking them individually what they need and how you can give it to them, requesting that they quiet down so *You* can get back on the road to *Your* destination. Eventually, *You'll* be able to keep driving, despite what the Kids on the Bus are doing or saying, because many of the passengers will settle down once they know they'll be attended to when they have something important to say.

Familiarity with this visualization will help your mind tune into the passengers fueling chaos without becoming overwhelmed. From there, *You* can ask for the help of the calmer passengers when the unruly types get out of control. *You'll* be able to request that the passengers settle down, stop yelling, speak clearly about what they need, and get back on *Your* side so you can all reach the destination *You've* set. Their pain will be

reduced by allowing, and making the best of, that journey. At first, you'll need to listen intentionally to hear the different voices that make up the chatter on the bus. But, eventually you'll be able to identify what each passenger is saying without getting thrown so far off course that you forget where *You* were headed.

There's so much internal dialogue preceding self-injury that it's important to learn how seriously you should take the content of that inner dialogue. Some passengers are more convincing than others, tricking you into stopping the bus as they petition that their needs are a matter of life and death when they really aren't. Some of the passengers really *are* there to tell you when you're making decisions that are going to make life more painful to live. Only through working with the dialogue of your passengers will you learn to know which Kids to believe, which to talk to, which to ignore, and which can be tamed so you can minimize their ability to create chaos. You'll also hear some Kids that are strong, reliable, and enduringly patient, because the bus isn't just filled with unruly characters, but also with the less competitive, quieter ones who are waiting for the noisy passengers to shut up so they get a hearing.

Understand that the state of your bus will evolve from total confusion to relative order as some of the Kids are taught new coping skills and others learn who's in charge and stop vying for control. There are parts of your belief system, your fears, and your pain that can be soothed so they don't create so much havoc. There are passengers on the bus that will eventually get off, and there are some that won't or can't leave; *You* need to learn to keep them all as balanced as possible while they're on your bus. This starts by being open to hearing what they have to say when they request your attention. You'll learn how to respond to them after you've gotten familiar with the tone, substance, and intensity of their commentary.

Work with the visualization below and, over time, learn to identify who's driving the bus, which passengers need the most immediate attention, and which passengers are able to come to your aid when the nastier ones are trying to take over. When you find your bus stopped in the middle of the road or teetering on the edge of a cliff as you dive into the content of your mind, you need to get the really unruly passengers back in their seats and get *Yourself* back in the driver's seat so you can keep moving toward *Your* destination—even if your progress is incremental. Make friends with the Kids on the Bus, and they'll treat you better. Once they feel that you'll listen to them if they have something to say, they may actually learn to work with you, making it easier for you to get to *Your* destination.

ONE WARNING: There are people who would be best to refrain from this particular type of visualization. Having conversations with yourself by imagining your extreme thoughts as individual entities should be done only if you can keep track of the fact that these "other people" are only metaphors for the many aspects of you made up by your distinct experiences and often-conflicting perspectives. The voices you hear when consulting various Kids are just messages different parts of you are trying to send about what's happening and how you need to respond. Know where you stand related to mental cohesiveness, and know if this kind of visualized separation of self will create additional chaos. Remember your Ground Rules.



## Kids on the Bus Visualization

*Get Ready: Settle into a comfortable seated position. Soften your breath. Allow the sitting bones to reach into your seat as the crown of the head reaches toward the ceiling. Relax your shoulders. Soften your face and let the tongue fall to the floor of the mouth. Take a long, deep breath in through the nose, sigh the exhale out the mouth. Again, inhale through the nose, sigh out the mouth.*

During this visualization, you're going to try to recognize your life direction as a destination, the processing faculties of your brain as the bus that can take you to the destination, and your habits of mind as the potentially unruly passengers who will determine the quality of the journey and its overall success. Your habits, thoughts, fears, beliefs—all the aspects of the person you are, whether fixed or malleable—these are the Kids on the Bus. But your brain, the physical mechanism that allows for

expression of all these aspects—it's just a vehicle giving the Kids a ride.

*Imagine, if your brain were a bus, what would that bus look like?*



Imagine walking up to your bus as it sits parked and ready for you. Create the mental scene.

*What does the bus that carries around your inner content look like? As you interact with the scene in your mind, what elements of the bus stand out?*

Now, walk around to the front of your bus and read the sign.

*Can you tell what it says? Is it a destination you really want to be headed toward?*

If you're going to drive this bus, it will be up to *You* to determine where the bus is headed and change that destination when it feels right. Some examples of destinations are financial control, emotional wellness, time management, planning for the future without losing the present, coping without self-injury, or learning to identify and express your feelings.

*What's your desired destination?*

Put your desired destination up on the sign in big, bold letters.

Walk to the open door and step onto the bus. Standing here, looking down the length of the empty bus, you know that you'll soon be taking on passengers, but you feel at ease because you have a minute to get ready before they arrive.

*Looking down the length of the empty bus, what do you see?*

*What do the floor, sides, and ceiling of the bus look like?*

*What colors, materials, patterns, or textures are present on the bus as it sits empty?*

*What does it feel like to be standing on this empty bus? What's the feeling quality of the space?*

Sit down in the driver's seat.

*What does the seat feel like? Is it a lounge, a pedestal, a traditional bus driver seat?*

*What does the cockpit of the bus look like?*

*How does it feel to be seated at the head of the empty bus?*

Notice now that your regular passengers—your recurrent thoughts, fears, beliefs, and habitual actions—are queuing up outside the bus door. It's a little hectic, because they all want to get on the bus; after all, each of them feels like an important part of you. The energy of this group of passengers, the Kids who ride your Bus, is tangible. They each want to remain part of your life.

One by one, you let them load onto the bus—the brutes of your pains, the downcast faces of shame, the not-quite-human-or-animal-or-alien aspects of you that drive your habits; your strengths, your aspirations, your talents for change and endurance. Every aspect of you can fit on this bus. You accept all the passengers as they come on, aware as they are that some of the Kids who have been riding the regular route won't be on board by the end of the trip.

As the last passenger gets seated, you close the bus door and stand up from your seat to look down the aisle at the loaded bus.

*What does the bus look like now? How has it changed from the image of the empty bus?*

*Is it sterile and drab, like a prison charter—convicts chained to metal seats? Or is it a party-mobile with jazzy colors and a disco ball?*

*Does it even look like a typical bus?*

*What elements of the loaded bus stand out?*



Notice that not all the passengers behave in the same way. Each aspect, thought, feeling, fear, habit, truth, and meaning inside you resides in a different emotional state, and based on internal or other life factors, each aspect may be in or out of balance. Together, though, each aspect combines to create an overall atmosphere.

*What is it? What does your loaded bus feel like?*

Take some time to walk down the aisle toward the back of the bus.

*What do you see on your way?*

*Where are the different aspects of you seated?*

*What are they doing?*

*What do they look like?*

*Do they try to get your attention?*

*What's it like at the back of the bus?*

Kids lacking in communication skills will start talking louder and move on to hissy fits to make themselves heard. That's how the Kids on your Bus behave sometimes. Even if they're not really children, the passengers are singular aspects of you, so they are inherently limited to certain types of behavior. Shame isn't Joy and Strength isn't Fear. Shame and Joy can sit together, work together, and relate with Strength or Fear, but each of the Kids brings its own temperament and range of ability to your inner dialogue.

Tune into the voices of the Kids on the Bus. In the chatter from all the passengers:

*Can you identify what individual voices are saying?*

*Are some of them raising their voices to be heard?*

*Are some of them yelling or venting uncontrollably without concern for the effect on other passengers?*

*Which passengers are quietly going along for the ride, and which are screaming for attention?*

*Which ones need the most immediate tending?*

*Are there some voices you can simply shush?*

*Can you ask the passengers to take turns when trying to get your attention?*

*Is anybody on the bus saying anything supportive or tender?*

Interact with the passengers for a little while. Let them try to tell you what they need you to hear and what they need you to do. Ask that they be clear and concise when communicating with you, so you can do as much as possible to improve the quality of the ride for all of you. It's not necessary for them to yell to get their message across.

When you're ready, go back and stand at the front of the bus. Look around. Take in the fullness of what you're looking at. This is the metaphorical embodiment of your brain, your experience, pain, your deepest and most primal desires, your weakness, and your greatness. This is the vehicle, and these are the passengers, that will make the trip to the destination *You* choose. It may be difficult to stay open and present when you're taking in the perspectives of your many aspects. Try to generate a willingness to accept all the passengers on your bus, despite their current state, because they all have something useful to tell you about how to get to your destination. But they don't all have to talk at once, and they certainly don't have to hijack the bus and drive it into a ditch.

Before you take the driver's seat, tell the passengers where *You're* headed, and ask them for their help in getting to your destination. Take a seat behind the wheel. Turn the key in the ignition to start the engine. Let off the brakes and step on the gas, and smile—you're headed for a new destination.

In times of emotional crisis, try to change your view and realize that the moment is just a small section of your journey. Come away from the chaos of the clattering Kids and listen to select passengers individually. Hold your course while you hear what they have to say. Decide if the passengers' ideas are going to help or hurt you, or if they're intending to hijack the bus, and act accordingly. *You're* the driver; it's up to you to keep your bus on or near a road that will eventually lead to *Your* destination. The passengers can give you tips on how to get there, and they will no doubt keep you entertained and challenged along the way, but they shouldn't be driving the bus. That's *Your* job. You need to remain aware that there is a destination, a bus to maintain, and passengers who may try to undermine the success of the trip.

During your clear times, work with this visualization to get a sense of what the bus is like when you're not feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Check in frequently with the Kids on the Bus ("How're we doin' back there, Kids? Anything you need?"), and let them know you're paying attention to them. Try to get a bodily sense of what it feels like to be on course, off course, stopped in the middle of the road, or tied up in the back while painful feelings go on a bender. No matter where your bus ends up or which Kids hijack it, *You* can always choose to reaffirm the destination, get back behind the wheel, and keep going. If you don't give up, you'll eventually get where *You* want to go.

In order to take your life back from the cycles of self-injury and self-sabotage, it's important to kick the unskillful aspects of your being out of the driver's seat and take control of your mental and emotional bus. Try to figure out which of your passengers need attention, want growth, need you to change your behavior, or simply need to be heard. Use any and all available tools and strategies to keep your bus running as smoothly as possible. Keep the thoughts and experiences that seek to reroute you toward self-destruction in their seats, maybe even try putting tape over their mouths. You'll reach your destination if you can get key parts of your being onboard (self-governance, compassion, patience) and if *You* can learn to interact skillfully with the parts of you that don't want *You* to reach *Your* destination.

Keep in mind that you're not really *fighting* for control of the bus, as this isn't a fight against yourself. You're *reorganizing* your bus so that the most qualified driver remains in control, and so the passengers aren't out of control. The best driver is *You*—the part of you that doesn't lose itself in pain, lust, or longing—the aspect of you that remembers there *is* a destination. The pace and quality of your journey will be dictated by how well *You*, the driver, encourage all the parts of yourself to work together and keep the bus on course. Eventually, your direction will be constant, though the Kids on the Bus may require you to make some twists and turns along the way.

If you can learn to hear, interpret, and work with the information presented by your passengers and remind yourself that you are on a journey toward a specific destination, you can change your life's direction. Your daily efforts at keeping the bus tuned up and on course (once *You've* decided on the best course!) will help determine how the riders of your habits, past, or current pains continue to distract you, and how many U-turns you need to make in order to get to *Your* destination. *You're* in control; let those Kids know it!





CHAPTER TEN:

# Your Inner Child

**T**he mental chaos before a self-injury episode can feel as if it's too much to bear, let alone understand. When your mind is spinning with painful, repetitive, or competing thoughts, it can be difficult to know which thoughts you should act on, which thoughts you should ignore, and where the chaotic or competing thoughts are coming from in the first place. Having related your mental chaos to the fantasy-land visualizations of the Kids on the Bus and the Incredible Hulk, it's time to relate to your mental experience by entertaining a metaphor for your deepest, most vulnerable, and innocent aspect: your Inner Child.

For the purposes of this metaphor, your Inner Child is the part of you that has been walled off or hidden away through pain, trauma or abuse. It's the part of you that has been left alone while you use self-harm as a form of self-care, and it's hoping for you to change the habits that keep it hidden. It likely mirrors the person you were during the first experiences that formed a foundation for your self-injury habits. Your Inner Child is the part of you that needed protection and didn't get it from you or the outside world, the part of you that's hurt and relegated to the shadows every time you self-injure. It's the part of you that's a little afraid you'll keep doing the things you're doing and proving to yourself that you (and others) can't be trusted to treat your vulnerabilities gently. It's your deepest longing, your unmet needs, your abandoned self-protection instinct, and your isolation personified. It's a part of you that knows exactly who *You* want to be and which parts of you get in *Your* way. It can be all that or something far more personal. One thing is true: You'll instantly know your Inner Child when you meet it.

The metaphor in this chapter is intended to give you a basic introduction to your Inner Child so that you can learn how to care for the most vulnerable parts of yourself. You'll have to build this relationship over time and allow your Inner Child to speak up when necessary. Your Inner Child needs to learn to trust you to act on the messages it sends you about how to provide true self-protection. When your Inner Child starts to trust you to make decisions that don't violate your boundaries or willingly increase your pain, you'll gain access to a softer, clearer voice inside you when your brain turns on the self-injury cycle. You'll have a deeper understanding of your most vulnerable parts and a reason to take care of yourself in a new way.

If you continue to ask your Inner Child what it needs during difficult times, you will eventually hear an answer. As you try to act on the wisdom of this innocent part of yourself, you'll start making friends with yourself in a new way. Once you've made friends with your Inner Child, this friend will be able to come to your aid when you're suffering and will help you act compassionately toward yourself. A strong relationship with your Inner Child will help you identify and meet your needs for safety, love, and acceptance—but every time you hurt yourself or deny your deepest needs, you damage the relationship with your Inner Child. To stop self-injuring, it's important that you become aware of the ways you bolster or damage the relationship you have with this vulnerable, raw, innocent part of yourself.

As you do the visualization below or listen to the messages available through your internal dialogue, don't be surprised if your Inner Child has some pretty direct things to say about how you've treated yourself or let yourself be treated. You're engaging the part of you that has had to endure every bit of abuse dished out by the

world—and by you—so don't expect it to be pleased about how things have happened. No matter how the internal dialogue goes, don't let this inquiry into vulnerability trigger self-injury. Remember your Ground Rules.

As you continue to drop into the visualization, interacting with this shy, raw part of yourself over time, keep asking it what it needs, specifically, to protect it. You may be told to stop a particular behavior, leave a relationship, or treat yourself more kindly. Work to make the suggested changes, if they resonate with *Your* ideas of what's truly best for you as a person. Each time you purposely protect your Inner Child from violation, you strengthen your relationship with yourself. But each time you take an action your Inner Child has asked you to stop, you damage the connection with the part of yourself that's trying to inform you about how to protect and express your deepest vulnerabilities.

If you're going to work with this visualization, it's important to realize that you're essentially asking your Inner Child to come out of its safe spot—the place where it's relatively protected from the choices you make to harm yourself. Don't take this lightly. Working with this metaphor may leave you feeling vulnerable, since you'll break apart the protective layer you've built around your Inner Child. If you choose to open the door to this work, it's important to be gentle with yourself. Keep revisiting the visualized place where you meet your Inner Child. With experience, you can strengthen the most vulnerable parts of yourself, gradually letting your Inner Child trust you to make choices that won't make it *need* to hide for self-protection.



## Inner Child Visualization

*Get Ready: Come into a comfortable seated position. Take a long, slow inhale through your nostrils, and sigh it out your mouth. Again, take a long, slow inhale through the nostrils; sigh it out your mouth. Let your sitting bones reach into the seat beneath you while your crown reaches toward the ceiling. Relax your shoulders and let your hands rest in your lap. Relax your face and jaw, and let your tongue fall to the floor of the mouth. Make a mental commitment to be gentle with whatever aspects of yourself you find during this visualization.*

It's a warm spring afternoon and you're walking along a forest path. The sun filters through the trees and falls in patches on the damp, spongy ground as you tread nearly silently along the earth. You notice that the sides of the path are lined with small plants growing up underneath leaf litter from last fall. Overhead is a thick canopy of new leaves waving in the warm breeze. Though the forest is dense and dark in places, you're not afraid. You sense that something special lies ahead.

You look ahead to see where the path goes and notice that it continues, but it also disappears around a bend, so you can't see more than the short distance between you and the bend in the path. You don't know how long the path is, where the forest ends, or where the path leads beyond the bend, but somehow you know that this path leads to the place where your most vulnerable aspect—your Inner Child—lives. The gentle wind blows at your back, and you start walking toward the bend in the path. Feeling a little nervous but excited to see what's ahead, you reach the bend and see that the path continues straight ahead, taking you out of the forest and into a clearing.

*Notice where you are. What does the landscape outside the forest look like?*

Taking in the landscape, the sounds, and the smells, you notice a structure a good distance ahead of you. You're sure your Inner Child is inside.

*From a distance, notice what the structure housing your Inner Child looks like. What are its defining characteristics?*

You walk the distance across the landscape, knowing that you need to find a way to get into the structure to find your Inner Child.



*Where is the entrance on the structure? How will you get in?*

Moving toward the entrance, not exactly sure what you'll find inside, you have a tangible sense of the part of yourself that has been kept here. There's sadness here, but there's also innocence, and you long to interact with the part of you that's inside.

You carefully enter the structure and see your Inner Child, who has been waiting for you for a very long time.

*What does your Inner Child look like? How is it dressed?*

*What are the first words you say to your Inner Child?*

*What are the first words your Inner Child says to you?*

*What does the inside of the structure look like?*

Tell your Inner Child that you're here to take it away from its solitude—you intend to free it from this protective but confining place.

*What happens when you try to lead your Inner Child from the protective space? Will it go with you? Does it run happily out the door, or does it want to stay there?*

Invite your Inner Child to come with you into the clearing outside the protective place where it has taken refuge. Even if your Inner Child wants to go back to the protective place after your visit, encourage a brief outing to let your Inner Child get a look at what exists outside the isolation of self-protection.

Standing together in the clearing, unsheltered but safe, you both take in the landscape around you.

*Notice the details of the landscape. What are the most defining elements of the space? Has it changed since you first stepped out of the forest and saw the structure ahead of you?*

*What new elements are present now that your Inner Child has been freed? Are there hills to climb? Ponds to swim in? Dramatic views to survey?*

*What does it feel like to be inside this landscape?*

*What's it like for you to have your Inner Child next to you?*

*What's it like for your Inner Child to be outside its protective space?*

Find a good place to sit down and talk with your Inner Child. You know that you'll need to go back to your outside life eventually, but your Inner Child will have to stay in this landscape. You don't want it to have to go back into the isolated protection of confinement, so you decide to create a safe and comfortable place for your Inner Child to live while you come and go. You can create anything your Inner Child desires to feel safe, protected, and able to express itself.

*Ask what your Inner Child wants. What kind of house, what kind of supports or companions, and what elements does it need to feel safe outside the protective space it's been confined in?*

Build your landscape based on what your Inner Child tells you. Build a comfortable home. Bring in a kitten for it to play with. As you're creating, allow your Inner Child to explore the new environment. Watch and notice how it responds to your support, your compassion, and your efforts to free it from captivity. Surround your Inner Child with all the comforts it needs to be willing to stay out of the protective shell you released it from. If your Inner Child isn't ready to trust you and longs for the safety of the protective space, allow it to return to protection after your visit, but build the outside supports anyway. If you build a safe environment, your Inner Child will eventually want to live outside of the confines of its protective space.

Let your Inner Child enjoy the new environment and ask for modifications. Once you're done creating the landscape, ask your Inner Child to sit with you again.



While you sit together, take in the space you've created and talk about the perspectives each of you has on your life experience. Ask what you can do to demonstrate that you can be trusted to care more gently for the needs of your Inner Child. Listen carefully to what the child asks from you.

*How does the dialogue go? What does your Inner Child say you should do? What does it say you shouldn't do?*

*What are your reservations or limitations toward meeting the requests of your Inner Child?*

Tell your Inner Child that it's been difficult for you to manage the mental effects of the troubles in your life, and you only resorted to self-injury because it was all you could do at the time. Say that you want something different now, and that you need help from your Inner Child as you take the proactive and protective actions that will lead both of you to safety. You want to become a version of yourself that attends to the needs of your Inner Child. Talk honestly about where you are in your life and what you're willing and able to change right now, but also promise to grow new skills to care for your Inner Child more effectively.

Before you wrap up your conversation, agree with the Inner Child on at least one change you can make to increase your sense of self-trust.

*What action can you take (or stop taking) that will increase your sense of self-trust?*

Thank your Inner Child for allowing you to find it and for visiting with you. Promise to work to change your self-harming actions over time, and commit to coming back and visiting so that your Inner Child won't be left alone here in vulnerability. Make good on that promise.

Watch for a moment as your Inner Child starts to walk away, keen to explore the home and landscape you've made (even if it won't agree to live there permanently quite yet). Connect with the idea that your Inner Child is a part of you that has been hidden and relegated to solitude. No matter how it came to be where you found it, recognize that this part of you deserves freedom, expression, and compassion. It's up to you to express and protect that vulnerable part of yourself without having to *hide* expression for protection.

Turn away from the landscape you created with your Inner Child and start to walk back in the direction you came from, toward the forest, noticing where the path that led you here cuts into the trees. Pick up the path as it goes directly into the forest, carrying you around the bend. Smell the foliage and feel the density of the trees ahead. Notice a sense of anticipation as you take in the knowledge that the walls that have protected your secrets and kept in your pain or confusion may have been necessary in the past, but change is coming. One day, you'll learn how to incorporate all parts of yourself into your life—even the vulnerable, innocent, and newly-freed Inner Child.

Give yourself some time to consider the imagery you've experienced, the elements of your internal landscape that encourage or concern you, and any messages you received from your Inner Child.

After connecting with this part of yourself, can you offer yourself compassion for having to endure the experiences in your life that confused or confined your Inner Child? Can you offer compassion to your Inner Child for bearing the consequences of your reactions to the pains of your life? Can you start to forgive yourself for not knowing what to do with the pains and the lessons of your experiences, and for surviving in a way that *prolonged* your pain? Can you start to allow the raw, innocent parts of you to come out of hiding as you make a safe place for them to reside?

## About the Internal Landscape

Inside your imagination, you'll likely find lush, verdant places full of life right alongside deserts or vast swaths of charred land. You're alive and fruitful in many ways and desolate in others. Since you can't tend to your en-

tire landscape at once, you have to choose where to start. Will you get to know yourself while looking at your lush lands, the indicators of what's working? Or will you sit off in the distance, looking at the dark, stormy lands and discussing with your Inner Child what you might find there? Do you let some lands regenerate naturally over time, or do you intentionally imagine filling in sinkholes with ponds and willow trees? As you continue to work with this visualization, recognize yourself as a gardener walking through your own garden. Touch, see, and feel what's alive or suffering inside you, and pay special attention to the areas that need your care. Once you've seen and acknowledged what's inside you, you'll be aware that flowers exist within you even when you're knee deep in your own weeds.

Drop in on your Inner Child in clear times as well as when you're nearing self-injury. Work intentionally to alter the landscape to create a safe place for your Inner Child to live, play, and grow. When you're away from your Inner Child, or when you find it on the Bus being bullied by some of the meaner Kids, do the work of protecting this raw part of yourself. Changing your actions solely to protect your Inner Child might sound strange, but you may be surprised how quickly and dramatically the changes you make in your mental habits will alter your internal landscape, and the ways in which your Inner Child can be expressed.

Remember your internal landscape, even when you're not working with the Inner Child visualization. Beautiful places exist inside you; you're never wholly desolate. As you've used self-injury, you've been walking in the more barren areas of yourself without seeing the greener pastures. Sometimes it's easy to think that your life is at a permanent standstill, in some form of purgatory, and that you'll never feel the joys of life again. But by doing the things you love and want to do—by honoring your Inner Child's self-protective wisdom—you help yourself become the person you want to be, both as your internal landscape changes naturally and by willfully changing it. Find ways to bring water and life to your deserts and to tame the storms that keep sending mudslides down the mountain. Change your internal landscape, and you'll find you're more able to trust you inner wisdom and express your vulnerability.

# Section Two Wrap-Up

Visualization is simply one more form of directed thinking. When it comes time to engage your internal content, working with your Hulk can seem more manageable than working with more literal interpretations of your rage. Listening to one Kid on the Bus instead of all of them at once offers a simplified way to work with chaotic thoughts. Relating to the most wounded parts of you as your Inner Child can give you a chance to re-parent the parts of you that were abandoned. Metaphor and visualization bring your imagination into the healing process, which can give you creative and safe avenues into seemingly dangerous territory.

When you're working with the material in the next section, keep the Hulk, the Kids on the Bus, and the Inner Child metaphors in mind. The work you do toward understanding and responding to your inner content will be much less painful if you don't take it all literally.

# *NPLTR: A Method to Tame the Pain*





CHAPTER ELEVEN:

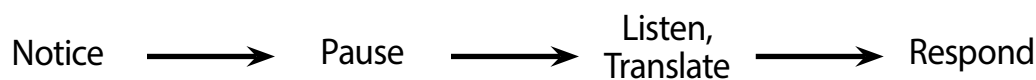
# Introduction to NPLTR

## The Nitty-Gritty

**H**ere you are: inspired with new knowledge about your brain, flush with visualizations and metaphors to apply to your mental chaos, and ready to get to the nitty-gritty of changing your brain. Welcome to the process of creating strategies to tame your pain and stop self-injury—NPLTR: Notice, Pause, Listen, Translate, and Respond. With NPLTR skills, you'll learn to master the moments when your brain is flipping out, the Hulk is coming on, and all the Kids on the Bus are in a tizzy. Self-injury may be the quickest and most habitual way to calm your turmoil, but you know that you have to stop *doing* it if you're going to *stop doing* it. This section is all about *how* to stop.

When you're triggered and can't think of positive action, you know that your only goal is to try not to self-injure. To meet that goal, you need to set another goal: When you *Notice* you're triggered, *Pause* all action, and *Listen* to your thoughts long enough to hear and *Translate* the internal messages that govern a healthy *Response*.

To decide on a course of action when your mind is chaotic, you'll need to pay attention to and relate intentionally with the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual happenings inside you without freaking out and making things worse. That may be a tall order at first, but just like self-injury became a habit, coping with NPLTR becomes automatic once it's repeated often enough. Here's how it goes.



## Notice, Pause, Listen, Translate, and Respond

Given the speed of thought, each step of the process can lead into any of the other steps; movement between the steps isn't always linear.

- **Notice:** Allow yourself to tune into sensations that indicate the source and severity of your distress.
- **Pause:** Take only those actions that help you avoid self-injury. If you're not able to engage your inner content, hold your Pause through distraction.
- **Listen:** Become aware of your thoughts, feelings and the habitual messages your brain is spewing—without taking action on or debating with those thoughts or feelings.

- **Translate:** Change your relationship to the content of your thoughts; get to the deeper meaning and messages that you can take constructive action on in order to change your feelings about your experience.
- **Respond:** Create options for addressing your situation and select the most skillful course of action to minimize internal conflict. Responding happens continually and can be any step you take to purposely Notice, Pause, Listen, Translate or act on thoughts, impulses, or feelings.

## Notice, Pause, Listen, Translate, and Respond (Again, and Again, and Again . . .)

NPLTR is about getting to the deeper messages inside your habitual, painful thoughts, first by Noticing that you're not feeling the way you want to, then by Pausing long enough to decide if you need to distract yourself or can endure taking a considerate Listen to what your internal signals and voices are telling you about what's happening. However, you know that you can't always trust the voices of the brain, your emotions, and your mental habits, so you also need to learn to *Translate* your thoughts and inner experience in order to craft an effective Response to your situation.

There's a difference between knowing and understanding. On the surface, it's easy to know that NPLTR is a realistic option, but understanding it in action comes only through time and practice. Of all the skills you learn in your life, few are as crucial as learning to Notice and Pause. No matter what mental state or stage of your self-injury cycle you find yourself in, the ability to Notice when you need to create a Pause between thinking, feeling, and acting is critical. From the stillness created by each Pause, you can find ways to lengthen the time between impulse and action, using that time to find compassionate Responses. Listening, Translating, and Responding can't happen without first Noticing and creating a Pause.

There's one main reason to use NPLTR as a foundation for your strategy to manage chaotic thinking: it works. It's not magic, but over time, using NPLTR to your advantage helps to improve your distress tolerance by developing your talents for:

- Noticing indicators of tension or elevated emotion
- Calming racing thoughts
- Managing and changing destructive tendencies
- Responding to your own signals by tuning into and naming what's happening
- Knowing when you need to reduce stimuli
- Dealing effectively with anger and shame
- Choosing soothing action
- Avoiding self-injury stimulants and supports
- Finding words
- Redirecting obsessive thinking
- Allowing for truth and acceptance
- Gaining an understanding of which of your thoughts you can believe

Until you become accustomed to Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding, try to consciously develop these skills. Notice and Pause, decide if you'll engage or avoid the internal content, and Respond to your initial signals that indicate the need for a Pause and choose the Response options that feel as if they come from a clear place inside you. Over time, NPLTR really does become second nature, and it's infinitely useful. Eventually, your earliest signals of distress will alert you to your need for a Pause or a Response, and

you will naturally take action on your own behalf without amplifying your stress or turning to self-harming behavior. As you begin this practice, though, you may have to work pretty darn hard simply to Notice (So many reasons not to!), Pause (*Pause?* But action comes so automatically!), Listen (To whom? So many voices and impulses!), Translate (Good Lord, the things you say to yourself! How do you find truth in that junk?), and Respond (I'm already confused; now I have too many options!).

With practice, you'll continue to learn about your own personal indicators of distress and become more familiar with the fact that you actually *need* to start Noticing. You'll start to see your own patterns—becoming more aware of your own internal state. You'll learn how to tell if you're raw and need to Pause and create comfort, if you're feeling stable enough to Respond quickly and thoughtfully to challenges, or if you're getting to a point where you may pop off any second and the only good Response is to shut your brain down. You'll Notice your own changes in pulse and energy, in thought and emotion, and from there you'll have a platform to take action to limit or stop your self-harming actions.

Part of your success in changing your self-injury habits will come from realizing that no matter how others or life may have hurt you, you've developed thoughts and emotions so powerful their strongest foe is self-injury. It's just not a great idea to keep on hurting yourself and making life harder than it already is. The other part of your success will come from developing practical skills that allow you to be compassionate, patient, and mindful. Following the course of NPLTR when your mind is on overload can give you something to rely on *besides* self-harm.

You deserve to be able to move on with your life despite your history, so it's best to see your violence for what it is: a cry for help, for compassion, for understanding and acceptance. Though self-injury is a confused self-protection instinct, you don't really *want* to hurt yourself or others with your habits. You want to be able to help yourself, but you just don't know how yet. Practicing within the framework of NPLTR will help you build a coping structure that supports you during times where mental chaos seems too much to bear.

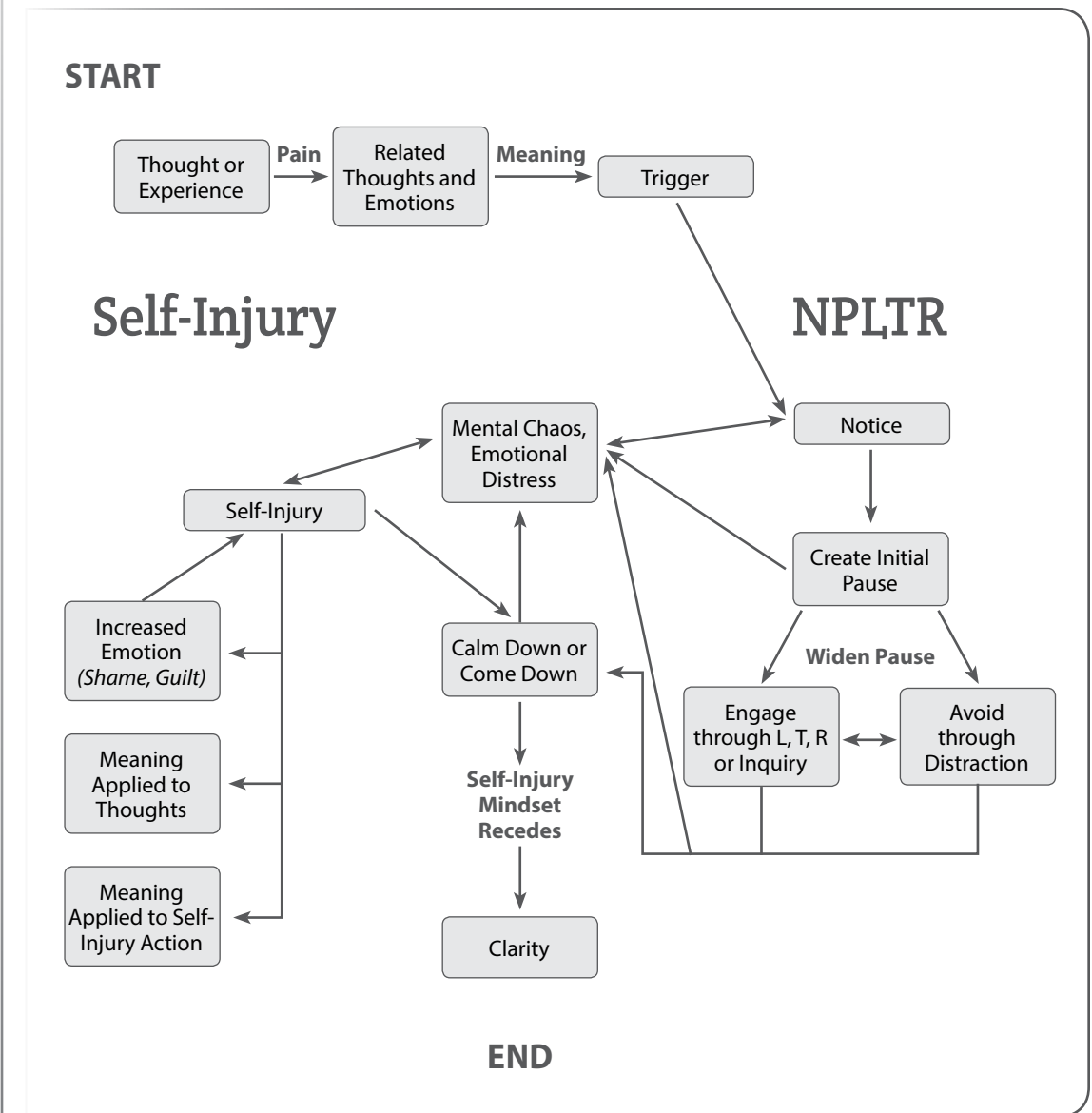
## NPLTR in a Nutshell

The basics of NPLTR follow, and each step is detailed in the following chapters. Follow your Ground Rules. Take or leave the inquiry or practice suggestions inside each chapter based on your own sense of what's right for you. And, above all, remember: Compassion and patience.

- **Notice:** Sense what's happening in your body and mind, even if it's just an amorphous blob of "something" that you don't understand. When you're especially ripe for self-injury, your mind is more receptive to painful thoughts than to positive ones. This means you'll Notice that you have to work harder to process images and thoughts or bring complex ideas into focus. You're likely to make a big deal out of things that in your clearer times wouldn't bother you with the same intensity. You can learn to Notice the very first signals that you're entering dangerous territory—when you're likely to go down a road you don't want to go down again—and create a Pause between Noticing your distress and *reacting* to the distress.
- **Pause:** Create a moment of Pause between Noticing what's happening inside you—Notice the *impulse* to dive into self-harming behavior—without taking action on your impulses. The Pause can come right after Noticing, while you're Listening, while you're Translating, or while you're Responding, because any mental action could potentially create stimuli that increases mental chaos. Widening each Pause is key to reducing self-injury behavior. If what you Notice is so overwhelming that you're likely to pop off any second, distract yourself to widen the Pause. If you're able to field the mental chatter, then engage what's happening by Listening and Translating.
- **Listen:** Become aware of and start to Listen to your thoughts, taking them as literally as possible, no matter how rough they look or sound. Listening is tricky, since you shouldn't *believe* most of your thoughts, especially when your brain is spinning. But you need to hear what's happening in your head before you can start controlling it. Listening can push you over the edge to self-injury, so it's important to secure your

Pause *before* trying to Listen. Over time, Listening and Responding effectively will help you learn which thoughts or voices to believe and which are the henchmen of self-injury leading you toward certain doom. The voice of *You* is decidedly different from the voice of your brain when it's on the fritz—and, over time, you'll learn the difference. You'll know it was *You* directing your actions when the internal content you're Listening to suggests actions *other* than self-harm.

- **Translate:** Get into your movie theater seat and take a detached look at what's really happening in your life-movie. Take the angry, hateful, "poor me" tone out of your words to find out what's true. Filter your literal thoughts through metaphor or visualization to get to the deeper meanings of the thoughts. Your chaotic thoughts aren't *true*, so you have to Translate them in order to hear what the Kids on the Bus are really asking for. Watch your own self-talk in clear or crisis times to minimize the damage you do to yourself by Translating your thoughts incorrectly. When you've become skilled at Translating, painful thoughts lose their power over your emotions, allowing truly helpful Responses to come to the forefront of your mind.
- **Respond:** A Response can be virtually any action you take that considers your desire to Respond *compassionately* to your situation—anything from choosing a method of distraction to working to engage your internal content through Listening and Translating. Knowing what to do and when will become second nature as you figure out your own ways of thinking, reroute habitual knee-jerk coping reactions and gain first-hand experience about the solutions that typically soothe you without self-harm.



# Example of NPLTR in Action

The NPLTR moments happen lightning-fast and in varying cycles. As painful thoughts come up, you might Pause and Listen, then go back to Noticing how your thoughts make your body feel—and you may need to Pause again to avoid being overwhelmed by your sensations or emotions. You might Pause, Listen, Translate, and decide on a Response, then Notice ways the Response agitates you further, creating a need to Pause again and rally for a modified Response. The process moves very quickly and is sometimes hard to get in on, but the main aim is to teach you to realize that wanting to self-injure doesn't have to instantly enact that result.

Following is an example of how NPLTR might happen if thought were actually linear. In reality, you bounce back and forth inside the steps, based on how your thoughts are moving in the moment.

- **Noticing:** Noticing physical sensations of stress, excitement in the belly, and feelings of being rushed or torn between options.

*"I can sense that I'm stressed, antsy-bellied, and rushing through my morning, while at the same time I'm dreading the fact that I have to live through this day at all. I'm pressuring myself to stop crying, put on a happy face, and get to work."*

- **Pausing:** Taking immediate action to stop reacting. Breathing out forcefully, holding hands in a position where they can't do any damage; thinking thoughts that reflect your desire to come up with a productive, non-harming solution to this crisis.

*"This is all my brain's reaction to a whole bunch of stimuli. I'll sit on my hands if I have to, but I don't want self-injure. I can do something else; there's got to be some way to deal with this other than hurting myself. I want to find a way of handling this that doesn't make it worse. I already hurt enough. I don't want to self-injure."*

- **Listening:** Listening to the chatter of thoughts and deciding which thoughts to acknowledge. Noticing which Kids on the Bus are vying for attention and hearing what they say, but without Responding, arguing, or taking thoughtless action. (Always Notice how Listening to your thoughts affects your subsequent thoughts and feelings, and Pause if you sense a build of tension that could lead to self-injury).

*"You're so stupid and useless; why can't you just get out of bed and go to work like normal people? Why are you always dreading your day? You're so weak. If you changed jobs, things would be better—but you won't, will you? Just going to keep me in the same crappy situation and expect me to be happy. I hate you so much." (The Kid on the Bus—the pain of the moment—bangs his head against the seat in front of him, and the Inner Child mopes with the knowledge that each self-injury episode hurts the most vulnerable part of you.)*

- **Translating:** Getting into your detached-viewer perspective and doing anything possible to take the judgment out of analyzing your thoughts so you can hear what you actually need. Finding messages in the chaos that can motivate positive action by getting to what's true. Working with your own reaction to reality by adopting any view that allows you to hold the painful thoughts away from yourself for clearer viewing.

*"I feel confined and unhappy in my work. I woke up feeling really emotional today, and I'm dealing with a lot of personal junk that takes Herculean energy to endure. The entire week has been a struggle, and this morning tops the whole week. I can tell that I'm bothered by simple things that wouldn't bother me if I weren't having to fake my way through my day again. I'm not feeling strong enough to endure, let alone rise above, everything I have to handle right now. I think I want to leave this job, but don't know what else I'd do. I feel trapped where I am and unable to make the changes necessary to get myself out of this hole I feel that I'm perpetually in."*

- **Responding:** Considering the most pressing issues revealed through Translating. Choosing a combination of Responses that don't increase mental turmoil and addresses the truth of what Translated thoughts seem to be communicating.

*"Whatever I decide to do, I don't want it to move me closer to self-injury. Since I feel trapped but confused about what steps I can take to feel freer, I need to pick a course of action that addresses my need to feel like I'm choosing this life—that it's not just 'happening' to me. There are a lot of things I can do to feel better, and ruminating isn't one of them. Maybe I could lay off the coffee and have a cup of chamomile tea; maybe I could use some vacation*

*days to think about how I can realistically transition to a job I like better. Maybe I could close my office door or put on headphones and soothing music while I work and remember why I stay in this job, even though it's challenging sometimes. Maybe this stress is more about feeling personally 'trapped' and without a voice. Maybe I need some time to reflect when I'm clear so I can Listen to and Translate what's really true. Maybe I can take a few breaks throughout the day to go outside (or into the bathroom, closet, car) to reduce the amount of stimuli my mind is trying to process. Maybe I could sit here for a few minutes with my eyes closed and stay in the viewer mode to see more clearly what the main character in my story should do next. I don't have to fix it all right now, but I have lots of options for Responding to my feelings in a way that stabilizes me and keeps me from popping off. I can take more directed action when I'm clear. I'll try one of the simple ideas and decide what's next based on how I feel."*

Stopping the use of self-harm is facilitated by learning how to live with directed effort and to maintain an intention to reduce your extreme responses to life. The tools available through NPLTR allow you to do exactly that, even if (early on in the learning process) you end up self-injuring when the choices you make don't lead you where you wanted to go. Growing your capacity for self-governance will incrementally balance your Response tendencies and allow you to choose self-supporting tactics that actually work to reduce mental chaos. Over time, you'll feel far enough from self-injury that you're not in daily danger, and you won't need to be quite as vigilant. But even if self-harming urges were to stick around in some small way, the only real question is how effectively you're able to NPLTR and derail your cycle of violence with skills *other* than self-injury. You always need to cope with life in some way, and NPLTR can work for any situation.

As you start to work with the ideas described in the following chapters, focus on Noticing during every other step of the process. Notice if what you're doing feels like it may drive you to self-injury. Notice, after you Pause, if you're in a state where you need to distract yourself until you get over the urges to self-injure. Notice, as you Listen, that you have a lightning-quick reaction to certain thoughts. Notice, as you Translate, that you have a *choice* about how you interpret your thoughts. Notice, as you Respond, which tactics work to ease your tension in particular situations and which are likely to escalate your tension.

Eventually, you'll learn to Listen to and Translate your thoughts and emotions as they arise. At first, simply give yourself permission to Notice, even if what you Notice is so overwhelming that you have to stop looking at it. Just don't self-injure as an instant Response to your emotional pain, and you'll be on your way.

## No Substitutes

There's really no substitute for self-injury. The release achieved through self-inflicted violence is unique and simply can't be recreated, *especially* through thinking. The goal with NPLTR is not to try to get the *same* relief that self-injury would provide, but to tolerate your pain and redirect your thoughts *without* self-injury—even if it means you don't get the same relief you may have become used to. Eventually, Noticing, Pausing, Listening and Translating will create a sense of ease that instantly washes away urges to self-injure. Responses borne from compassion and patience are infinitely more nourishing than self-harming Responses. But even the glorious relief provided by getting to what's true and Responding skillfully is not the *same* relief that self-injury provides.

Make no mistake—the process of letting go of any addiction, self-injury included, revolves around reducing urges and creating a substitute addiction to something healthier. You're really just trading ideas of what's OK and what's desirable. As you learn to live longer and longer without stimulating your brain with violence, what you *want* will change. You'll crave something *other* than the feelings created by self-injury, so you won't need your substitute addiction (NPLTR) to feel exactly like self-injury.

Please remember the Ground Rules as you work through the following chapters, and don't expect that you should be able to instantly stop self-injuring. If self-injury has been one of your key coping strategies, it's normal to find yourself returning to self-injury after long periods of coping in other ways. That said, don't justify your self-injury habit. Change it. Just set realistic expectations. It may be difficult to completely rid yourself of urges—after all, you've developed a *habit*. To stop self-injuring, you may have to drop a million clearing thoughts into your well of muck. If you persevere, you'll succeed in clearing up those mental waters and treating yourself with compassion. It all starts with Noticing.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

# Noticing

**N**oticing is the Pause's prerequisite and facilitator. As you start Noticing, you may be surprised how many different bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings are trying to get your attention when you're in or nearing distress. It's not that Noticing can *solve* a problem, but the information you Notice about your current experience indicates what the problem is, how you feel about it, how serious it is, and also when the problem has been resolved.

There can be an overwhelming array of sensations, thoughts, and reactions to Notice when you need to attend to yourself in some way. You can avoid getting caught up in what you're Noticing by taking your movie seat and watching what's happening inside you. From that vantage, it's easier to keep conscious control of what you allow your mind to attach to so you Notice the *important* stuff, not just mental chatter and emotional reactions. Once you're used to Noticing, you *can't help* but Notice the early-warning signals that indicate your need to take action or attend to yourself in some way. Certain types of sensations, thoughts, and feelings are most important to Notice when you're learning to identify and Respond to your own indications of need.

- **Body signals:** Signals that indicate your level of physical wellness, like hunger, thirst, or other sensations that result from normal bodily processes. The Response to these body signals is usually pretty clear. Hungry? Eat. Have an itch? Scratch it. Taking action on your own behalf when you receive signals from your body may sound like a relatively simple part of taking care of yourself, but sometimes you don't attend to your needs despite the signals your body gives you (e.g., not eating until you're famished, not using the bathroom until you're bursting, staying in situations that feel unsafe.) Taking thoughtful, deliberate action when you Notice simple signals of need, distress, or imbalance is an easy way to practice Noticing and Responding—without having to dive into emotional content in order to make decisions about what to do next. The skills you develop for Responding to basic body signals create a foundation for Responding to more complicated signals of need.
- **Emotional distress:** Signals that indicate your degree of emotional wellness and communicate information about your current mental state. When your mind is fertile ground for confusion or emotionally based reactions, these signals let you know it's time to tread carefully while you attend to your needs. Emotional distress signals will tell you when you're feeling steady or vulnerable, if you're safe to take on a triggering situation, or if you're likely to resort to self-injury. Responding to emotional distress signals may be difficult because the signals themselves are so powerful that you may get lost in the *expression* of the emotional signal (crying, obsessive thinking, violent venting) and forget to view the experience as an indicator that you need to alter your thoughts and your emotional relationship to your situation.

Noticing is the first step toward Pausing but taking action on your own behalf after you've Noticed can be difficult when you're emotionally overwhelmed. Noticing and Responding to signals of emotional distress long before they trigger the Hulk can help you preemptively Pause, Listen, and Translate (or distract yourself) so you can choose a tool other than violence. Becoming attuned to your common signals of emotional distress can alert you when you have critically important time on your hands—time to step in and change course before your mind raises the urge to self-injure as the best solution to your distress.

■ **Self-injury urges:** You know these signals, and they come from very specific places in your body and your mind. You likely have a handful of consistent indicators that you're feeling like self-injuring and a strong sense of how your urges can differ. You've likely Noticed how long you can linger in the sensations that come along with your urges, as if they just won't go away. You've likely also felt how little time there can be between the urge to self-injure and the action, as if the part of your mind governing self-injury has turned everything off in the brain except the quick reactions that satisfy its urge.

Noticing self-injury urges and their precursors is one of the most important aspects of stopping a habit of self-injury. Immediately before you decide to take self-injury action, you may have less than a few moments to make a space for considering other options. Noticing your urges and recognizing them as a signal that you need to create a Pause can help you train your brain to slow the action down when urges arise. Inside the Pause, you may sort out an appropriate Response—but first, in order to create your Pause, you have to Notice when your mind is suggesting that you relieve your pain with pain. Inside the act of Noticing resides a choice—to either take no action or to Pause long enough to work toward determining the best course of action. Every time you make the choice to Notice, it becomes easier to Pause and Respond without violence.

## Choose to Notice

Your body and mind may be giving you signals you're missing, especially if your Noticing sensors are buried and hard to connect with. Thankfully, if your internal signals have become quiet or distant, you can reconnect with the orchestra of systems that work together to alert you to physical or emotional danger. Tuning into your experience helps you detect your satisfied or unmet needs and tells you when it's time to come to your own defense—even when you are your attacker.

Whether it's Noticing the tension of history coming to life in a current conversation or feeling an urge to run without stopping, you're capable of Noticing, moment to moment, what's happening inside you, even if you don't have words to convey what you're Noticing. Just Noticing the signals trying to get your attention can compel you to consider skillful action, even though you may not know exactly how to interpret or act on what you've Noticed.

You do, of course, have the choice to *not* Notice. You have the choice to look away when you Notice something you don't like, and the choice of how—or if—you'll work to resolve any tension associated with what you're Noticing. Say you Notice that you have a minor headache. In the moment directly after Noticing the headache, you think to Respond by taking something for it, because you'd like to rid yourself of your pain. This is a moment when, having Noticed, you have the choice to take the aspirin or to simply endure the pain.

The same type of thing is true with self-injury. When you Notice signals that unmet basic or emotional needs could escalate to self-injury urges, you can choose if or how you Respond. You may not have the tools yet to treat your self-injury urges as easily as a headache, but you can eventually learn what remedy to apply in any situation by using what you've learned through previous Noticing. Rooted in with the act of Noticing are identifying what the problem is, what the remedy is, and if it works.

In order to stave off or interrupt a self-injury episode, it's essential to change your view from one of being swept away by what's happening to one of simply *Noticing* what's happening (as nonjudgmentally as possible). Notice that you're in a state where you're likely to be triggered and possibly choose self-injury to cope; Notice your escalating bodily and mental tension; Notice that you're in (or could go into) a place you don't want to go mentally; Notice that you're in a situation you need to change or leave; Notice the crucial moments when it is necessary to use new skills to change your cycle of self-injury. Noticing *always* precedes taking action because action based on clear Noticing is more targeted than action based on confused or emotionally reactive thinking.



After Noticing, sometimes the action point is clear and you can bypass Listening and Translating, because you've heard it all before. Other times, you may move slowly and deliberately through Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding. Still other times, you may have to move from Noticing straight to a nap. How you choose to work through what you Notice should be governed by the intensity of your distress. Checking in on your signals of distress and their intensity can help you choose which coping strategies to use and when to use them.

## Noticing

The next time you Notice uncomfortable body signals, increased emotional distress, or self-injury urges, try not to take action until you've created a Pause and worked with what you're Noticing. Consider the questions below frequently to get a baseline idea of what you Notice when you're clear, when tension is escalating, or when you're about to self-injure.

- What bodily sensations are you Noticing?**
- What emotional sensations are you Noticing?**
- What mental activity are you Noticing?**
- Is what you're Noticing serious, passing, dangerous, or confusing?**
- How intense are your signals? Do you feel pressed to take immediate action on what you're Noticing, or can you sit with it for a while without needing to take action?**
- What are the primary feelings, thoughts, or sensations associated with what you're Noticing? (For help finding words for your feelings, check out the Feeling Words list in the Translation section of Chapter 14.)**
- Do you have the energy to attend to what you're Noticing, or do you need to ignore it? Is a Response option clear, or would it require work to figure out an appropriate action to attend to the sensations, thoughts, and feelings you're Noticing?**
- How are you Responding to the signals you're Noticing as you Notice them? Is your Response to get into your movie theater seat and watch what's happening? Are you Responding to what you Notice by isolating yourself, ruminating on painful thoughts, feeling angry or fearful, biting your fingernails or smoking, spinning in mental chaos, or bouncing quickly between trigger thoughts?**
- What does Noticing *feel* like?**



Notice the signals your body and brain give you, especially when they indicate that you need to take steps to alter what's happening inside you and use energy to get back to a more stable state. You're going to use the energy anyway, right? Whether you use your energy to brace, fake, hurt, or ignore yourself—or to Notice and tolerate the moment—you'll be expending energy toward managing what's happening inside you. Make your energy count. And don't forget to Notice the good stuff, too.

Your brain will do what it most commonly does unless *You* step in and redirect it. If you Notice that you need support but decide not to take action in Response to your own signals, you're training your brain to abandon you when you really need help. Life leaves you alone often enough, so don't do it to yourself if you can help it. Each moment you *choose* to Notice your own signals without taking habitual action is a moment your brain isn't being allowed to dictate what you pay attention to; *You're* controlling the sensing and the action-taking.

After a lot of practice Noticing, you'll start to identify a few precious moments between Noticing your bodily sensations, emotional distress, or self-injury urges and taking action on them; that's the time to grab

your Pause. In those moments, you'll learn that it's possible to create a Pause despite what your sensations, thoughts, and feelings are telling you. You'll Notice that you have an early opportunity to reroute your thinking and choose actions other than self-injury. Creating and widening your Pause can only come *after* you Notice your own signals. You'll start to Notice that your internal sensors are telling you exactly what you need to know to Respond to your needs. You just need to learn to read your own signals.



## What Are You Getting?

There are a few benefits of using self-injury; you can feel them directly after you hurt yourself.

But you may not have thought much about what you're *getting* out of emotional escalation and self-injury.

**What's attractive about having an intense emotional experience in reaction to the external aspects of the world?**

**What's attractive about extreme emotional reactions to your internal content?**

**As you make the choice to rage, fall to pieces, or self-injure, what are you really trying to get out of it? Is it freedom from the work of conjuring up strength when pain is all that's on your mind? Is it the strange pleasure of using pain to prove messages from the past?**

**What do violence and emotional extremism get you?**

Of course, you may also consider that there are benefits to *not* self-injuring.

**What do you get out of *not* self-injuring?**

**What's attractive about finding creative ways to hold yourself together when you feel like falling apart? Is it the habit of strength? Is it a feeling of self-ownership?**

**What does coping without violence get you?**

## Noticing Self-Talk

The way you react to stress comes through in your self-talk. If you're supporting yourself, your self-talk conveys encouragement and lack of judgment. If you're undermining yourself, your self-talk is negative and demeaning. Start to Notice the overall tone of your self-talk without necessarily believing what you're saying to yourself. Notice the energy behind your self-talk as you move through your days. Notice how it changes when you're clear, when you're queuing up a self-injury episode, or when the Hulk is out on the town. What would your pastor, best friend, or grandmother think about your self-talk, if they could be a fly on the wall of your mind? What if you said the things you say to yourself to other people? How would those people react if you spoke to them the way you speak to yourself? Are you as kind and patient with yourself as you would be with a child, or are you vulgar and demeaning as you demand perfection of yourself? Odds are that you'd never say to someone else some of the things you'd say to yourself, and even if you do say hurtful things to others, you're likely more hurtful to yourself.

As you practice Noticing your self-talk, you'll Notice that the quality of your self-talk not only changes with your moods, but directly affects your ability to Notice and get to a Pause. If you dive into, argue with, or believe your negative self-talk, you may end up so trapped in your thoughts that a Pause is impossible until you step out of the mental activity by changing your view. Over time and with practice Listening and Translating, your self-talk will change and you'll get used to the sensation of compassion. You may actually hear yourself saying self-supporting statements during crisis times. For now, just Notice that your self-talk exists, Notice its overall character during various experiences, and become aware of how you use self-talk to support or hurt yourself.

# Practicing Noticing

Once you Notice you're likely to become triggered or move toward self-harm, you'll know that the next step in creating a Pause is tolerating what you Notice without taking immediate action. Practice consciously Noticing what's happening inside you, especially right before, during, and after a self-injury episode. You want to desensitize yourself to the most common sensations and thoughts that accompany self-injury ("Oh, it's that old stuff again . . .") so you can Notice when new thoughts or sensations come into the mix ("Oops, a new Kid on the Bus needs attention"). Notice *how* you're Noticing, and try to consciously change your view so you can more easily choose what you do in Response to your body sensations, emotions, or thoughts. As often as possible, try to be aware of what's happening inside you instead of letting the harmful habits of your mind choose what you pay attention to. Changing your self-injury habit involves actively controlling your habits of mind, since the mental patterns you've developed repeatedly take you to painful places. The suggestions below can improve your ability to Notice and to *tolerate* what you Notice.

## *Notice Obsessive Thinking*

Notice when you're having obsessive thoughts. What do they feel like? In general, what's the content of your obsessive thoughts? Is it painful, wishful, or compulsively generated and undirected? It's up to you to choose how you use your brain. When obsessive thoughts come up, Notice how they make you feel and what they make you want to do. Without taking action, consider how you can change your view to take you further out of the obsessive thinking rather than further into it.

## *The "Most Commonly Noticed" Award*

Attention to your own experience waxes and wanes throughout every day, but the types of things you Notice (pain, pleasure, colors, sounds, textures) tends to be fairly consistent. Start to Notice what sensations, thoughts, feelings, or external stimuli you Notice most often. Do you focus your attention and awareness so keenly on certain parts of reality that everything else is obscured? Do you focus more on the way people are dressed than on the environment they're in? Do you Notice your own painful sensations more than anything positive or external to you? Why do you Notice these "Most Noticed" things? What does Noticing what you're Noticing feel like? Notice what you *haven't* been Noticing. Purposely take your attention from a habitually Noticed object or thought to a more random, atypical one, and practice shifting your attention away from the Most Commonly Noticed realities. They've already gotten enough of your attention.

## *Finding Words for What You Notice*

There's much more on finding words in the section on Translation, but suffice it to say that finding words for what you're Noticing is critical. It allows you to identify your experience clearly and then question the accuracy of your identification. In the Translation section, you'll find a list of words for feelings and states of being. Use that list (or others you find online) to help you find words for what you're Noticing. Odds are you'll be able to identify with a lot of feelings at once. Start Noticing that in any given moment, many sensations, thoughts, and emotions exist at once. This moment is not all pain, and it's not all joy, but the proportion of each that your brain identifies with changes depending on the situation and on how you're using your brain. Use the clear times to practice non-emotionally loaded Noticing, and try to find words for what you're Noticing. Just be careful about making meanings, connections, assumptions, or conclusions about what you Notice. Now isn't the time to Listen, Translate, or Respond. Just Notice what you Notice, and Notice how it feels to identify it while you're feeling it.





## Notice the Pleasure

Noticing pain is easy; it has no problem grabbing your attention. Is it possible that you don't Notice the calm, enjoyable, or easy moments of your life simply because they aren't magnified in your vision the way pain and suffering are? Start Noticing how often you actually feel *free* of urges to self-injure, or even when you feel happy. Determine your baseline: Are you 90 percent ruminating on painful thoughts and 10 percent "fine" (even if it's not even the "fine" you want to be just yet)? Notice things that actually give you pleasure, if only to remember that life is not all pain. In your journal, track the times you Notice sensations of true pleasure, resonance, and alignment in your life. When your self-injury filter tells you that life is *all* pain, refer to your own experiences to remember that it's not true. Every day, week, or month you go without self-injury allows you to experience and Notice more pleasure, which will naturally change your baseline. You'll have more "fine" times and fewer painful times.

## Noticing the Body and Breath

Section Five of this book describes awareness activities that use your body and your breath to bypass your chaotic mind. Get in the habit of doing a few of these types of activities throughout each day to check in on your sensations. It's interesting to do awareness exercises at the same time each day and make notes. You can see just how different your sensations are from one day to another and how you can *change* your sensations through changing your awareness. Noticing what's happening inside you can be uncomfortable, especially if you try to do it only when you're upset. Use awareness activities during your calm times, too, in order to Notice what *not* being upset feels like. With practiced awareness and visualization skills, you can mentally manufacture the feeling of ease as an antidote to your pain instead of *losing* yourself in pain.

## People-Watch

It's generally not a good idea to compare yourself to others; this can be a very slippery slope. There's one way to do so that can be useful, however, because it demonstrates that we're all basically the same in the way we externally project our internal states. Take a few minutes to people-watch in a public place. Notice how, even when someone believes he's "hiding" his pain, you can sometimes sense an overall vibe of introverted or depressed energy. Notice how you can *see* open, happy energy and you can *see* the external expression of closed off or pained energy. As you watch others, look beyond your initial reaction and really try to *see* them. What indications of people's moods and psychology are evident through their speech, body language, or actions? What would you bet they're thinking? What are they feeling? Is it obvious? Why or why not? Granting that this is fantasy, since you don't know your subjects' thoughts, is there anything you can see that would remedy their situations and allow them to calm down, perk up, or approach the situation differently so their energy wouldn't be keeping them from a relatively balanced mental place? What would you suggest to create more ease for the unwitting subject of your study?

This activity isn't meant to create judgment or to tell you (or others) how to be; you can be introverted or angry or whatever you choose. Just Notice that emotions and mental activity give off a tangible vibe, because you communicate how you feel in many ways. When you're depressed, a different vibe comes off you than when you're feeling upbeat. You may have a very personal story, but you're also similar to others in the way you demonstrate what's happening to you without words. Your body language, energy, and other signals give so much information, and it's easier to Notice these signals in yourself if you can also see them in other people. Think about how your body language and actions demonstrate your moods and psychology. When you're clear or when you're bracing, what types of vibes do you give off? What habits do you have in spoken language, body language, or energy when you're struggling? What about when you're clear? Do your eyes, facial tension or body movements display your emotions? Do you look at the floor instead of looking in people's eyes? Do you purposely give off a "leave me alone"

vibe? Can you recognize that you give off obvious external signals that indicate your internal state? Do these external signals draw others to you or push them away?



## Noticing Before Injuring

Creating and widening the Pause can come only after you Notice that there actually *are* moments between “clarity” and becoming triggered—moments between the urge to self-injure and taking the action. These are crucial moments that you need to use for your own benefit. Think back on some of your recent self-injury episodes. Can you identify key moments when you Noticed that you were slipping from maintaining relative control to being triggered and going for a ride with your emotions and thoughts? What indications did you Notice before you became triggered, or before you used self-harm, that suggested you may be likely to resort to self-harming behavior? Did you Notice any internal messages that suggested something *other* than self-harm? If so, did you use self-harming tactics instead of taking the time to consider other options? How did you interpret and Respond to your sensations of distress? Can you learn to Notice these indications earlier in your cycle, so you can take advantage of the time you have to change your mental direction?

## Clarity and Confusion

Think back on a time when you’ve been absolutely clear on something that you wanted, no matter how simple it was (something that was good for *You*, mind you). What differences exist between your physical and mental sensations when you’re “sure” or “clear” and when you’re unable to make a decision because you’re bouncing between perspectives or caught up in an argument with the Kids on the Bus? What sensations and thoughts accompany your “calm,” and what sensations and thoughts accompany your rising anxiety or deepening depression? Try to tune into the memory of how sensations associated with clarity feel even *while* your thoughts are spinning. In other words, when you’re triggered or confused, tap into the part of you that understands what clarity feels like. The sensations you experience when coming up with Response options will indicate if they’re coming from a clear or confused place. Knowing what to do in a crisis is easier if you can filter your interpretations and action through a “does this feel like clarity or confusion?” filter.

## Self-Talk 101

Check in often to Notice how you talk to yourself. Do you have catchphrases that indicate you’re starting to struggle with your thoughts or emotions? What do you say to yourself that you can recognize as an indication you may be headed toward self-injury? What are the most common phrases you hear yourself say, internally or externally? Notice your vocal tone when you speak to yourself (or to others). Is it harsh? Demanding? Demeaning? Notice the venom, self-pity, or negativity in whatever words leave your mouth or whatever words kick around in your head. When your mind is spinning, try to talk gently to yourself. When the tone is berating, change it. Say the words again in a nonviolent or supportive way. Talk yourself down from your ledges, as if you could behave as your own friend, instead of bullying yourself with your self-talk. Notice that the way you talk to yourself has a serious effect on your outlook and ability to cope with stress.

## Checking Momentum

It’s important to learn to Notice when there’s momentum, but not exactly substance, behind an action you’re taking or an idea you’re repeating. Sometimes, the brain runs habitual routines that govern your actions. If you were to inquire about why, however, you wouldn’t find much “reason” behind it other than “My brain is just doing this. I feel *compelled*.” When momentum is driving your actions and you “can’t stop”, you need to Notice that you’re following a mindless course.



Notice that there are times when you don't *want* to think about what you're doing. Is it because if you stop the momentum to inquire what's behind it, the Kids on the Bus will pipe up? Are you enjoying the freedom of running on autopilot, feeling *driven*? When you run with the momentum of your obsessive or addiction-fueled actions, your brain may tell you, "Go, go, go! Don't stop and think!" But stepping in and directing the action is crucial to stopping your brain from driving the rest of you around without *Your* conscious control.

Your ability to Notice is tested in the moments when you're most vulnerable, because that's when habitual or knee-jerk reactions are most likely to trump awareness. Even if you don't know how to Respond in a way that manages your situation without self-injury, the ability to Notice is a prerequisite of creating a Pause between becoming triggered and going down the same old habitual, potentially violent, road. It's also a big part of getting to know and relate honestly with yourself about your own indicators of stress and vulnerability. Noticing helps you to see that by taking intentional steps in critical moments, you can stop or at least delay habit from taking you for a ride.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

## Pausing

**O**K, you've Noticed. You've Noticed that you're suffering and bumping around inside your own head, and that if you had a direction at all, it would be circular. You desperately want the internal chatter and related pain to stop, but you don't know how to *make* it stop without your old friend self-injury. You fear that without a way to break out of the cycle, you'll just keep going around in the same painful circles. Whether it's hopeless self-talk, increased muscular tension, or repetitive painful thoughts, your Noticing skills are relaying clear indications that your self-injury habits are trying to take control of your behavior. You sense your volatility growing, but as you're about to emphatically resort to self-injury, your newfangled NPLTR skills offer up the idea of taking a Pause.

You can create any number of Pauses as you're attending to what's happening inside you, but the initial Pause needs to be created the *very instant* you Notice your own signals of distress. Pause *before* the switch is flipped. *Before* thinking gets muddy. *Before* self-injury takes over. That's the time when you have greater ability to stop the action and find ways to manage your mental content *without* extreme reactions. You can keep self-injury from coming out of the toolbox if you make use of your more productive aspects of mind to create, widen, and maintain your Pauses. Though a Pause can be created at any time, it'll be easiest for *You* to direct your Response if your brain hasn't yet started to run the self-injury program.

Pausing as a concept is pretty simple, but it's not always easy to create, extend, or maintain a Pause. It requires mental presence and self-control to willfully slow down your reactions to thoughts and emotions at a time when your mind is anything *but* controlled. It may take a few seconds or a few minutes to create a Pause, and you may need to maintain it for a few hours, or even for a few days. During that time, even though you may not be rid of your self-injury urges or their painful instigators, maintaining your Pause keeps emotional momentum from taking you over the edge to self-injuring. Pausing essentially asks the parts of your mind that *aren't* in chaos to buffer you from the unruly Kids on the Bus that are encouraging your painful feelings or emotional overreactions. Creating a Pause doesn't necessarily *mute* the confused, volatile aspects of your mind; it gives you permission not to take any action *based* on those thoughts.

The Pause is in itself a Response to the signs of distress you Notice. Pausing is really the *best* first Response in any situation: it stops action so you can make yourself mentally safe enough to either engage with or distract yourself from the internal content affecting you. A Pause can come as a thought, an action, or just a space in time *without* thought or action. Creating and maintaining the Pause acts to wedge open the space and time between emotional pain and a quick reaction, so it's a Response that allows for further and more thoughtfully considered Responses. During that break in the action, whether it's before or during self-injury, you give yourself time to try to change your relationship to your pain, even if it's a struggle to figure out how to do so without self-injury. As you maintain your Pauses, you'll Notice that they naturally widen, putting more time and mental resources at your fingertips so that when it's time for a decision, the Kids on the Bus have all been put in their place and *You* are driving the bus. Widening a Pause, for our purposes, means more than lengthening. You're not attempting simply to increase the *time* between self-injury urges and action; you're *actively working* to use that time willfully, soothing or

stopping your painful experience with skills other than self-sabotage or self-harm. You're attempting to create, maintain and widen each Pause.

You create the Pause when you consider taking a moment to do something other than dive into your pain; you maintain the Pause while you Respond further by Listening and Translating; you learn to widen the Pause by practicing those skills. You create the Pause when you consciously hold back self-injury action; you maintain the Pause by using distraction techniques to become clear enough to decide on further Responses; you learn to widen the Pause as you get used to using skills other than self-injury. You create the Pause when you remember that you want to handle self-injury urges and spinning thoughts with compassion and patience; you maintain the Pause while you try out further Responses—even if, in the end, your Pause is broken and you self-injure, despite your wishes to do things differently. Creating and maintaining a Pause gives you a chance to take action *besides* self-injury, and practicing maintaining the Pause naturally widens each successive Pause.

Realize that as you learn to create or maintain a Pause, you have the ability to watch your brain react in all its habitual, fast-track, violent ways, and *You* need to *purposefully* step in to change those reactionary habits. It will take consistent work to break the cravings for the release that comes with physical pain, and to create enough space between impulse and action to use your new skills to craft effective Responses to your internal struggles. Creating a Pause takes compassion; maintaining it takes willpower; widening it takes applied skill. Be patient, as each Pause starts small and very slowly widens, increasing your ability to cope without self-injury. Over time, Notice how the habit of Pausing creates a space that *You* can control, a space where skillful action can arise.

## Knowing How and When to Pause

Knowing how to Pause is useful in just about every situation: when you're trying to figure out the best way to say what you mean, when you're getting annoyed and want to handle a situation more gracefully, when you're feeling yourself start to spin mentally, when you're just about to self-injure. Identifying situations that are triggering you and Responding with a Pause will help you develop a habit of thinking things through instead of instantly reacting with heightened emotion and rash action.

Inside the Pause, you take only actions that allow you to come away from the idea of self-injuring—without thinking about your thoughts. Thinking about your thoughts, when you're agitated and about to self-injure, is one of the best ways to *guarantee* self-injury. Any action you take during an initial Pause should be soothing and create calm; it should not agitate you further. Once you start to widen the Pause, you can decide on strategies to address your mental content, but don't take any actions other than self-soothing until you've reached the safe space of a solid Pause. If you're still on shaky ground, there's a good chance you'll lose your Pause if you try to take action based on your painful thoughts. Any time you're maintaining a Pause or trying to decide what's next, if you Notice thoughts or actions that are leading you back toward self-injury, you need to remember to start the process again and create another Pause. Technically, you could Notice—Pause—Notice—Pause—Notice—Pause all day long. You could maintain and widen your Pause and never deal with your internal content because inside the Pause, you'd only make decisions that would keep you calm enough to not self-injure.

Remember that the best time to create your initial Pause is *right after* you Notice any internal sensations of distress. This is when you have precious few moments to claim some solid ground, before your self-harming habits take over and start overreacting, overanalyzing, and pitching self-injury as the most logical coping tool. You want to encourage self-injury urges and habits to stay *dormant*. When mental trouble starts brewing, create a Pause that says, "Whoa, now, brain, we don't want self-injury taking the wheel here. The first thing to do is to calm down. Then we can consider a course of action that doesn't make us suffer even more than we already do." Once you create the Pause, you can choose to Respond by distracting yourself from the internal content, or by engaging the content through Listening and Translating, or by working with inner inquiry activities.



Notice, then Respond by Pausing. Maintain the Pause, then Respond by using tools to get calm. Pause again to determine which skills to use to widen the Pause and get your supportive mental characters back in control of your actions. Use your skills, take self-supporting action. Pause again and see how it worked. Stop to consider your actions and their results so you can strategize toward your own wellness, even if you end up self-injuring in the end. You may not be able to change the painful aspects of your life right away, but you can still slowly change your relationship to your pain through Noticing what's happening and Pausing your action. In that Pause, you can come up with ways to change the impact of your emotional content without brute force.

It may take more time than you'd like to learn how and when to create a Pause and to develop and properly use the tools available to you inside your Pause. Just stay with the goal of intentionally choosing your Response to intense mental chaos and self-injury urges without resorting to self-injury. It's never a waste of time to try not to self-injure; the act of trying to create a Pause is its own success, even if in the end you take action you regret. Once you've learned to Notice signals of distress and you more naturally maintain your Pauses, you can work toward refining your Responses, so they become ever-more effective and compassionate. Even when you move well beyond self-harm as a coping option, the Pause will still be your best first Response toward working with emotional distress and making decisions that aren't based on habitual reactions.

## Compassion

Creating a Pause essentially teaches you to create space for compassion instead of instantly moving toward violent action or reaction. Inside the Pause lies a chance to consider that you don't deserve physical pain as an antidote to emotional pain. If you are the combination of what life did to you and what you did with it, can you try to be *empathetic* toward all you've had to go through to get to this point, yet still be *responsible* for the place you're in? Offering yourself compassion is, in itself, giving yourself permission to accept your history and limitations while addressing parts of yourself that you can change. Compassion doesn't punish you and leave you suffering with emotional wounds or make you ignore what's real; it gives you a free pass to say, "Yeah, I've made some choices and had some experiences that weren't all that great, but I don't have to keep beating myself up for them." Compassion lets you live without punishing yourself or others for how your experiences, thoughts, or choices have affected your life; it allows you to move on.

Compassion in action can be as simple as having the thought, right before you self-injure, that you want something other than violence for yourself. You have to *purposely* infuse tidbits of compassion and objectivity into your experience, so you can eventually Respond to self-injury urges with patience instead of frustration. When self-harm urges come on, offer your body and soul the powerful gifts of compassionate thoughts and actions. Each time you do, it will feel more natural to love yourself when you would have previously punished yourself.

The notion that you actually deserve compassion is not vain or grandiose. Regardless of who you are, what you've done, or what's been done to you, you don't deserve violence. Regardless of what you think you deserve, abusing yourself mentally or emotionally isn't an effective way to create lasting peace in your mind. Creating the Pause can be difficult, primarily because it requires a commitment to treat yourself with compassion. It asks you to stop punishing yourself, to look objectively at what you're feeling and thinking, and to consider your Responses carefully. You do deserve compassion, and if you want it from other people, you need to start by giving it to yourself.

It's compassionate even to *allow* yourself a Pause, let alone to maintain it, given how intensely your thoughts are begging for your attention. Saying "no" to your own thoughts isn't exactly typical, since thoughts can be pretty convincing. But how many times have you popped off after you've heard only the first few words of a repetitive painful thought or felt the first wave of a painful feeling? You probably have good reason to not want to hear some of the things your mind may beat you up with, so there are times when you absolutely

need to stop Listening to your thoughts. Inside the Pause is one of those times. Compassion says that it's OK *not* to Listen to the parts of you that berate you or suggest that you self-injure; it says that you can have a break and come back to the confusing or painful content when you feel clear. You don't have to force yourself to wrestle with your internal content. It's not as if going into the lion's den unprotected makes you stronger. Learn when to Pause, and inside that Pause, know when it becomes safe to acknowledge your thoughts and when it's best to *stop* acknowledging your thoughts.

If you're going to meet your overall goal of not self-injuring, you'll need to choose strategies other than self-injury to cope with difficult emotions. This means your primary tasks are really pretty simple: to avoid becoming triggered if at all possible, and if you do become triggered, to Notice what's happening and create a Pause to give yourself a chance to overcome your distress in a way that doesn't require self-injury. If you interrupt the cycle and Pause for a fraction of a second to interject a more compassionate option, even if you don't take that option, you're on your way to a new way of thinking when crisis arises. Borne from each of these fractions of compassionate seconds are evermore minutes, hours, and days without self-injury. Each of these seconds is valuable to you and will help support you as you do the work of identifying and relating to the parts of your being that are crying out for your help or understanding.

As you work with the Pause, you'll Notice that you become more able to choose Response options that treat your needs compassionately. Some days, creating and maintaining a Pause will be relatively easy, and others, it may occupy much of your day. Your first Pauses may be clear, lightning-quick "Don't self-injure" thoughts inside a whirlwind of mental chaos, and they may come and go before you're able to make good use of them. As you maintain your Pauses with compassion, patience, and a good dose of effort, they'll widen. You'll have more access to the time inside each Pause to use tools to either soothe yourself or address what's happening to you.

While you create and maintain your Pauses, you'll get a new view of the components of your crisis. In these moments, while setting aside the analysis of your pain, you're more likely to hear the voice of compassion—the voice of *You*—even if it's mixed in with the voices of your fear, self-loathing, or anger. And when you master the Pause, you'll no longer instantly resort to self-deprecating or violent thoughts. You'll be able to stop yourself from self-injuring and ease your pain with something that doesn't hurt.

## The Decider

It's useful to realize that you typically try to make decisions as quickly as possible after having a thought. Pausing is about giving yourself as much time as you need to come back to a mental place where you're not likely to take dramatic or harmful action. It's about letting the quick reactions and complex decision making go until you can sense that you're not likely to self-injure. When you create an initial Pause, you decide only to still your thoughts and calm yourself enough to stop all violent action; when you maintain the Pause, you decide to take specific steps only to soothe yourself and prepare your mind to Respond to your situation from a clearer vantage point.

Pausing is an attempt to take away mental stimuli and attachment to long-term decision making, giving you permission to pull yourself out of your internal fight and take a breather before deciding how to care for yourself. As such, the time inside a Pause is not a good time to make any decision outside of what's necessary to care for your most pressing needs. Unless you're in immediate danger, it's important to let decision making go until you're clear. The Pause is not the time to make grand plans or major life decisions; it's not the time to judge, condemn, or berate yourself. It's also not the time to believe much of what you think.

Don't make predictions about what's possible or be too rigid about what's true when the Kids on the Bus are rioting or the Hulk is about to burst out. The Pause is the time to *stop* the momentum of self-injury, get off the ride your thoughts are taking you on, and make space between your intense and painful thoughts and the resulting self-injury actions. When you're clear enough, you can move on to deciding what you need in life and how you'll get it without violence, or how you'll rearrange your broader prior-

ities. But the Pause is really a handful of moments you purposely create and then lengthen, when you consciously decide to resist summary judgments and decisions so you can take action that clears your head without more pain. Given your knowledge about the intense pain your brain can create, you know that acting on painful thoughts doesn't lend itself to good decision making. Give yourself permission to not make crucial decisions when you're freaking out, and take *only* the actions that will soothe you without self-harm.

## Overriding Painful Self-Talk

Pauses are often necessary because of your self-talk. You have an experience or a thought, and it means something to you. You tell yourself something about that thought and meaning, and this stimulates additional thoughts and feelings. Your own self-talk will determine how often you need a Pause and how quickly you get over being triggered. With time, your connection to your inner strength will be more direct than your connection to your self-injury urges, and you'll calmly take on thoughts and self-talk which currently send you over your edge. Initially, though, to get a Pause, you may have to simply turn off, change, or stop Listening to your self-talk when you Notice it becoming overwhelmingly negative. One way to do this is through the use of a mantra or repeated supportive statements.

### *Mantra and Repeated Supportive Statements*

This isn't exactly a yoga book, but it does include practices from yoga that are useful in trying to retain a sense of internal harmony as you change the aspects of your being that get in *Your way*. One of these practices is mantra. The use of mantra is very similar to the practice of using repeated supportive statements to undermine habitual negative thinking or self-talk. You don't need to practice yoga to know that the words or syllables you repeat have an effect on your mental and physical sensations. Mantra takes advantage of this by focusing in on healing tones and words. The tones, syllables, and words in mantra can be of any language, and of any combination, because mantra is about the energetic momentum of sound waves. The energetic properties of sound are used to elicit a particular internal response as the sounds are repeated.

For our purposes, then, mantra is a syllable or series of syllables selected for the particular sound and physical effect they carry. For example, if you were in an agitated state, vocalizing syllables that are high-pitched and pointed like a child's screech would likely increase your agitation, whereas syllables with lower or monotone character like "hmmmmm" would be more relaxing. The idea with mantra is to use sound to calm your brain when your thoughts or self-talk are getting out of control so you can get back in touch with the calm detachment inherent in the viewer perspective.

As it applies to daily life, mantra is often treated more like a personal statement—your slogan—and this use of specific, repeated words can have a powerful effect on your mind. You probably already use mantras or repeated *harmful* statements, such as "I hate \_\_\_\_\_," "hmpffff" (with a disdainful tone) or "It doesn't matter." Any combination of syllables you find yourself saying repeatedly in response to a particular situation can become a mantra, so be careful which words you repeat to yourself. Your brain believes what you tell it, and you believe what your brain tells you. The energy behind your words can have a strong physical and mental effect on you. If you're going to choose a mantra for your life or repeat specific statements, Notice the physical and mental effects of repeating that mantra. Then decide if you need to alter it to be more supportive or nonjudgmental.

Here's an example of how mantra may be used in daily life. You could Notice your brain repeating the words, "I'm never going to be accepted." This mantra has the power to make you believe those words, and every time you repeat it, you solidify the idea behind those words. The negative vibration of that phrase would, naturally, carry into the way you lived your life; it would tell your body and mind just how unacceptable you are. But if you repeat the syllables, "I'm becoming more of who I want to be," you

create a different energy; you visualize and live a different reality. The tone and energy applied to your words and thoughts has the power to support, uplift, belittle, or undermine you. Choose a few supportive syllables or words to repeat to yourself in crisis times, and use the physical and energetic force of the sound waves to alter your brain's take on reality. If you're going to put sound and energy into the world, make the vibrations good ones.

If "mantra" is a word that has uncomfortable connotations for you, spin it, because mantra has very nearly the same effect as repeating supportive statements. When you need support in day-to-day life, or when you need to create a Pause because it's risky to think your thoughts, any series of supportive words can set a more positive mental tone. Use statements as gentle as "Shhh . . ." or "It'll be all right" or "Now is not the time to think about that" to stop the momentum of what's building inside you. Try vocalizing something like "ahh-hhhhhh" and focus on the sound and the vibration. Or say to your self-injury Kid, "I'm in a massive amount of pain right now, and self-injury isn't going to take this pain away," or "I already hurt enough", or "I'm not going to make this harder on myself than it already is."

Whether you call it mantra or repeated supportive statements, when you Notice painful thoughts, feelings, or negative self-talk, the act of using soothing tones, syllables, and messages can tap into the parts of you that are *beyond* pain. Use any non-harmful series of sounds or words to keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed by, or believing, your internal chaos. Protect yourself from the negative vibes that come along with self-hating or judgmental self-talk. Speak, sing, or hum whatever syllables or phrases remind you of your worth, your effort, your calm and compassionate nature. If compassion is hard to cultivate for yourself, consider how you would use your repeated supportive statements to comfort a child you loved when they were feeling overwhelmed. Try to love yourself just as gently.

## Distraction and Self-Soothing

Sometimes, inside your Pause, you'll Respond with distraction or self-soothing tactics. When you distract yourself, do it with things you love, like art, music, beauty, crafts—something that taps into the deeper elements of *You*. If you can help it, don't use drugs, gambling, sex, or other habits that can harm if they aren't used mindfully. You can numb out to what's happening without setting yourself back by doing things that undermine your long-term stability. Direct your distraction so that, incrementally, the things you do when distracting yourself create stabilizing emotions and a sense of having exerted positive control over your actions.

Distraction is useful when chaotic or overwhelming thoughts could quickly lead you to self-injury, but avoiding engagement with your internal content could cause you trouble if the Kids on the Bus have something important to say and you're trying to ignore them. (What do kids do when they have something they want you to hear and you ignore them? They talk louder!) If your relief needs to come from expressing what you feel or need, distraction isn't going to give you relief. So, when you're not able to settle your mind on a distraction, odds are you need to move to a more active form of distraction: self-soothing.

Self-soothing doesn't mean diving into your feelings. It's a form of distraction that acknowledges your need for comfort, tuning you into your physical and energetic needs rather than trying to tune everything (including your needs) out. Distraction or self-soothing can allow you to calm down enough to choose Responses to your situation that don't slide you mindlessly into self-injury. Notice if your distraction tactics are working, and take action on your own behalf when you need to do something more directed to calm down or soothe yourself.

Eventually, distraction will become less necessary, since you're learning to skillfully engage what's happening inside you. Until engaging becomes possible, maintain your Pause with distraction while noticing what types of distractions work best in specific situations and what situations mandate self-soothing. Get to know your own need for soothing or distraction when difficult internal content comes up.

You'll be better able to engage your pain if you know when to shut things down with distraction and when to use self-soothing as a salve when you've acknowledged what's real.

## Practicing Pausing

When you're freaking out, you need to find a way to calm down quickly that works to soothe what ails you, does as little damage as possible, and doesn't cause consequences that make life harder to live. Learning to create a Pause and then using the space you create to find ways to calm down is absolutely essential to stop self-injury. Try the suggestions and ideas below and see if any of them resonate with you. Practicing some of the ideas will help you create and maintain a Pause, and some will act as forms of distraction from your painful thoughts. Use what works in any given situation as long as it allows you to distract or soothe yourself.

### Stop

First step: Stop. Stop everything. Stop crying. Stop thinking obsessively. Give yourself permission to take the time you need to get through the wave of emotion without resorting to self-injury. Self-injury may be a fast solution to the emotional situation, but doing it doesn't teach you to handle your stressful feelings without pain, and you know it. Stop and Notice your breath; Notice your feet as they meet the floor. Commit to Pausing self-injury action for as long as possible. Any time you start moving closer to self-injury, stop again.

### Open Your Eyes

Move your visual attention in a way that changes the direction of your thoughts. Try to stop thinking and just watch. A fly. A blade of grass. The way the colors of thread in your clothing weave together. A window curtain moving in the breeze. Visually identify the most minor point of action in a room (like dust blowing the vent of an air conditioning unit) or the most defining aspect of your environment (like the view out a window). Take it in. Watch it, see it. Forget everything else besides the colors, textures, sounds, movements, and space taken up by the object of your attention. Turn your focus to the most subtle qualities of what's in front of your eyes, *not* the thoughts trying to get your attention.

### Journal

Write in your journal, but do it in a way that doesn't dive into your complex or painful thoughts. Write about your favorite type of flooring to walk on barefoot. Describe your favorite place, person, or animal. Describe what tin foil tastes like. Write a story about the awesome future you're going to have. Don't write about your painful or wistful feelings unless you're mentally ready to Listen, Translate, or do inner inquiry. Take your thoughts *off* the pain by thinking about something benign or pleasant.

### Arts and Crafts

Get out the markers, construction paper, glitter, and glue. Make something really ugly or something really beautiful. Mess with reality in your crafts, paintings, or drawings (blue house, brown sky). Express, paint, draw, sculpt. Whatever you choose, do it calmly, without fervor or emotional intensity. If you're artistically inclined, draw or paint the picture of how you would like to feel—the life you want to have or person you want to be. Stay away from painting the world with the greys of depression or vividly expressing pain in a way that may lead you to self-injury. Focus on what feelings you *want* to have, not on the feelings that plague you. Or, just tune out and have craft hour.



## *Creating a Pause by Focusing on Your Breath*

Creating a Pause is easier when you tune into how your breath is moving in your body. Dropping out of your thoughts and simply watching or controlling the breath can calm you down without actually having to do much. Try the following suggestions for creating a Pause by focusing on your breath. Notice how they feel and how quickly your thoughts settle when you take your mind off your thoughts and focus your attention on the breath coming into and out of your body.



### *Calming Breath*

Take a deep, slow breath in through your nostrils, letting your belly expand as you inhale, and exhale a strong sigh through your mouth. Feel your entire body release on the end of the sigh, and squeeze the abdomen at the bottom of the exhale to get all the air out before the next breath. Take another deep, slow breath in through the nostrils. Keep breathing in this way until you're not likely to self-injure thoughtlessly. Then, move on to further soothing yourself, distracting yourself, or engaging what's happening.

### *Vacuum Breath*

Take a deep, slow breath in through your nostrils, letting your belly expand as you inhale. Exhale forcefully through the nostrils, pushing the air out of the abdomen at the bottom of the breath, and hold the breath out for as long as you can. Notice that a natural vacuum is created by the exhale. At some point, as you hold the breath out, your body forces you to inhale. Take that inhale as slowly and deeply as possible, again exhaling forcefully through the nostrils while allowing the slow vacuum of the breath to govern the pace of your next inhale. To expand this breath, hold the breath at the top of the inhale until your body naturally moves to exhale. Don't control the breath with your will—use the natural vacuum created by the movement of your diaphragm.

### *Go to the Ocean*

Put your hands over your ears and close your eyes. Hear and sense in your hands the vibration created by your energy. Start breathing through your nostrils with a slight constriction at the back of your throat, so that both the inhale and exhale create the sound of an ocean. Behind closed lids, roll your eyes as if you could look up at the space between them. Soften the face and the heart. Notice if the energy or vibration in your hands changes with the calming of the breath and heart.

### *Chill It Down*

Sit in any way that allows you to fold forward and relax, resting the center of your forehead on top of stacked fists, touching the point between your eyebrows. Breathe in through lightly pursed lips, as if drinking the air through a straw, and exhale very slowly in a forced stream out of your mouth. Feel the weight of your head as it presses gently into the top fist and focus on the sound of your own breathing.

## *Creating a Pause by Focusing on Your Body*

Creating a Pause is usually necessary when you're so aware of your thoughts that you forget about anything else. Self-injury is a means to "put yourself back into your body," but there are other ways to get out of your spinning thoughts and feel grounded. Just like watching or controlling the breath, Noticing the body and moving in ways that create ease doesn't take much energy. It does take compassion to give your body attention when your thoughts think they're the hottest thing going. Try the suggestions and ideas below and try to create a Pause by focusing on your body. Notice how it feels to drop into your body and out of your thoughts.



## Create Some Space

Self-injury urges can make you feel small and closed off. Expand your energy by literally “pulling” strings of energy out of your heart (front and back) and wrapping them around your body. Create an energetic space around your body by physically broadening your own energy field. Wrap yourself in a bubble of your own energy, expand your sense of your physical boundaries.

## Move It

Notice how much energy is coursing through your stomach, your head, your heart, your face. Can you distribute that energy more uniformly so it’s not centered in one spot? Can you mentally connect with all parts of your body and spread your energy to your fingertips and toes? Stand with arms and legs wide, like a starfish, and distribute and clear your energy. Find slow, deliberate ways to move your body that settle your energy if you’re anxious or elevate your energy if you’re depressed. Move your body in any simple way—dance or putter around the house dribbling a soccer ball between your feet, run or walk while you focus only on the sound of your footsteps meeting the ground, walk as slowly as you can, or hop on one foot around a safe space while covering one eye. Don’t use this physical exertion as a punishment; movement is intended to trip your brain into dropping out of your thinking mind and into your physical sensations. If you ask your body how it wants to move, it will tell you.

## Nonviolent Touch

Softly and compassionately, tickle or touch the places you would normally self-injure. (Read: *softly and compassionately*.) Your poor body remembers every time you punished it. Look at that body—the one that kept ferrying you around despite your treatment of it, the heart that kept beating despite your desire to shut it down. Look at the limbs that still hold you close after you’ve hurt them. Look at your body with tenderness and compassion for what it has been through and will continue to go through. Touch your body so softly and gently that it begins to remember what tenderness feels like. Apologize through your touch, without activating feelings of shame or sexual desire. Find *compassion* for your body.

## Wipe It Down

Use gentle sweeping motions of the hands to “wipe down” your body from head to toe; as if you were dusting off the residues of difficult experiences or strong emotions. While you do this, imagine that you’re brushing off all the negative energy that’s become attached to your body, wiping away sensations of tension or contraction. Notice that after a good dusting-off you feel lighter, more aware of your body, and a little clearer mentally. This nonviolent physical stimulation can feel especially amazing if someone you love does it to you while you close your eyes. Gently, please.

## Stacked Assets

Stand. Notice the soles of your feet. Are they on a wood floor? Inside shoes? Are the soles of your feet supporting your weight equally? Notice the legs, the hips, and pelvis. Notice all the body space below your belly button. Notice the torso, arms, neck, and head—all the body space above the belly button. Notice that you have a front, back, two sides, a top half, and a bottom half. Sense your body, while keeping awareness of the stability in the lower body. See the upper body as *stacked* on top of the lower body, reaching upward, fluid and light, while the lower body is heavy, anchoring you to the ground. Stand in this position for at least a minute, allowing the weight of your legs to simultaneously yield into the ground and support your upper half as it lifts to the sky.



## *Pitter Pat*

Sit on the floor with your legs outstretched in front of you. Starting at the tops of the feet, use cupped hands to gently pat the surface of the body. Move up the front, side, and back of each leg, up to the hips, then move up to the belly, the sides, the arms and shoulders. *Feel* your body. Let your *body* feel your hands gently stimulating it without violence. Let your intention be to fully occupy your physical space rather than staying in your head and thoughts. The idea is to lightly stimulate your skin to remind your brain that you actually *have* a body; you're not just your pain and your chaotic thoughts. Remember your Ground Rules: Do not use this suggestion as a form of self-injury.

## *Nervous Squirrel*

Make loose fists and move your fingers across your thumbs and thumbs inside your fingers (much like a nervous squirrel might fidget with his hands). Do it slowly, feeling the skin on the hands and the way the fingers move. Give stimulation to all the fingers, the thumb, the palms, and the base of the thumb. Focus on the tactile experience as well as the warmth and energy in the hands, and keep your eyes focused on the way your fingers move.

## *Bouncy Body*

Stand up. With your feet a little wider than hip-distance apart, center your weight on both feet so you feel stable. Bend your knees just slightly and start bouncing lightly, focusing on the energy you're directing downward and feeling how the rest of your body responds. The shoulders and hands will bounce on their own; the relaxed head and face move, too. Get all jiggle. This may seem silly, but when you need to get back into your body to take your brain off of itself, it's best to start by doing something so simple you don't have to think about it. Just let your body *move*. Create space for ease, and feel the fluidity in your relaxed joints, in your relaxed face. See if you can feel where your heart, stomach, and intestines are inside your body, and Notice that they're getting jiggle, too.

## *Use the Wrong Hand*

Grab a pen and try to write with your nondominant hand (or try using one of your feet!). Be deliberate, write carefully, and slow your thoughts to match the speed you can write with. Focus on every letter. Don't get frustrated and try to hurry it up; the point is to focus on what you're doing so intently that you're not focusing on your internal chatter. Write down a short story, a joke, a quote, or a supportive message to yourself in the most deliberate way possible. Take your time and let the calm come through the intense focus of controlling an appendage in a new way.

## *Tactile Senses*

Drop into your tactile senses. Get someone you trust to rub your scalp gently, or gently rub something soft against your skin, like a piece of soft fabric. Feel the softness on your hands, face, belly—anywhere that feels soothing (without stimulating sexual desire). Sit under a running shower and focus on the feeling of water running over your body; roll grapes around in your mouth without biting them, feeling the way they interact with your tongue; caress and hold a plush toy tenderly; rub a flat river stone; get some lotion or oil and give yourself a slippery foot massage. Interact with something comforting, soft, smooth, or snuggly to take you away from thinking and drop you into your tactile senses.

## *Creating a Pause by Focusing on Sound*

We talked a little about mantra and repeated supportive statements. How you use your words, tone, and sound waves affects your mental and physical state. Using sound to create a Pause is probably the most di-



rect way to shut your thoughts up. You can turn up the volume on soothing sounds and hog the sonic space that chaotic thoughts are trying to take up. Try the suggestions and ideas below and try to create a Pause by focusing on sound. Notice how sound feels in your body and how quickly your agitation settles when you purposely use soothing tones and words.



## Talk to Yourself

You already talk to yourself, so use it in the service of good instead of pain. When you need to distract yourself, talk to yourself to keep calm. Compassionately repeating statements such as “Now’s not the time to think about that” could help when your thoughts are trying to pull you away from your distraction; “Don’t freak out” could help if you sense your tension escalating; “Don’t hurt me” could work to drown out initial urges; “Pick something besides self-injury” could work to remind you that now’s the time to do something to save yourself; “No more” could work to drown out painful thoughts while self-injuring. Whatever you say to yourself, make it short, sweet, and to the point. And don’t use a nasty tone in your mental voice; remember, you’re practicing *compassion* and *patience*.

## Faintest Sound

If you’re in an over-stimulating environment and need to keep calm, tune into the smallest sound in the environment (but choose one that won’t agitate you). Is it the hum of a fan? A chime in the breeze? Let all the other noises fall away and mentally separate yourself from an overstimulating environment by bringing the smallest noises of the room into your awareness. Let all other noises fall to the background as you train your attention on the faintest noise in your environment. Try not to look dumb-struck while you do this or others will catch on to the fact that you’re tuning them out.

## Play with Tones

To try to get back into your body and calm your thoughts without much effort, play with tones. Sitting on the floor or a chair, try any or all of the following exercises and Notice how the sound affects your brain and body.

- Notice the base of the body as it meets the surface you’re sitting on. Inhale slowly through the nostrils and Notice your body. Exhale slowly through the mouth while vocalizing the syllable “uhhhhhhhhhh” (as in “under”). Allow the sound to be low, long, and steady, completely draining your exhale. Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**
- Notice the pelvis and hips. Inhale slowly through the nostrils and Notice your body. Exhale through the mouth while vocalizing the syllable “ooooooooo” (as in “you”). Allow the sound to be strong, steady, and slightly higher in tone than the “uhhhhhhhhhh.” Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**
- Notice the navel and space just below your rib cage. Inhale slowly through the nostrils and Notice your body. Exhale through the mouth while vocalizing the syllable “ohhhhhhhhhh” (as in “doe”). Allow the sound to be direct, a little forceful, and slightly higher in tone than the “ooooooooo.” Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**
- Notice the front and back of your heart and lungs. Inhale slowly through the nostrils and Notice your body. Exhale through the mouth while vocalizing the syllable “ahhhhhhhhhh” (as in “father”). Allow the sound to be flowing, hopeful, and slightly higher in tone than the “ohhhhhhhhhh.” Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**



- Notice the front and back of your throat and collarbones. Inhale slowly through the nostrils and Notice your body. Exhale through the mouth while vocalizing the syllable “eye” (as in “sky”). Allow the sound to grow from inside your throat and be slightly higher in tone than the “ahhhhhhhhhhh.” Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**
- Keeping your chin level with the ground, turn your head slowly from side to side, looking over one shoulder, then looking over the other, repeating the syllable “hahm” (as in “calm”). Move the sound and your head at the same time, using the length of the inhale and exhale; and finish each syllable as your neck comes to full extension. Notice any effect on your body or mind. Repeat for at least thirty seconds.**

As you get used to the way different sounds resonate in your brain and body, you may find yourself gravitating toward certain tones at certain times. Notice which ones feel best and most natural to you and use them to drown out chaotic, overwhelming or painful thoughts.

## *Make Some Notes*


Either create or listen to music. If you're musically inclined, distract yourself by playing the strangest sounding series of notes you can line up, a single note that vibrates in a way that soothes you, or repeated notes of a mode that you enjoy. If you prefer to listen to music, choose something that drowns out your thoughts without agitating you or increasing your emotional intensity. Sing a song that mirrors how you want to feel. Don't stick with the sad, minor keys; you've had enough of that. Be bold enough to listen to or sing songs that speak of empowerment, change, and inner strength. Go for the major keys.

## *Shush yourself*

When thoughts come up, or a Kid on the Bus starts screaming and you don't feel up to handling it, or you know that engaging will just make things worse, use the syllable “Shhhh” to yourself as if you were gently bouncing a screaming baby. When you're about to self-injure, your brain is as riled as a screaming infant and needs some simple sounds and soothing energy to calm down a little. Be nice to Baby. “Shhhh” away the screaming.

## *Play with Mantra or Supportive Statements*

When you need to turn off painful thoughts, you could start internally repeating a simple mantra (“Hummmmmmm”) or speak supportive or meaning-neutral statements (“It's going to be OK” or “Shhhh”). Use the repetition created through mantra or supportive statements to put the chaotic parts of your mind into the background, while the soothing parts of your mind go to work calming you. If you have a hard time coming up with supportive statements to repeat, try these:

- Pain goes away.
- Don't give up.
- I don't become whole through the way other people see me.
- Create your own “prayer,” a statement of desire that you memorize and repeat. 

## *Creating a Pause by Focusing on Your Physical Safety*

Some Pauses allow for a type of clarity not available in other Pauses. When you have the clarity of mind to protect yourself *before* you calm yourself, try the suggestions below. It's important to start to recognize that you're responsible for your own safety, especially when self-injury comes a calling.



## Tell Your Brain What to Do

When you're in a crisis, don't forget the intention to Pause, and don't allow your brain to roll on its own. Tell your brain that you don't want to self-injure and that, instead, during crisis moments, you want it to stop the action and take a Pause. That very intention allows your brain to create the first few Pauses for you, essentially trying it out and asking, "Is this what you mean by Pausing?" And when you confirm, "Yeah, brain, that's what I meant, so let's have more of that and less of the crying, hating, hurting, and desperation, OK?" your brain will know what Pausing is and that it's now the protocol when self-injury comes out of the toolbox. When you think, "This is one of those times when I'm feeling drawn toward self-injury; I need to Pause," *ask your brain to do it*. There's no rule that says you can't ask your brain to do what *You* want it to. Brains can be surprisingly compliant when they're told what to do. It's just a matter of gaining compassionate control over your brain.

## Get Away from the Implements

You know how you hurt yourself, and you know when you're setting yourself up for self-injury by leaving certain tools in places that can be easily accessed during a self-injury episode. Don't stash implements of pain around "just in case you need them," and get away from any implements you may have stashed when you're likely to self-injure. You know how quickly urges can lead to action, so keep yourself away from things you'd use to hurt yourself when you're feeling the urges. Would you keep a bludgeon handy so you could wallop your boyfriend or girlfriend whenever you wanted to? Move an argument with someone you loved into the kitchen just so you could be near the knives? (Let's hope you say "no.") Why would you do that to yourself?

## Hand Check

Do a "hand check" when you're trying to Pause, and keep those hands where you can control them. Sit on them, or fold your arms and tuck your hands along your sides. Put them anywhere they can't immediately damage you. Shake them out with your palms open, wring a thick stack of paper, or squeeze something as hard as you can to release the energy in your hands in a way that doesn't hurt you or escalate your tension. Keep those hands in check.

## Go Public

When you're not quite ready to self-injure but feeling as if urges could come on, head out for a place that you like to be—where you know you won't self-injure. Coffee shops and bookstores are great for this, since you get to decide how involved you get in the action around you. Choose somewhere that feels good to you and that will help you keep yourself under control. Read a book or magazine or write in your journal. Know when you may be triggered by your environment and it's time to be alone. If you're very near self-injury, you may want to *limit* public exposure. Do what you feel is best, and use public spaces as a means to redirect your attention and to calm yourself, not to further your alienation or isolation.

## Creating a Pause When Stimuli Are Situational

There are situations you put yourself in which actively support or passively incubate your self-injury habits. When you need to create a Pause to compensate for recurrent pains in your environment or life, there are a few key things you can do to temporarily remove yourself from triggering environments, reduce the stimuli you're asking yourself to process, and lessen the habitual emotional reactions to your situation. You can, of course, do these things any time, but if you're self-injuring in reaction to a difficult living circumstance, you'll need to learn to support yourself without self-harm and tolerate your circumstance until you can change it.



## *Don't Stay if It's Killin' Ya*

If you Notice recurrent sensations of distress that are tied to a particular place or situation, do what you can to change your environment *before* your distress turns into full-blown urges. Remove yourself from situations you find yourself reacting to with escalating tension, even if it's just leaving the room. If you're in conversation or arguing with someone, ask for time to collect yourself. Take responsibility for not putting or keeping yourself in situations that create or increase your urges to self-injure. If you *live* in that situation, you can create a Pause by temporarily separating yourself from the triggering stimuli, but this may require you to get away from particular people or environments. When you're triggered, you've got enough going on without putting yourself in a room with barking dogs, crying babies, or abusive lovers. If you can, choose an environment that supports you, and leave any environment that causes you harm, especially when it triggers your use self-injury to cope.

## *Turn Down the Stimuli*

Reduce the stimuli you're asking your frazzled brain to process and go for softness and self-soothing. If you can, find a quiet place with soft lighting and limited stimuli. Bury yourself under sandbag weights or couch pillows, snuggle into a sleeping bag, put on an eye mask and rest, take a bath or a nap (the kind that doesn't make you want to crash for the rest of the day), or visualize yourself in a place where no stimuli can reach you. Turn off all the lights and sit in the dark, or put on some candles and soft music. Find a way to lessen your stress and "cocoon" yourself in a safe way. This isn't time to let the parts of you that are rioting have their way. The idea is to surround yourself in the coziest, most womblike way possible. Give yourself a sensory snuggle.

## *Pull It Back*

If you have a tendency to cry regularly, try to pull it back a little. Crying is a sure sign that you're very closely identifying with what's happening for you emotionally. Each time you break down, it becomes easier to break down during the next crisis. Each time you move through your pain without washing yourself in it, you make it easier to be strong during the next crisis. That's not to say that you stop feeling your feelings, or even that you stop crying altogether, but with practice, you'll be able to get some distance from the pain rather than wallowing in it. Notice what situations are most likely to trigger you toward strong emotional responses. When you're wallowing in pain and tears, try to keep from making *meanings* out of the pain. Simply watch your experience, and acknowledge that you'd like something in your life to be different than it is. Responding skillfully is easier if you're not diving into the content of the movie of your life, but rather sitting in your movie seat offering compassion and patience to the main character. Some aspects of life you can't change. Some you can. Crying can get in the way of acting on your own behalf; so watch how often you allow yourself to break down when you could choose to Pause instead.

## *Duhhhh . . .*

Tune your brain to a numbing frequency by watching a movie you love or surfing for online content that's funny, uplifting, or connective. Be careful how you do this; you'll make healthier distraction habits if you don't soothe your pain by watching violent, overtly sexual, or triggering content. Don't focus on the content so much as the way video sets are designed, the way characters are dressed, how websites are laid out, how colors appear or voices sound. Notice benign external details; forget about your own, but don't get wrapped into the self-judgment that can come from watching how reality is presented in the media. Notice if numbing out is working, or if what you're zoning out on is increasing your internal discord.

## Go See Your Inner Child



When you're in a recurrent situation that triggers you, it may be useful to retreat to the landscape you constructed with your Inner Child. Check in on what your Inner Child is doing, ask what he or she wants from you, and Notice how the landscape has changed since the last time you visited. Find the pleasure of your own deepest company, or manufacture elements that would allow you to tap into a sense of safety—even if it's only in your mind. And if safety doesn't exist in your physical reality, work to change that reality so that your Inner Child feels protected both in your private landscape and when he or she ventures onto the Bus to see the sights.

## What's after Creating the Pause?

As you work with creating an initial Pause, at the very least, you'll learn to avoid self-injury as an instant response to a trigger. As you maintain and widen your Pauses, you'll practice skills that help you distract yourself, self-soothe, or gently explore your inner workings to find ways to meet your needs without self-injury. You have two basic choices about what to do after your initial Pause: to distract yourself or to engage what's happening. Distracting and engaging both act to widen your Pause, as long as you don't self-injure as a reaction to the choices you make.

### *Distracting Yourself*

The act of distraction can force a Pause to widen by making a choice to Respond to pain with options that don't allow you to dive into feelings or negotiate with the emotional content your brain churns up. Time without self-injury is time without self-injury, no matter how you get there (minding the Ground Rules, of course). If you're still a little volatile after creating your Pause, or if it's difficult to maintain your Pause, continue to find something to do that disconnects you from your painful feelings and thoughts.

Don't move on to Listening, Translating, or Responding further to your distress until you're clear, except perhaps when you hear yourself say something like "I'm gonna freak out any second." Then you can Translate that into options like "Bath, nap, run." You'll know when clarity comes; you'll feel it. But until you really feel as if you're not likely to pop off, do all you can to avoid challenging scenarios, and distract yourself to stay outside the emotional storm. Just don't do it in ways that increase your tension.

Distraction can move you through pain simply by forcing your brain to focus on something else, kicking the pain into the background. But it can be a challenge to purposely wait to address what's triggering you or to distract yourself from the meanings your brain is creating as it queues up a fit. Know when it's time to turn off your brain with distraction tactics, so it doesn't just go whizzing on in a tizzy. Give yourself permission not to engage the chaos, especially if it will drive you toward self-injury. If you need extended distraction, choose a time-consuming activity that isn't at all harmful. Throw a fistful of pennies on the carpet, then count them while you pick them up, put lentils in a bowl and rub your feet or hands in them (but maybe you shouldn't eat them afterward), or shake your hands out until your fingers feel like they're little sausages flapping around.

You can do a million things to take your mind off your mind. Use your clear times to make a realistic list of actions you can take to distract yourself from self-injury during a crisis. Don't be ashamed of using distraction as a tool to keep yourself from engaging your inner experience. If it helps, it helps.

### *Engaging through Listening, Translating, or Inner Inquiry*

Depending on your level of volatility, you can engage what's happening. If you were only mildly triggered (compared to a full-Hulk blowout), you may be able to engage by Listening to what some of the Kids on the

Bus are saying, Translating their statements, and coming up with Response options. But, if you were in a full-Hulk, all-the-Kids-are-in-an-uproar-and-the-bus-is-in-a-ditch tizzy, you may not want to give all the Kids on the Bus (or the Hulk!) a voice. You may engage your internal drama on a more segmented level (Inner Child only, unmet needs only), dealing with the least amount of stimuli possible. Or you may dive back into distraction when you Notice that engaging your inner content isn't calming you down.

Remember that serious introspection isn't necessary to meaningfully engage your thoughts, but you do need to insert additional Pauses in your process if what you're thinking about increases your pain or likelihood of self-injury. Each time you feel yourself escalating emotionally, it's time to create another Pause so you can find a way to calm yourself enough to get clear. Try not to let any of the steps you're taking as a *result* of your crisis *escalate* your crisis.

## General Rules of the Pause

To stop self-injuring, it's absolutely essential to create a Pause, then use the space you create to find ways to calm down without self-injury. In all stages of a self-injury episode, you have the opportunity to place a Pause between Noticing emotional pain or chaotic thoughts and taking action toward self-injury. Creating, maintaining, and subsequently widening your Pauses will become the foundation that supports Listening and Translating or inner inquiry. Once you've created the Pause, practice maintaining it and using that time to decide if you need to distract yourself or if you can engage the internal content. Each time you practice your Pausing skills, you'll become more of a natural. Just keep some basic rules of the Pause in mind:

- Make only decisions that *stop* action toward self-injury. Leave situations that are creating turmoil for you; ask others to give you some space; commit to not continuing self-injury actions.
- Create the mental space to remind yourself you don't want to self-injure, do what you can to keep the Hulk at bay, and allow the Kids on the Bus to riot without acting on the chaos.
- Don't make life-altering plans. Now is not the time to make decisions about relationships, your future, or suicide, or to send messages to ex-lovers.
- Reduce stimuli. You know you're Pausing if you're not diving into your thoughts—even if all you're doing instead is saying, "Shhhhh."
- After a successful Pause—one that allows you to calm down or get clear—decide what's next. Will you distract or will you engage?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

# Listening and Translating

**Y**ou're maintaining your Pause and considering your options, but now you need to keep your focus on a goal. What's your primary goal? *To get through your crisis without harming yourself.* How you do that depends on your situation. If you're not feeling up to engaging your internal content, you can avoid it with the tools in the previous chapter, calming down through distraction or self-soothing. No inquiry, no self-reflection, no consideration of anything that's wrong, and certainly no problem-solving, unless you're working on a crossword puzzle. But when you feel a greater ability to engage what's causing your urges, distraction may not be your best option. You may want to unpack and reorganize some of the baggage that's dragging you down by Listening to and Translating your inner content to see what it's trying to tell you.

You already know your thoughts change frequently and your brain tells you plenty of things that aren't literally true, so you also know it's not a great idea to act on your raw, unfiltered thoughts. This is especially true when the thoughts are violent or otherwise extreme. Understand that the thoughts you Listen to are not literal truths but indicators of what you want. They're *signposts* to what's true. Translating the thoughts you Listen to exposes the desires and unmet needs that can drive your decisions. It gets to the *truth* in all the mental chatter, so you can take actions that work to improve the quality of your mind and your life. But Listening and Translating aren't easy, especially when your brain is obsessed with the most painful aspects of reality or about to let the Hulk out. You need to get some practice Listening before you can separate *Yourself* from the thoughts you're Listening to. With experience Listening without *reacting* to what you're hearing, you'll become better able to stay with your thoughts and Translate their deeper meanings.

It can be freeing to know that you need to Translate your most extreme or painful thoughts. There can be relief in the knowledge that you don't have to believe or argue with your brain. There is strength to be found in learning to more skillfully engage what's *behind* your thoughts rather than getting caught up in the *content* of the thoughts. When you start to identify the recurrent thoughts that motivate your self-harming habits, those thoughts won't seem so negative or chaotic. You'll simply Notice that it's a bunch of junk you've heard before, and you'll see that you have an opportunity to uncover what those thoughts are *really* saying. Thankfully, you don't have to Listen carefully to or Translate every thought. When a thought enters your head or leaves someone else's mouth, you don't have to believe it or incorporate it into your life as truth—especially if it causes you pain. Brains do so many strange things that it will always be necessary to Translate some of what you hear, since the quality of your thoughts is usually based on your current interpretations of the past, present, and future.

## The Basics of Listening and Translating

Listening and Translating are separate processes, but they're intimately connected. You're constantly Translating thoughts and impulses into *meanings* that direct your choices. The choices you make and the meanings you apply to what you hear when you Listen direct your life experience and alter your vision of what's possible. A lot of Translation is (necessarily) done by automatically applying meanings from the past

to the present situation, so you can take shortcuts in decision making. After all, once you've had a certain thought or experience, you can learn lessons that you can apply to the next similar situation. The trouble with this automatic assignment of meaning starts when you thoughtlessly apply lessons from the past to your current emotional situation and create pain, shame, confusion, or urges to self-injure. When fears of what's true about you or the world create a habitually negative outlook, every situation is approached with the idea that life is confusing, draining, and difficult to live through. You may not realize how the lessons of your past are continually applied to your current situation, and how they motivate your self-injury habits.

When you're clear, as well as when you're triggered, Listening and Translating help you get to know yourself. You'll hear your habitual thoughts and fears, you'll ask yourself where they're coming from, and you'll come to understand what's really behind those thoughts and fears. You'll learn to make decisions that aren't *driven* by your fears and past lessons, and you'll see how often you limit your own Response options by relying on the lessons of the past at the exclusion of the truths of the moment. Choosing how you think about your decisions and your past requires you to secure your Pause before Listening to and Translating triggering stimuli. Whether you're Listening to your own thoughts and body signals or someone else's words, securing your Pause is essential to maintaining the *ability* to Listen and Translate without taking dramatic or unconsidered action.

The process of Listening and Translating happens on many levels. Once you understand the concepts of Listening and Translating, Notice how many different thoughts and impulses you *can* Translate—benign or painful. Seldom does your first thought, word, or impulse accurately represent your *complete* thought, perspective, or desire. You'll always need to ask questions and dig into superficial or thoughtless meanings that you're applying to your situation in order to understand what you *really* mean. As you get comfortable Listening and Translating, you'll start to Notice that it's not just your brain that needs Translation services. Start to Notice how often other people don't say what they really mean because they can't find appropriate words or they're emotionally reactive. With practice, effective Translating helps to pare away verbal fluff and reactionary statements to expose the deeper truth that's trying to come through.

Before you look separately at the steps of Listening and Translating, it's useful to consider how closely they are related. The first of the two inquiries below will help you evaluate the appropriateness of the goals you've set for yourself. The second (heavily loaded) inquiry will help you realize that every thought, even suicidal ones, can be Translated and turned into revelations that *change* your thoughts and your life. Mind your Ground Rules, please.



## Listening and Translating: *Rock Star*

- Are there times when your self-injury is fueled by failing to meet an expectation or a goal you've set for yourself?**
  
- Do you hear yourself berate or belittle yourself for "not being \_\_\_\_\_ enough"?**
- What does your ego sound like? What does it tell you to "be"?**
- What do *You* sound like? What do *You* ask yourself to be?**
- How do your ego and deeper knowledge of *Yourself* affect or weigh in on your expectations? How do they compete for expression through your actions?**
- Have you considered the appropriateness of your expectations of life and your personal goals? How 'right' do your expectations and goals feel to you? Do your expectations fit the person *You* really are?**



**If you were a fairly conservative person who didn't like being out late at night and didn't much like being in the spotlight, what would it mean if you heard some part of your mind emphatically say, "I want to be rock star"? Would you roll with that thought as if you literally wanted to be a rock star? If you Listened more carefully and Translated your thought, would it mean something more like "I want to express myself freely," "I want to be seen," or "I want to wear zany costumes and feel important"?**



**Have you ever watched your mind combine aspects of what you want into a glittering fantasy of a life that didn't actually fit you?**

**Have you ever found yourself lamenting something you don't have in your life, while knowing that you don't really want to do what it takes to get what you feel you're missing out on?**

**What can the desires expressed by your goals or fantasies teach you about what you really want?**

Translate any dreams or fantasies about what you want to be, do or have in your life into *desires*. Then Translate those desires into needs. Find ways to meet the needs that are fueling your desires and dreams without chasing a life that doesn't actually fit you. You can find ways to be seen that won't involve the hot spotlight of fame. You can express yourself freely without having to stay out late at night. You can wear zany costumes on the weekend and go back to a business suit on Monday. You can feel important without having to go on a world tour.

Take some time to consider the goals you've set for yourself and the expectations you're trying to meet. In your journal, describe the top three goals you've set for your life. Then list the steps that are necessary to meet those goals. Look closer at each of those steps and answer the questions below.

**Who do you have to be and how do you have to behave in order to take the steps to get to your top three life goals?**

**Are the actions that are required to reach your goals actions you want to take?**

**Does the thought of taking these necessary steps uplift and energize you, empowering you to live a life that feels authentic? Does the thought depress you or highlight that you'll always be striving toward something you can't have or be?**

**Can you identify any steps on your list that feel appropriate for the person you are and the life that you want to live, even if the goal they lead to isn't appropriate?**

Jot down your five most dominant interests or the five activities that you love to do most. Choose activities and endeavors that feel nourishing and allow you to express aspects of your most authentic self. Look over this list of actions that you'd say would fit the person you are.

**Consider your top three goals. Are your dominant interests present in the steps to your current goals?**

**How can you edit your life goals so they can be met by combining the actions you want to take or activities you want to perform? How can you incorporate more of what you love to do, more of what fits you best, into your life goals?**



- As you edit your goals, do you Notice yourself dropping back into fantasy thinking about what you could do if only you were a different person? How well do your edited goals fit the person you are and want to be? Do the edited goals support your wellness or encourage fantasy or chaotic thinking?**

Practice reminding yourself that you're trying to get a clearer idea of what *works* for you. Let go of the pursuit of futures that encourage you to behave contrary to your interests or cover over your authentic identity. Listen to and Translate your desires into actionable items that help you to be more *You*, and edit any of your goals that don't really *fit*. If you've been hearing yourself say, "I don't want to do this," but you keep on doing it, maybe you're trying to be a rock star when you'd be happier as a bank manager.



## Listening and Translating: *Suicide Kills*

Have you consulted your Ground Rules lately? Please do so when working with this inquiry, sticking primarily Rule #1: Lighten Up. No need to make these ideas any more painful than they already are. These are just thoughts, and we're just talkin' here.

"I want to die," "I just wish it were over," "Kill me now"—there are plenty of ways to say "I want to stop trying." Have you ever had suicidal thoughts? Has your mind ever suggested that the best way to solve your life's problems would be to *end* your life? Suicidal thoughts, like other extreme thoughts, can be indicators of something *other* than the desire to check out.

Suicidal thoughts should not be ignored. They should be Listened to *without taking action* so the message(s) behind the thoughts can be Translated. If you have extreme or dark thoughts, don't just *believe* them. *Challenge* them. Look beyond your reactionary words and see that the truth in "I want to die" is more like "I want this to be easier." Hear "Kill me now" and realize that the thought is saying "Make it easier now." Remember that most emotional pain comes from the desire for things to be *different than they are*. You may not want to have some of the experiences you're having, or you may want to have a life that doesn't require so much maintenance, but dying is an unnecessarily dramatic response to an otherwise manageable problem. You'll never have a life that feels good if you check out before you've created that life. Just realize that you may have to *work* for it. That work is made easier through Pausing as Listening uncovers suicidal or self-sabotaging thoughts and *Translating* the junk your brain is spitting out. Through Pausing and Translating the thoughts you're having, you can better understand what you need and align your actions and values through skillful choices.

If you're at the extreme end of your pain tolerance range, suicide may sound like a good idea, but you know deep down that it's not. That's at least one reason why you're still alive. Whatever your spiritual beliefs, suicide is truly giving up, when what you really want is to *live*. You want to feel *on top* of your pain; you want to *stop fighting* so damn hard against yourself and your life; you want a life that's *easier* to live and feels *better*. You can have those things. If you don't commit suicide.

Whether or not you've had suicidal thoughts, get out your journal. Write down at least ten (yes, ten) things you love about living—nature or animals, snuggling or deep kisses, puffy white clouds or puffy white dogs, warm baths or cocoa on a winter's morning. List the elements of life that are actually *worth* experiencing. This is something of a mindfulness exercise. It's not that those puffy white clouds will rescue you if you're desperate and sad, but life doesn't get better by ignoring the good things. Try to remain aware that not all elements of life suck. And, remember that if you're not here, you'll be missing out on sunny days in the park and being seen or touched lovingly.

Look closer at the list of things you love about being alive.

- How often do you experience the things you love about life?
- Do you purposely infuse your life with the things you know you love?
- If you Translate the thought “I want to die” into “I want my life to be easier to live,” can you see that there are ways you could make your life easier to live? You could respond to “I want my life to be easier to live” in ways that make life feel better, but you can respond to “I want to die” in only one way, and it gives you no further options. How could you make your life easier to live? Spend more time with friends? Get yourself the pastry and coffee you love in the morning more often? Get out into the world in a way that helps you feel alive and connected? What real, tangible enjoyment can you put into your life, even if it can’t immediately outweigh the heaviness of the darker aspects of your experience?



Write a short list of the people you would not want to hurt by causing your own death. You may choose to escape your issues through suicide, but that act saddles those you love and leave behind with the pain of your unaddressed issues. Odds are that you don’t want them to *hurt* every time they think of you. You probably don’t want them to feel the sting of your difficulty managing your internal content in a more constructive way.

Consider individually each and every person you would not want to hurt, imagining their faces in your mind. Commit, for each person’s sake, to take responsibility for your healing so that they don’t have to suffer the emotional burden of your dramatic and extreme choices. Let them live *with* you, not *without* you.

Now, imagine your own face in your mind and look on yourself with compassion. Commit for your own sake to do the work of *Translating* your darkest thoughts instead of acting on them. Promise yourself you’ll try to find ways to make your life feel *better*, and don’t believe the summary statements your brain-in-pain kicks out that say there’s no hope for you.

Whoa, Nellie. Let’s get out of the deep end. Bring out Rule #1 again. Let’s lighten up.

## Listening

Hopefully by now you’ve realized that diving headlong into your problems is seldom the solution to them. Separating yourself from the content of your mind so you can see or hear it clearly is the more skillful path. The problem, the thought, and the experience are all products of the mind processing them. Getting into your movie theater seat and changing your view lets you hear, see, and Listen to your mind’s content without being so involved in it that you become triggered.

Listening to your thoughts is a bit different from hearing them. Odds are it’s not all that difficult to *hear* the Kids on the Bus shouting their insults and slurs; it’s more difficult to endure what they’re shouting or pick apart what they’re saying to make positive use of it. Listening is a more active form of hearing, and it involves tuning into the thoughts in your head in a compassionate and detached way. Over time, as you watch what’s happening in your head, you start to understand the patterns of your thoughts and the indicators that you need to step back from painful thoughts and do some Translation work. Tolerating your thoughts becomes much easier when you learn to tune into what’s happening in your head without having to debate it or change it. If you can maintain your Pause and Listen *without acting* on your thoughts, you’re likely to open the door to pain—but behind that pain lie self-understanding and feelings of ease.

To learn to Listen, it may be useful to consider *how* you Listen when you want to hear a specific tone that’s buried in a louder group of noises. What do you naturally do when you’re straining to hear a particular

sound? Don't you try to mentally turn down all the other noises, focusing your attention on what you want to hear to bring it out of the mix? When chaotic thoughts are an overwhelming cacophony, you can tune into or out of different thoughts in the same way. You could tune into loudest thoughts and determine whether they're just noise or have substance that requires Translation. You could also try to tune *out* the loudest tones and pick up the softer ones that can't compete with the intensity of the others. Maybe there's a whispered message of compassion behind the booming voice of self-loathing. Listening helps you tune into and out of different mental content so you can choose which thoughts you'll acknowledge or Translate. Maintaining your Pause is key here, because you may quickly resort to self-injury in order to shut some of those booming voices up.

To Listen, you simply need to tune your awareness into something in particular. But, depending on the internal content you want to tune into, you may have to get the noisier Kids on the Bus to either clarify what they're yelling or tone it down, so you can hear the softer messages that most need to be heard. You don't need to Listen to or Translate all of your thoughts or engage with all the Kids on the Bus; you just need to pay attention to the ones holding the few nuggets of truth you need in the moment.

You can't Listen carefully if your mind's chattering away, overanalyzing and judging your situation. Remember that much of the chatter produced by your mind is active competition between the different aspects of your thinking as your brain tries to decide what it believes. Your judgments are based on the *meanings* you apply to what you're hearing. It's up to you to keep yourself from buying into, judging, or applying meaning to the thoughts you're Listening to. You need simply to watch how they work, what they say, and what impact they have on your ability to stay calm. It'll be easier to Listen without getting carried away in the action if you stay in your movie theater seat to observe the story of the moment. Become the compassionate observer instead of the main character, and the thoughts you're Listening to won't knock you off your Pause. Then you can keep Listening and maybe even move onto Translating.

The thoughts that lead to self-injury can tell you a lot of things. Get familiar with Noticing the sources of particular thoughts and urges. Look at them and Notice where they come from. Are painful thoughts the shouts and insults of an unruly Kid on the Bus that really just needs a hug? Are they voices of a habit that's trying to convince you there's no point in trying to change, despite the proof that you can? Do painful thoughts come from the mind of your Controller, beating down the hopeful, vulnerable parts of you to keep you from thinking you deserve better? You'll get to know yourself through Listening, and you'll realize how much of your pain is rooted in habitual thinking and your *reactions* to that thinking. Just remember that the thinking, the thoughts and the reactions aren't *You*.

While you're Listening, consider that thoughts that beat you up about why "you don't deserve \_\_\_\_\_ and here's the evidence [insert the myriad thoughts and memories that "prove" there's no hope for you]" may be coming from the mind for addiction, as it tries to keep you an addict for fear of losing its place at the foreground of your thinking. You're familiar with the release created in the body and mind during self-injury. But the chemical processes behind that release are so powerful (and addictive) that you shouldn't expect the parts of your brain that *like* the release to stop asking for it. That habit isn't going to step aside without some work on your part; it's not always easy to Listen when your mind would rather skip the work of dealing with your issues.

To kick your addiction, you have to stay in control as you Listen to all the reasons your brain gives for using self-injury. Until you can Translate those needs and requests to decide on your options for action, Listen—and Respond only by Pausing long enough and often enough to avoid hurting or sabotaging yourself. Your power to cope without self-injury grows every time your brain begs for the self-sabotage fix and you delay the action or calm down without it. The chatter your brain creates may seem overwhelming, because so much has built up inside you while you didn't know how to care for the Kids on your Bus. But, the intensity of that internal chatter will feel less overwhelming as you get used to Listening from a detached view and attending to one triggering thought at a time. At first you may have to steel yourself against the thoughts

you hear; just keep in mind that most thoughts can use a bit of Translation even if you're not able to do that Translation in the moment. Don't *buy into* the thoughts that cause enough pain to trigger self-injury. Just maintain your Pause and resist action on your painful thoughts, knowing that you'll eventually learn to Translate those thoughts into targeted Responses.

## Practicing Listening

Listening requires that you hear what's going on in your head—even while you're struggling with painful or chaotic thoughts—without reacting to the content you're Listening to. When you're Listening to your mind, it's hard to remember that you shouldn't automatically *believe* the content or try to change it. Try to simply Listen to the thoughts, then Notice where they're coming from and how they impact you. To get some practice Listening, try the suggestions below and adapt them as you see fit. Find the best way to Listen to your thoughts without being carried away by them. Then move onto Translating.

### *Listen to Your Head*

Set a timer for sixty seconds. Sit comfortably. Read the instructions below, then start the timer and close your eyes to perform the activity. Attempt to Listen to your thoughts without becoming overwhelmed, without analyzing their correctness. What's it like inside your head right now? What's the level of activity in your brain? Is it quiet? Are you mentally numb? Is there a hum of thoughts in the background, barely discernible as words? Is there a whirlwind of activity? Which aspects of yourself can you tune into? What are they saying? Are thoughts about random things you're Noticing (the air is cool, Listening to mental activity is annoying), or are they incessant, unavoidable urgings (satisfy my longing, give me a fix)?

Try tuning into what's happening in your head when you're clear and when you're in different stages of your self-injury cycle. If you can Listen and maintain your Pause, you'll begin to identify the difference between repetitive, nagging thoughts that may actually need attention and the mind stuff that just comes and goes.

Once the timer goes off, reset it and go for another sixty seconds, Noticing the similarities or differences between the two sessions. Notice how fast your thoughts move and how they cycle back to certain topics and ruminations. When your brain is aware that you are trying to Listen to your thoughts, does it provide repetitive or particularly painful thoughts for you to Listen to? Notice any recurrent messages or requests from your Inner Child or the Kids on the Bus while you're Listening to your thoughts.

### *Listen to Your Surroundings*

Stop right now and Listen to your surroundings. What noises do you Notice? Do you hear the sound of a clothes dryer, or a child playing in the other room? The ticking of a clock? What's your reaction to the sounds you're Listening to? Do the noises fall to the background, or are they hard to ignore, grating on your nerves? When you're clear and when you're in different stages of your self-injury cycle, Notice what you're Listening to and how sound affects you. What you Listen to and how it affects you changes, depending on how your internal state impairs your ability to calmly take in your surroundings. When Listening becomes overwhelming, whether to your thoughts or to the outside world, it's time to create another Pause. When you Notice that sound becomes triggering by itself, it's a good indication that you need relaxation and restoration.





## Voices in a Choir

If you tune into your mind and hear chaos that is difficult to separate into Listen-able thoughts, imagine that you're in an audience taking in a choir performance. Though the choir contains many practiced voices (thoughts, feelings, and beliefs), those voices don't necessarily sing in harmony. Some voices are trying to hog the sonic space and others are just moving their lips. When your choir isn't singing the same song or when the distracting, grating, or demeaning voices seem loudest, shift your attention. Focus your awareness on the voices in the mix that are soothing or inspiring. Directing your awareness will help bring those nourishing tones to the foreground of your experience, which leaves the voices that you *don't* want to hear fading into the background.

The theme of the concert and overall tone of the performance will vary depending on your situation. Watching and Listening to the noise of this mental choir, you'll become familiar with the voices you like to hear most (or least), the voices that intrigue or soothe you, and the voices that undermine the performance of the entire group. Use this metaphor to help you choose which thoughts, feelings, or beliefs you'll Listen to when your inner conductor isn't leading a cohesive outfit. When you're able, Listen to your choir and ask yourself:

- What's the tone and energy of the loudest voice in the choir—the one hogging the sonic space? What lyrics or sounds are being sung by this vocalist?**
- What's the tone and energy of the quietest voice in the choir? What lyrics or sounds are being sung by this vocalist?**
- What's the overall tone or energy of the song being created by the entire choir? Is it chaotic or cohesive?**
- Is there a theme to the performance (lust, fear, insecurity)?**
- If *You* were conducting this choir, how would *You* create a cohesive, soothing choir rather than a cacophony of competing voices?**

Remember to practice tuning into the voices in the choir when you're clear and during different stages of your self-injury cycle. The song, tone, and energy will change as vocalists rotate in and out. And, luckily, the singers you *don't* like to hear will occasionally take a day off.

Remember that maintaining the strength to Listen is far easier if you continually remind yourself that Listening isn't about debating with or indiscriminately buying into your thoughts or emotions. It's about Pausing long enough to watch what's going on inside you, even when it's painful, and then deciding if the thoughts are *worth* Translating. You'll be able to remain stable while Listening when you know how to create and maintain your Pause—and when your brain accepts the fact that the thoughts it produces and emotions it creates are much more useful when *You* Translate them.

## Translating: *Getting to What's True*

Unless the process of Listening triggers you and you need to distract yourself, the next natural step after Listening to your thoughts is Translating them. When you Listen, you Notice your thoughts as they arise without reacting. When you Translate, you get to what's true by reconsidering the words you're using and the meanings you're applying to a situation. By finding words for feelings and identifying needs at play, you can start questioning the truths and meanings you're bringing into a situation. The same is true when Listening

to others. You Notice their words, and your internal reactions as ideas are expressed *while* maintaining your Pause. You Translate others' words or actions, helping to find words for feelings and identify needs. From this place, you can also question the truths and meanings that others are bringing into a situation.

Practicing Translating will teach you to spin painful meanings and truths in ways that are accurate, just not loaded with emotional interference. Once you get good at getting to what's true, self-injury will become unnecessary, because you'll be attending to the conflict that's *fueling* your urges. Dealing with the core issue will naturally reduce the intensity of your emotions. You may find that the relief of getting to what's true can actually feel more lasting and come on faster than the relief that comes from self-injury. But, like anything worth learning, getting to what's true takes practice.

Listening can be so painful. You may get caught up in what you're Listening to and simply hear the broken record of your mind droning on, not realizing that those repetitive thoughts are ones you could Translate. If it takes strength to Listen, it takes even more to stay present and calm while Translating your thoughts. But in the end, Translating is effort well expended, because it takes unnecessary pain out of your thoughts so you can Respond from a clearer place. Finding the strength to endure the process of Listening and Translating will loosen the grip self-injury has on your actions and create a habit that actually allows you to quickly attend to your suffering instead of trying to hurt it away.

There are reasons for what you do. Real reasons. No matter what action you take, that action is an attempt to meet a need. Self-injuring doesn't attend to your deepest unmet needs; it just pushes them into the background, as if they won't just come up again. Understanding and meeting your own needs involves finding what's really behind your painful thoughts instead of simply accepting the version of the truth that spills out of your inner turmoil. By getting to what's true, you'll find words for complicated feelings, uncover the needs behind your thoughts, understand the truths and meanings you're bringing along, and accept reality in a way that gives you a foundation for creating effective, non-harming Response options. Translating starts with finding words for what you're Listening to and feeling.

## *Finding Words*

Communication with yourself and others is crucial to happiness in general, but it's especially critical when urges to self-injure come on. Unfortunately, words can be hard to come by when your brain is overwhelmed and bickering with itself. That's not a great mental state to be in when you need to pull cohesive, insightful sentences out of your head. Despite the challenge, you have to learn to work with this mental state. Finding words for your feelings can help you identify the needs behind your extreme reactions and emotions.

Consider how your feelings relate to your needs. The presence of an emotion gives clear insight into your thoughts, desires and presently fulfilled or unfulfilled needs. You feel some feelings only when your needs are met, and others when they aren't met. Tuning into the needs at work behind your painful feelings can help you detach from *feeling* those feelings, which allows you to take action toward meeting your needs and *changing* your feelings. Taking the step of relating your feelings to your needs also gives you the opportunity to Notice when your needs *are* being met. As you build the habit of identifying and meeting your needs through finding words for your experience, you'll also Notice that your experience of life becomes more stable.

Following are three related lists: Words for feelings when needs are met, words for when they're not met, and the list of Needs from Chapter 6. To label extreme emotions and get to the needs behind your feelings, you need more words than "sad," "mad," and "glad." Read over the lists below and then work through the following inquiries. Notice that many feelings can exist at once; your emotional landscape is made up of many individual feelings, not all of which are painful. Also Notice that some of your needs are met while others remain unfulfilled. Your work to change your self-injury habits involves purposely supporting the idea that you don't have to *focus* on pain. You're not always in pain—or at least, if you look closer, pain isn't the only feeling present.

## Needs

- **Peace:** Beauty, harmony, inspiration, order, presence, awareness, ease.
- **Belonging:** Love, acceptance, appreciation, community, consideration, interdependence, understanding, support, respect.
- **Contact:** Closeness, connection, trust, support, being known and seen.
- **Joy:** Play, fun, laughter, pleasure, celebration.
- **Safety:** Emotional and physical safety, protection.
- **Creativity:** Passion, expression, choosing dreams, meaning, purpose, knowing and seeing.
- **Physical:** Shelter, food, water, clothing, restoration.

FIGURE 9:

### Feelings Present When Needs Are Fulfilled

Absorbed	Compassionate	Feminine	Moved	Satisfied
Accepted	Complete	Friendly	Needed	Secure
Alert	Confident	Frisky	Open	Seen
Amazed	Content	Fulfilled	Openhearted	Serene
Amused	Cuddled	Funny	Optimistic	Spellbound
Animated	Curious	Giddy	Passionate	Spiritual
Appreciated	Dazzled	Glad	Peaceful	Sprightly
Appreciative	Delighted	Grateful	Pleasant	Spunky
Ardent	Eager	Gutsy	Pleased	Still
Aroused	Ecstatic	Happy	Positive	Stimulated
Astonished	Elated	Holy	Powerful	Strong
Attracted	Empowered	Hopeful	Protected	Sunny
Awed	Enchanted	Humble	Proud	Surprised
Blissful	Encouraged	Impish	Quiet	Sympathetic
Bold	Endless	Important	Radiant	Tender
Brave	Enduring	Interested	Rapturous	Thankful
Bright	Energetic	Intrigued	Refreshed	Thrilled
Buoyant	Engrossed	Invigorated	Rejuvenated	Tickled
Calm	Enlivened	Involved	Relaxed	Touched
Captivated	Enthralled	Joyous	Relieved	Tough
Cared for	Enthusiastic	Jubilant	Renewed	Tranquil
Carefree	Entranced	Light	Repaid	Trusting
Centered	Equanimous	Lighthearted	Rested	Vibrant
Childlike	Expansive	Lively	Restored	Virile
Clearheaded	Expectant	Loved	Revived	Warm
Close	Exuberant	Loving	Rewarded	Whole
Comfortable	Fascinated	Mellow	Safe	Wonderfilled



FIGURE 10:

## Feelings Present When Needs Are Unfulfilled

Aggravated	Despondent	Hated	Mistrustful	Stingy
Agitated	Detached	Hateful	Mortified	Stopped
Agonized	Devastated	Hazy	Mystified	Stressed out
Alarmed	Disappointed	Heartbroken	Needy	Surprised
Alienated	Discombobulated	Heavy	Nervous	Suspect
Alone	Disconcerted	Heavyhearted	No good	Suspicious
Aloof	Discouraged	Helpless	Nostalgic	Terrified
Ambivalent	Disgruntled	Hesitant	Numb	Timid
Anguished	Disgusted	Hopeless	Outraged	Tired
Animosity	Disheartened	Horried	Overloaded	Torn
Annoyed	Disliked	Hostile	Overwhelmed	Trapped
Anxious	Dismayed	Humiliated	Panicked	Troubled
Apathetic	Displeased	Hurt	Perplexed	Turbulent
Appalled	Distant	Icy	Perturbed	Tumultuous
Apprehensive	Distracted	Ignored	Petrified	Turned away
Ashamed	Distraught	Impatient	Pining	Uncomfortable
Avoided	Distressed	Inadequate	Pitiful	Uneasy
Babied	Disturbed	Incensed	Powerless	Unhappy
Baffled	Dour	Indifferent	Put down	Uninterested
Beat	Drained	Indignant	Puzzled	Unloved
Beaten	Dreadful	Inferior	Rattled	Unneeded
Bereaved	Edgy	Insecure	Regretful	Unnerved
Bewildered	Embarrassed	Irate	Rejected	Unnoticed
Bored	Empty	Irked	Remorseful	Unrewarded
Burnt out	Enraged	Irritable	Removed	Unseen
Chagrined	Envious	Irritated	Repulsed	Unsettled
Challenged	Exasperated	Jealous	Resentful	Unwanted
Chaotic	Exhausted	Jittery	Reserved	Upset
Cloudy	Exposed	Judged	Restless	Used
Clumsy	Flustered	Judgmental	Ridiculed	Useless
Cold	Foolish	Jumpy	Risky	Walked on
Contemptuous	Forced	Leery	Sad	Wary
Cornered	Foreboding	Left out	Sarcastic	Washed out
Cranky	Forlorn	Let down	Scared	Watched
Craving	Fragile	Lethargic	Self-conscious	Weak
Crushed	Frazzled	Listless	Self-pitying	Weary
Dazed	Frightened	Livid	Sensitive	Wistful
Defeated	Frustrated	Lonely	Shaky	Withdrawn
Dejected	Furious	Longing	Shocked	Worn out
Depleted	Gloomy	Lost	Shy	Worried
Depressed	Grieving	Martyred	Sleepy	Wounded
Desperate	Guarded	Melancholic	Startled	Wretched
Despised	Guilty	Miserable	Stepped on	Yearning



# Feelings Follow Needs

Referencing the example in figure 11 below, list five words in your journal that represent your most common *pleasant* feelings. Next to each feeling word, list at least one need that's met when that feeling is present.

Now, referencing figure 12 below, list five words that represent your most common *painful* feelings. Next to each feeling word, list at least one need that isn't met when that feeling is present.

Then, using the examples in figure 13 and figure 14 below as a reference, expand on each of the lists you've made by answering:

- What other feelings come along with the first feeling you noted?**
- What thoughts or experiences most commonly trigger the feeling?**

FIGURE 11:

<i>Pleasant Feeling</i>	<i>Fulfilled Need</i>
<i>Protected</i>	<i>Safety</i>
<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Ease</i>
<i>Cuddled</i>	<i>Closeness</i>
<i>Enlivened</i>	<i>Restoration</i>
<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Community</i>

FIGURE 12:

<i>Painful Feeling</i>	<i>Unfulfilled Need</i>
<i>Alone</i>	<i>Love</i>
<i>Exposed</i>	<i>Protection</i>
<i>Bored</i>	<i>Play</i>
<i>Uninterested</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
<i>Chaotic</i>	<i>Harmony</i>

FIGURE 13:

<i>Pleasant Feeling</i>	<i>Fulfilled Need</i>	<i>Feelings that Come Along</i>	<i>Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling</i>
<i>Protected</i>	<i>Safety</i>	<i>Security, trust</i>	<i>When my friend stuck up for me as I was being insulted by a stranger</i>
<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Ease</i>	<i>Happiness, confidence</i>	<i>When I'm content with the effort I'm putting into my life and seeing the results of my effort</i>
<i>Cuddled</i>	<i>Closeness</i>	<i>Cared for, close</i>	<i>When I'm feeling held and being touched in a safe way</i>
<i>Enlivened</i>	<i>Restoration</i>	<i>Enduring, energetic</i>	<i>When I take a walk in nature or go for a run</i>
<i>Accepted</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Whole, involved</i>	<i>When I open myself to the world and don't feel awkward</i>

FIGURE 14:

<i>Painful Feeling</i>	<i>Unfulfilled Need</i>	<i>Feelings that Come Along</i>	<i>Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling</i>
<i>Alone</i>	<i>Love</i>	<i>Isolated, fearful</i>	<i>Relationship ending; thinking I'll never be seen or loved</i>
<i>Exposed</i>	<i>Protection</i>	<i>Mortified, embarrassed</i>	<i>When I try to do something I don't feel good about, fail especially in front of other people, and don't handle it gracefully</i>
<i>Bored</i>	<i>Play</i>	<i>Hazy, listless</i>	<i>When I don't come up with things to do with my time other than work and the basic requirements of life</i>
<i>Uninterested</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Detached, numb</i>	<i>When I think I'm supposed to do something with my life, but I don't know what to do or what fits me</i>
<i>Chaotic</i>	<i>Harmony</i>	<i>Jumpy, overloaded</i>	<i>When I believe that my mind will always torture me with memories, pain, and the ways I'm not consistent</i>

# Using Damage as Communication



It's likely that, in certain situations, you've hidden or shown the physical or emotional damage caused by self-harm because you know that your damage *communicates*. Using damage as communication is something like silently saying "See how much I suffer!" and silently asking for help, "Do you see how out of control my emotions must be for me to have to cope like this?"

When you communicate via obvious self-inflicted physical or emotional damage, you're *communicating by brute force*. Others tend to shy away from brute force, so it's likely that if you're making a silent or convoluted request for help, you will not receive the help you're seeking. The process of finding feeling words and Translating your thoughts is the basis of satisfying communication. You may be communicating more than you hope when you ask someone into your world by showing them your damage. Finding words and relating them to needs is far more effective than using damage as communication, especially when trying to convey your experience to someone else.

Think about the questions below, remembering that this isn't about shaming your behavior. This is about finding the opportunities you have to change the way you're meeting your own needs. If you find that your tendency to use your damage as communication is undermining relationships or limiting your ability to practice finding words, you can *change* that tendency.

- Have you ever self-injured because you didn't have the words or the patience to skillfully convey what you were feeling to a person you wanted to open up to? Did you show the damage you inflicted in order to tell the story? If so, what kind of response did you get from the person you wanted to talk to (but used damage to communicate with instead)?**
- In what situations, and with what people, are you likely to cover or hide your damage?**
- In what situations, and with what people, are you likely to let your damage show without silently using it as a request for help?**
- In what situations, and with what people, are you likely to purposely show your damage as a request for help or to manipulate their feelings?**
- What feelings and needs do you find behind your use of damage as communication?**
- Are your needs and feelings conveyed as clearly as you'd like when you use damage as communication?**
- How effective has showing your damage been in meeting your needs for compassion and understanding?**
- How does it feel when you reinforce your isolation by communicating through damage instead of finding the words for your feelings and needs?**
- When others see your damage, how does it affect their willingness to remain open to you?**
- How does using damage as communication reinforce your identity as a "self-injurer" or undermine your sense of internal stability?**

Self-injury urges can come on so forcefully that it becomes difficult to accurately process your thoughts or feelings. When you're *not* triggered, make a habit of asking yourself, "How do I feel about what's happening?" or "What additional feelings come up as a reaction to the trigger feeling?" or "How does my body feel right now?" Try to get in touch with the variety of needs and feelings you experienced before and after self-injuring so that you can relate to (and relate about) what happened. You'll have a better shot at communicating before and after self-injury if you practice finding and using words in your clear *and* crisis times. Listen to your thoughts; identify the resulting feelings and the needs behind those feelings. This practice can free you from silently self-injuring, left only with the damage to tell the story of your experience.

Even if you've decided never to talk to another living soul about what's happening inside you, you'll still need to be able to find words for what you're feeling in order to Translate your many thoughts, emotions, and needs. It's a real skill to be able to find accurate feeling words when your mind is spinning and chaotic, or while a person you're talking to has little understanding of or compassion for what you're going through. Those tricky times are just the moments when it's important to find the few words that really matter so you can meet your own needs as skillfully as possible, even if you do it alone.

Slowing down your reactions to what you feel or need and finding words to describe those feelings will widen your Pauses and reduce your urges overall. Mental chaos doesn't have quite the same impact on you if you're able to anchor yourself with accurate identification of your needs and feelings. Maintain your Pauses as you're Listening, and try to take the time to Translate what you're hearing into words for your feelings and needs. It can be tricky to ask a chaotic mind to produce accurate words for what's happening, so don't just believe everything in your head; take your time with it. And, given how many competing thoughts a brain has, you'll need to take an additional step once you've Listened to and Translated your feelings into needs: Working with the truths and meanings you may be applying to or taking from the situation.

## *Truth and Meaning*

For our purposes, truth roughly equates to belief. When you're acting on your truth, you're acting from your core beliefs, which have been created by the meanings you've gleaned from your experiences. When Translating, it's important to realize that truth is a creation of *thought*, the cementation of lessons you've learned by making *meanings* out of your experiences, and then believing those meanings. This results in "truths" being quite malleable when they're openly reconsidered. The meanings that form truth are rooted in the self-protection instinct, and they tell you how to interact with reality, what to expect from certain circumstances or experiences, and how to feel about those experiences. You can apply truth or meaning to your experiences or actions, and you can take truth or meaning *from* them. The meanings you make or apply can vary depending on your current state of mind, so if they harden into truths, they may prove just as unstable as the thoughts that produced them.

For instance, you could bring an existing meaning into a situation based on a truth you've cemented that receiving help means you're weak and unable to care for yourself. Your receipt of help from a friend would then be Translated through the lens of "help = weakness" and further cement the "truth" that you're weak. Furthermore, it could also add a meaning that you're *seen* as weak, regardless of how others actually interpret your receipt of aid.

But if you didn't *bring* a meaning into the situation, you could *make* a new meaning based on the realities of the situation instead of relying on your own mental prejudices. Of course, your brain could make the same self-deprecating meaning that you're weak, but *You* could make the meaning that you could trust your friend to help you, even if you both knew you could have taken care of yourself. You could see *love* and *support* in the help rather than weakness. It's your *choice* what the help means and what truth you cement from your experience. It's easier to make your choice consciously if you *remember* that the truths and meanings you're bringing in or making can pollute your present experience with a habit of negative thinking.

Some truths aren't based on discernment but on instant reactions conditioned from unmet needs and past experiences. The version of truth you identify with can be a total fabrication created by your thoughts, it can be created from existing beliefs and biases, and it can be created by an emotionless assessment of available variables or a hyper-consciousness of particular social attitudes. Truth can be created by a need to believe certain things to reduce the pain of unmet needs or by an emotional reaction to a thought, and the truth can change depending on which parts of your mind are doing the thinking. No matter why you adopt the truths and meanings you do, depending on your outlook on life, those truths and meanings will consistently reflect either a positive or negative perspective.

# Meanings and Truths: *Perspective*



Continue expanding on the lists you've made in your journal as you've worked with Listening and Translating, referencing figures 15 and 16. For each painful or pleasant feeling you identified, consider the meanings you could make out of your thoughts and experiences. Look at the feelings both from a positive and negative perspective when assigning meanings to your feelings. Notice that even pleasant feelings can be twisted into negative truths and meanings, just like painful feelings can be twisted into more positive truths and meanings. Once you've come up with positive and negative meanings, consider what truths would be cemented if you believed those meanings.

FIGURE 15:

## Positive and Negative Perspective: *Pleasant Feelings*

Pleasant Feeling	Fulfilled Need	Experiences or Thoughts That Create Feeling	Positive Perspective		Negative Perspective	
			Raw Meanings	Raw Truth	Raw Meanings	Raw Truth
Protected	Safety	When my friend stuck up for me as I was being insulted by a stranger	I can trust my friends to stick up for me if I'm being attacked.	I'm able to protect myself, but I'll have help if I want or need it.	I'm so weak that my friends have to stick up for me, because I won't do it myself.	I'm seen by others to be weak and unable to protect myself.
Satisfied	Ease	When I'm content with the effort I'm putting into my life and seeing the results of my effort	I'm able to control the way I use my energy; I'm able to choose my direction and meet my goals.	I can direct my efforts.	Life is so much work; I have to try harder than other people.	Expending effort toward the life I want is a burden.
Cuddled	Closeness	When I'm feeling held and being touched in a safe way	The person holding me loves me; I love being loved.	I am cared for and open to affection.	I feel vulnerable when I am physically intimate with others.	I don't like to be touched.
Enlivened	Restoration	When I take a walk in nature or go for a run	There are places and practices that energize me.	I know how to restore myself.	I feel run-down and lack energy; I'm drained by life.	Life is draining; restoring myself is work.
Accepted	Community	When I open myself to the world and don't feel awkward	If I control my feelings of awkwardness, I can interact freely; I get to choose the parts of me that I express.	I can control my interactions in groups on my own terms.	I feel awkward when I open myself to others; community requires me to put on masks.	I'll never be accepted as I am.



FIGURE 16:

## Positive and Negative Perspective: Painful Feelings

Painful Feeling	Unfulfilled Need	Experiences or Thoughts That Create Feeling	Positive Perspective		Negative Perspective	
			Raw Meanings	Raw Truth	Raw Meanings	Raw Truth
Alone	Love	Relationship ending; thinking I'll never be seen or loved.	I want what fits, and if this relationship doesn't fit, I'll wait until I can be part of one that does.	I can have love and companionship that feels nourishing.	I'm too messed up to be loved.	I'll never have the love I want.
Exposed	Protection	When I try to do something I don't feel good about, fail especially in front of other people, and don't handle it gracefully	This experience doesn't mean anything about my ability; I feel embarrassed when I push myself to do things I'm not ready for; I can learn to handle embarrassing situations better.	Failure doesn't define me.	It's not a good idea to expose my weakness in front of other people; I can't handle it when people laugh at me.	I'll feel better if I hide my flaws and limitations.
Bored	Play	When I don't come up with things to do with my time other than work and the basic requirements of life	When I'm bored, I can find ways to feel playful; I have control over how I spend my free time; I want to do things that feel inspiring.	I can find ways to entertain myself.	I'm always listless; there's nothing to do that really interests me; I have a lot of time to kill.	Life is boring, and so am I.
Uninterested	Purpose	When I think I'm supposed to do something with my life, but I don't know what to do or what fits me	I have the opportunity to figure out what fits me best and do it; working toward goals helps me feel self-directed; I may not have it all figured out, but I am growing.	I define my life goals and purpose.	If I didn't have issues, I'd be able to direct my actions; I don't want the work of finding meaning or purpose in life; I'll always feel detached from myself and numb to life.	I'll never have control over my life.
Chaotic	Harmony	When I believe that my mind will always torture me with memories, pain, and the ways I'm not consistent	There are times when I'm overwhelmed with thoughts and need to use tools to relax my mind; I'm not all that different from other people, I just need to calm down right now.	I can create internal harmony when I need it.	Being overloaded so often means I can't handle life; I can't control my reactions to life.	I'm always going to feel overwhelmed.

Since your meanings are colored by your perspective, the truth you make out of the meanings you create isn't always *true*. Just because you *think* something is true or someone else says something is true doesn't mean that it *is* true, and just because you *think* an experience means something *doesn't* mean you're correct. Sometimes truth is true for a little while and then changes, because life and time move on without regard for our desire to cement truth. Some truths are very much living entities—imagined, created, lived, and destroyed as life progresses. Though it's normal to hold tight to ideas that aren't totally true, if the meanings you're making and the truths they impart contribute to your self-injury habits, you need to question them. You may find that some of the weight of your painful internal content comes from your emotional reactions. You may be *creating* pain in your life by making *untrue* meanings and trying to solidify them into truths about what's real and possible.

## Three Ways to Make Meaning

Your brain needs to be able to take in and interpret many images, thoughts, and external stimuli. You don't have to remember all the facts of a situation or keep track of all the details of life, because your brain takes in loads of information and makes it all *mean* something. Each time your brain receives information, it reacts based on meanings it made out of similar previous experiences or information it gleaned from other sources. The nature of life dictates that you instantly derive meaning from words you hear and experiences you have, but a situation that causes you pain will create different types of meanings than benign situations do. You may overreact to the pain, making inaccurate meanings and truths that are intended to, but won't, actually help you avoid the pain in the future. When you're likely to become triggered toward self-injury, Notice the meanings you're making out of your experiences and how they affect the beliefs and emotions you're acting on.

The process of making meaning out of your experience is natural, automatic, and necessary, but it can create a real problem when you don't control or understand the meanings you take in and solidify into truths. There are different ways to establish meanings. Three methods that may relate to your self-injury habits follow.

- **Linear or purely logical thinking:** Meanings your brain makes by analyzing the realities of cause and effect. For instance, "That burner is turned on. If I touch it with my bare skin, it will burn me." It can be considered true across the board that a stove burner being on could result in burns. It's not harmful to you or anyone else to tout a linear or logical truth when you can prove that no matter the conditions the truth will be *true* (a burner being lit will always have the capacity to burn things). It's OK if linear/logical meanings stick with you, especially when they're self-protective. But, sometimes a brain makes things that aren't logical *seem* logical, so it's a good idea to test out your "it just works that way" truths and meanings to see if the truth of the association you're making is provable time and time again. There is no good reason to change the meanings you've made or the truths you've identified if they can *always* be proven true.
- **Treated as linear thinking, but subjective:** Meanings made out of singular experiences that *could* define a truth, but there isn't enough data to prove if the meanings are *always* true. For instance, a memorable experience may have altered your feelings about trusting others. Your emotional response could have directed your brain to create a seemingly linear truth like "Being vulnerable will lead to being mistreated." The tendency to believe your thoughts may result in your not Noticing that the meaning is subjective. Experience with one (or more) people doesn't guarantee identical experience with *every* person. Making facts out of subjective experiences can lead to trouble, but it also happens very naturally. When trauma or confusion creates a mental landscape where you're grasping for security and ways to avoid being hurt, your brain can interpret your situation in ways that treat complex, subjective issues as simple, linear ones. Using discernment is important in determining if an idea you hold or meaning you've made is *consistently* true. If the subjective beliefs you hold or the meanings you make out of words or experiences create self-sabotaging habits or self-injury urges,

it's a good idea to question those meanings and beliefs and appropriately work with the subjective associations you've made.

- **Treated as linear thinking, but based on emotionally driven wrong-thinking:** Meanings made based on the wrong-thinking of extreme emotions which result in thoughts like "I'm never going to be OK." Granted, this could be true, but it likely isn't. Meanings made from difficult emotional experiences or fears, such as "I'm never going to be OK" or "I'm unlovable," can be toxic to your spirit. These are not facts, even though you can treat them as such and call up evidence to be twisted in the service of painful thinking. Truths based on emotional wrong-thinking can't ever be proven, because they're based on your own opinions and limited interpretation of your situation. Opinions and interpretations change. Your mind might be accessing memories of times you've failed or been treated as "unlovable," blocking access to your capacity for self-love. But once your balance shifts, your talent for discernment can make the assessment that you're the product of many experiences, not all of them bad, and you're *far* from unlovable. If your talent for self-love were running the show, the statement "I'm unlovable" would be exposed as the utter hogwash it is. Translate any meaning that changes based on your internal circumstance, especially when it triggers urges for self-harm.

The truths and meanings you make out of your experiences greatly affect your reactions to future experiences and determine how you relate to yourself and others. Your long-standing beliefs can obscure the more accurate truth of the moment, or stop you from asking the clarifying questions that would allow you to consider alternate meanings and truths. Be careful what associations you let your mind make without your explicit consent. Question the version of the truth and any meanings you're making out of, or applying to, your experiences—especially when they cause you pain. You'll find a sense of ease when your emotional reactions aren't deciding what you feel or believe, and when you learn to spin painful truths and meanings in ways that allow you to *accept* them.

## Working toward Acceptance

You have experiences that create thoughts. Thoughts are put up against beliefs you hold, based on meanings you've made from your experiences. Painful meanings and beliefs, when triggered, create painful emotions. Your reaction to a painful emotional response creates additional meanings and truths that you apply to the situation. If you react skillfully to your emotions, you make truths such as "I can handle this." If you're taken over by your emotions and acting unskillfully, you make different truths, such as "I can't handle this." If you accept those truths, your future experiences are colored by them. The words, truths, and meanings you use are important, but your emotional reaction to them is *more* important. An extreme emotional reaction is a solid indicator that you're trying to make yourself accept thoughts, truths, and meanings that are unnecessarily painful.

Controlling your emotional reactions to your thoughts and beliefs is easier if you realize that sometimes you apply your truths and meanings not because they're true, but because the beliefs and feelings you already hold dictate your view of what's true in the moment. You can be blind to the moment, because your brain is using recollections of the past or predictions of the future as a basis for interpreting the now—and trying to make you accept faulty and painful truths and meanings. But neither the situation you're experiencing nor the quality of your internal abilities is the real trigger for self-injury. The trigger is what it would mean to you—*about* you—if you accepted the thoughts in your head (or out of others' mouths) as true. If you can't accept the meanings and truths you're identifying with without shame or self-injury urges, this is a definite sign that you need to recognize the negative spin you're putting on the ideas you're asking yourself to accept. Then it's time to peel off the self-loathing, self-pity, world-hating, or fear that's wrapped around your truths and meanings so you can expose a truth you can actually live with.



# Making Meaning and Truth Acceptable



Painful meanings (made from pleasant or painful feelings) don't always have to have painful truths. Twisting around your raw negative meanings and truths can help you find a way to truly accept what's hurting you and offer a positive basis for future action. Continuing with the lists you've made in your journal while Listening and Translating, look at the raw *negative* meanings and truths you've created for your fulfilled and unfulfilled needs.

Using figures 17 and 18 for examples, consider what meanings and truth(s) you are asking yourself to accept if you believed the raw *negative* meanings you've assigned to your pleasant and painful feelings.

Then, *Translate the negative meanings* made from pleasant and painful feelings and come up with truths that are *true* but aren't filtered by victimization, anger, self-blame, or hopelessness. Continue Translating your negative meanings until you've come up with Translated truths you can accept without extreme emotional reaction.

FIGURE 17:

## Translating Negative Meanings: Pleasant Feelings

Pleasant Feeling	Fulfilled Need	Experiences or Thoughts That Create Feeling	Raw Thoughts		Translated Thoughts	
			Raw Truth Made with Negative Meanings	Raw Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept
Protected	Safety	When my friend stuck up for me as I was being insulted by a stranger	I'm seen by others to be weak and unable to protect myself.	I'm weak.	Sometimes I need help from others; sometimes I don't. It doesn't define me.	I'm able to receive help without feeling shame; even if I am seen as weak, I can live a valued life.
Satisfied	Ease	When I'm content with the effort I'm putting into my life and the results of my effort	Expending effort toward the life I want is a burden.	I lack the energy for life.	I have wavering energy for the demands of life.	I may not be as consistent as I'd like to be; I may have to reassess my goals.
Cuddled	Closeness	When I'm feeling held and being touched in a safe way	I don't like to be touched.	I'm uncomfortable with affection.	Some of my experiences taught me to shy away from affection.	I need to find safe ways to receive affection; I may always have some confusion around physical affection and safety.
Enlivened	Restoration	When I take a walk in nature or go for a run	Life is draining; restoring myself is work.	I'm unable to take care of myself.	I can care for myself in simple ways that don't feel draining.	I'm capable of managing my energy and effort. It's OK if I don't always manage my energy and effort as I'd like to.
Accepted	Community	When I open myself to the world and don't feel awkward	I'll never be accepted as I am.	I'm incapable of interacting fluidly with the world.	Some situations are harder for me to be authentic in than others.	I can pick the situations I open myself to; when I feel awkward, I should act carefully.



FIGURE 18:

## Translating Negative Meanings: Painful Feelings

Painful Feeling	Unfulfilled Need	Experiences or Thoughts That Create Feeling	Raw Thoughts		Translated Thoughts	
			Raw Truth Made with Negative Meanings	Raw Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept
Alone	Love	Relationship ending; thinking I'll never be seen or loved	I'll never have the love I want.	I'm unlovable.	It hurts that I don't have the love I want right now, but it doesn't determine what's possible in the future.	I may have what I want in the future; if I don't have what I want in relationship, I can still live a valued life.
Exposed	Protection	When I try to do something I don't feel good about, fail especially in front of other people, and don't handle it gracefully	I'll feel better if I hide my flaws and limitations.	Hiding is better than being seen.	When I feel awkward, it's not unusual for me to do something embarrassing, but I do want to be seen.	I can be seen without being embarrassed, but sometimes I will embarrass myself.
Bored	Play	When I don't come up with things to do with my time other than work and the basic requirements of life	Life is boring, and so am I.	Life holds nothing I want.	I want more out of life; otherwise I wouldn't feel bored.	I may need to do some work to find ways to feel enlivened; I may have to work to come out of my shell.
Uninterested	Purpose	When I think I'm supposed to do something with my life, but I don't know what to do or what fits me	I'll never have control over my life.	I'm out of control.	There are times when I feel directed and moved toward certain goals; I may not know who I am or what I want right now, but I can figure it out.	I'm not lost; I may not know exactly where I'm headed but I'll find my way day-by-day.
Chaotic	Harmony	When I believe that my mind will always torture me with memories, pain, and the ways I'm not consistent	I'm always going to feel overwhelmed.	I'm overwhelmed by my life.	I have a very active mind and sometimes lose perspective when I'm in pain.	I'm not always overwhelmed, but being overwhelmed is a state I may have to adapt to.

Keep editing until your meanings and truths are totally removed from judgment, blame, and shame. See the truths and meanings you're making from your movie theater seat and don't stop at meanings or truths that *validate* the painful, confused, or vulnerable parts of you. Find a way to spin painful thoughts, emotions, truths, and meanings into productive truths, meanings, and lessons that *compassionately* guide your beliefs about what's true. Even if the truth is still painful to accept, you can take all your emotional loading out of it so it's *easier* to accept.



## Acceptance

Once you Translate your raw meanings and truths into something less emotionally charged, you'll be able to accept thoughts, feelings, and realities that don't feel great. But it may be useful to ask yourself what "acceptance" actually *means*.

"Acceptance" is one of those words that every person defines a little bit differently. It's situational and comes in many shades of gray. As it relates to the topic of creating or accepting truths, meanings, and realities behind your self-injury habits, it's easier to define acceptance by what it *isn't*. Acceptance *isn't* approval, or a statement of belief that what you're accepting is good, right, or morally superior. You can accept even the darkest elements of reality, while on another level know that you'd change that reality to suit your values if you could.

Your role on this planet isn't to give reality permission to exist. Things are like they are—some great, some not so great. Some you can change, some you can't. *Acceptance is not approval*. It's seeing the reality of the moment without raising your defenses, and without hiding behind your desire for reality to be different than it is. (Note: Keep in mind that we're talking about Translating emotional states, turning painful thoughts into truths in a way that allows for positive action. Working with and accepting feeling states is very different from accepting genocide, sexual abuse, or any of the other extreme aspects of life that require us to filter our acceptance through our primary moral judgments.)

As used in this book, the concept of acceptance is both a coping *tool* that helps you live with Translated truths and meanings and a specific *action*. The action of accepting is something like *consenting to receive* or undertake *something offered*.

*Consenting = Allowing*

*Receive = Take in*

*Something offered = Thought, feeling, truth, meaning, aspect of reality*

When you accept various elements of life, you're allowing yourself to take in an aspect of reality. You're not giving it permission to exist; you're seeing that it *does* exist, and then determining the view you'll take on it and the reaction you'll have to it. The only way you can alter your reality is by changing the meanings and truths you make and apply, which shapes reality into something that's easier to accept.

An automatic process of acceptance can happen if you're not acting with awareness. You may unwittingly accept painful truths with a mantra like, "I think it, they said it, I saw it on TV, I feel it—therefore it must be true, and it means a lot of other things are also true." The "I think it, therefore it's true" mode of belief is obviously faulty, given what you know about the competing perspectives a brain conjures up. You could find yourself about to self-injure because you took in as true ideas that, in hindsight, obviously needed refinement. Accepting at face value the truth you or others present, without discernment, is more like acquiescence than true acceptance. Be careful what you simply slide into "accepting," especially if it has a negative effect on you. Acceptance is the last step in solidifying the meanings you've turned into truth, so it's worth Noticing the messages you accept into your belief system.

Consider a few habits you might have brought to your automatic translations of truth and meaning. If any

one of these is present, it's likely you won't have an easy time accepting an idea, truth, or judgment without shame or self-injury urges.

- **Self-victimization:** When you feel like life is happening to you without your consent, you may wonder things like, "Why is this happening to me?" or "Why am I so unlucky?" or "Why doesn't this happen to anyone else?" Life isn't fair for anyone, so when you're on the down side of things, don't feel too special about it. Find a way to rework truths and meanings so that you feel like you can direct your reactions to life. You aren't life's victim. *You* control your outlook on life, regardless of circumstances—and when you aren't acting like a victim, you're able to change or leave situations that truly oppress you.
- **Reacting in anger:** Some truths and meanings are contrived when you lash back at a situation or the people around you for what's happening. (Remember David Banner when he was trying to change his tire in the rain? "Stupid rain!") Take your disapproval of reality out of the truths and meanings you try to accept, and you'll feel less resistance to what *is*.
- **Self-blame:** You may have had everything to do with the creation of your situation, but odds are there were more variables involved than your self-blame will allow you to believe. You may make meanings out of "being so stupid" or based on beliefs that you "can't do anything right," but blaming yourself doesn't help you handle what's real without increasing shame or self-loathing.
- **Getting depressed:** When your truths and meanings contribute to you losing hope or giving up, not much good can come from accepting them. You may be blinded by your depression and ask yourself to accept that you'll "never be happy." Managing feelings of despondency is crucial to Translating and getting to a meaning that's both true and less painful to accept.

## Radical Acceptance

There's another idea called Radical Acceptance that's worth mentioning in relationship to self-injury. This notion (not mine) is basically that you're to radically accept that every moment is a consequence of all the moments before it. You're supposed to hold that idea without shame, blame or harsh judgment; just a simple fact. When applied to the thinking behind self-injury, this idea could be Translated in at least two ways:

1. Actions and consequences follow a course, and one can't escape from the consequences of preceding actions.
2. Your life circumstances are your own damn fault, and the past will forever affect the present.

There is, of course, truth to be found in just about any statement; it's just a matter of how you Translate it and what you choose to believe. It is true that the conditions of this moment are simply a consequence of all moments prior, so fighting this moment as if you have the strength to change the effects of all those prior moments is a little silly. But, those prior moments and their consequences are all too familiar, aren't they? Rehashing the details of your life can wreak havoc on your ability to handle your thoughts without extreme emotions. When you're experiencing the chaos that comes along with self-injury, trying to Radically Accept the current situation could be an invitation to *intensify* your internal chaos. It's not necessary to include in your thought process the millions of moments that led you where you are. How many times do you need to access memories of being abused, screwing up, or making choices you regret?

When you're already struggling, neither Radical Acceptance nor "I think it, therefore it's true" are going to calm your mind; *getting to what's true in the moment* will. Try to break your acceptance down to what's relevant in the moment (and that you can take action on), and leave out all the thoughts about experiences that got you where you are. You can look at the bigger picture when you're clear, when you can hold a mental state that doesn't lead you to punish yourself for what may be true. In your efforts to accept your circumstances, don't set yourself up to fight with all the prior moments of your life. The present is already difficult enough.

This moment, right now, is all you have. You may carry the weight of the past or the fear of the future, but this moment is the only moment you have control over *now*. Then the next moment, and the next. Consciously controlling the way you see the reality of the moment, and consenting to let it exist, will help you make choices with consequences you actually enjoy.

## Letting Down Your Guard

By the time you try to accept a feeling, thought, or reality, you've done the work of breaking down your trigger thoughts into feeling words and needs, and you've questioned the truths and meanings you're bringing into or taking from the situation. When it comes time to work toward acceptance, you may find you're trying to accept truths and meanings that are (1) not entirely true and (2) kind of true and intensely painful. Getting to what's true requires that you try accepting an idea, Notice how it feels, and determine if you need to change the truth or meaning in order to accept it without an extreme reaction. When you've turned your thoughts, experiences, feelings, and needs into meanings and truths that don't intensify your pain but empower you with tools for constructive action, you've gotten to what's true. The safety of a nonviolent and accepting perspective on your situation can allow you to let your guard down. When your guard is down, you're more able to allow your vulnerability to be expressed and act in accordance with your deeper needs instead of being driven by thoughtless reactions and resistance to what's happening.

The act of letting down your defenses is essential to accepting some truths and meanings. The moment is going to exist whether you like it or not. If you do have input on reality, it's best to retain a perspective that allows you to have *effective* input, from a clear mental place. If you're guarding against the pain of the moment, you're not able to Respond to it as effectively as if you were in your movie theater seat, trying to determine what could be true about the story you're watching and what the next scene should involve to support the main character. Assuming you're not willingly in a dangerous situation, tolerating the unpleasantness of life helps you work with, and become desensitized to, that unpleasantness. Your ability to stand up to, watch, Notice, or name what's happening without becoming triggered *hinges* on you realizing that your approval or disapproval doesn't *change* reality; it changes your ability to *Respond* to reality. Letting your guard down—letting reality exist without fear that it will overwhelm you—is *necessary* to let life in.

You may try, as all people do, to push against what's happening, so that you don't have to feel or challenge your feelings. You may try to manipulate your available options or the people in your life so you don't have to be vulnerable—but doing so limits your ability to Respond effectively to the circumstances of your life. You gain strength from learning to remain present with what's real and by habitually Responding to truths you can't change in ways that protect, uplift, encourage, and empower you or others. Thoughtful Responses will eventually change what's real in your life, and Translating truth and meaning so you can *accept* what's real will make life easier to deal with in the meantime.

It's important to learn to truly accept the realities of the world, your life, and the current moment. But it may be more important to do so in a way that allows you to remain compassionately accountable for the way you use your words and make meanings into truths. Noticing, Pausing, Listening, and Translating should help you get a perspective on your situation and tap into your inherent strengths to attend to the realities of the moment. Take your time as you're working with acceptance, truth, and meaning, and maintain your Pauses so you can work with your thoughts without resorting to self-injury. The internal sensations present when you create a positive relationship with the truths and meanings in your head should feel cathartic; they shouldn't bury you in more pain. If the way you're using your words and self-talk during Translation creates self-injury urges, it's a good sign that you need to start your Translation process again.

At least one thing is true related to stopping the use of self-injury: Skillfully Translating your internal experience makes self-injuring *unnecessary*, since doing so relieves the tension that *drives* self-injury. But

getting to what's true can take time. The process asks you to question the accuracy of the words you're using, but it also asks you to question the myriad meanings you've created and to see how you continue to accept and apply them to certain words, actions, and situations. It may not be easy to look at and unravel the way you make your pain worse with your estimations of what's true and the meanings you apply to those truths. It is, however, essential to learn to find words and identify needs, question your own truths and meanings, and work toward some Translation of reality that allows you to accept it without self-injury. Keep Translating until you find the words and get to the truths and meanings that feel *true* and that *You* can truly accept. Getting to what's true allows you to let down your guard and be with what's happening, and Translation skills help you accept reality without emotional resistance. Getting to what's true feels much better than self-injury, and it will form the foundation of creating solid Response options.

## Practicing Translating

Translating compassionately is the key to getting relief from your pain without self-injury. As you practice getting to what's true, be aware of your self-talk when finding words, questioning truth and meaning, or practicing acceptance. Translating your inner content into a useful basis for action isn't about coming up with translations like "I suck" or using berating comments or judgments as if they were valid translations of your internal dialogue or others' words. You're trying to get to what's *behind* your negative self-judgments and beliefs, so if your Translations are going in a painful direction, come back to compassion and try again.

The practice strategies below can be used repeatedly to gain mastery in interpreting the thoughts, truths, and meanings you're affected by. Each time you practice Translating your general or moment-to-moment experience, you improve your ability to cope skillfully with your inner content.



### *Translate Feelings and Needs*

Get used to Translating feelings and needs by considering the questions below. For help finding words, use list of needs from page 59 and the lists of feeling words on pages 132 and 133.

- What do you feel when you think about how you treat yourself through self-injury?**
- What do you feel when you're caring for yourself after an episode?**
- What do you feel when you consider telling someone who *knows* what you're struggling with that you've been self-injuring?**
- What do you feel when you consider outing yourself to someone who *doesn't* know that you self-injure?**
- What do you feel in your best moments?**
- What do you feel in your most painful moments?**
- What needs are associated with the feelings in the questions above?**

Pick three words from the lists of feeling words that represent feelings you don't want to feel. What actions could you take to limit those feelings in your life?

Pick three words from the lists of feeling words that represent feelings you actually *want* to feel. What actions could you take to bring those feelings into your life?

## Translate Judgments



When you're judging, evaluating, or criticizing, practice Translating the *need* the judgmental statement is expressing. Expressions of condemnation, disappointment, or superiority are also expressions of what you need and how you want things to be. In your clear times, Notice your judgments and expressions of dissatisfaction over simple situations. If you judge a driver for being "stupid to drive so fast," Translate the feeling (fear, annoyance) to the need (safety). Then Translate it, without judgment, into what you would like to see: "That driver is tripping my need for safety. When I see people drive so fast, I feel scared about what could happen to them, to me, or to others on the road. I would like people to drive closer to the speed limit." Translating simple judgments will help you when annoyances feel overwhelming.

When you're getting upset, Listen for the comments that trigger painful feelings and Translate them into needs. Without judgment, express what you want. If you thought, "I'd have friends, but nobody likes me," you could identify feelings of loneliness and a need for connection. Then you could Translate the initial thought into something such as, "I'm feeling isolated and afraid that I won't ever have the connection I want." Then, you may Respond to your need for connection by taking some classes at the local gym to get out of the house and find some sort of interaction, even if it wasn't exactly the connection you wanted. There are many degrees of meeting a need, and a little connection is better than none. Translating without judgment helps you identify the needs you *can* actually meet.

## Translate Truths and Meanings

Your brain works so quickly that it can seem nearly impossible to understand the truths or meanings in your thoughts during moments of clarity, let alone during mental chaos. Translate the repetitive internal chatter that drives self-injury and reflect on the accuracy of the meanings you've been applying. Make a habit of slowing down the reaction-machine in your head, so you can determine what you're actually taking in and potentially cementing as a belief.

Consider the feelings that most often trigger you toward self-injury.

- What meanings *behind* the thoughts lead to your most intense emotional pain? What do the feelings or related unmet needs *mean*?**
- Do the meanings you're applying contribute to *truths* that aren't quite true?**
- Why do the meanings you've created cause you pain? What do the meanings *mean* about you or the world?**
- Are the truths or judgments formed by the meanings you've interpreted *accurate*? From which standpoint? A brain interpreting based on habit, or *Your* talents for self-governance and discernment?**
- Which of your truths and meanings need further Translation to get to meanings that are true but not colored by self-loathing, self-blame, or hopelessness? Work with those truths and meanings until they've transitioned to truths and meanings you can accept without self-harm.**

## Get to Acceptance

Though you're fully capable of changing the way your pain affects your life, it may be unrealistic to believe that through acceptance, you can *let go* of some of those pains and they'll somehow vacate you. The original trauma(s) that led you to self-injury and self-sabotage will never completely go away. A healthy brain will not be able to forget all of the impacts it undergoes. You're always going to be the person who experienced your life and the pain it's brought with it, but you can change



the effect painful experiences have on the way you *live* your life. Accepting the reality of your experiences as a concept sounds good, but it takes practice to truly accept some of the more terrible realities of life, and to refine truths and meanings to a point where detachment allows reality to exist without taking you for an emotional ride.

Consider the most common trigger for your self-injury. What meanings and truths are behind it? How would you need to spin those truths or meanings so the truth you created was still accurate, but more palatable? What would it take for you to find a way to accept the realities of life without punishing yourself for them?

In situations where you feel overwhelmed and need to quickly Translate and accept painful thoughts, practice doing a rough Translation (figure 19). Without getting deep or teary-eyed, simply list your thoughts or fears and consider how it would feel if the thoughts or fears were true. Then come up with an alternate idea that allows for truth, but phrase it in a way you can accept.

FIGURE 19:  
**Rough Translations**

<i>Thought or Fear</i>	<i>Rough Translation</i>
<i>I'll never forget what happened.</i>	<i>That might be true. I may never forget. But remembering doesn't mean I'm doomed to a life where painful experiences are the only things available. I may be able to orient myself differently to my painful history and not need to forget in order to feel happy.</i>
<i>I'll never forgive myself for how I behaved.</i>	<i>Maybe. But that's up to me. If I don't forgive myself, I'd need to learn to live with the shame. But if I do forgive myself, I'd have to allow for the reality of what I've done. I may be able to orient myself to my shame in a way that doesn't continue to punish me for something I've already suffered for.</i>
<i>The world is cruel and unfair.</i>	<i>Yep. And it's also beautiful and awe-inspiring. Terrible and wonderful realities exist at one time. I can focus on the worst aspects of it or the best. Acceptance allows them to coexist, regardless of how I feel about reality. I get to choose how I involve myself in remedying the terrible things in the world, or how involved I am in enjoying the wonderful things in the world.</i>
<i>I can't always understand why I do what I do.</i>	<i>I'm a complex thinking and feeling creature and can't always be consistent. Trying to understand myself is better than not trying at all. I may be able to orient myself to my inconsistencies differently, becoming more consistent in ways that support my health and allow for the variability that keeps life interesting.</i>
<i>I'll never quite fix what was broken in me.</i>	<i>Maybe. But I'd have to live life anyway, so I may as well try to do the best I can with what I have. I can fix some of it. I can grow underdeveloped skills; I can practice forgiveness and let what's real be real while making life as good as I possibly can, given what's happened in my life. Maybe being a little damaged from life isn't a sentence for doom or loneliness.</i>

Getting to acceptance can be a challenge. It can be done by working through lists of feelings, needs, truths, and meanings, or by simply releasing self-judgment and letting truth be true without having to apply self-deprecating meanings to it. If considering an aspect of reality creates urges for self-harm, you need to realize that it's time to spin the truth and meanings you're applying. Learning how to make reality *acceptable* comes through the practice of Translating your truths and meanings—and through avoiding hissy fits when reality presents obstacles you'd prefer not to encounter.



Though your worst fears or most painful interpretations of truth and meaning *could* be true, they likely aren't. You could be adding painful meanings to the situation that amplify your fears or undermine your success in acting on your own behalf. But even if your fears or negative self-beliefs *were* true, that doesn't also mean that you'll be devastated or unable to handle the realities that come along with the truth. You can still Pause, Listen, and Translate the truths and meanings you're bringing into the situation, turning it all into material you can accept and live peacefully with.

Accepting Translated truth is different from accepting the raw, emotionally based meanings you apply to situations. When you truly accept reality, you don't fight it, worry about it, or lament it; you Translate it to get to the closest version of truth you can. Then you trust yourself to handle the truth without amplifying the pain it causes you through judgments and negative attitudes. (It already hurts enough, right?) You work with it. You filter it through patience, compassion, and understanding so that you can stop fighting it. You choose to live your life as best you can despite the realities involved.

When you know who you are, what you stand for, and where you want your life to go, you're more able to picture yourself handling challenging situations without seeing doom in every small problem. You're more able to detach from what you're Listening to so you can Translate the emotional response you're applying to truths and meanings. But, even in the face of distasteful realities, you don't have to ask yourself to swallow a meaning that makes you rot from the inside out. You *question* and *adapt* your meanings and truths, trusting that you'll be able to get through the realities Translated meanings may bring.

Remember your Ground Rules, as Listening and Translating can leave you raw in ways you may want to soothe with self-injury. Remember that you're not trying to figure all this out at once or to psychoanalyze yourself into oblivion; you're trying to take small steps toward changing the way your thoughts and habits rule your actions when you're upset. Be patient with the process; Responding skillfully to your life will become easier over time.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

# Responding

**Y**ou're almost always responding to life and the plethora of stimuli available to you. Most of your basic responses are automatic and healthy (need to eat = eat). At the most basic level, you respond through *reaction* to your experience, and at your most discerning, you consciously select your Response to your environment, thoughts, and feelings. Responding is part of every small step you take through Noticing, Pausing, Listening, and Translating—and even in distracting. For our purposes, Responses are deliberately calculated strategies intended to make your life more wonderful at best, or less painful at the least. They could simply improve your momentary outlook or improve your overall ability to tolerate distress and cope without self-injury. They may not always work, but Responses based on thoughtful internal inquiry give you better odds of coping skillfully, compared to the automatic responses your emotions and painful truths can suggest.

When you need to Respond to inner turmoil, compassion becomes critical. When you ask the million-dollar question—“How am I going to cope without self-injury?”—answers other than “you’re not” will come more easily when you’re compassionate with yourself and get into your movie theater seat to change your view. Being compassionate enough to inquire what’s happening inside you and Respond carefully to your challenges cultivates fertile ground, where solutions can arise spontaneously to seemingly insoluble problems.

## Response Options

As you Respond to your life circumstances, Notice that you could Respond *instantly* to your instincts, thoughts, or desires. Some of those Responses are harmful and some aren't. When a Response is clear and non-harming, it's fine to take relatively mindless action: I'm thirsty, I get a drink; I've been sitting too long, I stretch. Some Responses to the sensations you Notice are that easy. But it's a different scenario when your brain is locked in painful cognitive dissonance and the best Response you can come up with is to stop your pain with self-injury. In a crisis, it's important to Pause long enough to carefully consider your Response options, even when the only good Response is to reboot your brain through a nap.

## Good Responses

Given your experience with self-harm, it's likely difficult to trust your ability to Respond skillfully to your pain. To be sure you're crafting good Response options, you only need to ask yourself two questions:

1. Does it support me in being who I want to be, or support the life path I want for myself?
2. Does doing it (and potentially repeating it) create stability in my life?

That's it. When you try to enact a Response option, you'll know if you're going in the right direction because your strategies will help you become more of the person you want to be and less of what you don't want to be. Responses that attend skillfully to your feelings give you a sense of feeling better, not worse. Be mindful of your self-talk and attitude as you work with Response options, and do your best to commit to not making yourself suffer more than you already do.



# Response Options

Instead of responding hastily and from emotional reactivity when you're triggered, try to Pause, Listen, and Translate to slow things down so you can carefully consider a variety of Response options. When it's not possible to take your time in Responding to self-injury stimuli, consult work you've done *prior* to the crisis to help you decide on a Response. In your journal, create (or use from a previous inquiry) a list of five thoughts that trigger feelings of desperation or self-injury urges. Do a rough translation of each thought or feeling, and come up with at least three Response options that would either change the feeling or situation or change the effect your pain has on you. Consider or create quick Responses you can enact when similar trigger thoughts come up in the future.

FIGURE 20:

## Rough Translations and Response Options

Thought	Rough Translation	Response Options
<i>I have no idea what to say; I can't communicate.</i>	<i>I want to appropriately express my thoughts and emotions in a way that doesn't hurt me or other people.</i>	<i>I could try to be more patient with my words; I could read books on communication; I could work with a therapist.</i>
<i>I'm totally stuck; it's always going to be this way.</i>	<i>I want to feel like I'm moving forward, regardless of the weight of the past pulling at me; I want to trust that I can change.</i>	<i>I could look more objectively on how far I've come; I could Notice the ways in which I've purposefully created change in my life.</i>
<i>I lose myself so easily; I do things just to make other people happy.</i>	<i>I want to be present so I can Notice when what I'm doing is energizing or draining me; I want to find ways to reconnect with myself.</i>	<i>I could be more mindful of how much I give and Notice if I'm losing myself in the process; I could try relaxation or restoration when I need to reconnect with my deeper self; I can let others take responsibility for their happiness and give myself permission to take responsibility for my own happiness.</i>
<i>I can't control my thoughts; I'm totally out of control; I don't know what I need.</i>	<i>I want to consistently be able to create a Pause when my thoughts are spinning; I want to look at my unmet needs and find a safe way to meet them.</i>	<i>I could try to make a habit of telling myself to "stop" when I Notice I'm losing control of my thoughts; I could consistently ask myself which of my primary needs aren't being met and come up with one way to meet them.</i>
<i>I have no idea what I think or feel; there's so much in me that's wrong.</i>	<i>I want to know and own my feelings and needs; I want to perceive my own validity.</i>	<i>I could work with a list of feeling words and check in to ask myself how I feel; I could read about developing self-esteem or self-control.</i>
<i>I'm so ashamed of what I've made of my life; why can't it be easier?</i>	<i>I want to look less resentfully on my experiences and choices, and to be able to tolerate the life that I've made so far.</i>	<i>I could remember the parts of my life and self that I wouldn't trade; I could tune into my values and make sure I'm aligning them with my choices so I'm making a life I'm proud of.</i>
<i>I'm broken; others aren't; if I could just be _____, I'd be better.</i>	<i>I want to reduce or eliminate the competition I feel with others and not envy their lives.</i>	<i>I could try not to treat others as abstractions but see them as people with needs that may or may not be met; I could Notice the ways in which my experience of life is easy and pleasurable.</i>



FIGURE 20:

## Rough Translations and Response Options *(Continued)*

Thought	Rough Translation	Response Options
I can't feel this without self-injuring; there's no time between my emotional pain and self-injury; I'm doomed.	I want to recognize my warning signs before I'm in a full-blown frenzy; in moments of extreme pain I want to give myself an option besides self-injury.	I could practice Noticing so I get more familiar with the indications that self-injury is coming on; when urges strike, I could practice a mantra of "Don't hurt me" to remind myself to find another option.
I'm so ashamed of my self-injury behavior.	I am disappointed and angry with myself.	I could practice compassion while I look at what's behind my self-injury urges; I could self-soothe and try to forgive myself for the ways in which I've failed myself or others.

Now, in your journal, continue with the lists you created in the Listening and Translation chapter. Without enacting any of the strategies, identify positive Response options for each of the Translated truths you've developed for your pleasant and painful feelings. Use figures 21 and 22 for reference.

FIGURE 21:

## Responses to Translated Truths: *Pleasant Feelings*

Pleasant Feeling	Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Response
Protected	When my friend stuck up for me as I was being insulted by a stranger	Sometimes I need help from others; sometimes I don't. It doesn't define me.	I'm able to receive help without feeling shame; even if I am seen as weak, I can live a valued life.	Notice how often I'm safe, even if I'm alone; learn how to defend myself so I can be my own protector when I don't have help; visualize safety and the version of myself I'd be if I were skillfully protecting myself or accepting help from others.
Satisfied	When I'm content with the effort I'm putting into my life and the results of my effort	I have waning energy for the demands of life.	I may not be as consistent as I'd like to be; I may have to reassess my goals.	Find ways to keep energy available to do what it takes to live the life I want; practice forgiveness when I don't follow through as I'd like.
Cuddled	When I'm feeling held and being touched in a safe way	Some of my experiences taught me to shy away from affection.	I need to find safe ways to receive affection; I may always have some confusion around physical affection and safety	Spend more time with people who are physically affectionate; work with intimacy issues in a way that doesn't trigger me.



FIGURE 21:

## Responses to Translated Truths: Pleasant Feelings

(Continued)

Pleasant Feeling	Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Response
Enlivened	When I take a walk in nature or go for a run	I can care for myself in simple ways that don't feel draining.	I'm capable of managing my energy and effort. It's OK if I don't always manage my energy and effort as I'd like to.	Do things I love more often or find other activities that create feelings of freedom and enjoyment.
Accepted	When I open myself to the world and I don't feel awkward	Some situations are harder for me to be authentic in than others.	I can pick the situations I open myself to; when I feel awkward, I should act carefully.	Use the times I'm clear to engage with the world to get experience succeeding; avoid trying to find community if I'm not in a mental place to be open to it; work to understand and accept myself so I can express myself without feeling awkward.

FIGURE 22:

## Responses to Translated Truths: Painful Feelings

Painful Feeling	Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Response
Alone	Relationship ending; thinking I'll never be seen or loved	It hurts that I don't have the love I want right now, but it doesn't determine what's possible in the future.	I may have what I want in the future; if I don't have what I want in relationship, I can still live a valued life.	Try not to see romantic love as the only form of love in my life; be patient and become more of the person I want to be so I'm ready for an intimate relationship when it's time; find ways to be with other people so I remember I'm not really alone.
Exposed	When I try to do something I don't feel good about, fail epically in front of other people, and don't handle it gracefully	When I feel awkward, it's not unusual for me to do something embarrassing, but I do want to be seen.	I can be seen without being embarrassed, but sometimes I will embarrass myself.	Prepare better when people will be watching what I'm doing; try to be more myself so that when they're watching, I'm at ease; forgive myself when I do something stupid.



FIGURE 22:

## Responses to Translated Truths: *Painful Feelings*

(Continued)

Painful Feeling	Experiences or Thoughts that Create Feeling	Translated Meaning	Translated Truth You're Asking Yourself to Accept	Response
Bored	When I don't come up with things to do with my time other than work and the basic requirements of life	I want more out of life; otherwise I wouldn't feel bored.	I may need to do some work to find ways to feel enlivened; I may have to work to come out of my shell.	Find some fun; get on a local team, go swimming or dancing, find things to do that are intriguing and uplifting.
Uninterested	When I think I'm supposed to do something with my life, but I don't know what to do or what fits me	There are times when I feel directed and moved toward certain goals; I may not know who I am or what I want right now, but I can figure it out.	I'm not lost; I may not know exactly where I'm headed but I'll find my way, day-by-day.	Pick one of the three things I love to do most and find a way to do more of it; work to see how the bigger picture relates to what I'm doing right now; Notice what I like to do and do more of it.
Chaotic	When I believe that my mind will always torture me with memories, pain, and the ways I'm not consistent	I have a very active mind and sometimes lose perspective when I'm in pain.	I'm not always overwhelmed, but being overwhelmed is a state I may have to adapt to.	Keep learning to control my thoughts; Notice when my needs for resonance or harmony are being fulfilled; purposely find ways to feel calm; accept that sometimes I am chaotic and I need to be able to handle it without self-injury.

## Counterfeit Self-Injury

Some therapists suggest coping tactics to manage self-injury urges that aren't supposed to be self-injury but, in reality, amount to *counterfeit* self-injury. They suggest things like snapping yourself with a rubber band, holding onto ice until it hurts so much you have to let go, drawing on yourself in a way that resembles self-injury, or actively visualizing the damage you'd inflict on yourself. You're supposed to take these steps without moving further toward *real* self-injury. These therapists say that these things are better than self-injury, and that you should try them when you want to self-injure. I can't think of many things I could disagree with more emphatically.

There are a lot of Response options available to you in a crisis, and self-injury, real or counterfeit, is one of

them. But you're trying to *stop* self-injuring. That process will take a lot longer if you continue to Respond to yourself with the basic belief that it's OK to hurt yourself on purpose.

Sure, if you were on a course to hurt yourself badly and instead chose to grab an ice cube, that choice may be better for you (in that moment) than what you might otherwise have done. But is that ice cube going to be powerful enough to *relieve* your urges to self-injure? Is it going to train you how to deal with what's happening inside you? What do you *get* by grabbing that ice cube? Is it any different than what you get through *real* self-injury, or is it just one more way *out* of dealing with what's happening inside you, when you really need a way *in* (or a way to distract yourself so you don't pop off)?

If you do choose to use counterfeit self-injury for relief, think carefully about *why* you're using it and what you're trying to accomplish by considering the questions below.

- What does staying in a self-injury mindset through the use of counterfeit self-injury *get* you?
- Does your craving for violence feel "cheated" when you hurt yourself "a little"? Does counterfeit self-injury provide the relief you're craving, or do your self-harming actions escalate in order to get your "normal" level of emotional release?
- If you were to draw or visualize red cut lines on your body, what would that be about? Why do it? Is it supposed to fool your brain into thinking you actually self-injured? Your brain isn't that foolish. Is it to let your mind numb out in the zone of calm that self-injury brings? There are plenty of options for zoning out besides real, or counterfeit, self-harm. There are plenty of options that won't *reinforce* your self-injury habits.
- Why would you choose an ice cube, or other counterfeit self-injury tactic, over a pillow to snuggle for comfort? What would snuggling the pillow *get* you and why isn't it as attractive as pain?

Even if faking it could momentarily satisfy the longing inside you, the idea that replacing *real* self-injury with *counterfeit* self-injury will somehow lead to a life *without* self-injury is, to my mind, totally wrong. The *last* thing you should believe in a crisis is that drawing cut marks or "kinda" hurting a body that usually bleeds or bruises will *vanquish* the urge to self-injure. The *idea* of violence feels much different than the *action* of violence. Counterfeit self-injury will never be as satisfying as real self-injury. Even if it were satisfying, there isn't much difference between a mindset where you're inflicting serious harm on yourself and a mindset where you're just *wishing* you could.

Try turning counterfeit self-injury on its head. Get out the red marker, but instead of drawing cut lines, make red hearts or flowers or the pony you wanted in third grade. Write "I love you," "I'm trying to forgive you," or "I'm sorry I hurt you" on those precious appendages. Write what you need to hear from yourself or other people to feel supported. Don't imagine hurting yourself; imagine yourself receiving the support you actually *need*. If you're going to zone out and go numb, do it while scribbling positive affirmations or braiding your hair or lovingly caressing the spot you would normally injure. Do what you can to keep real and counterfeit self-injury from trapping your brain in the self-injury mindset. The way to stop self-injuring is to find compassion for yourself when you're hurting, not come up with clever new ways to hurt yourself while saying "it's not that bad." When urges come on, the most important thing you can do for yourself is tap into *compassion*.

The only way out of self-injury is to stop treating yourself like an object to be punished, ignored, subjugated, or damaged. Don't grab an ice cube or visualize pain if you want to feel *better*. You have access to all sorts of non-harming coping strategies and distraction techniques. *Use them*. The urges to self-injure won't go away until your mind clears, so clear your head with the beauty of images that *soothe* you. Distract yourself with things that actually feel *good*. Don't "fake" self-injury or do anything that increases the already tremendous pain you're in. You know that the emotional and energetic release achieved from real or counterfeit violence is momentary. That release isn't going to make you feel better in the long run. Feeling truly *better* doesn't come from treating yourself with more violence, real or imagined.

Try to keep in mind that you're learning to Respond to yourself with *patience and compassion*—or at least not with abject self-loathing and violence. When choosing a Response, remember the journey you're on (you



know, the one *away* from self-injury) and focus on the destination you've chosen. Using counterfeit self-injury during a crisis will just keep your mind fixed on a longing for self-harm when you're really trying to train yourself to access the parts of your brain that can help you get through *without* violence. Please, don't draw cut marks on your body, snap a rubber band on your wrist, or take any other "kinda-painful" route. Even if you just hurt yourself a little, that action tells your brain that it's OK to treat your pain with pain—which is exactly what you're trying to *stop* doing.

## Venting Explosive Emotions

Venting energy explosively is also recommended by some therapists as a Response to self-injury urges. They say to punch a pillow or scream and yell. They think it's a good release of pent-up energy. Again, I can't disagree more.

The key to eliminating self-injury action is to *reduce the intensity* of stressful moments. The emotional intensity during self-injury can't be reduced if you're simultaneously fueling it by venting your extreme emotions. What's the difference, energetically, between punching a pillow while screaming wildly and punching yourself while screaming wildly? The act of punching a pillow may not be hurting yourself much physically, but you're still allowing yourself to be taken over by Hulk-like smashing urges. Doing *anything* that sustains the energy that typically accompanies your self-energy habits is destructive and can lead to violent and counterproductive behavior. The idea isn't to encourage a state of rage when you're already freaking out, but to find what the rage is trying to say and to truly soothe it, so you don't need to keep buying pillows to punch out.

Consider how the ways in which you expend energy can increase your tension and push you over the edge to self-injury. If you're on the fast track to an emotional meltdown, don't punch pillows or walls (or other people!). Don't scream and holler or expend energy in any way that serves to *escalate* your tension. Use distraction or Listening and Translating to unwind your chaotic thoughts and soothe your explosive emotions. Wildly venting won't help you create your Pause or widen it so you can choose skillful Response options, and it won't help you get through the episode in a way that changes your brain so the next episode is easier to deal with. Unless you're absolutely incapable of stopping yourself, don't go on a tirade, and don't expect your unbridled fury to *calm* your emotions. Explosive venting is not a long-term (or even short-term) alternative to self-injury; it's a *trigger* for it.

Though it's important to decrease the severity of your self-injury actions, the broader goal is to find such compassion for yourself that you start *calming* your explosive emotions and saying no to all forms of intentional self-injury or uncontrolled emotional outpouring—even yelling or holding onto ice cubes. You're responsible for Responding to your life. Learning how to cope with your reality without self-injuring will come from trying something *new*. You've already done the violence thing. It's *not working* to make your life better, so why keep trying it?

## Stages of Self-Injury and Possible Responses

Many elements play into the escalation, or the soothing, of self-injury urges. Take some time to look over the self-injury stages and the elements of a Response that are detailed in figure 23. Then, read about each of the elements that can factor into an effective Response to an emotional crisis. Once you've digested all the information in figure 23 and the descriptions that follow, make notes in your journal and create your own handy "Response Chart." Identify the tools available to you in each stage of your self-injury cycle and determine how you would use the tools to Respond to your distress. Focus on the elements of a Response that would minimize the impact of your most common trigger environments, or come up with some easy-to-apply Responses for your most painful experiences or recurrent thoughts. List concrete actions you can take so that, if you were to consult this resource during a crisis, the Response options offered would give you clear, personalized direction.

FIGURE 23:

## Elements of a Response

Emotional Experience	Agitated	Losing control	Debilitating mental chaos
Goal	Don't self-injure; Redirect actions		
Stage	Hot / Ripe	Triggered	Fighting Urges
Environment	Reduce stimuli; avoid self-injury implements or supports; do not increase mental tension.	Limit Responses to self-soothing and creating Pause; do not increase mental tension.	Find safety and comfort immediately; use darkness and quiet to soothe.
Thoughts	Notice negative messages; consider ways to constructively work with thoughts; inject positive statements; call up parts of the mind that govern positive self-control.	Recognize habitual thoughts and reactions; call up parts of the mind that govern calming; try not to Listen to thoughts unless you can Translate them easily into Response options that calm you.	Do not believe thoughts that reinforce the use of self-injury because the self-injury mindset is not to be trusted; call up the part of the mind that can sit in the movie theater seat and get a clearer perspective.
Mantra to Repeat	Don't freak out	Find a way to Pause	Please, don't hurt me
Emotions	Notice how your thoughts trigger your emotions and try not to Respond to your painful emotions as if they are facts; calm the emotions via positive images or mantra.	Notice habitual or trigger emotions and the meanings or truth you're applying; find words and recognize that it is time to create a Pause to attend to those emotions before they lead to self-injury.	Do not argue with or believe emotions based on spinning thoughts; recognize that you are immersed in emotion and need to get a different perspective on your pain. Get into your movie theater seat.
NPLTR	Notice, Pause, and Respond by self-soothing; Listen and Translate, if possible, to create further Response options.	Notice, Pause, and Respond by self-soothing; Listen only if stable enough to do so; choose avoidance or engagement of inner content.	If unsafe, secure the Pause and only Respond by maintaining that Pause; if safe, choose avoidance or engagement of inner content.
Relaxation and Restoration	Practice conscious relaxation and self-soothing; 🎧 Comfort Zone, Restorative Yoga, Savasana	Practice conscious relaxation and self-soothing, guided meditation.	Practice relaxation that does not require you to access turbulent internal content; body scans, object gazing.
Body	Distribute energy evenly through body; soften face and heart.	Release pent-up energy in fluid, non-aggressive way; sense energy in the hands, move it away from you.	Get out of your mind: forehead releases to stacked fists; rest with awareness of stillness and the space where the head meets the hands; any movement when nearing self-injury should be slow, repetitive, and calming.
Breath	Inhale deeply through the nostrils; take a slow, controlled exhale through nostrils, contracting abdomen at end of breath; hold exhale out until vacuum of lung action starts the next inhale.	Inhale deeply through nostrils; retain breath in; sigh a long exhale out mouth; hold exhale out until vacuum of lung action starts the next inhale.	Place your hands over your ears, inhale slowly through nostrils with a slight constriction in the back of the throat; take a long, slow out-breath through nostrils; focus on the ocean sounds made by the breath.
Visualizations	Kids on the Bus: Identify your perspective; which parts of you are driving the Bus right now? Which do you want to be in control?	Hulk: Ask the Hulk what it wants, besides to smash; Translate wants into Response options.	Inner Child: What is your self-protective wisdom saying that you may not be Listening to or acting on? How can you best care for your most vulnerable parts?
Inquiry	What needs are unfulfilled?	What are your immediate Response options?	What words describe your feelings? What would the antidote feelings be? How can you create the antidote feelings?

Self-injury actions	Emotional overwhelm abates	Pain is tolerable
Stop self-injuring	Non-judgmental self-care and support	
Actively Self-Injuring	After an Episode	Calm Times
Use the “safest” and least damaging amount of self-injury; don’t create or stay in environments that support self-injury.	Find a safe, quiet spot to regroup; choose an environment that reconnects you with the deeper parts of yourself that you actually like.	Give yourself permission to find safe, quiet spaces to reflect, relax, and restore yourself; engage with the world enough to keep you from feeling isolated.
Do your best to not Listen to or believe painful thoughts; seek out supports you’ve made in the clear times; only believe thoughts that ease pain without violence; turn off the part of the mind calling up self-injury and judgment by asking yourself for compassionate and patience.	Avoid judging the episode; activate the parts of the mind that can review the experience and comment without shame.	Notice the typical movements of your thoughts, which parts of your mind are usually at play; practice getting into the movie theater seat and watching yourself make decisions that encourage or discourage self-injury.
Please, no more	Self-injury won’t always be how I cope	I’m leaning how to cope without self-injury
Get out of the emotional storm via the breath and stillness; recognize that you don’t deserve to be punished, but calmed and soothed.	Notice your emotions without increasing shame; conjure up some compassion for yourself and resolve to try again next time to work through your pain without violence.	Notice the typical movements of your emotions; which emotions are most common, most painful, most desired; practice working with your thoughts to create desired emotions and changing your emotions through questioning your thoughts.
Notice, try to Create a Pause, and widen it enough to stop self-injuring; don’t Listen or Translate; the only Response is one that stops the action of self-injury.	Find compassion; Listen to and Translate what happened and Respond by designing strategies that increase your ability to live more mindfully and to handle the next crisis more gracefully.	Practice Noticing, Pausing, Responding, Listening, Translating, and further Responding in situations that aren’t emotionally loaded; identify your own resistance to coping without self-injury.
Practice “forced” relaxation; extended rest with physical pressure on body (under pillows or sandbag weights); Savasana.	Practice conscious relaxation and self-soothing; Restorative Yoga, Savasana.	Practice conscious relaxation and self-soothing; regularly practice Yoga Nidra, Restorative Yoga, Savasana.
Get back into your body: shake out hands; jiggle all over; pat body lightly with cupped hands; any movement during self-injury should expel energy without escalating tension or emotional upset.	Be nice to your body; try Restoration.	Get movin’: run, dance, sashay; make any movement that does not increase opportunities for shame.
Inhale through nostrils and hold at the top of the inhale; let exhale fall out naturally, even a little exaggerated to expel the air.	Breathe naturally.	Practice using breath exercises to get used to tuning into your breath in a crisis; feel how differences in how you inhale and exhale affect your body and mind
Reduce stimuli and complexity of visualization; imaging softness; go to your inner landscape or Comfort Zone.	Reduce judgment and desperation for change; look on yourself with compassion; visualize only compassion.	Inner Child: what should you be doing with your time and energy to support your deepest needs?
No inquiry.	What triggered you? Why? Can you Translate trigger thoughts into acceptable meanings?	How can you more consciously direct your thoughts and actions?

■ **Goals:** Set a goal in every stage of your self-injury cycle to guide your Response. Your Response options can be both *driven* by your goals and *supportive* of them.

- The moment you Notice signs of distress, set a goal: “Cope without self-injury.”
- As you Pause, set a goal: “Stop the action,” “Calm your thoughts,” “Get into your body.”
- Inside each Pause, set a goal: “Decide if I’ll cope through engaging or avoiding.” If you’re going to avoid your internal chaos, set a goal: “Do anything other than self-injure.”
- If you engage with Listening, set a goal: “Hear what’s happening without reacting.”
- If you’re Translating, set a goal: “Get to what’s true without becoming more volatile.”

In every stage of your self-injury cycle, try to set at least one goal for your Response so you can direct your actions skillfully. Self-injury can happen as quickly as thought, so the first thing to do when your thoughts start spinning is to anchor yourself with your goal. The way you meet your goals will vary widely, from taking a nap or shuffling a deck of cards to playing soothing music while Listening, Translating, and creating a list of Response options. Though the path to the goal is never exactly the same, you have a handful of strategies to choose from in each stage of your self-injury cycle. Practice your skills for distraction, Listening, and Translating, and work through mindfulness, inner inquiry, or practice suggestions when you’re clear. When self-injury urges come on, one of the skills you’ve practiced is bound to come in handy.

■ **Environment:** Holy stimuli, Batman! How a brain can spin and become overwhelmed with input! Consider how your environment is affecting your ability to identify with or cope with what’s happening inside your body and mind. Reducing the amount of stimuli that your brain has to process can make all the difference in creating and using the Pause to facilitate a skillful Response. Turn off the lights or put on an eye pillow; plug your ears or Listen to calming sounds on headphones. Check out the audio files on [www.stopselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopselfinjuring.com). Do whatever is possible to give your brain a break; it’s already doing enough.

■ **Thoughts and Mantra:** If your head is spinning with thoughts, it’s a good idea to plant *stabilizing* thoughts in your head that can contradict some of the painful ones. Controlling your thoughts is essential as a Response to self-injury urges. Use mantra, prayer, affirmation, or any other series of words repeated mentally to redirect your stream of thoughts. Notice how your thoughts factor into your emotional state, and work to calm your emotions with your thoughts.

■ **Emotions:** It’s easy to get caught up in emotions as if they’re true or logical. Manage your emotions in a way that allows you to watch them come up without getting caught up in them. Do the work of finding words and identifying needs. Then, you can take steps to ease the pain caused by the truth and meaning that you’re attributing to your thoughts and experiences. Notice your emotional habits, the thoughts spurring your emotions, and the beliefs you hold about yourself or the world, the past, or the future. Pay close attention to how your emotions and beliefs factor into your emotional experience. In all cases, do what you can to ease extreme emotions without self-sabotage or self-injury.

■ **NPLTR:** The parts of the NPLTR process you use and the strategies used within each stage should be adapted to your current needs. Figure out what works best for you in certain stages of your cycle and adapt your NPLTR process accordingly.

■ **Relaxation and Restoration:** There are always things you can do to relax your mind and body and to restore your spirit and strength. *Practice* relaxing. Seek out relaxation and restoration resources that feel right for you. There’s bound to be a handful of activities (see Section Five) you can practice in your clear times that will help you restore your emotional and mental balance. The trick is that you have to *choose* to relax and restore, which is difficult when your brain may be telling you that it’s time to cry, obsess, or self-injure.

■ **Body, Movement:** Much of your mental tension can be addressed through your body. Coming out of your thoughts and into your body is important, but it can be difficult when your brain would rather keep the focus on its chaos. See Section Five for suggestions on calming yourself by moving your body deliberately.

- **Breath:** It may take a while to internalize and use this element of a Response to your advantage, but the breath is the fastest, simplest way to calm your thoughts. Take time to Notice how you breathe when you're calm and during all stages of your self-injury progression. Odds are you'll Notice that focusing on expanding and slowing your breath will quickly calm your mind. Again, it's up to you to *choose* to soothe yourself through the breath.
- **Visualizations:** The way you imagine and visualize the present, past, or future plays into your self-injury habits. Be mindful of the ways you change your relationship to your internal content through visualization.
- **Inquiry:** You need to decide what the appropriate level of inquiry is during each stage of your self-injury progression. Each stage requires (and allows) a certain amount and type of personal inquiry, and some stages are not the appropriate times for inquiry. With experience, you'll grow to understand what types of self-reflection are safe and available in any given moment. Inquiry is best when you can look objectively at the thoughts and habits that lead you toward self-injury without taking any of it too seriously. When you have the patience and sense of humor to unwind what's bound up inside you, inquiry can help you smooth things out.

Many tools are available to you in addition to self-injury, and you have to do the work of finding what fits you best in differing situations. Use breath, mantra, movement, meditation, prayer, affirmation, visualization. Create your own tools, but use them to support yourself in moving beyond your pain, not to reinforce your pain or to punish yourself. Grow your self-knowledge through each self-injury episode, learning which actions and thoughts work to support you and which actions and thoughts guarantee more pain.

## Practice Responding

Responses come in many forms. Really, you're always practicing Responding simply because you're living your life. To care for yourself when self-injury urges come on, *refining* your Responses is the goal. Target your action to address your most immediate need, and always Respond with your Ground Rules in mind.

### *The Little Things*

Practice with the little needs: If you Notice you're hungry, eat. If you need to use the toilet, go. If you're stressed about a conversation and want to end it, do so. Don't wait even a minute. Practice taking action on your own behalf whenever you Notice clear, simple signals of need and when the Translation and Response are no-brainers. Then, when the situation is more complicated, you'll know what it feels like to prioritize your needs, create clear Response options, and choose one.

### *Be Choosy*

Don't try to talk all your thoughts or problems through or Respond to every issue you can identify. If you're going to talk, talk specifically about what you need to put the Hulk away and get back to being David Banner. If you're going to choose a Response option, address the most pressing, most painful, or most accessible issue. Be choosy when deciding which aspect of your experience to look at. You can't do it all at once. Prioritize and only take on what you can handle in the moment.

### *Wait for You*

Practice Listening and Translating without Responding until you hear the voice in the chaos that you can identify as *You*. Do only what *You* say, not what your brain or your emotions or your twisted-up thoughts say. Don't Respond while you're Listening to the content of your pain. And, in the beginning, don't expect your brain to be honest with you or your Response options to be completely effective. Your poor brain is really confused about a lot of things, and it needs you to understand that it's a bit fragile right now.





Watch for habitual thoughts, and ask yourself, “Who’s thinking this?” Is it the bullied fourth grader in you? Is it the awkward teenager that didn’t fit in? Is it your balanced adult self? Is it your intuition, or the *You* beyond all your thoughts and confused thinking? The Response you apply depends on which parts of yourself you’re Listening to and how you’re Translating them. Listen to the content, but not in order to be *directed* by the thoughts. Just hear the repetition and folly in your own internal characters before choosing the Translation of the thoughts you will accept and allow to guide your Response.

Noticing is how you familiarize yourself with *yourself*. You’ll inevitably choose to take action on the most convincing of your watched thoughts, so you’ll also inevitably take action directed by self-injury-fueling thoughts that disguise themselves as *You*. Addicts need a fix, and if self-injury has to pretend to be your inner wisdom to get you to dispense it, it will. Learn to recognize when your actions are being guided by pain and when they are guided by the familiar, clear, non-threatening tone of *You*.

As you practice Responding, *learn from it*. Remember the feeling and sound of the aspects of your mind or the perspectives that motivate you without self-injury. Call them up when you hear the parts of you that try to doom you to a painful fate. Learn to Notice the habits of your mind that may undermine your ability to Respond without self-sabotage or self-injury.

Be honest with yourself when a Response you choose turns out to agitate you further, and choose something else—even if it’s simply to restore your old standby goals, “Don’t self-injure” and “Don’t make it worse.” Keep practicing the skills of Noticing, Listening, and Translating (and distracting when Listening and Translating are too much to take on). You’ll develop a few tried and true methods so that Responding to emotional distress will become almost as simple as soothing a headache by going for an aspirin.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

# During an Episode

**L**ife can feel so different from day to day, and from moment to moment, based on how your thoughts are moving, how close a connection you're keeping to your past and your pain, and the meanings you accept from your current and past experiences. The process of NPLTR takes focused energy and can sometimes seem complicated. If you're not in a mental space where you can work with a bunch of details, just simplify your Response. Try to let *three main ideas* guide your behavior when self-injury urges come on.

1. **One goal.** Your only goal is to keep from self-injuring; whether that means *not starting* to self-injure or *stopping yourself* when you're actively self-injuring.
2. **Decide not to decide.** Give yourself permission not to make life-altering decisions when your mind is in turmoil.
3. **Soothe yourself.** Choose to do something that soothes your emotions without losing focus on your goal to cope without self-inflicted pain.

## One Goal

Whether you're trying to keep from Huling out or interrupt a self-injury action, nothing deserves your attention as much as finding ways to calm down without using pain for an emotional release. Even if you do self-injure, the act of trying to meet the goal of not self-injuring, for three minutes or three hours, helps you learn to expand the length of time between a trigger and violent action. (You want to widen the Pause, right?) Those minutes and hours add up to quality time practicing nonviolent coping methods. And you know what they say: Practice may not make you perfect, but it does make you more skillful.

If you're serious about changing your self-injury habits, it's essential that you actually attempt to use other strategies—even if they don't work as you want them to—when your self-injury urges or actions are happening. There are times when coping without self-injury may require that you use your best avoidance skills instead of engaging what's happening, and there are times when looking at what's happening is the best choice you can make. Only you know if you're about to go over your edge. Maintain a goal of enduring the products of your overactive mind while protecting yourself from harm.

## Decide Not to Decide

When you sense that you may self-injure, it's not the time to make decisions about your life, to make conclusions about your worth, to ruminate about the past, to make predictions of the future, or to consider the damages that you or others have inflicted on yourself. It's immensely difficult not to buy into what your brain is telling you when you're spinning—but skillful decisions don't come easily from a chaotic brain, do they? How many times have you taken the advice of the parts of your mind that come along with self-injury and found that they actually advised you *wisely*? Once your habitual painful thoughts have taken the stage and

started voicing their opinions, it becomes more difficult to make decisions that your more supportive aspects of mind would approve of. The only decision you really need to make when chaotic thoughts are whirling is which soothing or distraction activity you're going to try.

Do your best not to contemplate all the pain that exists in your world or to "think things through" when you're triggered, volatile, or spinning. *Stop* thinking; *stop* analyzing; *stop* the mental chatter. Don't poke your Hulk with a stick if you can help it. Don't try to figure it all out or be understood when all signs point to mental frazzlement. Once you've come down, you can make all sorts of decisions or evaluations from a clearer place. Attend carefully to the moments before and during self-injury, put your energy into changing your habits in those moments, and don't forget to be gentle with yourself. Telling yourself that "now is not the time to make a decision" is far more compassionate than judging yourself for being incapable of decisive behavior when key parts of your mind are actively competing.

## Self-Soothe

Meeting the goal to not self-injure requires that you bring down your level of emotional intensity and find ways to soothe yourself without violence. No matter what judgments you can place on this little fact, the only way to meet that goal when triggered, spinning, hot, popping off, HULKING out, or any other variation of freaking out is to not take any action that builds on your shame or pain. You have to muster up the energy to actually *decide* to soothe yourself instead of compounding your pain with hurtful self-talk or bathing in the painful content of your experience.

Practice applying the same patience and compassion to your own situation as you would if a small child you loved were hurting and needed soothing. How would you soothe that child? Would you just smack her if she were confused and overloaded by her internal content? Let's hope not. And let's also hope you wouldn't say things such as, "Well, you're pretty messed up, and you'll never really be happy. You might as well get used to it." If you were soothing an emotionally confused child, you'd want the episode over as fast as possible. To that end, you'd likely take action on his behalf to help him calm his mind and relieve tension in healthy ways. No matter the cause of his difficulty or how ridiculous you judged his internal content to be, you'd likely understand—maybe even without judgment—that creating calm was essential for the child to come back to a more sensible reality. You'd also know, and accept, that his communication and decision making would be impaired during such an emotional meltdown, so you likely wouldn't be asking the child what he wanted to be when he grew up or ask complex questions. You'd focus on the issues at hand.

Someday, compassion for yourself will come naturally, but at first you may have to force it on yourself. Challenge your self-injury mindset's desire to treat you with disdain. Once you get used to what real soothing feels like, self-injury won't seem like such a good option.

## Crisis Response List

Make a short list of things you can do in a crisis that will help you to remember your goal to cope without self-injury. You'll use the list during times of emotional crisis to resist making any decision other than which self-soothing tactic to employ. Make it a short list, so you aren't overwhelmed with choices. Here's an example.

- **Busy your brain:** Crossword puzzles, Sudoku, hangman, games on your phone
- **Use your hands for good:** Garden, knit, sew, play guitar, write; sit on hands when they can only punch or cut
- **Use active relaxation and restoration:** Use breath or body for active calming; walk, sit in the sunshine; talk to someone who doesn't judge you or encourage you to do self-defeating things
- **Use passive relaxation and sensory deprivation:** relaxation, restoration, napping, quiet rooms, covering ears, soothing music, reduce sensory stimuli



- **Find words:** Use word lists to identify your feelings, as well as feelings you'd like to have; take time to construct a skillful request when you need something from another person; if you have trouble saying what you need to, try to write it down first

Remember, you don't want an end to *all* challenge or to stop having new experiences that push your limits a little; you just want to be able to handle those challenges, to manage your pain skillfully, and to build a life you enjoy living even in the midst of those challenges. Try to keep it simple when you're overwhelmed. When you're able to create and widen your Pause, you can consider and create additional, and more complex, Response options. There are only three things to think about during a crisis: trying not to self-injure, keeping yourself from making big decisions or judgments, and choosing to actively soothe yourself. Certain tactics will work best for you, depending on what's fueling your desire to self-injure. Try whatever tactics you can and Notice what works. Come back to those tactics when you're feeling lost.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

## After an Episode

**K**nowing what you know about the brain, it may be unrealistic to expect that a brain patterned to react in a certain way to particular stimuli will follow any course other than that habitual, ingrained course of action—until a new course is taken so many times it reroutes the original one. In order to change the course your brain takes when the same old triggers, thoughts, and feelings come up and threaten your stability, you need to see what course your mind is taking. That knowledge can come only by looking at what happened when your mind was off course and determining what reactions would demonstrate being on course.

Just like David Banner, your recollection is hazy after a HULKING episode. But after the fact, you can gain valuable insight by looking at what triggered you, how you reacted, meanings you made of your experiences, what Responses you chose, what worked about your approach, and what didn't work. This insight can be hard to access once the more stable parts of your mind take over, since they aren't necessarily responsible for remembering the details of your self-injury experience. There's always something to learn from your triggered thoughts, emotions, and reactions, and it's easier to connect with the details right after an episode is over. However, you need to be sure you can maintain the *right view* of your situation so you stay out of the ocean of emotional content and avoid making judgments about how things went.

Once you've calmed down after a self-injury episode, it's important not just to go back to your life as if the episode didn't happen. It's also important to refrain from regressing into ways of thinking that lead you back into a volatile state. Getting into your movie theater seat for a view of the key elements in the story of your self-injury can help you see what happened and expose the storylines that need editing—without again becoming the character *immersed in* the story.

### Analyzing a Self-Injury Episode Once It's Over

Rewinding the story of your episode allows you to look more clearly at your habitual thoughts ("I'll never be free of this pain," "I'm not loved," etc.) and see which ones are causing you trouble. You may see over time that the thoughts, and the pain they cause, are relatively predictable. This means that (1) if you change the thoughts, you can change the effect they have on you, and (2) the pain may be avoidable as you practice Responding, because you can change your *relationship* to that pain.

As your self-injury episode passes, Notice when you've calmed down to a point where further self-injury is unlikely. Notice what it feels like to transition from an active episode to relative clarity. Ask yourself one or more of the questions below, but only if you're not likely to be triggered by further analyzing what happened. Notice how you reacted to your thoughts and how you made meaning out of those thoughts. Just be sure to mind your Ground Rules as you're replaying your movie, and keep in mind that this isn't another way to identify the ways you failed or lost it so you can beat yourself up. The only good reason to analyze your thoughts and habits is to view the life story you're writing and see how you need to edit it to tell a future story that contains more of the experiences you want and less of what you don't want.



## Can You Inquire?

First thing: you need to determine your level of readiness to look at what happened. Are you safe to ask yourself questions about your episode? If not, don't do it until you have calmed down enough to look at your experience. Practice distraction techniques and reduce agitating mental input until you feel clear enough to revisit your experience.

If you do feel it's safe to inquire about your experience, remember to be gentle with yourself. Try to stay in your movie theater seat to keep your thoughts as supportive, reflective, and calm as possible. Then, move on to the inquiries below.



## Tripping Triggers

- What thoughts, emotions, or sensations were happening inside you that made you *susceptible* to being triggered toward self-injury?
- What was happening for you in the days or weeks before this episode? Was the stress that made you likely to self-injure “old,” or was it purely situational? What was happening in the few moments before you chose self-injury? Did you see this episode coming?
- What habitual thoughts came up and caused you pain? What was the pain—pain of what's present, pain of what's absent, or both?
- Did you take time to Listen, Translate, and Respond to your painful thoughts and feelings before internal chaos became self-injury urges? Did that effort work? For how long? Which of your efforts worked to soothe you and which didn't? What thoughts or feelings took you away from Listening, Translating, and Responding?
- How much time was there between your initial sensations of distress and the start of self-injury-related thoughts? What thoughts finally pushed you over the edge toward self-injury?
- What thoughts allowed you to *justify* the use of self-injury? Why did you choose self-injury over other available coping options? What did you *get* out of using self-injury?



## Notice the Patterns

- How many episodes in the last week or month have been related to the same content as this episode?
- Which of your habitual actions contribute to the creation of the emotional stress that can lead you to use self-injury?
- The next time this content or habit comes up as a stimulus for self-injury, what can you do to reduce the impact of your own actions or pain or to support yourself in avoiding self-injury? What are your best Response options in the future when that same painful content is accessed?

## How do You Undermine Yourself?

- Did self-sabotage help pave the road to your latest use of self-injury?
- What forms of self-sabotage usually support your use of self-injury? Are you willing to change those self-sabotaging behaviors? If not, why not? What do they get you?
- Were you in a situation that you knew may drive you to use self-injury? Are you likely to be in that situation again?
- Can you support yourself in, leave, or change situations that fuel these particular self-injury urges? What stops you from changing the situation, leaving, or supporting yourself?



## Why the Big Reaction?

- Looking back on it from your movie theater perspective, what could the character in your story have done differently in order to reduce the *intensity* of reaction to the triggers?
- What could the character have done to take appropriate responsibility for meeting their own needs and expressing themselves clearly and compassionately *before* self-injury became the coping choice?
- If you (the one in the movie theater seat) could have stepped into the scene right before you (the character in the movie) self-injured and offered yourself some clearheaded advice, what would it have been?
- As the viewer, can you see anything the character in your story could have done for self-support, or at least to not have made the situation worse? Was there an option other than self-injury?
- Did you take that option? If not, why not?



## Translating Your Meanings after the Episode

Self-analysis directly after a self-injury episode not only helps you get a clearer perspective on your thoughts, but also on the meanings you associate with your thoughts, certain words, actions, and experiences. After you've calmed down, consider the words that were said to you or the words you said to yourself that created feelings or thoughts with meanings so horrible that you soothed your turmoil with self-injury. Look at the beliefs about yourself or others that inspired your self-injury, and ask yourself what meanings lay behind those triggering thoughts and beliefs. Work with getting to what's true and altering or accepting painful meanings, so that the impact of your thoughts and their meanings won't have such an effect on the storylines you can write.

### Meanings

When your thoughts told you what was "real," your brain applied meaning to that reality. When your episode is over, and while maintaining your Pause, consider where your interpretation of reality came from and Translate your truths and meanings.





- What painful meanings did you take from your thoughts (“I’m not worthy”; “I’ll never be seen”)?**
- Why did you believe the painful thoughts or meanings?**
- Why did *believing it* trigger you toward self-harm?**
- Is the painful meaning or truth your brain applied actually *true*?**

If the truths and meanings that push you over the edge to self-injury aren’t actually true, do the work of getting to what’s true and create a more accurate meaning that can be accepted without shame or self-loathing (“I didn’t get what I wanted”; “I wasn’t seen in the way that I wanted to be”). If the meanings contain truth, Translate the meanings into a truth you can accept without resorting to self-harm.

- What can you do the next time those same trigger thoughts, truths, and meanings come up to keep them from fueling urges to self-injure?**

Remember to be gentle with yourself after an episode; you’ve just been through a lot. Try to look on your own patterns without judgment and as insight into challenges you’re likely to have in the future. Be open to seeing how your reactions, habits, and beliefs feed into creating your self-injury urges. Though your Response to your situation led to self-injury, that doesn’t mean you’re a failure or loser or any of the other derogatory terms the judgmental part of your brain can throw out. Next time may be different. You may choose compassion instead of self-harm.

If you have even a *single thought* that challenges self-injury, you’re on your way to being done with self-inflicted violence. Simply giving yourself the *option* to Respond in a way other than self-injury is its own success. Even if you did choose to Respond to your emotional pain with self-injury, give yourself a break, eh? Life hurts enough; you don’t have to make it harder on yourself.

## Section Three Wrap-Up

There’s no denying that your mind must be trained, and this training can be a long and pain-ridden process. But don’t give up, and don’t believe for a second that you’re broken. Every person has internal content they can choose to work with or ignore. You’re not choosing to ignore your pain; you’re trying to make it hurt less. Respect yourself for enduring your pain for so long without giving up on yourself. Know that you’ll work through your important issues over time, and you’ll experience more mental ease. Accept that you might not be able to have everything you want right now, and keep working toward what’s important to you. Suspend your need to have your baggage or the world all figured out, and allow yourself to see what’s present in this moment—what you need to attend to *right now*.

During or after an episode, take on only the details you can handle. Keep your Responses simple and give yourself the freedom to cherry-pick the strategies that seem best for you in the moment. Remember compassion and patience. There’s no right or perfect; there’s only what fits right now. Read over the “NPLTR QuickList” on the next page and consult it when you need to simplify your Response options during different stages of your self-injury cycle.

When you’re experiencing difficult feelings, or when you’re in the middle of a self-injury episode, do yourself the favor of taking small, directed steps toward changing your reactions to your pain. Your habits and dominant feelings won’t change overnight, but by maintaining awareness of your reactions and the internal states that lead you to self-injury, they will change over time.

FIGURE 24:

## NPLTR QuickList

<b>Notice Chaos</b>	Notice there are aspects of you at work that are creating confusion
	Know that your thoughts aren't <i>You</i>
	Identify <i>Yourself</i> beyond painful thoughts
	Notice, but don't believe or argue with, mental chaos
<b>Pause</b>	Stop action toward self-injury
	Realize you have a choice to make
	Decide to distract or engage
<b>Avoid through Distraction</b>	Redirect your mind; find a safe outlet for your energy
	Use your hands for good
	Reduce input and control stimuli
	Actively restore through body, breath work
	Use compassionate self-talk
<b>Engage through Listening</b>	What does your brain say?
	What does your heart say?
	What does your habit say?
	What's the loudest thought in your head?
	What's the quietest thought in your head?
	Check the pain
	What's the pain? What's present? What's absent?
	Feel the pain without being swept away in it
	Watch the story: See what story is being told and what meanings are being applied
<b>Engage through Translating</b>	What messages can you identify in the thoughts you hear?
	Which parts are negative self-talk and which identify need?
	Get to what's true
	Find words and related needs
	Identify the truths and meanings you're creating or applying
	What truth are you asking yourself to accept about life or yourself?
	If you're unable to accept it, know that the truth you're applying is incorrect and overly negative
	What do you need to change about the truths and meanings you've created to allow you to create a truth you can accept without violence?
<b>Respond</b>	Identify and choose from available Response options
	Set goal
	Find softness; have compassion
	Body, breath, movement activities
<b>During an Episode</b>	Set your goal
	Decide not to decide
	Self-soothe
<b>After an Episode</b>	Reflect
	Don't ignore what happened after it's over
	Try to understand why the meaning of the trigger affects you as it does
	Try to think up alternate Responses you could use when that trigger gets tripped again
<b>When You're Clear</b>	Live mindfully
	Take healing seriously; read about mental health; write about your experiences
	Find classes on communication or emotional management
	Get counseling or find friends to talk to

# What NPLTR Gets You

Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding aren't cookie-cutter concepts. They're a formula you modify to suit your own needs. At best, using this formula to process difficult thoughts or emotions can:

- Warn of an impending self-injury episode early enough to take alternate action because you know your habits and warning signs. You familiarize yourself with your own bodily senses, the words you use, and their effects, and you know when it's time to step in and save yourself.
- Delay quick, mindless self-injury actions by teaching you to insert a Pause between thought and action.
- Help yourself hear what's really happening by teaching you to allow, but not react to, the content of the mind. You learn to hear more than self-injury chatter each time you Pause when content is upsetting, and each time you welcome it as a messenger telling you what you should do to care for yourself.
- Translate confusing thoughts into what you actually need. You learn not to take internal content at face value, unless you hear the voice of *You*. You realize that your pain distorts truth and meaning, and that getting to what's true is far more relieving in the long term than self-injury.
- Help you choose a broader group of Response options, so you can meet your needs mindfully. You learn that you *do* have control over your self-injury habits and can train your brain to provide compassion when you need it.

But perhaps one of the most crucial skills that NPLTR teaches (especially when coupled with mindfulness; covered in the next section of the book) is the ability to *tolerate distress*. Think about how much distress you've tolerated in your life, and then think about the simple daily or routine stresses that can push you over your limit. Has your deeper pain compounded so greatly that you're at your limit of tolerance? It's not just the big stuff you need to tolerate in life, but the little stuff that happens *while* you're tolerating the big stuff.

If you live life at the limit of your emotional tolerance, you can be pushed over the edge not just by your deeper feelings but by simple annoyances like, say, dropping an artichoke on the kitchen floor. NPLTR and mindfulness help you increase your tolerance limits while also reducing the amount of internal stress you *need* to tolerate. Using them, you'll be able to keep yourself from popping off because you'll recognize the power you have over your reactions. As you come away from living at your limit of tolerance, you won't be quite as raw, so you'll be better able to handle what comes up more gracefully and without habitually extreme emotional reactions. These practices help you better understand and address stressors that *can* be relieved and help you tolerate the stuff you're stuck with. This frees you from bracing so hard under the pain, reacting instantly to it, or letting the pain make you forget that you, ultimately, are the only one with control over your emotional state and actions.

Though you're learning new skills, the process of moving away from self-injury is also about learning to look differently at what skills you *already have*. You have within you everything you need to change your behavior and live a valued life. It's just a matter of tweaking the skills you have and seeing the ways in which you're more complex—and less complex—than you may have realized. It's not impossible to have internal peace or emotional stability when times get hard. It's just really, really difficult to do when your brain is freaking out. Don't look at life with desperate longing for peace or emotional stability; it's already within you, and you just have to bring it out. Don't fear that you won't ever have predictable stability. You will, and you do, and you're on your way to fine-tuning that stability right this minute. It's just going to take time, compassion, patience, and your new process for understanding and directing your thoughts, feelings, and reactions: NPLTR.



# *Using the Clear Times*



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

# Introduction to the Clear Times

**I**n those delicious moments where life exists as if self-injury, pain, abuse, and trauma were not part of it, spend some time practicing your NPLTR skills. The work you do with your internal content during the clear times will teach you practical skills to apply when your pain comes calling. How you use the time when you're *not* triggered will help determine the Response options you have available when you *are* triggered.

In the clear times, carefully work through issues driving your self-injury habits and develop supports that help you create a Pause during a crisis. Keep track of the insights you gain through your inner inquiry and create custom-built strategies to pull out when you Notice you're heading in a familiar, painful direction. Build your group of Response options so that self-injury moves down your list of coping tools. And since self-injury urges can come on from denying your basic needs, it's also important to remind yourself frequently of the actions you need to take to stay as balanced as possible, like eating right, getting enough rest, or doing things you love.

Get to know yourself as someone *experiencing* clear times. This can be as simple as maintaining awareness of what feels nourishing and what feels depleting, or practicing the art of finding words for your feelings. Hold onto the knowledge that what you do during your clear times will have a direct impact on the intensity and duration of your next self-injury episode. That's not a suggestion to constantly remind yourself that you self-injure, or a requirement to be consistently self-actualizing; just don't act in the clear times as if self-injury doesn't exist. When your brain is able to look at and analyze its own behavior without punishing you, do it. Talk to the Kids on the Bus, cuddle your Inner Child, learn about yourself, see yourself more clearly, and acknowledge the parts of you that are unsatisfied while working to live life in a way that feels healthy for you. Notice that you *do* have clear times to begin with, and work with your inner content when it's not overwhelming you.

During your clear times, consider the various ways you can change your relationship to your pain. A few ways to change that relationship are mentioned in the following chapters. These topics are intended to get you thinking about ways you can modify the thoughts, emotions, and actions that support your use of self-injury.

- **Living mindfully:** You may have an idea of what living mindfully means, but how do you put mindfulness into practice, given the challenges of living with a self-injury habit? We'll cover some methods of developing mindfulness so you get a bodily sense of what acting mindfully feels like.
- **Your story:** At different times, your story and the way you tell it can change. You could verbally describe yourself or your life from a viewer perspective, as if life were a series of events that simply happened; you could feel emotionally attached to the story, as if life is a series of events that happened to you; or you could be so engrossed in living the story of your life that you can't see it clearly enough to describe what's happening. Your brain can relive elements of your chosen story again and again, and it can edit the story to enhance shameful or embarrassing aspects, rewriting your lifetime of experience as if your life were a one-liner centered on pain or humiliation. Depending on whom you're talking to (among other factors),

you reveal yourself in different ways, focusing on certain elements of the story of how you became who you are now. Start to pay attention to the stories you tell about your life and your pain. We'll look at how you can change the stories told to yourself or to others to be less centered around your pain and more focused on what you're doing to meet your deeper needs.

- **Interacting with others:** Boundaries, relationships, and communication all factor into your self-injury habits. How you identify and maintain boundaries or create healthy relationships depend on your communication skills. We'll work with ideas that allow you to get to what's true even when the words don't exactly flow right out of you.

When you feel strong and clear and can look at your history or present without dramatics, it's time to open, unpack, and reorganize the baggage you're carrying. Sorting out what's inside you and rearranging it so it's more useful is work that will pay off when mental chaos is breaking loose and you need to access one of the skills you carry. Remember: What you do in your clear times will determine the tools you have access to when you're in crisis.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN:

# Living Mindfully

**W**hen changing your self-injury habits, a lot can be done in the clear times to set yourself up for success during times of emotional crisis. Mindfulness is essential to living a *chosen* life, and choosing your values (stabilizing traits that you most want to express) is central to mindfulness. When you know you need to do something different but don't know what that is, applying your knowledge of your values to your decisions through the practice of mindfulness—and then Noticing the results of your efforts—is the best way to learn what works for you and what doesn't. Mindfulness not about “getting it right” or pretending to be enlightened; it's about acknowledging your inherent variability and managing the impacts it has on your life.

Living mindfully focuses on maintaining awareness and acceptance of your own deeply held values and rules for living, and on Noticing your own ability to undermine yourself. Many cultures practice mindfulness, and all of them recognize that, left to its own devices, the brain does *not* act mindfully. (The brain is, after all, a physical facility that *houses* the aspects of mind, and not the aspects of mind themselves.) This understanding of the basic nature of the brain has, for centuries, motivated us to purposefully cultivate an awareness to see *through* internal and external chatter and to develop the skills to align our actions with our higher intentions for living. It's a universal quest to challenge one's own tendency to live from a thought-centered, reactive, numb, or resistant mindset and to seek a higher intuitive calling.

Einstein said, “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant.” When self-injury urges come on, the servant has taken over and is blocking access to your gift. When painful thoughts are spinning, it can be difficult to take the focus *off* the train wreck of a rational mind gone awry and hear the wisdom of the intuitive mind in all the chaos. One learns to detach from the chaos of the thinking mind and recognize the gift of intuition through the practice of mindfulness.

Practicing mindfulness is a way to make wise decisions through accessing and enhancing your intuitive abilities—your ability to know yourself, question yourself, and interpret the response that comes from beyond the logical rationale of thoughts. Placing your senses and skills at the service of mindful action allows you to explore the link between your interpretations of the outside world and the actions you take. Mindful action and intuition allow you to see and adapt your habits toward the goal of being in touch with your deep and lasting source of internal wisdom. With a habit of mindful thinking, you're able to hear inner wisdom even while your brain is chattering away and churning out competing thoughts.

This internal wisdom, your intuition, is available even when your brain is doing its habitual negative thinking. The trick is to keep coming back to the work of being mindful of your actions and tuning into your intuition and naturally rational aspects of mind for guidance—even when part of your mind wants to ruminate on painful thoughts and emotions. It's not easy, and your brain may tell you that it's stupid to try to pay closer attention to what you're allowing your brain to do. Really, your brain would like it if *You* just stood back and left it to do its thinking without all that Translating or intuiting getting in *its* way.

The will to cultivate the talent of mindfulness comes, in part, from taking on the idea that life simply feels more *alive* if you remain aware and present, and less difficult if you attempt to minimize the habitual responses of the brain that cause harm in your life. As you practice being mindful of your actions and their results, you'll get to know your own habits and motivations better and learn to alter your circumstances appropriately based on which approaches to living have worked to develop stabilizing personality traits and which haven't. As you develop your skill at being mindful, you'll get better practice Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding. All of this will train your brain to slow down the thoughts and mental processes that can take you for a ride, giving *You* a chance to get in the mix and direct *Your* course of action.

## A Million Ways to Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness when you're clear makes emotional crises less frequent and less severe, especially if you use mindful inquiry to create supports you can seek out *during* your crisis. The rest of this chapter contains information to consider and activities to try during your clear times, so you can rewrite some of the messages in your mind. The results of that work will take some of the power out of the torment your brain unleashes when you're triggered. Do the work of finding additional mindfulness resources and supports that fit your current situation and value system, and work regularly with those resources. Practice makes better, so try to remain mindful as often as possible, while remaining compassionate with yourself when "what is" is pretty darn tricky to deal with.



### *Start with Compassion*

You've toyed with the idea of compassion in previous chapters, but it still may be difficult to imagine treating yourself with compassion in your daily life. If you're going to stop self-injuring, you'll need to learn to turn on your compassion, both during times of inner turmoil and of focused inner inquiry. You'll also need to actively *live* with a sense of compassion for yourself and others. Practicing compassion in the easy times will make it more accessible during the hard times.

Try this: First thing in the morning, before you've opened your eyes, try to get a visualization of yourself having an out-of-body experience, floating above your bed, looking down at the person still lying in bed. Can you look kindly on that person in the bed—the one that tries so hard to get it right, the one who survives despite the odds? Can you look on yourself with compassion?

Do this activity about a hundred different times during the day, shifting your perspective from the brain walking around in a body to a view that includes compassionate respect for the depths of the person inside that body. You're not a long list of foibles, awkward moments, and negative traits. You're vast. You're a human doing your best in a complex world, and you haven't given up. Train yourself to offer compassion toward the person you are—the many parts of you coming together to do the best they can with what they have. Keep in mind that compassion and pity are not the same thing; compassion should soften your heart, not amplify voices in the "poor me" choir.

Also try this view with other people. Look on others as if they're not the one-dimensional abstraction of a being you generally interact with. They're vast, too. They're trying and haven't given up. Can you cultivate a sense of compassion for others? Empathy isn't the same as compassion. You aren't trying to *feel* what you're observing; you're looking on it from a distance, seeing yourself and others as people doing the best they can with what they've got at the moment, even if it isn't the best they had in mind for themselves.

## What's Mindful?



For people who use self-injury, it's valuable to learn to Notice (without judgment) the times you *aren't* living mindfully, so you can reconnect with what it would mean to be more mindful. Some examples of what it means to live mindfully follow.

- Learning about and acknowledging your tendencies when you're stressed, pushed, overloaded, or about to self-injure, and then modifying your actions and circumstances appropriately based on what you know about yourself.
- Knowing that you have a tendency to be triggered toward self-injury, and then actively working to meet your needs without violence.
- Observing your thoughts and feelings from a distance without judging them as right, wrong, good, or bad.
- Living your experiences without drowning in them; attempting to connect to your innate ability to remain present with what's happening moment to moment, even if it's uncomfortable, boring, or new to you.
- Letting the experience of your deeper needs guide your self-protective actions.
- Learning to see and accept yourself, as you are, without judgment; learning to accept others.
- Listening to yourself patiently enough to hear what's really going on inside you; being honest about what you find inside you and the things you do to survive.
- Finding your element; learning what helps you thrive and allowing yourself to live in a manner that supports your wellness. Returning to the comfort of self-knowledge when times get hard.

Practicing mindfulness gives insight into what works and what doesn't work for you, what trips you up, where your strengths lie, and where you have room to grow. From this insight comes the permission to be who you are in each moment and the clarity, will, and strength to act on your own behalf to change what you can (about yourself and your situation) to make life less painful.

## Your Version of Mindful

In your journal, write down some additional scenarios that reflect you living mindfully. What evidence can you see of your own mindfulness in the clear times? In a crisis?

## Notice This

When you're clear, build a habit of Noticing and Pausing and consciously choose to step back from obsessive or painful thoughts long enough to identify what you're feeling. Stay in your movie theater seat and simply watch what you're experiencing without reacting to it. Work with each of the items below and Notice the sensations, thoughts, and internal messages that arise when you focus your attention on each of the aspects of your experience. Bypassing your thoughts, ask yourself what's going on in your *awareness*. What sensations do you feel? What do you Notice about this experience and your resistance or openness to it? Watch what you're experiencing. What needs, desires, or wishes come up when you become aware of these different aspects of your experience?

- ▷ **Notice your breath:** How does the air feel on your lips or nostrils? What's the temperature of the air you're breathing? Where does the breath live in your body? Where does the strongest sensation of breath reside? In the lungs? In the upper chest? Stay with the breath for a few minutes and take note of the sensations, thoughts, and experiences you associate with being mindful of the breath. Are you resisting the act of settling into the breath? What would you need to change about your posture or mindset to make your breath come and go with complete ease?



- ▷ **Notice your body:** Notice the weight of your body being supported by the surface beneath you. Notice, for a few seconds in turn, your hands, your face, your abdomen. Where does your body start, and where does it end? Notice its edges, the boundaries between your skin and the space around you. Where do sensations of ease reside? Where do sensations of distress reside? Stay with the body for a few minutes and take note of the sensations, thoughts, and experiences associated with being mindful of your body. What would you need to change about your body position, orientation in the room, or degree of physical tension to make your body feel complete ease?
- ▷ **Notice your senses:** Notice your *ability* to take in the sights, sounds and tactile experience around you. What sounds do you hear? How far are those sounds from you? Notice the many *types* of sounds in your awareness. Notice your *ability* to feel the space you fill in the room where you are. Notice the space in the room that isn't filled. Now, look around. What color is most dominant in your surroundings? Notice your *ability* to sense the energy inherent in living things. A table doesn't give off the same vibe as a houseplant or pet; what kind of energy do you *feel* coming from the objects, people or animals in your surroundings? Notice the energy in the palms of your hands. Notice the energy in the center of your chest. Can you feel your heartbeat? Tune into your many senses, Noticing first that you even have the *ability* to sense, then Noticing what you're sensing. Take note of the information, related thoughts, and experiences associated with being mindful of the senses. What would you change about the information your senses are receiving? What would be a preferable sensory experience to the one you're having now? What resistance do you have to staying with unpleasant or "boring" sensations?
- ▷ **Notice your thoughts/emotions:** Without believing or interacting with the content of your thoughts; Notice the current state of your thoughts and emotions. Watch your inner experience and identify the primary thoughts and emotions you're experiencing. Notice the feel and volume of the thoughts in your brain as the various aspects of your mind come into and out of control. Watch, and connect with, the many perspectives inside you. How does the tone and feel of the voice of shame compare to the sound of hope? Can you identify which aspects of your mind, or which needs, drive your various sensations and thoughts? ("Oh, there's my need to be needed again", "There's my fear of isolation.") Are your most habitual thoughts present? If your thoughts had a color, what would it be? On a scale of 0–10, where are you right now with regard to emotional reactivity? If your emotions were an aspect of nature, what would they be (frost, rain, heat)? Stay with your thoughts and emotions for a few minutes and take note of the intensity, character, and related body sensations that come along with being mindful of your thoughts and emotions. Remain conscious that you're not *thinking* your thoughts or *feeling* your emotions; just *watching* them.
- ▷ **Notice your experience:** What do you Notice about having the experience you're having? Focus your attention on what it's like to watch yourself *experience* your experience. Notice the "you" that you are in this moment. Which version of yourself have you chosen to put on? Stay with the experience of *experiencing* for a few minutes and take note of the viewpoints, sensations, and your own resistance or openness to being mindful of your experience.

Connect frequently with your ability to Notice the basics of your moment-to-moment experience through your breath, body, senses, thoughts, and emotions. When you need to understand or change what's going on inside you, start watching what's happening without becoming entangled in it. There's a lot of information available if you're able to look at your world as it happens instead of getting wrapped up inside your internal content. You can't be mindful all the time, but solutions come more quickly when you know how to check in with various aspects of your experience for information on how you're doing and what you should do next.



## Choosing Versions



If you're aware you're slipping into a version of yourself you don't want to be, it's important to prioritize and consistently take actions that are motivated by the knowledge of your deeper needs, rather than the self-destructive habits of the brain. When you're clear, ask yourself, "When I feel torn between perspectives and I need to make a decision on how to cope, which skills, traits, or ideas do I want to help me choose a course of action so I can cope without self-injury? How can I help that happen?" Write down any insights in your journal. Work out which of your many characteristics need to be brought to the forefront when you're struggling. Sit with and try on each of the aspects of your person (or hear the individual voices of the Kids on the Bus) that would need to be present in order to master that moment of action. Try to bring forward the characteristics and abilities that will enable a nonviolent, self-supporting response.

When you're struggling or needing to choose between letting your brain drive you toward self-injury or taking other steps to cope, ask yourself, "What would it take for me to bring in the part of me that can cope without violence?" Listen. Respond to yourself. Try to choose your intuition over habit, even though you won't always succeed. The act of trying to bring in another version of yourself, or specific aspects or traits, when the self-injury mindset is rolling sets the stage for Responses *other* than self-injury.

## Daily Dose of NPLTR

Think about how the process of Noticing, Pausing, Listening, Translating, and Responding relates to mindfulness. Consider how these skills can bring more ease into your daily life and decision making. Work with the questions below as often as possible to check in and see if there are ways you can manage your internal content more effectively.

- What's happening in your life right now that you need to Notice?
- What consistent messages are you hearing but unwilling to Listen to or Respond to?
- Are you habitually Translating your own or others' feelings into negative truths?
- What situations in your life require your immediate Response? A longer-term Response?
- Is your intuition informing you about the areas of your life in which you need to slow down the quick, generalized reactions and work with the details of what's happening? Are you honoring your intuition?
- Are there situations you aren't sure how to handle that can be guided by taking the time to NPLTR?

## Checking In, Checking Out

Consider how mindfully (or mindlessly) you go through your days or certain recurring situations.

- In what situations do you consistently check out or have a hard time keeping your wits about you?
- In what situations do you react appropriately, despite the trying nature of the situation?
- In what situations do you fail to react authentically at all, going through the motions based on what you think other people want from you?
- To what circumstances are you *sure* to overreact emotionally?
- In what ways do you check out before, during and after self-injury?



## Always an Upside and Downside

Have you ever noticed that you can find something wrong with literally *anything*? Seriously. Think of your favorite thing in the world. Surely it has a downside or you'd change *something* about it if you could. Life is imperfect in ways, and in some ways it's amazingly perfect. But there's always a downside—a characteristic about a person, situation, or thing that could be improved. That's just life. Self-injury thinking tends to focus on the downsides and imperfections, eviscerating mindful or positive perspectives with its powerful negative content. The self-injury mindset focuses on the ways in which life and the world are lacking, desperate, and hopeless. Seeing reality and being mindful of your pervasive negative thoughts allows you to see that nothing and no one is perfect; that you can always find something negative if you try. But why try? Many times you don't even *have* to try to focus on the downsides of a situation. The harder work is finding the *positive*—finding the silver lining even though it's on an obviously dark cloud.

When you're seeing only the downside of a situation or attaching painful meaning to the ever-present imperfections of life and relationships, do you Notice that the view you're taking creates its own problems? You naturally move toward what you focus on, so don't make the hard stuff the focus unless you're dismantling it, dissecting it, and taking its hurtful power away. Work to find the upside. And, make life choices that have downsides you can *handle*—ones that aren't likely to support self-injury.

Make a few lists in your journal. What's wrong with the world, you, your history, your past, and your future? Minding the Ground Rules, read over the lists and find similarities. Is life unfair? Is it hopeless? Is it broken? Can you find the common threads in your lists and Translate those ideas? What are you saying you *want* through focusing on the negative? More actions in the world that meet your idea of justice? More peace for humanity? Less pain? What knowledge can you gain about what you want and how you want things to be for yourself and the world by looking at what you find *wrong* with it all? Can you find some degree of acceptance for those downsides that can't be changed? Can you see what's *good* through all the pain? Now make lists of the positive aspects of the world, you, your history, your future. Surely you, your life, and the world aren't all bad, unless your mind is making them seem so. How can you remind yourself to focus on the real, positive aspects of life more often?

## Unsatisfied Curiosity Killed the Cat

Consider the topics you're interested in or curious about. Have you explored activities or knowledge you're interested in, or have you been holding yourself back for some reason? What do you want to do, to learn, or to be, even if no one told you to, asked you to, or paid you to? Where do you want to go just to explore? Are you afraid of trying things you're interested in and pushing your own boundaries?

As you move through your days, continually check in and Listen to your voices of self-expression. Cultivating mindfulness allows you to give yourself permission to perform activities that truly interest you and to be honest about what moves you. And you'll be moved, internally, by doing more of what you love. Don't let healthy curiosity go unsatisfied.

## Trying It On

Imagination is a great way to research what fits. Use your imagination to visualize the changes you want to make in your life. Imagine the person you want to be, the situation you want to be in, the healthiest version of yourself. Tapping into your imagination helps you to try on possible futures or expressions of your personality. Your imagination can relay important sensory information to your body and self-evaluating abilities, telling you what feels right and wrong. When you imagine situations that don't fit the life you want and then switch to imagining a scenario more in line with your values, you can sense the changes in your body, energy, breath, and the resonance your intuition reflects. If you were to imagine a future of pain and suffering, you'd naturally create a particular group of sensations that feel "off." If you were to imagine

scenarios where you have the life that fits you best, you'd create a vastly different sensation of resonance that could be felt in your body as something like "Yes!" instead of "Ow!" Ask your intuition what life you need to imagine into existence (or what life you need to stop imagining awaits you), and then Listen carefully for the answers. Through mindfulness, you are cultivating a link to your intuition. This link can convey information from your rational mind and tap into the imagination to show you versions of what's possible. Practice using your imagination in a mindful way and Notice your internal sensations. Let your visualizations and sensations guide you to a life that feels right for you, but don't set traps for yourself by imagining a life that doesn't fit the person *You* want to be.



## Wilting Inside

Living mindfully can free the parts of you that have been relegated to the shadows. What's been dying inside you while you've been trying to live? How much of you is dying inside from trying to be something you're not or from spending too much time managing painful thoughts? What would it take for you to give these abandoned parts of you permission to exist alongside the pain? Can you commit to the process of bringing the more desolate parts of your internal landscape back to life? What can you give yourself that feels so *You* that it helps you remember *Yourself* beyond pain?

## Anchors Aweigh

Consider that you could use an anchor when you're drifting around in your ocean of emotion. Below are the The Four Rs from Adlerian psychology. These ideas are intended to be consulted during problem solving to increase self-esteem and improve communication and decision-making skills. As you read the suggestions and consider how you might implement these concepts, Notice in your internal dialogue any indicators that you have resistance or ingrained beliefs about the concepts of Respect, Responsibility, Responsiveness, and Resourcefulness. You have to deal with your own beliefs about the feasibility of these concepts before putting them to good use.

- ▷ **Respect for self and others:** Treating yourself and others with dignity and respect; acknowledging the innate value of all human beings for who they are and not who you'd like them to be. Self-respect comes from thinking and acting consistently with your own freely chosen values and beliefs. Other-respect comes from accepting (but not necessarily approving of) another's right to think or act consistently with a different set of values and beliefs.
- ▷ **Responsibility:** Being willing to accept the natural and/or logical consequences of your behavior and communications and allowing others to do the same. Not enabling by doing for others what they could, or need to, do for themselves, which robs them of opportunities to grow in self-respect and teaches learned helplessness that may eventually be resented. Not asking others to enable you when you should be doing for yourself.
- ▷ **Responsiveness:** Responding to your own and others' needs, feelings, and requests. Responding does not mean always saying yes, taking care of others' needs while excluding your own, or "fixing" others' problems. In fact, in most instances, the most responsive Response is to share your own experiences and feelings from similar situations—not advice—and then to encourage others to find their own unique and creative solutions that align with their values. Receive the responsiveness offered by others even when it asks you to be truthful and potentially vulnerable.
- ▷ **Resourcefulness:** Always experimenting with new and creative ideas, decisions, and actions that bring more joy and meaning to your life and help you compassionately address your limitations. Accepting that sometimes you have to take risks and make mistakes in order to learn. Spontaneity and confidence are enhanced by continuing to find new ways to think and act, even after you've found ways that work. Otherwise, even the new and better ways soon become habits, and again you'll be acting mindlessly.



## Lifestyle Limits

Consider your lifestyle choices. In what ways are you helped or harmed by the activities you participate in, the people you associate with, the foods you eat or avoid, and the rituals you keep? Do you get enough sleep and healthy food? Do you act in ways that your Inner Child isn't happy about? Do you metaphorically (or even literally) smoke cigars while drinking whiskey and playing with fire near gas cans? Can you pinpoint a handful of internal or external changes you can make to your lifestyle choices that would support you in being more of what *You* want to be or more responsible in caring for yourself? Knowing which lifestyle choices support you best can be useful when you're trying to self-soothe. But knowing what you need isn't the same as giving it to yourself, is it? You have the right to choose your regular rituals and lifestyle—so is it going to be herbal tea every night to relax, or will it be whiskey?

## S-U-C-C-E-S-S

Define what success is to you, in realistic measures. If you achieve the steps that would make you successful (in relationships, finances, or generally as a human), will you be the person you want to be? Will you be doing what *You* really want to do? It's easy to wish for a fantasy life or hold a definition of success that acts as an oasis in the desert, teasing you as if it's really going to satisfy your thirst. But if you have "success", will it be the end-all? Will you sit rocking on your porch till your dying day, with no more to learn, to do, or to be? Qualify your ideas of success with short- and long-term vision, and try to be truthful about whether or not you actually want what you're working toward.

## Live the Transitions

Self-injury can often come on as if it's not really a choice; it's just what naturally happens after becoming triggered. Practice gaining control over your habitual actions by *living your transitions*. Whenever you switch from one activity to another, remain aware of what you're doing; don't just do it mindlessly. Try to avoid multitasking, asking many parts of your brain to be active at once, mindlessly jumping from activity to activity. That kind of mental activity supports lightning-fast self-injury and the dominance of the brain's habits over mindful action.

This is really the crux of guiding an overactive brain: to *choose* your actions, to *transition* between experiences as if you actually mean to do so. This practice asks you to take control of your mind and your actions as often as possible, keeping your many competing aspects of mind from rolling down the highway with you in tow. Notice how the practice of mindfully choosing how you move through your activities gives *You* time in the driver's seat, moving the mindless habits that allow self-injury or mindless action to the back of the bus.

## "I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough . . ."

Oh, Stuart Smalley. You had so much to teach the world. (If you don't know who Stuart Smalley is, please do yourself the favor of Googling the name.)

It's time to take a look at what's good about you. The color of the light in your eyes, the things you do better than anyone else you know, and all the glorious things about your multifaceted magnificence that the world really ought to see so they can properly appreciate your splendor.

When you're clear, write a list of things you actually like about yourself. Use some space in your journal to validate how good, smart, kind, worthwhile, and generally great you are when you're not being beaten up by self-injurious thoughts. You happen to have skills and uniqueness that no one else on this whole planet has. Even if those qualities don't make you a million dollars, they do make you a useful and valid human being. Write down your list, look at it when you're freaking out, and try to reconnect with the parts of you that actually believed that stuff when you wrote it. As long as the parts of your mind doing

this little exercise believe it's true when you write it, you'll have an easier time buying into that good stuff when your self-injury thoughts are berating you about all that's wrong with you.



## Rules for Living

You don't have responsibility for how other people live their lives—only for how you live yours. As you grow your connection to your intuition by getting comfortable reading your senses and thoughts, your decisions will come from a place that's governed *intentionally* instead of one that's reactionary and chaotic. Remembering the Ground Rules and considering that this isn't a bar to put yourself up against, take some time to think about your "rules" for life. What ideas, strategies, or guidelines do you hold fast to as you hold yourself to your own standards? What are those standards? What are the *rules* of your life?

Then, identify five major experiences that formed the rules you live by, and describe the lessons you learned from those experiences. Is it OK to steal? When? Is it OK to lie? In what circumstances? Is it OK to demean other people? What makes it OK to target some people with ridicule while you spare others? What life lessons taught you that the logic of your rules is sound? Did past bullying, sexual abuse, limited resources, crime, alcoholism, or addiction play into the rules you live by? In what ways? How have your rules factored into your use of self-injury? What rules do you need to modify to support you in becoming more compassionate, patient and self-loving?

## Mindful Moves

Paying attention to your current experience of body and breath can keep you from getting caught up in your thoughts and help you maintain a sense of physical presence. Move mindfully and watch how your body and breath are affected by your internal and external conditions. Also Notice how difficult it can be to move mindfully or slowly. It's easy for a brain to just switch on muscle groups, but try move your body (pick up a fork, walk around a room, stretch) mindfully and see how it feels.

### Noticing How You Move

As you move through your daily life, think about the way you move your body. How do your feet make contact with the earth when you walk down the street or step up stairs? Are your knees locked as you stand in line at the grocery store? Do you use your abdominal muscles to support your spine as you walk? Are your shoulders relaxed down away from the ears as you run your errands, as well as when you exercise or play? Do your hands clench to fists when they're relaxed, or are they open? Do you walk quickly or saunter? As you move, Notice the way it feels to move your body. Notice how your own energy patterns demonstrate ease or tension and how your energy is relayed through your body movement.

### Engage the Core

Lightly engage your abdominal muscles as you move through your day. Use the strength of your abdominals to keep you aware of the distance between the crown of your head and the base of your spine, and of the need to support the spine to keep your energy moving without encumbrance. Pay attention to the abdomen in general, reengaging your core strength as often as possible. There may be not tangible results from this practice—this isn't *Abs of Steel*, after all—but placing your awareness on supporting the length of the spine allows for more effective energetic alignment in your body. Slumping through your day affects how energy moves through your heart center. Energy that's moving freely simply feels better than energy that's bound up.





## *Noticing the Breath*

During your days, become aware of how the breath most commonly moves in your body. Is it shallow? Rapid? Easy? Mostly in the chest? Mostly in the throat? Can you deepen your breath as you exert energy during the stresses of your day (or exercise routine), purposely slowing the heart rate and reducing the feeling of exertion? Notice your breath while you're working, while you're shopping, while you're eating. How does it differ depending on the activity you are participating in? Why is it different? Can you change the breath as you're noticing it? Can you localize or direct the breath to different parts of your body by visualizing the inhale going into the leg? The hand? Directly into the heart? Can you feel the breath opening a small chamber in the heart, allowing some light and space to reside within? Can you allow the exhale to remove stress and strain, just letting thoughts and pain go on the breeze you create? Can you move the breath to a spot where you're experiencing pain? Every time you can remember to do so, make a mental connection to the feeling of conscious breathing. Notice how your body and mind respond to the breath, especially as you direct it toward the heart and painful spots in the body.

## Supporting Yourself with Reminders

You're the only one who's going to be able to consistently prioritize your own wellness, and it's easier to do if you're mindful of using supports you've made and left for yourself to find. Self-supports come in handy every day, whether or not you can find the focus or clarity to use them as you'd like. Make a practice out of creating, then seeing and using, any and all healthy supports you have available throughout each day. Don't just look for reminders of who you are and what you want when you notice you're triggered; continually keep your mind open to self-support tactics. Try the suggestions below to remind yourself that life involves more sensations than pain.



## *Happy Stuff*

Make a box of happy stuff and fill it with things that, well, make you happy. Select photos, knick-knacks, pieces of cloth or ribbon, stones—anything that gives you instant and deep pleasure and reminds you of softness, love, stability, and patience. Get this treasure chest out when your brain is arguing that there's nothing in life but pain. See the variety in the reminders you have; moments aren't always one emotion or another. Happy can reside alongside sad and scared. Though no moment lasts forever, you have elements of happiness right this minute; they're just harder to appreciate when your brain gets obsessed with habitual painful thinking. You've had more than just pain in your life, and there's more than just pain in a painful moment. Gaining a perspective on the richness of life can come from looking at a card sent to you by someone you love or a flower that you dried and put into the box. Happy stuff. Find it. Store it. Come back to it. Feel it again and again. Seeing the supports you set for yourself may not ease all your pain, but it may allow you to take on a view of your situation that doesn't move you toward self-injury.

## *Displays You Can't Help But Notice*

Craft your personal space to inspire, encourage, and remind you of the lessons you're currently working with. Decorate a corkboard or the walls with collages, art, notes, love letters to yourself, or large notes that say things like "DON'T GIVE UP." Write supportive quotes or other words that remind you who *You* are and how *You* want to be and put them in places you can't help but notice. Purposely keep some notes on hand to reference during crisis times.

Reminders about what you're doing for yourself and why are massively important, so create new ones every time you have a clear insight that can direct and support your actions. Make it a point to support yourself with visual stimuli, so you don't have to dive into your memory or a book to find words or images that keep you focused and feeling true to yourself. Don't forget to leave some reminders in places you would typically go to self-injure. Your reminders may jog the memory that you're trying to *stop* using self-harm to cope.



## Card-Carrying Supporter

Make a note card you can carry in your wallet that tells you steps to take when you're becoming triggered. Or list ways in which you'd like to be mindful during a crisis. Take some time to make a step-by-step plan telling you how to deal with impending emotional turbulence. For instance, "Stop. Listen only to your breath. Close your eyes and identify the faintest sound around you. Breathe out as deeply as you can, hold it out. Feel the breath naturally move to fill you up again. Listen without taking action. Get to the truth. Talk to yourself nicely. Hush your mind if it's spinning. Be gentle with yourself."

Or, try something like this:

- Notice that it's time to Respond to myself or I'll likely move toward self-injury
- Tell my brain that I want to deal with what's happening inside me without self-injury
- Connect with and consult the part of me that "watches" my behavior
- Use the tools I've made in the clear times to widen the Pause
- Realize that this is all happening in a mind I'm having difficulty controlling
- Remember that I'm learning how to handle my pain effectively, and self-injuring interrupts that learning process

## Treatment Plan and Goals

No matter what type of therapy you're working through or what specific steps you're taking to stop self-injuring, it's important to set goals toward a treatment plan of your own. Take some time to consider the ways you could be more mindful and how those actions could build toward the overall goal of moving away from self-injury.

For each of the items below, consider an overall goal (what you want to have/do) and a plan to get to that goal (how, when, and where you'll accomplish that goal). Talk to trusted friends or your counselor to get feedback on the clarity and feasibility of your goals. Set yourself up for success by setting goals that help you as you *currently are*. Know that you'll set new goals once you've grown and changed. As you're going through your days, check in with the list of goals and plans you've made; this will help direct your thoughts to the areas in which you've decided to be more mindful without having to think too hard about what you could be mindful of. Don't punish yourself if you don't meet the goals; simply alter them to be more attainable.

▷ **Habitual Behaviors:** What do you do relatively unconsciously that disrupts the balance in your life? What realistic, measureable goal would redefine the way you'd like to behave? How can you map out your way to that goal? For example:

*Goal:* To decrease self-injury behaviors to one time per month or less.

*Plan:* When I feel body sensations and swirling thoughts that lead to self-injury, I'll practice mindfulness and focus on my breath and body rather than on my thoughts and emotions. I'll wait until I've cleared my head enough to assess my needs and meet them before I decide how to Respond (even if self-injury is the chosen Response).



▷ **Work/Education/Career:** In what ways can you modify your goals in these areas to bring more ease and less internal conflict into your life? For example:

*Goal:* To practice observing healthy boundaries at work and making choices that are in line with my deeper values.

*Plan:* I'll actively determine what type of work setting is appropriate for me, and set a strategy for transitioning to a new job when it's possible; I'll practice expressing healthy boundaries by speaking up when I sense that my skills are being used inappropriately.

▷ **Social Skills/Friends/Recreation:** In which areas can you set realistic, actionable goals to bring more joy, fun, or connection into your life? For example:

*Goal:* To practice embodying my true nature with other people; to get out more.

*Plan:* I'll spend time with friends that I feel like I can be authentic with, call someone I can speak freely to about self-injury at least once a week for the next month, and get out in nature or with friends at least once a week for the next month.

▷ **Relationships/Intimacy:** In what ways could you reconsider your current goals around relationships and intimacy? Do you find yourself noticing self-limiting relationships that you'd like to change? For example:

*Goal:* To learn to be skillful in voicing my needs and dropping masks in intimate relationships.

*Plan:* I'll cultivate an ability to ask for help even if I don't know what to say in the moment. I'll tell my partner that when I'm dealing with painful internal content that may lead to self-injury, I will say, "I need to talk"; ask that, when they feel patient and compassionate enough to sit with me, they hold me and either listen to what I have to say without trying to fix it or let me be held in silence.

▷ **Self-Concept/Self-Worth:** In what ways does your self-concept keep you in a struggle with self-injury? What tangible goal can you set to focus less intensely on the negative aspects of being so you can start down the road to greater self-acceptance? For example:

*Goal:* To accept that I am vast and hold both positive and limiting qualities, and that my current confusion about how to work with my inner chaos doesn't make me "broken."

*Plan:* I'll practice seeing myself more clearly, without such a strong negative focus, by checking in with the things I like about myself and noticing my successes; read encouraging texts that connect me to the deeper aspects of my being; take time each day to reconnect with my inner wisdom and ask it to guide me (even if it has to raise its voice to be heard over all the other chatter); resist diving into or arguing with my thoughts when demeaning internal content comes up, and gently shush those thoughts as often as possible.

▷ **Personal Values/Interests/Priorities:** What can you do with your free time that will feel uplifting? Which of your values can you express more fully? What do you long to do for enrichment that you're not currently doing?

*Goal:* To bring more creative pursuits into my life.

*Plan:* I'll sign up for a class at local art school and make a space at home to be creative, I'll advertise my availability for group activities and do what it takes to bring myself to the challenge of meeting and settling in with new people who share my interests.

## Pick Your Team

If you're fortunate enough to have a few great people in your life who have the ability to help you understand yourself and relate more gently to your pain, use them. Gather them around you, whether they be massage therapists, naturopaths, spiritual leaders, friends, or family. When you're sensing that



you may dive into your thoughts and not come out without self-injury, call someone on your team and say, “I need to talk,” even if you don’t know what words come next. See these people as often as possible and allow yourself to receive the healing and experience they have to offer.



Though no one else really understands what you’ve gone through, or what you are dealing with day to day, a compassionate, encouraging, or energizing companion can go a long way toward helping you feel less isolated with your pain. Pick people you can be honest with—even if your discussions stay in a limited range—and hold yourself to being as truthful as you can about how you’re feeling, what you’re thinking, and what you need from them. People who are willing to make the effort to show you they care shouldn’t be dismissed when the myopia of turbulent thoughts comes on, even though your thoughts may tell you isolation is just what you need.

If you could choose a fantasy team from all the people, energies, and animals on the planet, who would they be? Why? What does each member of your fantasy team contribute?

If you picked your team from your existing reality, who would be on it? What does each member of the team you have available need to do, be, or contribute?

## One-Hour Plan

Set a plan for at least one of your hours each day and follow it, no matter how simple it is. Spend the time doing something you actually like, are interested in, or feel bolstered by. The hour is all about you taking care of your deeper needs. Take this seriously, and use the time to do something that makes you feel connected to *Yourself*. (Masturbating to porn for an hour, spending excessive amounts of money, or getting stoned and passing out don’t qualify as taking care of deeper needs.)

If you have trouble following through, consider if you’ve set realistic plans. As simple as this may seem, it’s a real skill to decide what you’re going to do and how, and then do it—even if you have to alter your plan when it doesn’t play well with reality. Learn how to make realistic plans and actively remove any obstacles to your success. Prove to yourself that you can set a one-hour self-care goal and meet it; from there, you can make bigger plans.

## Thirty-Day Plan

Each time you self-injure, the next time becomes that much more likely, unless you have a strategy. Make yourself a thirty-day plan that includes a variety of coping skills and self-support tactics. How can you use your energy and time in the next thirty days to support yourself in undertaking the lowest possible number of self-injury actions? What have you learned that’s at least worth *trying* when you may self-injure? What can you do in your clear times to keep yourself strong in crisis times? Which members of your team are integral to your thirty-day plan?

Without shaming yourself for any self-injury actions during the month, just see how long you can go without self-injury. If you’re injuring multiple times a day, try to reduce the intensity and frequency. If you’re more sporadic with self-injury, pay attention to how many days go by between episodes. Also, pay attention to which skills work and in what situations. Notice when you are more able to Listen and Translate, when you need to avoid stimuli and distract yourself in order to calm down, and when nothing seems to work.

As you practice your newfound coping skills, you’ll see two things happen:

1. The expanse of time between episodes grows naturally when your goal is to put as much time as possible between self-injury actions—especially if you’ve gotten most of the Kids on the Bus on *Your* side.
2. You’ll Notice your own patterns and the habitual thoughts that precede and stimulate self-injury,



since you'll have to choose either to avoid or engage them. Knowing your own patterns allows you to realize when it's time to step in and do some preemptive mental maintenance. You'll see that the thoughts that trigger self-injury aren't new, special, or random. They're predictable, patterned reactions that you'll watch yourself modify.

In your journal, write up a synopsis of a thirty-day plan that includes at least five each of lifestyle choices, support tactics, or other steps to take to minimize self-injury urges and actions. I'm calling it a plan, but it's not like the one-hour plan, and it's not a you-have-to-live-every-day-a-certain-way kind of plan. It's more of a framework to get you to think about the choices you have available in the next thirty days—and then the next thirty days. The plan also becomes a window into your progress over time, as each thirty-day plan adapts to your ever-changing internal situation.

Don't create a hard-and-fast rulebook for your life that you use to punish yourself; make a list of things you can try at different times, and adapt the list as you see fit over the thirty days. Think about how your actions hang on that framework, and use your insights to expose what's easy and natural for you to do and what is easier planned than done. Setting realistic plans to modify your situation to encourage your emotional stability is crucial, so set your sights on simple, doable changes you can try over the next thirty days. And be nice to yourself, no matter how you actually behave over that time. Just make a plan with achievable milestones and Notice your progress without judgment.

The goal of living mindfully is one that actually can't be met. Every day, you're mindful in some ways and mindless in others. It's human nature. But nature also allows you to learn, and education comes from practicing the art of really *experiencing* your experiences. You're working to become more mindful so that you can stop the habit of self-injury. You're not doing it because self-injury doesn't work, or because you're bad for choosing to be mindless. You're choosing it because self-injury simply doesn't play a productive role in creating the life you want to live. Becoming mindful of your actions does.

## CHAPTER TWENTY:

# Your Story

**M**ost people who use self-injury are highly functional and have the ability to withstand and hide a great deal of pain. Unlike with compulsive eating or methamphetamine addiction, you can cover your self-injury damage to hide the deeper realities of your emotional condition. But like anyone, in order to describe who you are and how you got this way and to rationalize your behavior, you have to tell yourself stories about what's happened to you, what the elements of the story mean, and what the effects of the story are. But what's a story, anyway?

A story is the *current* telling of *one* of the *many possible* views of the events.

Think about Hollywood. A film company wants to tell a story about the life of Marilyn Monroe. They consult various writers to get an idea of how each writer would tell her story. What will the tone be? What message will the audience be left with? How will each writer portray the characters? Each writer would select different parts of Marilyn Monroe's life to focus on and would have various perspectives on her story. Each writer could write the story from any number of available perspectives: from an outsider, from an insider, from various participants in her life, or from a fly on the wall. The story chosen for distribution will be the one that's deemed a "good angle" for a number of reasons, but primarily because it tells the story in a compelling way that gets a certain reaction from the viewer. The story told isn't the *only* way it can be told, just the way it *is* told. Understanding this idea is important, because it also means that your version of a story isn't the only one, or even necessarily an accurate one. It's a story that's been told in a particular way to elicit a particular reaction from the audience—even if the only one listening to the story is you.

## The Version of the Story

Stories are wily things. Have you ever met a storyteller who tells a story the same way twice? Each time we tell a story, it changes a little. A word here, a detail there, and by the time we've repeated it a dozen times, the story is being delivered with full conviction by a mouth attached to a mind that tends to believe everything it thinks. The mind can overlook the fact that it's not recalling exactly every detail of the experience, but filling in the blanks in order to suit a variety of purposes and situations. Trusting a story can be risky business.

In our defense, we don't necessarily remember having changed the details or applied emotional logic to our story. We may not exercise much control over how our "poor me" stories spill out when we want attention or how our "look how great I am" stories come out when we want to feel more awesome. We're changeable, and so is our storytelling.

When we meet new people or catch up with friends, we tell them what we think, how we've been doing, and the tidbits we feel they should know about us. Distilled from all the details of our lives is the *gist* of things,

the shorthand to describe the vastness of our experience. On some level, we choose how to speak about our experiences—how we deliver the story of what’s true, who we are, and why we are that way.

You get through your life in particular ways, relying on certain habits to insulate you from the shameful or painful elements of your story. You may not want to be all that honest about what you’ve been doing or how you’ve been behaving when people start asking questions, so you may have learned to protect your privacy through dishonest storytelling. But now, you’re working to become more able to understand your own reactions to your experiences and accept your own life story as one that’s lived by a character doing the best they can in the moment. From this vantage, you can see that the character is capable of more but doesn’t always rise to meet their challenges. You can start applying compassion and patience to the content and delivery of your story instead of coloring the words with fear, insecurity, or shame. You can tell a more accurate story that emphasizes your triumphs while also clearly describing your challenges.

Despite all the other work you do trying to move beyond your pain, you can choose to spend your life telling your story over and over again, drilling into all the details, rehashing the wrong turns and painful lessons, and questioning your very worth. But your brain can so easily get locked in a cycle of telling your ever-evolving sob stories that you can miss your opportunity to identify the *lessons* from your experience. You can overlook how you *reacted* to the experience because you’re so focused on the experience itself. Your brain could forever retell all the same old stories, lambasting you for not having done something more productive with your life. But your brain isn’t necessarily looking clearly at the vast amount of content that *could* be included in the life story it’s telling.

## Consider Your Story

The telling of your story dramatically affects the audience’s view of your experiences and what you’ve done with those experiences. One way to tell your story is to relate it as a series of facts, as if it were a documentary. The impact on the audience suggests that you know your own experiences, and you’ve gotten your mind around how they impact your day-to-day life, even if the effects are hard to eradicate. Another way is to tell the story in a way that’s more focused on the individual experiences. This telling brings in more emotion and moves you from a documentary-narrator perspective to the current-participant (wallowing) view. It gives the audience insight into the level of resentment you still carry and an indication that you haven’t quite owned your experience to the point where you can see or alter its effect on your life.

### *The Docu-Story*

My mom died when I was young, and I found myself in the role of caretaker for my alcoholic father. He was violent when he was drunk, and I never knew when the next blow would be coming. I felt so nervous around him that I often had stomachaches. I resented my mother for leaving me, hated my father for what I saw as taking away my childhood, and despised myself, because I was always failing to take care of my responsibilities as well as an adult would have. In many ways, the experience of having lived that way still affects my life, especially when I try to be perfect and expect that I should handle everything in my life just right. I punish myself when I make mistakes, and when I do punish myself, it reconnects me to the feelings I had growing up. There’s a strange kind of comfort in reliving the trauma of the past. It’s what I knew, and my mind easily goes back to habits it created during that time of my life. I’d like to change the hold those experiences have on my life now and choose my reactions instead of finding myself reacting as my child-self might.

### *The Wallow-Story*

My mom died when I was young and left me alone with my dad, who was a violent drunk. He thought I was his housemaid and expected me to take my mom’s place. When he wasn’t at the bar, he was sulking around the house, and I never knew when he would beat me. He enjoyed it. I had to do all the

housework and cooking, and I had to take care of myself because he wouldn't. I had no childhood because he couldn't take care of either of us and my mother wasn't there to save me from him. I hate him and my mother (and myself) because of what my life has been. I still punish myself for being such a failure, and sometimes it feels good to give myself the pain I deserve. I'll never be able to get over the lessons that life with my dad taught me.

There are many ways to tell your story. But for now, we'll focus on trying to write your life story from the Documentary perspective. Take a few days to do this work. Consider the different angles you typically tell your story from and identify other views that get closer to the truth without wallowing in the pain that's inherent in the story being told.

## *Write Your Story*

First, outline your autobiography by summarizing the happiest, unhappiest, and most confusing moments of your life. Then fill in the story of how you became who you are now. Consider, before writing:

- What are the five most dominant personality traits you've been expressing in your current life? Where do you think those characteristics came from? What do they *do* for you? Are they based on rules you've applied about "how life works"?
- How do those dominant characteristics come through in the stories you tell about yourself?
- What are the five most dominant memories or experiences that positively or negatively affect your ability to live a life you love?
- What causes you the most pain, and what do you do about it? What inspires joy or serenity in your life? Why?
- What do you remember most vividly about being a child? What would you care to forget? What were your favorite parts of childhood? If you could go back and talk to yourself as a child with the knowledge you currently hold, what would you tell your younger self?

When you're ready, write as much as you see fit, then think about the ways in which the experiences you've described still affect your life. How do these experiences affect the way you tell your story, for good or ill?

Focus on writing about experiences that shaped you, your beliefs, and your attitudes, but write this story as if you were delivering the narrative for a documentary—not without compassion, but not tied to any specific emotion of the experience. Tell your story from an outside perspective, and relate the biggest lessons of your life without applying undue shame, guilt, or false bravado, and without becoming emotionally involved in reliving the experience or lesson. Don't let your documentary production crew make the villains more dastardly than they were or paint you as a helpless victim. Be honest about how the experience or lesson felt, what you know now about how you might handle a similar experience or lesson, the impact it had on you, and how you've lived with it. Describe what shaped and continues to shape who you are, but don't be colored by telling the story from inside the challenges. Stay on the shore of that ocean of content, watching and describing it.

## *Read Over Your Story*

Read over what you've written so far. Which storylines are you emotionally anchored to, and which self-injury-fueling life moments are missing? What information did you bypass or purposely leave out of your story?

Notice which aspects of your mind are telling the story. Are you able to maintain the documentary perspective? Does the storyteller change into the part of your mind with the long memory for being wronged? Is your storyteller the part of your mind that seeks to create drama for a listener, even if the content isn't totally accurate? Is the story told to speak to one person in particular—perhaps one that hurt you? Do the aspects of you at work when reading (or telling) your story change depending on which parts of your history you're talking about or who you are directing it to? Are you the victim? The victor? Is everyone except you mentally challenged?

## Revise Your Story

The habits of history are hard to break, but you have to choose the perspective from which you tell the story of your experiences and the lessons you've learned. Otherwise, you may get locked into spinning a tale with a distorted storyline that *further*s your pain. Read through your story again and consider how you'd edit it to get to the closest version of the truth you can muster. Find ways to tell more about what you did as a result of being "stimulated" by life's experiences, and how you live with or would want to live with the material of your life. As you revise your story, consider:

- What are the five most dominant characteristics that you *want* to express in life and through your retelling of your experiences?
- How could you change your approach to talking or writing about what's real for you to honestly display those existing positive characteristics?
- How could you change your actions or perspective to come up with something more to relate about yourself than your past or your pain?
- What storytelling perspectives are available besides the "poor me" or "life sucks" angles?
- How could you tell your story so that it would be delivered the same way to any person that asked you the question, "What made you who you are?"
- What elements of the story would you change if you were telling it to someone who was just getting to know you, a longtime friend, or a family member you haven't seen for a while? What reasons would you have for editing your story to omit certain truths in certain situations? Are you telling too much personal stuff in your story? Is the content too triggering or embarrassing?
- What's consistently important about you, your past, and where you are today?
- What aspects of the story are you using to hurt yourself or keep yourself believing a painful idea that didn't actually originate from you, but from someone else's actions or words?

Take your time writing, reading, and revising your story. Revise it until it's a series of facts. Think about it from different angles and determine the best way to be mindful of your life lessons. Find compassion for the heart that lived through those experiences. Use this not as another opportunity to suffer the memories of your formative lessons, but as a way to remind yourself that you control the way you make yourself and others feel about your life experience through the way you tell your story. Come away from this work with an awareness of why you tell your story the way you do. Then consider the ways in which you'd like to tell it differently. Find the voice in you that tells the truth but doesn't use that truth to continue your victimization. There are plenty of good things that came out of being you and living your story; don't forget to mention some of them.

## The Story of Your Self-Injury

Practicing NPLTR and living mindfully help you to get a look at what's real for you, how you make things worse, how you make things better, and how other people factor into your challenges and solutions. As you work with your inner content, it's useful to drill down to the story of how your self-injury works, so you can get your mind around what's real without getting too dramatic.

Keep your Ground Rules handy, and write an alternate version of your story that zooms in on the particulars of your self-injury habits and cycles. When did you start using self-injury and why? What's your "normal" with self-injury? Describe how certain stages feel and where the progression goes from start to finish—from becoming triggered to enacting self-injury to coming down and getting back to living life. Though the elements of your self-injury cycle are very personal, some of them are fairly universal. Consult the example of self-injury related terms on the next page. Then read through the questions that follow and consider your story of self-injury. Remember to keep your movie theater perspective. Consider how your routine thoughts and emotions come together to form your self-injury history, your current urges, and your episode progression.

FIGURE 25:

## Terms That Could Be Applied To Self-Injury Stages

Term	Definition
<b>Extreme Emotions</b>	Some people actually don't experience these. That could be hard to believe for some of us who can be knocked completely off course by our emotional storms. These are the emotions that leave you on the floor crying, wondering "why, why, why"—the ones that gobble you up, chew on you for a while, and then go away, leaving you dry and withered, a little farther from the <i>You</i> that you want to be. They're the calling cards of trauma and unmet needs. Thankfully, they can be moderated and changed.
<b>Spinning</b>	Chaos, sometimes hormonally driven, when thoughts are churning but you have little ability to make a logical thread out of all the pieces and evaluate your circumstances rationally. This happens when you're dissociated from reason, logic, or strategic thinking, because all your circuits are busy with cognitive dissonance.
<b>Bracing</b>	The inward energetic sensation of holding yourself together because, with one more trigger, you could pop off. Your guard is fully up when you're bracing, making it difficult to connect with others.
<b>Faking It</b>	The outward version of bracing. You know when you fake it. You say "I'm fine, really . . ." or pretend you didn't just self-injure under the table or come back from the bathroom with a new injury. You usually fake it at times when it would be really useful to talk to someone so that you don't have to deal with what's happening alone while pasting a smile on a face that really wants to scream.
<b>Shifting</b>	The timeframe when you sense your mental movement from being clear to popping off or self-injuring. This is the time to carefully consult your coping strategies and give yourself what you need in the moment without using self-injury.
<b>Losing Time</b>	Time lost ruminating, detached from any reality except pain. This usually precedes self-injury, and once you're clear, you can go back to using your time intentionally (and you can see how much time you spent spinning around in your head).
<b>Triggered</b>	Stimulated by experiences or thoughts in a way that results in pain. Triggers can be calmed through NPLTR, or emotion could be amplified internally to a point where you choose to use self-injury.
<b>Hot</b>	When for extended periods of time you are either stuck in the chaos inside your mind or you come and go from it, but always at red-alert level—when there's virtually no time between thought and action. You're thought-to-fist. Thought-to-razor. A frustration could come on quickly and you could instantly go for self-injury. Your mind could reside here for any amount of time, bracing to keep from popping off.
<b>Popping Off</b>	Happens when you're Hot. This is a time when you can go from relatively contained, faking, or bracing to enthusiastically self-injuring for a short period of time. It's self-injury that doesn't necessarily come from losing time or spinning, and it's not sustained. It's maintenance self-injury, a little pop here and there to keep you composed, to shut you up, or to remind you that you shouldn't bother trying to talk about what's happening, because it's all too complicated, and keeping things under control with a little pain is better. Control pops often happen in secret when other people are around—like at work or school, on a date—when to others you seem OK (if not a little stressed or weird), but inside, you're just barely keeping a lid on the pain. A continuously triggered state that's managed by repeated, quick and intermittent self-injury.
<b>Hulking Out</b>	Raging; taken over by emotion. This is a state where your deeper aspects are pushed aside so the big-green-rage-monster can get out on the town, mindlessly venting rage or unhappiness.
<b>Self-Injuring</b>	Violence allowed toward or perpetrated against yourself; self-instigated physical, verbal, and situational actions that create personal harm, usually done in Response to extreme emotional pain. This can include cutting, burning, punching, or perpetuating situations that allow you to be physically, sexually, or verbally harmed. Any form of nastiness or violence against yourself, including derogatory comments, comparisons meant to illustrate your failings, or physical or emotional violence. Self-injuring is different from popping off in that it is used as a solution to pain, to move you from one state to another.

FIGURE 25:

## Terms That Could Be Applied To Self-Injury Stages

(Continued)

Term	Definition
<b>Calming Down</b>	This is the time when you're moving from self-injury urges or actions to a state where you aren't as likely to self-injure, but you could go there again quickly because you're still hot—when the Hulk is still awake but considering letting David Banner back onstage.
<b>Coming Down</b>	When you're coming back to yourself, like when David Banner is taking back the space from the Hulk. It's when the episode is over and you're moving from self-injury urges or actions (or from hot/popping off to calming down) to becoming clear. Returning to a nonreactive state; the episode has passed, even though you may not be clear yet.
<b>Clear</b>	That inexplicably delicious convergence of circumstances that allows you to live life as if self-injury, past trauma, or emotional extremes are not part of it or have no discernible negative impact. In clear times, you can actually forget that you have difficulty coping because you feel so capable of handling life, or you can reflect on painful life experiences without judgment. When you're clear, you're able to live mindfully and do the work of changing your habits to reduce your suffering.
<b>Shining</b>	Nope, not Jack Nicholson with an axe— <i>You</i> . Your best you. You without shame, without negative impact on others, just in the zone, able to handle what life brings with a mindset of positivity and strength to stay on track toward your goals. When you meet someone who's suffering, you can feel it, virtually smell depression or angst on other people, and you don't generally gravitate toward it and think, "Hey, gimme some of that, 'cuz I don't have enough of my own pain to deal with." But you also feel it when you or others are shining. The essence of joy is palpable—your eyes, your body, your energy—everything good about you is alive. This isn't a state you can always reside in, but it's your shiniest self, and it's somewhere inside you even when you're self-injuring.
<b>Choosing</b>	Something like intentional action, but to make a choice, you must be able to discern that (1) there's more than one option, and (2) your choice of action has a consequence you desire, whether or not that consequence is in line with your values or needs. This is acting in order to obtain a particular, intentioned result. Your choice can be to self-injure, to use NPLTR, or to cope otherwise.

Consider the questions below and include the answers in the story of your self-injury.

- What actions, thoughts, or feelings most often *start* your urges to self-injure?
- What energetic states or common instigators are present before you're triggered, after you're triggered, and as you're self-injuring?
- What actions, thoughts, or feelings most often *end* your self-injury episodes?
- What terms would you use for your progression? Do "spinning," "hot," "triggered," or "Hulking" work to define points along your self-injury gradient? What's your gradient like? What terms would you apply to your stages, and what are the characteristic thoughts or feelings in each of those stages?
- What environments, stimuli, or types of people guarantee escalation from one stage to another if you're triggered?
- When you're triggered, what environments, stimuli, or types of people make you feel better without using self-injury?

Knowing your own cycle is important, even if you don't communicate it to others. Keep your self-injury story clear and accurate—based on what's real, not what your emotions say from moment to moment. Find the commonality in your self-injury experiences and the characteristic escalation, not just to get to know yourself better, but to expose the habits and thoughts you need to address the instant they crop up. Be careful how you tell your stories and who you tell which story to, and know that your story isn't over; there'll be more to write as you grow into a life without self-injury.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:

# Interacting With Others

**W**hile you're living mindfully and dealing with your stories, you may Notice that it's sometimes attractive to retreat into your "working-on-yourself" cave and shut everyone else out. Though it's true that practicing your non-harming coping skills in isolation can be helpful, Notice when you're isolating yourself in order to avoid the difficulty of interacting with others. If you're feeling isolated and know it's not helping your mind-state, challenge yourself to get up and get out of your head and into the world for a little interaction—even if it's just to go buy coffee down the street. Don't let your *fear* of interacting make you *avoid* interacting, because then you'll just get *worse* at interacting. Get at the root of your social or communication fear and question any assessments that say you can't handle what's out there. Spending time with (or near) other people or getting involved in some connective activity can sometimes be far better for you than spending time alone in your head.

The parts your mind supporting self-injury may make you think you're *harmed* by closeness. Though you want emotional intimacy and support, you may also consider it a threat to the security of your secrets, and your trust for safety and closeness may have been abused in ways that still affect the way you can open yourself to others. As you practice interacting authentically with other people, you'll likely bump into issues with how the past factors into your ability to relate in the current moment. Be as patient and compassionate as possible, and know that with consistent effort, you can change the effect the past has on your ability to be open to others. Interacting with the *right* other people can be quite healing if you allow it to be.

If you realize that you're never going to be perfect, you can take some pressure off the importance of what is said or done through your interactions. There are many areas of your life where you simply have to try something, see if it works and adjust your tactics to get the result you want. Especially when you try to interact with others, you'll come up against a wide variety of obstacles. Perseverance and patience may be required as you learn how to interact with the world in the ways you want. But you don't need to level judgment about where you're starting from. Purposely learning or practicing new skills isn't meant to expose your weaknesses or judge your current degree of skillfulness; practicing helps you simply learn to become more skillful.

Interacting with others is easier when you understand and purposely set your own boundaries; when you effectively communicate and hear difficult feelings, thoughts, or requests; and when you manage your relationships with an eye for what you're trying to get and what others truly have to offer. We'll start the inquiry into interacting with others by looking at boundaries. Then we'll cover communication and relationships, which are intimately intertwined. As you do this work, realize that relating skillfully with other people is just another aspect of living, and the skills you develop in relating to *yourself* will help your efforts. Interacting with (relative) emotional and relational steadiness requires you to be aware of, and truthful about, what's happening in the moment. Interaction isn't about being perfect; it's about being more *You*. With others.

# Boundaries

It's possible you haven't given a lot of thought to boundaries. You may step right over them, only to Notice they were there after you've gone too far. You may defend your boundaries staunchly without considering if doing so is really helping you. Since your emotions are intense enough to drive you to use self-injury, it's likely you need to take a look at how your boundaries affect the way you interact with the world—and, therefore, how you treat yourself and others.

Boundaries are statements of willingness: what you're willing to give, and what you're willing to accept from yourself and others. Many of your boundaries developed as you grew up, through a process that was largely unintentional. The boundaries you created (or didn't create) reflect your experiences, the beliefs of your family and community, and your own ability to manage physical and emotional sharing, connection, and intimacy with others. Boundaries don't define who you are, but they affect how you relate to the world and how you let it relate to you. They define what behavior and treatment you'll allow in your life.

If you Notice yourself behaving in ways that feel unsafe, unsatisfying, under-nourishing, or depleting, odds are that you're not maintaining boundaries that work for you. Giving doesn't always have to equate to feeling drained; interacting doesn't require you to gush out all your feelings at once, or to clam up because you don't know where to start. Falling in love doesn't require that you endure abuse or give yourself away. Try to recognize if there's an unhealthy part of you at work that maintains your negative beliefs or lax willpower by defining and enforcing boundaries in a way that creates or prolongs pain. Don't stay in situations that minimize your needs or allow yourself to minimize others with your boundaries, and don't set your boundaries in ways that feed your willingness to self-injure.

While you have a look at the basic boundary information on the following pages, think about where your own boundaries tend to fall, especially as they relate to self-injury.

FIGURE 26:

## Types of Boundaries

*Your boundaries are basically self-created guidelines. They define what behavior from others is permissible, reasonable and safe, and they govern how you'll respond to others' behavior. The rules and limits that you bring to your relationships can be created and analyzed in a variety of ways.*

*Figure 26 lists examples of characteristics you might express or actions you might take as they fall along a gradient of "weak" to "rigid" boundaries. Each person will express weak, partial or rigid boundaries in different situations, and will have at least an occasional need to modify their boundaries as they negatively affect mental, emotional or physical health. Improving your ability to identify, express and appropriately change your boundaries fosters your ability to meet your own needs and protect yourself and others. But, it can be a challenge to identify and override the habits and conditioning that form the foundations of your boundaries. You're a work-in-progress and there's no "right" way to create or enforce your boundaries. But, when you've carefully considered your and others' boundaries, it becomes easier to treat yourself and others with compassion and patience.*

*While you're working with your boundaries, be gentle with yourself and others. Until you've gotten used to understanding and effectively enforcing your boundaries, your behavior will be defined more by your moment-to-moment needs and reactions than by your conscious choice. Don't worry about having inconsistent boundaries or expressing them unskillfully; you'll learn to continually modify the beliefs and behaviors that allow the overstepping of your, or others', safe limits.*

FIGURE 26:

## Types of Boundaries *(Continued)*

	RIGID BOUNDARIES	PARTIAL BOUNDARIES	WEAK BOUNDARIES
<b>Physical</b>  Physical boundaries pertain to your personal space, privacy, and body. Do you give a handshake or a hug – to whom and when? How do you feel about loud music, being naked, or locked doors?	Resists physical intimacy; is uncomfortable being touched; avoids touching or showing affection to others	Allows affection and physical intimacy, but fluctuates in tolerance of physical closeness depending on the situation or relationship	Allows physical space to be invaded; touches others or allows others to touch him/her, even when it's uncomfortable or inappropriate
	Doesn't react, or underreacts, to physical stimuli; feels no tangible sense of pleasure or enjoyment	Shows extremes in need for physical space; has wavering reactions to the same physical stimuli	Overreacts to all types of life circumstances; personalizes the behavior of others
	Stoic or cold attitude; "stone" face, stiff body posture; identity is based on enforcing rules that foster feelings of security	Displays rigid physical stance and attitude in physically challenging circumstances and an open and flexible attitude in less taxing situations	Unaware of own need for physical privacy; lets others dictate physical boundaries or forces their own boundaries on others; doesn't like being alone
	Boundaries don't change based on others' opinions or behavior; a restricted amount of physical intimacy is present in all types of relationships	Boundaries change quickly; identity isn't expressed consistently; behavior is dependent on the situation or behavior of others	Boundaries are relaxed to avoid feelings of separation; assumes every person thinks/feels the same way as him/her
	Very predictable	Erratic	Unpredictable
<b>Emotional</b>  Emotional boundaries apply to how well you manage the emotional impacts of your thoughts and other's actions. Are you highly suggestible? Do you know what you believe, and can you hold onto your opinions without anger? Do you become highly emotional, argumentative, or defensive? Can you distinguish your emotions, and responsibility for them, from others'?	Has difficulty identifying feelings; doesn't show or discuss feelings	Discusses feelings indirectly (ex: sharing feelings about boyfriend with mother rather than boyfriend); brings up feelings for discussion in ineffective or confusing ways	Feels and shares everything; overreacts to the thoughts and feelings of others; gets too close too fast; says yes when he/she wants to say no; gives and takes too much
	Has difficulty asking for, or receiving, help from others; attempts to meet needs/wants by him/herself	Requests help in inappropriate situations and in a confused way; unsure how to meet his/her needs and wants by him/herself	Feels unable to make decisions without feedback of others; feels excluded if he/she isn't invited into others' emotional processes
	Doesn't react, or underreacts, to emotional stimuli; appears insensitive, aloof, disinterested, or emotionally numb to the needs of others	Has frequent mood swings or changes of opinion; tends to react quickly and in extreme ways to emotional stimuli	Dependent on others' behavior for emotional wellbeing; experiences prolonged resentments; feels like a victim; overcompensates

FIGURE 26:

## Types of Boundaries *(Continued)*

		RIGID BOUNDARIES	PARTIAL BOUNDARIES	WEAK BOUNDARIES
Sexual	Sexual boundaries protect your comfort level with sexual touch and activity – what, where, when, how and with whom.	Underreacts and has little awareness of, or interest in, the sexual dynamics of an intimate relationship; does not prioritize partner's sexual needs; low-libido	Fluctuates between sexual openness and frigidity within the same relationship based on the inconsistent application of sexual values; acting in ways that invite unhealthy sexual attention	Feels constantly aware of sexual dynamics in all relationships; overreacts to sexual stimuli; interprets others' kindness or affection as sexual attraction; uses strangers (one-nighters, porn, etc.) for sexual gratification
		Limits expression and fulfillment of sexual desire; minimizes sexual need; entertains a fantasy life that is not shared with sexual partner	Easily manipulated sexually; unsure of own desires or sexual needs; are moved by passion, but can turn off libido as 'punishment' in relationship	Unaware of, or willingly violates, the sexual boundaries of others or allows the violation of his/her sexual boundaries; uses or is susceptible to guilt or coercion

FIGURE 27:

## Healthy and Unhealthy Boundaries

*A more generalized way of analyzing boundaries is to determine if they are "healthy" or "unhealthy." Boundaries which are well-considered, specific and clearly communicated ("healthy") leave little room for emotional discord or emotional reactivity. When relationships or situations feel painful, stressful or contain seemingly-incurable conflict, it's a good sign that boundaries need to be altered. Boundaries are not intended as a means to punish others or create defensive walls, but to protect you and improve your sense of well-being. They help you practice self-discipline and regulate your relationships and your responses to others. They help you manage your time, thoughts, emotions, behavior and impulses.*

*Setting healthy boundaries is part of taking care of yourself and involves knowing what you like, need, want, and don't want. It also involves going inside yourself to figure out what you feel, then clearly communicating it to others.*

*While you're considering signs of healthy or unhealthy boundaries, become aware of which needs might be met through enacting the behaviors. Since most of our actions revolve around getting our needs met, unhealthy boundaries are really just a not-so-great way of meeting unclear or twisted-up needs. Healthy boundaries can be created by becoming aware of your feelings and needs, then Translating any feelings, needs or thoughts which contribute to harmful behavior.*

*When you observe yourself and others, Notice how and why boundaries are being defined and enforced; you'll be more likely to Respond in ways that respect your, and others', limitations and preferences.*

FIGURE 27:

## Healthy and Unhealthy Boundaries *(Continued)*

	HEALTHY BOUNDARIES	UNHEALTHY BOUNDARIES
Physical	Appreciates the physical body; cares appropriately for his/her and others' physical needs; knows when he/she needs touch rather than sex and tries to get needs for touch met in healthy ways	Overlooks one's own need for physical connection and for privacy; does not protect the privacy, or provide for the physical needs, of others
	Remains sensually aware and stays conscious in the body; demonstrates understanding of how to interact appropriately with people in varied age, gender or social groups	Is unaware of unhealthy behaviors or ideas he/she or others bring into a situation; do not comprehend the limitations to physical intimacy created through posture, demeanor or communication style
	Nurtures self and others and accepts nurturing from others; can physically express feelings of attraction, love or desire in ways that do not focus on sex (ex: holding, caressing, kissing, affectionate non-sexual touch)	Is unable to negotiate or compromise; is insensitive to the needs and rights of others; sees the giving or receiving of nurturing as a demonstration of weakness
	Decides on what's personally "right" and acts on those values; demonstrates tolerance for those with different values; makes boundaries clear to others without anger; protects self and others from physical abuse	Doesn't allow others to set their own boundaries; yields to or intimidates others; wants to be led, or insists others do things his/her way; asserts self with anger and intimidation or overemphasizes weakness and inferiority
Emotional	Communicates needs effectively to other people; stays present without judgment or blame during emotional crisis; is able to negotiate emotional conflict to enact life-affirming solutions	Has as undeveloped a sense of who he/she is; is unable to identify and change the effects of formative experiences that impact emotional behavior
	Develops friendships that do not have a sexual agenda; allows him/herself to be vulnerable; is sensitive to own and others' feelings	Resists, or overemphasizes, emotional disclosure or intimate experiences; assumes others know what he/she feels and thinks; or assumes that he/she knows what others feel or think
	Respects others' rights to experience and share emotional viewpoints; resists taking action based on extreme emotional reactions	Is verbally abusive; is intolerant to differences in opinion; has difficulty making mistakes without damage to self-esteem; easily believes what others say or think
	Feels confident in his/her ability to set appropriate boundaries; doesn't take responsibility for others' feelings; is able to find ways to make self "heard" when necessary	Needs constant reassurance from others; goes against personal values and morals to please others; overreacts or over advises
Sexual	Interacts with all genders, ages and sexual orientations in appropriate and respectful ways; is able to resist sexual urges that hurt others or damage intimate relationships; is able to express need for sexual attention from an appropriate partner; is able to give his/her full mental presence to current sexual partner	Uses guilt-trips; manipulates, abuses, or allows self to be manipulated or abused, through sex; feels a need to always be in a sexual relationship; identifies with others purely through sexual means; has difficulty controlling sexual thoughts; uses morally questionable means to experience sexual pleasure
	Communicates and negotiates sexual limits; listens to and respects others' boundaries and limits; is sensitive to non-verbal cues of others' boundaries and limits	Chooses partners who are not responsible, trustworthy, safe and giving; doesn't take steps to minimize sexual issues created through past or current experience
	Allows intimate touch that does not lead to sex; gives and receives sexually; can be sexually intimate without being physical (ex: talk about sexual feelings, verbally express attraction, do things that awaken desire in partner)	Prioritizes sexuality as primary identity; has difficulty expressing self with non-sexual affection; falls in love at first sight; rushes into sexual behavior without regard to affect on relationship



## Consider Your Boundaries

It's normal to have partial or unhealthy boundaries in many areas of your life. After all, sometimes you feel safe to enforce or allow certain actions, and sometimes you don't. Before looking at specific relationships in your life, look at your overall boundary types in different types of relationships. Notice how your boundaries change depending on who you're interacting with. You can have healthy, unhealthy, partial, rigid or weak/non-existent boundaries at the same time.

- In general, what's your boundary type in sexual relationships?**
- What about with ex-lovers?**
- What type of boundaries do you have in strictly friendly relationships?**
- What about with your parents or siblings?**
- With nieces or nephews or kids you love?**
- Does the type of boundary you allow or enforce change depending on the type of relationship, or are your boundaries pretty steady across relationships with varying intimacy levels?**
- What kind of boundaries do you have in your five most intimate relationships? Are they primarily rigid? Healthy? Weak? Nonexistent?**
- Where in your life is it hardest to have healthy boundaries?**
- In what ways do you see your own boundaries contributing to your self-injury habits or negative self-image?**
- What changes would you make to your boundaries? What do you need to do to make those changes?**
- Are all of your boundaries necessary to maintain? Are they working? Are they keeping you away from the things you really want?**
- What kind of boundaries do you prefer in the people you interact with? Do you prefer to be around people with weak boundaries who can be manipulated? With rigid boundaries that enforce distance? With partial boundaries that can be flexible depending on the need of the moment?**

The boundaries you define impact the way you interact with others, how you communicate, and the kinds of relationships you maintain. You're the only one who can appropriately define and maintain your boundaries. Once you've defined and taken ownership of your boundaries and the consequences they carry, you can more easily clarify your choices when your boundaries collide with those of others, and you can determine if it will harm you to change your own boundaries to accommodate someone else's.

Working with your boundaries can help you know what rules you'd like to apply in certain situations, after having vetted them with your discerning aspects of mind. You may decide to change your rules and shift your boundaries to accommodate a particular circumstance, but it's best to take some time to get to know your rules before you try to change them. Watch yourself in various situations, and Notice when your boundaries result in isolation and when they truly protect you. Maintaining healthy boundaries when interacting with others will feel less draining or risky as you start to establish healthy communication patterns that nourish your relationships. Healthy relationships allow for communication about, and reassignment of, boundaries that may need to grow or change.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:

# Communication

**W**hen you know your boundary style and are comfortable practicing your Listening and Translating skills, you'll be ready to engage in meaningful communication. Once you've Translated and gotten to what's true, successfully communicating that truth can ease self-injury urges in a more lasting way than self-injury or avoidance. It's not necessarily easy to do, but when done well, clarifying the elements of your experience that you want to communicate can provide a valuable release of tension, even as you engage with ideas that cause you trouble. It may seem that communication about what you feel or think, what you want in life, or what you want from others all comes down to the *words* you use. But when you communicate, you do it in more than one way, and usually the words you use say *less* than the other types of communication you employ.

## Basic Types of Communication

As you read over the list below, think about the last few times your (or others') words have communicated one thing while actions or body language communicated something different. It's likely you can tell when conflicted communication is happening, even if you can't easily expose and align the messages with the methods of communication. It's also likely that, when your methods of communication conflict, you're hoping the person you're talking to doesn't call you out on what you're also Noticing in yourself. Clarifying what you want to communicate *before* trying to do so will help you align the different methods of communication you are using. And, with clear communication, you won't feel the awkwardness of using words to say something is true when your other signals betray your spoken message.

- **Words:** Thoughts or feelings communicated orally, whether written, spoken, sung, yelled, nagged, or whispered in pain.
- **Unspoken Verbal Cues:** Thoughts or feelings communicated through grunts, huffs, and other noises without forming actual words: "hmpff," "shyah," or "mmmhmm." The message is conveyed through the chosen syllable as well as the energy and tone with which it's delivered.
- **Body Language:** Thoughts or feelings communicated by the body: eye contact, gestures, posture, and body movement.
- **Actions:** Thoughts or feelings communicated by how you set your priorities, how you make (or break) agreements, and your level of follow-through; actions are expressed gestures of emotional intent.
- **Tone/Energy:** Thoughts or feelings communicated by the energetic tone of one's delivery or the harmonic frequency of the notes in the voice when speaking. Tone is the largest contributor to communication: any word, nonverbal spoken cue, aspect of body language, or action will be impacted by the energetic or harmonic tone in which it's delivered. You can *hear* disdain. You can *hear* love.

Each type of communication is effective at identifying feelings in different ways, and you normally use more

than one type at a time. Words, unspoken verbal cues, body language, actions, and tone simultaneously communicate thoughts and feelings, even if one type of communication betrays another. You can tell when words are saying “I love you,” but the tone and body language are saying “I’m barely tolerating you.” A different meaning is conveyed if the tone of the “I love you” and the body language accompanying it actually *feel* loving. You look for harmony across all the communication types when you’re discerning if someone is telling the truth, and they do the same when reading you.

It’s easy to think you’re communicating convincingly, even when you don’t realize the discord present between the types of communication you’re using. Others may not receive your words as you’d hoped when you’re not aligning your words with your other cues—body language, actions, and energetic tone. You can make or break your communication based on 1) how accurately you Translate and convey your thoughts and, 2) how effectively you sync your words with your other means of communication.

You can watch as others react to one particular type of your communication, when you may hope they’re focusing on a different element of it. For instance, if you don’t accurately represent your thoughts verbally (i.e., lying about what’s real, or maybe not knowing what’s true but talking anyway), you’re likely to send messages with your body, cues, actions, energy, or tone that expose your words as untrue. You may Notice that others respond, not to your words but to the thoughts or feelings you *don’t* verbally communicate because the missing pieces come across through your tone of voice, mannerisms, or choices. Others could synthesize an “essence of dishonesty” from your overall communication, even if you’d prefer that they focus only on your words. Others may, of course, choose not to call you out on the conflicted communication they Notice, and you may dispute their perceptions, despite the truth in them.

Though your words can say one thing and your body language, unspoken verbal cues, actions, energy, and tone can say something entirely different, there’s one thing you can do to align your communications so one clear message comes across: *Work with what’s true*; don’t evade it. If there isn’t inherent discord inside you, there won’t be discord in the way you communicate. Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth—even when the truth changes with new information. Working with what’s true is more likely to meet your needs in communication than avoiding, detaching, hiding what’s real, or padding your communication with meaningless fluff.

Once you’ve gotten to what’s true, you can use any of the four actions described below to open the door to successful communication. Remember, you’re trying to get your words, unspoken verbal cues, body language, actions, energy, and tone to deliver the *same message*. That means you have to stay present during a conversation to keep in touch with your own internal dialogue so you can actively Listen, Translate and get to what’s true. Remember your compassion and patience. Communication tends to go more smoothly when you offer compassion and patience to yourself and to others.

- **Speak without attachment to the other person’s reaction and without using blame; offer clarification:** The ability to speak this way comes in part from feeling safe to speak in the first place. The other part is effort—taking time to Listen to yourself and to find words, question truth and meaning, and work with your acceptance issues before you even try to speak. If you find yourself using blame or feeling attached to someone’s feelings about your words, or if you demonstrate resistance to offering clarification, you may be trying to shut down communication, you may not understand, or may not be taking responsibility for, your own feelings.
- **Listen without attachment to what the speaker says and without blaming or shaming; probe for clarification:** This talent comes partially from allowing others a safe space to communicate, and also from the effort of carefully Listening to others while internally Translating statements that could be triggering (and holding reaction until you can clarify). If you find yourself falling into a victim role while Listening to others, or if you take on blame or shame, take the time to probe for clarification. Asking someone to explain what seems confusing or triggering is often left out of conversation, but it’s likely that meanings you’ve made of the communication don’t always mirror the meanings the speaker intended. Clarification allows you to see if meaning is being added to words because of a strong emotional response.



- **Respond to actual points made:** Clarify key points and focus responses so they take into consideration the actual issues being discussed. Responding to actual points made is far more effective than taking rapid-fire action based on quick reactions to partially or totally misunderstood statements, desires, or needs. During the back-and-forth of communicating, offering clarification and probing for clarification can whittle down a conversation to a few key points that each party feels strongly about. Understanding and Responding to the actual points that have been made in a conversation is crucial to true communication (as opposed to bouncing words back and forth and ending the communication feeling unsatisfied because you never got to the point that needed discussion or clarification).
- **Acknowledge and challenge meanings your mind generates:** Throughout a conversation, verbalizing your interpretations and reflecting what messages and meanings you hear can help to address inaccurate truths or meanings being applied to the content. Acknowledge what you think you're hearing someone say so the other person has a chance to challenge inaccuracies in your perceptions.

## Me Communicate Good

Though some conversations flow more effortlessly than others, no one will ever be perfect at communication. Each participant is responsible for his or her own behavior. With very few agreed-upon standards for communication, it would be difficult to create a situation where you don't *need* to go back and forth repeatedly to get points across clearly. But that's really what communication is: the back and forth, the patience to let it happen, and the wisdom to know that it's an evolving process that you're never really *done* with. Doing it well (which is usually accompanied by compassion and patience) makes that whole process feel a lot better. Your brain may not like this fact, but getting to communication that works starts with how *you* communicate.

If you don't take the time to figure out what you want to say and how to communicate it best, you'll lead the person you're trying to share your thoughts with into a trap. Help yourself and the people you try to communicate with by doing your work. Look at where you're coming from, where you're trying to get to with communication, the habits you bring with you, the communication "rules" you apply, and your limits to staying at it when someone doesn't respond to you as you'd like (or doesn't understand a word you're saying). Find the words and energy to convey your current internal state and ask for what you need. This makes a healthier communication habit every time you try it, even if you don't do it as gracefully as you'd like. And yes, even if the other person just doesn't *get* what you're trying to do.

## Other People

Let's take a moment to talk about "other people." It will be helpful to remember that getting away from self-injury is *your* work. It may take a while to change your coping and communication habits, but the work will feel much better if you don't try to change everyone else's standards for communication at the same time. The work you're doing for yourself *isn't* about other people. It's not about training others to say all the things you want them to say, or about being understood by people who simply don't or won't understand you. And it's not about finding new and creative ways to use other people's actions or words to validate your feelings of self-loathing. The work you do is to *find what's true* for you and to communicate it with care, without shaming yourself or allowing yourself to be shamed by others.

Other people can be perfectly content with their communication skills, even while shaming or alienating you. But if other people increase your feelings of shame or encourage you to hide what's real for you, you may need to consider if it's worth trying to communicate with them on anything but a superficial level. Don't stop your *work* because other people don't communicate with you as you want them to. Trying to communicate compassionately with someone who isn't interested in it is something like trying to get orange juice out of a cactus. The cactus is just being a cactus; it simply doesn't *offer* orange juice. If orange juice is what you want, you have to go find an orange tree (or a grocery store). Practicing the skills you want to develop is

easier if you do it with people who actually understand what you're trying to accomplish (and who are open to communicating about challenging topics).

The value in learning communication skills lies in your ability to continually come back to what's real for you and communicate it, giving you a vehicle to express your experiences, identity, desires, and needs in a way that feels nourishing. Other people tend to affect the expression of your identity, as you modify yourself to suit various relationships. Be sure that the identity you adhere to in communication doesn't hinge on being "messed up" or "not good enough." Nothing good comes from communication that contains a baseline assumption that you're just needy or crazy.

You can try to communicate with others in all the "right" ways. You can try to clearly convey requests and include others in the plans you make to improve your situation. But other people get to decide whether or not they're going to listen to, let alone meet, requests you make of them. They may not want to go in the direction you need them to. Give yourself permission to stop trying to create connection with people who aren't open to connecting with you in the ways you need. Give others permission not to connect with you if they don't want to or don't know how.

Try to realize that if you're having a hard time finding someone who understands you, it may not just be about you being odd or mysterious, but about *others' inability* to understand or communicate about complex emotion. They are people, after all. And they, too, are governed by the Three Good Reasons for not communicating. Consider that trying to communicate with someone who wants to stay out of "scary" emotional territory might set you up for a fruitless or self-injury-triggering interchange. Also keep in mind that others who don't accept your attempts at communication may need your patience, even when you're volatile and don't have much energy for patience. They may even need you to see that they're actually *more* challenged than you are by dealing with complex emotions.

Whatever the obstacles to communicating clearly with others, other people don't have a requirement to deal with your triggers, urges, or self-injury habits. You do. Don't make it harder on yourself by trying to get what's not available in communication, or by seeing life as if everyone else has it figured out and it's you who shoulders all the responsibility for a communication problem. You have to decide how to deal with relationships that reinforce your negative feelings about yourself. Regardless of how other people play into your progress, you need to know how to communicate with yourself and with the compassionate, understanding people who are going to be part of your recovery process.

## Personal Power

Communication challenges often relate to the ways in which you try to obtain or maintain your personal power. Effective communication involves you keeping your personal power—remaining calm, connected to inner signals, and open to feedback from others without judgment or attachment—while you engage with other people. It takes a certain kind of internal strength to hold your space in difficult conversations. It's easy to retreat from a position of self-control and self-knowledge when someone disagrees with your feelings or ideas, or the conversation is uncomfortable, or the person you're talking to just doesn't understand what you're saying. Your Response to the feedback you receive during communication naturally has an impact on how you feel, but it's your choice to access your internal power to speak truthfully, patiently, and with a type of conviction (not impatience or anger) that doesn't falter at the slightest resistance.

If your personal power tends to diminish in conflict, you may be leaning toward getting your power from external feedback—as if the person you're communicating with needs to validate your position in order for it to be correct for you. Trying to get a sense of personal power, worth, or control primarily from the responses and reflections of the world around you may leave you at the mercy of the ever-shifting judgment of others. But, you may also get to see your successes reflected in those external responses and feel the validation that comes from being seen in a way that pleases you. That view comes with the double-edged sword of not having to set your own standards and rules for living, and also not knowing exactly what you think or want

without cues to what *others* think. You could easily fall into doubting your internal compass when it conflicts with the direction of the group.

You could also swing on the other side of that pendulum. You could have steadfast conviction, relying solely on your *own* opinions of right and wrong to guide your behavior, despite the opinions or reflections of others. With an internal locus of personal power and self-control, worth is measured by an *internal* standard of what's right or desirable, so any measure of success is based on how well you meet your own rules for living. From this vantage, it may be more difficult to see your successes clearly or consistently because you're evaluating yourself by your own often-changing, sometimes overinflated standards. But with internally derived personal power, you're more likely to know what you think and want, even if you don't say it or act on it. With an internal locus of control, you're not waiting for the outside world to tell you what to think, do, or be. But, that results in more work clarifying your thoughts and needs, trying various avenues toward fulfillment, and refining your choices when your ideas about what's right for you change. It also requires that you hold fast to what you know about yourself when someone is painting a different picture of you.

Odds are you're somewhere in between these two extremes, and you get your personal power in different ways, depending on your internal state and the circumstances. As with everything in life, each tactic has its ups and downs, and as you move away from self-injury, you'll find a balance where you know yourself, set your own standards, and live up to them. But you'll also be able to acknowledge others' opinions—positive and otherwise—without your ego inflating too dramatically or self-injuring as a Response to those opinions. You'll change your mind and your needs when it feels right for you, but not simply because other people think you should or because you don't feel up to communicating truthfully with someone who doesn't see the world the way you do.

You can't help occasionally having your beliefs challenged or changed by circumstances or convincing communication. But changing your stance isn't the same as losing your power or demonstrating weakness. Holding onto your personal power isn't about being unyielding, but being careful to consistently maintain access to well-considered ideas of who you are, what you want, and what your standards are for getting what you want from yourself and others. Knowing your own tendencies is crucial to formulating communication strategies that get you what you want without using or abusing anyone—including yourself—for your power.

Be careful when using the external world for a source of your personal validation; this may just strengthen the pile of evidence your self-injury mindset uses to tell you that you're not worthy of compassion and never will be. If your internal sense of control is lost easily when hearing others' feedback (or your own), or if people, situations, or thoughts are altering your basic feelings of self-esteem, you may be giving away too much of your personal power. It's normal to feel good about healthy reflections of your worth or external acknowledgement of the actions you'd like to represent you. But you set yourself up for issues when you use others' opinions or actions as a basis for your self-esteem or personal power. Setting your own standards for your life—and working to live up to them—can improve your sense of personal power and, as a result, improve your ability to communicate with yourself and others.

## Inconsistencies and Lies

A brain sometimes places strong emphasis on exact words as an attempt to find a single truth: a simple, solid, lasting way of relating to information. But depending on the topic, which Kids on the Bus are screaming, and the quality of the conversation, the brain can't always have what it wants. As people with brains, we are tethered to inconsistencies and lies.

Say that during a conversation, you determine that someone is lying. Really, they may just be speaking from a particular part of their mind that actually believes what they're saying, but they only believe it because they haven't connected with the other aspects of mind that would contradict what is being said if an alternate perspective were given a chance. They may be inconsistently delivering their ideas, contradicting what they said yesterday. You may hear their inconsistency, or read their "not-all-of-me-believes-this" body language,

and determine that the inconsistency equates to a lie. Or, you may be doing the same things—delivering momentary and partial truth as if it is lasting—without Noticing your own inconsistency or considering that the partial truths delivered by a single Kid on your Bus can sound very convincing to you but like lies to other people. You may not have Noticed that inconsistencies, and therefore what we term “lies,” are part and parcel of communication.

Your brain wants life to be as simple and stable as possible, made of dependable, understandable, reliable truths. It doesn't want inconsistencies or statements on “truth” that differ based on the aspect of mind delivering them or the conditions under which the communication is happening. But the truth in any given moment, and how it's told, is totally dependent on your own inconsistency of mind—which Kids on the Bus are most active. You may be able to learn to be more consistent, so fewer parts of you are competing when speaking about the truth, but you'll still be inconsistent and you'll still deliver words that aren't literally true.

Communication can be made easier by acknowledging that just because a mouth opens and words come out, that doesn't mean those words are the mouth owner's intended statements. It doesn't mean that they're the final words on the subject and no further words must ever be spoken to question, qualify, or clarify the mouth's current utterings. The fact that you are speaking and trying to sound convincing doesn't mean you know what you're talking about, that you understand yourself or others, or that you've been skillful in getting to what's true and verbalizing the truth of the moment. Nor does the act of speaking mean that you have the ability to hear and acknowledge the inherent inconsistency that resides in the words you or others are saying.

Start to get to know your own tendency to speak without awareness of which parts of you are trying to get their needs met. Mindfully organizing the parts of your mind that control your talker help you get to what's true more directly. For instance, if your “poor me” character comes on and takes over the talker to say to your partner, “You never go out with me” or “We never do anything fun!” there may truth in those words. But when the more discerning aspects of mind Translate, those words say something more like, “I want to do more with you” or “I want to have fun.” The truth in the words is relative to the part of the mind speaking them, but the truth behind the words is the same. The “poor me” character and the discerning aspects of mind are just filtering the reality differently.

The part of your mind that keeps track of all the things you find imperfect about your partner might verbalize the truth as “Your flaws drive me crazy.” But the part of your mind governing tolerance might say, “I love this person and want to tolerate their imperfections.” In this case, both things said can be true, but the part of your mind that most commonly dominates the thinking will determine the degree of truth felt by the statements and the impact it has on life. More than one thing can be true at the same time, but in different proportions, depending on the version of yourself you're being and which parts of your mind are interpreting that truth. But to get to what's *true*, you have to Translate your statements, which may really be saying something along the lines of “I'm struggling to maintain a consistent viewpoint on your imperfections.” If the part of you keeping track of your partner's flaws steps back, the list of wrongdoings isn't necessarily *true* anymore, because it *doesn't matter* to your sense of tolerance. If tolerance is running the show, your partner will be a beacon of love and light instead of a list of annoyances. Either way, the *truth* is that *you* have trouble maintaining a consistent perspective.

Inconsistency is part of being human. It's unskillful to believe that you or others are unchanging, or that what's said is or remains true just because we said it. Over time, you may be able to sort out what's true consistently—but don't expect your talker (or anyone else's) to be speaking for all parts of a brain, or for all points in time. Figure out which parts of your mind you *want* to do the talking before you open your mouth so the need for Translation is minimal, but also give yourself and others a break when the truth told isn't only inconsistent, but perishable.

Your delivery of the truth changes depending on whom you're talking to and which aspects of mind are at play. The perspective, situation, and interpretation of truth changes over time as various parts of your mind add their truths to the pile. Translation is always necessary when communicating, because some words may sound like lies, but there is truth to be found inside them if you consider that they're coming from an inconsistent mind.

# Inconsistency



- Are you trying to find “one truth” to communicate the complexity of your feelings? Do you try to boil it all down, or do you consider the many viewpoints available from your various mental characters?
- Are you being as skillful as you could be in trying to understand, find words for, and convey your moment-to-moment truths? Can you see that many of the truths, especially emotional ones, are momentary?
- Can you identify which truths are believed by many of the aspects of your mind—the “more true” truths, such as “Life sucks,” “I gotta change this,” “Love is pain,” or “Self-injury means that I’m broken”? Do these “truths” come out as responses in conversation, as if the you’re using the communication to *prove* your truths?
- Which of the Kids on the Bus verbalize your feelings in ways that never even *attempt* to tell the whole truth? Which aspects of your mind typically help you facilitate clear, truthful communication? Which personality traits or aspects of your mind would be better able to handle communicating, hearing, questioning, and reworking the truths found in difficult conversation?
- Can you call up the part of your mind that manages communication and ask it to rework the protocol to include restraint in trying to sum up, get out, say, or hear communications in ways that are irrefutably true? Can you allow for flexibility in truth that leaves you sensing what feels true and Translating possible meanings instead of trying to make one truth or meaning stick?

## Direct Communication

Learning to find and use accurate words for what you’re feeling can be a real challenge, but there are ways to make the process easier. Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is one of those ways. When you mix the process of NVC with the ideas of Direct Communication and Compassionate Communication, you get the basic rules of a new kind of communication game—a basic formula for expressing yourself as truthfully as possible and listening empathetically to other people. You may not have the experience or comfort level to use this formula just yet, so it’s likely you’ll have to put some effort into it, especially if you’re asking others to participate in the game.

Following is a basic look at the formula that tells you what to say, how to say it, and how to handle the response you get. To follow the formula from either direction, you observe what’s happening, feel what’s alive in the moment, acknowledge the universal needs involved, and make real-time, doable requests by honestly expressing how you are and what you’d like without blame, criticism, or demand—and while receiving another person’s nature and desires without blame, criticism, or demand.

Ideally, you formulate words that take you through the string of steps into a cohesive statement before you open your mouth, but it can sometimes work on the fly, too. Remember to try to keep a positive tense and tone, so you don’t load your words with added meanings and negative energy. When you express yourself:

1. State what you’re seeing or experiencing.

“When I imagine . . .”

“When I see . . .”

“When I remember . . .”

2. Find words for your feelings and express them.

"... I feel ..."

3. Find words for and express your needs or preferences.

"... because I wanted/needed/hoped for/would have liked ..."

4. Ask for what you want.

"So, would you be willing to ..."

That turns into something like this: "When I remember you walking away after I self-injured, I feel isolated, because I would have liked your support. Would you be willing to hold me when you know I've self-injured?"



## What Would You Say About Your Experience?

Play with the formula for communication above. Pick three situations where you've been triggered and consider what you might have said, or what you might say in the future, based on the "When I ... I feel ... because I wanted ... so would you be willing to ..." formula.

The basic formula for listening to others follows the same steps but applies them to another person, in something of a guessing fashion—again, using a positive tense and tone. When you listen to others:

1. Guess what they're seeing or experiencing.

"When you imagine ..."

"When you see ..."

"When you remember ..."

2. Guess their feelings.

"... do you feel ..."

"... are you feeling ..."

3. Guess their needs or preferences.

"... because you wanted/needed/hoped for/would have liked ..."

4. Guess what they may want.

"So, now I'm guessing you may want ..."

"Does that mean you want me to ..."

That communication could turn into something like this: "When you walked away from me after I self-injured, did you feel confused or angry because you don't like what I do to myself? Do you want me to explain why I would do something like that, or do you want to tell me how you feel about it?"



## What Would You Infer About Others' Experience?

Pick three situations where someone you love has been isolated or hurt by your acts of self-injury, and use the formulas above. Consider what you might have said, or what you might say in the future about their reactions based on the "When you ... do you feel ... because you wanted ... so do you want me to ..." formula. Remember to make only suggestions that are actionable.

# Goals of Changing the Way You Communicate

Formulas are super, but if you don't know why you're using them, they don't do you much good. It takes *effort* to use words carefully, to Translate what's being said and heard, and to commit to the process even when it's challenging. The brain says to this effort, "Why bother?" But communication is important if you're trying to let out what's inside you or connect with others, and you may want to remember why you bother. When you're trying to develop and use new skills to express your needs or hear someone else's, keep in mind that there actually are goals to communicating compassionately:

- To create connection with others that meets all the needs present within the group
- To recognize that everything we do is in order to meet a need, and that life itself is based on manipulating our environment and relationships to meet our needs and to feel good/content/happy
- To create a set of conditions under which we manipulate our world so the least amount of harm is done and we leave no residue of resentment
- To use speech as a spiritual practice to create an intention of connection and to choose to deepen relationships through mutual consensus
- To be profoundly Self-ish; to know boundaries to your own giving and observe them
- To be happier and to like the way you feel (feeling free of conflict rather than feeling annoyed and wronged) because it's worth it to you to be in alignment with your values and contribute to creating a world you'd like best to live in
- To feel better and like yourself more because you're being clear about your needs, not fearing judgment, and working to empathize with others

## How to Put It into Practice

Communicating in satisfying ways sounds nice, but it can't always be satisfying to use your skills when others aren't playing the same communication game. If you want to stop self-injuring, you need to learn to use words instead of letting violence speak for you. So, how do you actually *practice* compassionate communication when it's a one-sided game? You start by being willing to not get it right, to allow communication with partners that don't use the same rules, and you continue to try despite the obstacles. When you need to communicate something complex or are about to have a loaded conversation, try to take the same steps every time to build a habit of being mindful of the way you handle a conversation.

1. Connect with needs without judgment or evaluation. What needs are met or unmet? Consider your own needs, and try to empathize with others' needs before ever trying to communicate.
2. Practice the conversation in your imagination. How would you like it to go? Which issues would you pinpoint to keep the conversation focused? Can you imagine yourself delivering your words with compassion and patience?
3. Try to actually have the conversation. Observe what's happening. What's enriching or not enriching your life (or another's)? Say what people are doing that you either like or don't like, state how you feel when the action is observed and what needs are connected to the feelings (or guess at others' feelings), and state what you want (or guess what others want) that would enrich life. While you're having the conversation, be as clear as possible, especially when asking others for what you want. Acknowledge and support the person you're talking to, try to Respond to negativity without becoming negative, and be honest in sharing what you will or won't do.
4. Evaluate how it went. Identify and share feelings, celebrate needs that were met, and acknowledge needs that weren't.
5. Integrate what worked and what didn't. Next time, you'll have access to the benefit of your experience.

No participant in a conversation is going to get communication just right. The point of communication isn't to win, it's to work back and forth to relate, clarify, and expand on ideas. Try to cultivate the patience to translate what others are saying just as you would translate your own internal content. Give them time and space to get their point across, and take your time when you're formulating the ideas you want to communicate. When you treat your own and others' words as offerings for deeper inquiry (instead of steadfast, completely true statements) you will become more comfortable expressing yourself and hearing what others are trying to express. And no matter how well you do it, if you stay mindful of what works and what doesn't, you'll naturally expand your range of communication skills.

## Habits You Bring to the Table

Your brain may like to think it's doing everything right and that "other people" have it all wrong. It would be easy for a brain to overlook the tendencies you bring into conversation that undermine satisfying communication. Of course, other people bring their own tendencies—but this book is not about them, it's about you, and you can work only with your own habits. There are times when your brain is just thinking about things in a certain way and taking the rest of you along for the ride. Consider the list of mental habits below, and try to be honest about the ways in which they come into play in your life and your communications.

- **Personalization:** You see yourself as responsible for negative external events for which you weren't the direct cause. You take others' statements as if they're about you without clarifying if they actually are about you.
- **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a continuous pattern of failure. You read into single events without considering past events.
- **Negating the Positive:** You reject positive experiences, somehow internalizing them less deeply or consistently than negative experiences. You amplify and focus on the negative by excluding the positive from consideration.
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** You engage in a form of projection where you read minds, play fortune-teller, and generally assume you know what others think or feel based on a few words or experiences. You think you know the intent of a statement without actual clarification, or know the cause or result of an action without any verifiable facts.
- **Reasoning Emotionally:** You think your emotions reflect the way things really are. You don't take time to translate thoughts and emotions, but you act on them as if the emotions are logical.
- **"Shoulding":** You whip around statements of what *should* be done, as if brute force or fear of not doing what you should is an appropriate motivator for yourself or others.
- **Amplifying or Minimizing:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your negative feelings) or inappropriately minimize things (such as your contribution to a problem) until they appear smaller than they are.
- **Mental Filters:** You know about your many perspectives and the Kids on the Bus that look at life through filters; this is when the negative Kids on the Bus skew interpretations of reality, keeping the parts of the mind that would process the situation more effectively waiting in line for control.
- **Labeling and Mislabeled:** You translate an experience into a label (I/they didn't do that right; I am/they are so stupid).

## Belief Barriers

Think about how many ways you could use your self-injury-fueling beliefs and actions for the support of, or detriment to, communication. You have aspects of mind that may hold conflicted ideas of how to protect yourself, and these aspects may call up ways of being that either negatively or positively impact your ability



to connect with yourself and others. The trick is to realize whether the self-protection you're engaging in is really protecting you or keeping you isolated. Your self-injury mindset and the negative beliefs you keep may limit or support you in communicating in new ways. You're limiting communication when:

- You're stuck in the negative myths of self-hate
- You resist experiencing anything besides negativity and fear, resisting the fear of change and new experiences, so you can sit comfortably with familiar fears
- You're distracted, and your awareness is held by negative internal content and self-limiting beliefs about what you can't do
- You purposely gross people out with how far you've taken your self-injury and self-hate; you scare other people off by "proving" that you're so messed up they can't handle you; inevitably, they go away
- You continue a cycle of resisting communication, which only increases your anxiety about communicating; you fuel your own urges to flee from connection, proving that you *can't* communicate by not actually trying to
- You protect the people who harm you by not asking them to communicate, or you create a rationale for not *having* to communicate, so you don't have to acknowledge the effects, or realities, of other people in your life
- You remain protected, assuming that no one will ever understand you; you allow others to wonder what they did wrong to make you the way you are
- You lose touch with what there is to talk about and don't try to access it
- You keep the voices of shame from allowing yourself or others to reach out
- You keep yourself tied to silence because other people are afraid of your issues
- You fear that you'll be disliked if you're seen as demanding; you believe that you deserve abuse or emotional isolation
- You clam up because you don't know what's coming and you don't trust yourself to handle it.

When you're closing down communication, others can feel it. Others can also feel it when you're *open* to communicating. Remaining open can be difficult, but it's necessary. At a minimum, you're allowing yourself to connect to another person. And, at its best, allowing communication can air the unexpressed parts of you that rage through self-injury. You're more open to communication when:

- You accept how you came to internalize self-hate and see that the voice of self-hate is not the voice of truth; it's the voice that became internalized from your history with shame
- You endure, without fleeing, the anxiety that comes with new ways of communicating and feeling
- You're open to developing in ways that connect you to yourself and others in new and intentional ways
- You're willing to tolerate the tension and anxiety involved in relating to others
- You don't create negative messages out of others' statements, and you realize that you're not what your negative thoughts tell you or what others think of you
- You access your talents for compassion and patience, allowing yourself to feel a full range of feelings, when you realize that the range of feelings you open yourself to makes you more human and more available for relationships
- You give yourself permission to try to skillfully express what's real for you; you acknowledge others' emotional limitations without punishing yourself or allowing those limitations to stop you from trying to be open and truthful
- You free yourself to be direct with your feelings and validate your experience with people who have the capacity to understand you
- You respect your ability to cope with and tolerate your pain; you claim your pain story as only part, not all, of who you are

- You extend compassion to yourself and others
- You exempt yourself from needing approval, and come to conversation without fear of others' lack of understanding
- You know your own ability to adapt and allow for the uncertainty of what's coming next

## Masks, Identity, and Authenticity

The face you put on most often, or in specific situations, isn't *You*, but a version of yourself that represents you in the world. *You* know best if your authentic identity is being expressed, or if you've assumed masks or a version of your identity to cover your actual experience from the view of others. Work with the questions below and consider if and when you put on masks, in what ways you behave as if things are what they aren't, or if you have created an overall identity that doesn't include accurate assessments of your internal state. The level of authenticity you bring to your life directly affects all your relationships—even the ones that have nothing to do with self-injury. How real are you about who you are? The answer will impact how authentically you can communicate with others.



### Masks

- What are your masks? Who do you become in order to hide who you are?
- Have you assumed an identity because you didn't quite know who you are?
- What's the identity you've assumed, and what parts of the identity work or don't work for you? (Use any insights you gained in the Identity inquiry in Chapter 4.)
- In what situations do you feel free to be your real self?
- In what ways could you consciously learn drop the masks you wear?
- In what ways could you maintain greater authenticity and involvement when you're part of a group? Do you actually *join in* with others, or do you reside in your thoughts, behind your masks and your perceived identity of separateness?

## Word to the Wise

Since communication is different every time you attempt it, you aren't always going to know how to handle it. Communication takes practice and patience. At first, it can take so much effort to work up to communicating what you're feeling or what you want that you may find yourself overblowing your communication. You may hold fast to your feeling words, expressing yourself verbosely to anyone within earshot (maybe even stopping long enough to hear what someone else has to say): "Hey, everybody, look at me! I'm expressing!" Try to remember to relate to others in a meaningful way instead of leaning toward overemotional, overdramatic, or overassertive tendencies. You may want to get out a megaphone to let people know how you feel, but they may not have much interest in hearing it—or, at least, hearing it that loudly. It's most important that you learn to identify your own feelings and communicate them compassionately.

Eventually, you'll slow down your communication processes and carefully choose words that say nearly what you mean and deliver them in a way that demonstrates respect for the perspectives of others, and you'll get it "right" more often as you practice. But try to find patience for yourself and manage the shame that comes up when the shifting combination of variables involved in communication yields undesirable results. When you feel shame at your limitations or guilt because of the way you relay or accept the truth of the moment, you'll have to Notice and Pause long enough to Respond by forgiving yourself for not always handling communication as expertly as you'd like to. Then get back to practicing.

# Building Bridges

Odds are good that, like everyone else, you won't have anyone to talk to during certain times of your life, and you'll feel alone. Communication does something to build bridges between the islands that people are, and learning to communicate can feel like trying to building a bridge to nowhere, especially if there isn't anyone available for connection on the other side. If you're alone with your pain, it isn't really the end of the world; in some ways, pain is easier to manage on your own. But be sure you really *are* alone before you assume that you're an island unto yourself.

Are you avoiding building bridges with certain people when they could actually provide a connective level of communication? Do you keep yourself a lonely, floating island because if you talked about self-injury, you'd have to admit that it's harming you? Is there really no one to talk to, or are you trying to build a bridge to someone who hasn't yet issued a permit for a bridge to be built? Are you in a hurry to get the bridge built immediately, or can you do it in stages? If there isn't anyone else to talk to, can you build a bridge to yourself, talking with the Kids on the Bus to reconcile your feelings? Communication is important, even you're just talking with yourself, maintaining a quality living on your own island.

## Imagine

Even if you don't have anyone besides yourself to communicate with, you can have something *like* the conversation you need. Call up your visualization skills and *imagine* the conversation. Focusing on what you *would* say if you had the opportunity is far better for your brain that focusing on the pain caused by what you're *not* saying.

- Imagine a person you'd feel comfortable talking to. If this person were with you, and could listen to you in just the right way, what would you express about your experience?**
- If this friend were to respond to you in just the way you need, what would she say to you? What would she do? Use the imaginary interaction to *soothe* your tension. If imagining communication *amplifies* your distress, consult your Ground Rules.**
- Imagine that you're in conflict *successfully* with another person. What's different about your behavior, internal sensations, and approach than if you weren't successfully communicating?**
- Do you sometimes have imaginary fights with people who aren't in the room or pick over previous conversations in your head? If so, try imagining successful communication instead of ruminating on what didn't go right.**
- Does it make you uncomfortable to think about conflict? How hard is it to imagine yourself successfully handling communication that involves conflict?**
- Imagine you're communicating your loving appreciation successfully to another person. What does that feel like? Does it make you uncomfortable to imagine being in such intimate dialogue?**
- Imagine how you are seen and touched when you're cared for by a tender intimate partner. How does it feel? How would they communicate their love and support? How would you communicate your love to this person?**
- Imagine yourself with good, trustworthy friends. What do you do together? Who are they? Who are you when you're with them?**





- Imagine yourself speaking in a calm, smooth voice inflected with love and empathy. Imagine being spoken to that way. Notice your body sensations. What stops you from speaking, or asking to be spoken to, with such tenderness?**
- Notice how often you shy away from making direct eye contact when you're upset. Imagine what it would feel like to be able to look people straight in the eye—to see them and let them see you. What does it feel like to be seen when you're feeling clear? When you're not clear?**
- Imagine what it would be like to explore communication with others while you were feeling safe and open. Imagine interpreting words—not as definitive statements in themselves, but as indicators of what lies beneath. What does it feel like to hold back your reactions to a moment so you can be present in and explore it? What does it feel like to *avoid* being present by trying to change, analyze, or resist the moment?**

## Communication Basics

You're learning all sorts of processes, and here's another one to consider. When you need to communicate, it's really not all that complicated. Just take a few basic steps and forget all the formulas.

1. Use NPLTR to sort out your feelings before and during the conversation
2. Take responsibility for how your words and actions affect others, but limit shame and punishment
3. Consider every person you communicate with as someone who deserves your empathy
4. Apologize when you've behaved inconsiderately, and work to remedy any consequences
5. Be honest in expressing what you want and need

## Hearing Carefully

Communicating with people is easier if you try to hear them as carefully as you'd like them to hear you. To make life easier on yourself, try to alter the way you take in the words other people are saying. Words, and your reactions to them, are incredibly important, since self-injury often results from the fusion of ideas when a painful thought, feeling, or memory is fused with something another person says/does/doesn't say/doesn't do. This fusion results in a *meaning*: "They (or I) did/said/didn't do/didn't say something, and it means my painful thoughts or feelings are true." When you're hearing other people, it's easy for your brain to interpret everything they say from the viewpoint of what it *means*. Strangely, you're not always hearing what their comments mean about *them*—but what they means about *you*, *your* life, or *your* hope for the future. You're hearing to see how the information applies to *you*. There are two aspects of the way you hear other people that are worth considering when trying to stop using self-injury.

First, people don't necessarily know what your triggers are moment to moment, even if you've communicated those triggers. Without a bit of back-and-forth, they can't know your internal state, and you can't know theirs. Therefore, you must consider that pure disconnection from what's real in the moment is a typical instigator of misspeaking or mishearing. The trigger often doesn't mean anything beyond "It's time to clarify what was said and how I feel about it." People aren't usually trying to speak in ways that are hard to relate to or trigger you on purpose. They just don't know what they're doing, or they're doing it sloppily. We all need compassion when it's time to play the communication game—even people that seem to be willingly hurting or rejecting you.

And, second, even if people are *purposefully* saying or doing things that hurt you, you're responsible for what you do with the things other people do. One way to make it easier to take responsibility for how you react to people is to remember that you're experiencing the interpretations made by other people's minds, which are based on

their experiences. They've made their own meanings and have their own limitations getting to what's true, and they may have communication habits that shut down connection, just like you do. When people act purposely hurtful, it's important to restrain yourself from making meanings that can trigger you, because your Response to others can affect your feelings about yourself. The best Response may simply be to think, "They're just using a mean part of their mind," or it might be to try to communicate and ask where that person is coming from so you can understand why they're acting the way they are. Either way, it's not a good solution to internalize the hurtful things other people say as if those people are stable, consistent, or right. Always Translate compassionately, without taking emotional responsibility for someone else's behavior or words.

It's important to use your NPLTR skills to find a way to transform a trigger thought into something more manageable, so you can choose how you interpret and react to other people's words and actions. When you work with your own and others' limitations long enough, you'll be more able to distribute responsibility appropriately and put the onus for their actions and words on them—while taking appropriate responsibility for the way you speak and act. We all have our own internal work to do in one aspect or another. Some people choose to do that work and some people don't, but none of us is perfect. If all else fails, assume that those people saying or doing things that trip your triggers are sleepwalking through life and simply can't see the impact of their actions. Don't hurt yourself because of what they do in their sleep.

Your life may have included a solid dose of feeling responsible for the cruel behavior of others or the consequences of their uncaring choices. After all the time you've spent with other people hurting you and you hurting yourself, it's time you received a good dose of compassion. Beating yourself up with the things others do or say distracts you from focusing on what *you* need to say and what *you* should be doing to take care of yourself.

## There's No Way to Sum it Up

Remember that communication is a process, a type of journey where you, and others, build bridges across oceans of internal content. From the safety of these bridges, you can look over into the chasm that's being bridged and talk about what's there. It may not always be easy, but it can be incredibly satisfying to overcome obstacles to communication and really connect with another person. The suggestions and tools in this book will get you started, but only time and practice will improve your communication skills. Use whatever tools you can to improve your ability to identify and communicate your feelings and hear what others have to say without an extreme emotional response. There are about a million books on communication, but the best ones to read will teach you to deal with the practical difficulties of trying to communicate in emotionally triggering circumstances. The skills you practice will continue to support you in holding onto your identity and your values, observing your boundaries, so you can communicate with others in a respectful and truthful manner that doesn't leave you craving self-injury.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:

# Relationships

**T**o a large degree, the people who surround you affect the choices you make, because they alter the choices you see as available in the first place. Consider a rage-aholic. Someone who finds fault in nearly everything and rages at the imperfections and disappointments in life offers only a certain type of relationship: One based on anger and dissatisfaction. Rage-aholics don't generally spend much time with people who point out the good things that reside right alongside the painful things. And, if you want to be a rage-aholic, all you have to do is find one to hang out with, and your brain will pick up on the messages, attitudes and preferences that come along with raging. Your available choices for relating will be limited to what's offered by the rage-aholic and you may easily fall into the same habits. But if you want to learn to relate compassionately and remain strong, present, and patient, you won't spend a whole lot of time with rage-aholics. Doing so would just undermine your efforts and challenge you more than necessary when trying to relate to the world patiently. As you change your self-harming and communicating habits, you're better off to hang out with people who model the characteristics you're trying to cultivate.

But, successful relationships aren't just about *the people* you choose to surround yourself with or how you're affected by their behavior. They're also about *what's available* from others—what you can *receive* and how you can *relate*. Your ability to receive the positive support available in any relationship and to use it to your benefit makes a substantial impact on how long it takes, and how hard it is, to kick your self-injury habits. If you spend time with someone who, through his or her own views and limitations, validates painful messages of your past that underlie your self-injury, you may feel small or limited around that person. When you feel small and limited, you're likely to interact in ways that aren't as direct, truthful, or self-protective as those you might relate to if you felt free and unbound—and you're likely to just make things worse when you're not acting from a clear mental place.

How you're able to relate to the people in your life is determined by the baggage you bring to the situation, the way you relate to the other person's baggage, and how comfortable you feel with the other person. Know if your own limitations and habits are harming the health of your relationships or if the limitations of the relationships are harming you. Consider whether or not it's a good idea to withstand the impacts of any relationship that encourages your shame, hiding, or awkwardness. Act on your own behalf to keep the way you relate, and the relationships you maintain, from maintaining your self-sabotage or self-injury habits.

## Minds at Play

Some relationships you've built through your activities and history—family or coworkers, church members, or yoga class friends. Other relationships you choose—close friends or intimate partners, your dentist, your midwife, your mentor, or your bandmates. Some relationships aren't actually with people at all, like your relationships with shame, money, and sex.

Of all your relationships, only a small fraction has the capability to offer the emotional support you need to be truthful about the internal content you deal with. That doesn't mean you're a burden, or that a relationship is unhealthy because it can't withstand this element of your reality. You wouldn't need to talk to your dentist about self-injury, after all. It means only that each relationship is limited to the engagement of a certain group of mental characteristics, traits, or aspects. The characteristics of a particular relationship help determine which parts of your mind are at play during your communication.

In reality, only certain of your mental aspects can be related with at all. Most of your abilities are too busy mindlessly reacting or managing bodily functions to actually relate to other people. Relating requires you to bring forward the parts of your mind that are open to asking about and hearing the perspectives of others—even when they challenge your own, even when you're feeling a bit out of sorts. And that takes practice.

In subtle ways, you express the pains you hold and your willingness to relate to others, and sometimes you do it without conscious knowledge. You can live life through a mind that is running a habitual program of judgment or isolation, and you can be mindless of the actions you're taking that interfere with your ability to relate to other people. You can be blinded by emotions that compel you to communicate, without recognizing that the parts of your mind coming to the situation don't actually possess useful *relating* functions.

If the more defensive aspects of your mind are active and choosing the rules of the relating game, you're subtly demonstrating the guarded posture you're holding—but you're not likely to Notice that you're shutting down communication because defensiveness doesn't care about anything but winning, and winning is *not* relating. But if you Notice your defensive mind at play, you can try to switch it out for a part of your mind which would pull *You* out from under your emotional perspective and allow you to relate with others in a totally different way.

When you're trying to relate to someone about pressing emotional matters, practice pushing away the parts of your mind or the habits that block you from speaking honestly or really Listening. Even if you have to stop midsentence to call up other aspects of yourself after Noticing your unproductive relating tactics, do it. Of course, it's easier to change the way you're relating midsentence if the person you're talking to can appreciate the process of what you're trying to do.

When others don't understand what you're trying to get at or why you're saying the things you are, try not to let reaction swoop in. Relate to them. Translate your own statements with detachment and awareness, and Notice which of your conversation partners', traits, internal characters, or aspects of mind may be affecting their ability to relate to you. Consider how you could use your communication skills, tone, and energy to bring in the components of your mind (and theirs) to create the most connective type of communication available in the relationship. It may be possible to deepen your ability to relate with certain people if they are open for the process, but you may never be able to relate in some ways with some people, and you may never know why.

Relating to your own brain is hard enough, but relating to others' brains can be even more difficult, given that you're not in their head. You have no real knowledge of the state of another person's mind from moment to moment, and they have no real knowledge of what's happening for you, unless communication is clear and conscious (which can't happen all the time). You may not be living through your clearest, most effective aspects at the moment, and the other person may not be doing so, either.

But even your closer, more emotionally supportive relationships may not be able to survive the demands of interacting with someone who self-injures. They may not have the qualities of mind required to understand your needs or to Listen or Respond to you compassionately. It's up to you to decide if a particular relationship must allow for dialogue about self-injury in order for you to feel heard or emotionally satisfied. But part of that relationship deal hinges on you relating to others honestly. It's up to you to be truthful when you seek connection with others to facilitate relationships that allow others to relate to you.



# Should I Stay or Should I Go?

It's easy to find yourself confined to certain available responses based on what is viewed as acceptable or unacceptable in your relationships. Many times, the Response you choose isn't really a choice; it's a function of acquiescence to the limitations and rules of the relationship. Notice your reactions to the limitations of a relationship before trying to determine if you should change or leave that relationship. If your expression is limited by the rules of a relationship that, for you, requires free expression, or if your relationship and available choices support your cycles of self-injury, you need to consider whether that relationship is good for you.

Sometimes, what's right for you can be pretty simple to know but much harder to act on. You're the best judge of the health of your relationships, so you likely know already if you're keeping a relationship that harms you—with family, friends, or an intimate partner, or with sex, money, or drugs. Ultimately, it's your choice if you stay in, change, or leave relationships that undermine your wellness. If you do decide to end a relationship, be sure you support yourself so the absence of the relationship doesn't intensify your self-injury urges.

If you feel stuck in a relationship that isn't good for you, you may have to work to cultivate ideas of what else is possible before you can free yourself to end or change the relationship. If you believe that you can't express yourself or that you'll never find a supportive situation, it will be easy to linger in an unhealthy relationship because you don't believe there's anything out there that fits you better.

Before you can free yourself from harmful relationships or habits, you have to believe in what's available instead—the other options you have. Try to see that you're starting to open yourself up to a life that doesn't include self-injury, which may mean dreaming yourself into it. Cultivate visualizations of what type of relationships would fit you. Daydream about what feels right without increasing your internal turmoil. If you can visualize what fits, you'll naturally gravitate toward it.

Many relationships can be maintained without detriment to your progress, even if they don't have elements that help you deal with your inner content. For instance, hanging out with your favorite bartender may not require the depth of conversation that would bring up your issues with self-injury, and it may provide feelings of comfort without that deep contact. But some relationships require the intimacy of deeper honesty, and they simply don't function properly if you aren't being honest, or if they aren't able to meet the need for trust and communication that your work with self-injury brings along for the ride.

It's important that you know what you need and if it's available, but also that you Notice if you're being skillful at trying to get what you need. If your self-injury habits are fueled by trying to relate to a person who simply isn't available for it, give yourself permission to stop trying. If you're going to keep yourself in relationships with people who increase your feeling of isolation or who encourage you to hide your authenticity, do so only as long as it takes to learn to love yourself enough to move on.

## Digging Into Your Relationships

Considering a few aspects of relationship can broaden your approach to changing your self-injury habits. Your values, needs, and ability to trust and endure conflict, as well as the way you define caring and use sex, all affect the types of relationships you have, and those relationships affect your belief in what's possible. Your habits in these areas will be exposed as you work with your internal content and the meanings you associate with your experiences. Notice how they help or hurt your chances of getting what you need out of your relationships or communications.



## Relationships in General

Think about the variety of relationships you have in your life—with your family, your baker, your barista, your teachers, your friends. There are ways in which you want to function in each of your relationships and specific things or feelings you want from each relationship. Consider the questions below to get a clearer sense of how your relationships *feel*.

- Of all the relationships you maintain, which support you most noticeably and how? Which nourish you? Which challenge you? Which deplete you? Which relationships feel great to have, even though they aren't all that deeply intimate? Which relationships don't feel great because they aren't intimate enough?**
- Of all the relationships you maintain, which ones could you take or leave, and which could you simply not do without?**
- Are you managing your most important relationships as you'd like to? Are you letting calls go unanswered, watching opportunities for connection drop without reply? Do you think that the people you consider most important feel that you're available to them? Do you keep up connection and feel a reciprocal openness to being present for others?**
- How have your most important relationships become what they are? How long have you known each other? What major experiences have you been through together? How have those experiences, and the way you and the other person handled them, positively or negatively impacted your ability to relate with each other?**

### *Relationship Values*

The relationships you maintain that *aren't* with people can have just as much impact on your ability to stop self-injuring as your relationships with people. You have certain values that pertain to each of your relationships—a type of relationship you want or a type of person you want to be when seen through the lens of that relationship. In your journal, work with the inquiry below and consider the way you'd like to behave in each of the relationships, whether they are with a person, habit, or aspect of life.



## Relationship Values

- If you were your best self in the relationships below, how would you behave? What would you do? How would you act in, or toward, the relationships below if there were no baggage, history, or pain in your way?**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ■ Marriage/intimate relationship              | ■ Relationship with money                         |
| ■ Family relationships                        | ■ Relationship with shame, fear, or self-loathing |
| ■ Parenting relationship(s)                   | ■ Relationship with recreation, leisure, or play  |
| ■ Friendship/social relationships             | ■ Relationship with spirituality                  |
| ■ Career/work relationships                   | ■ Relationship with community                     |
| ■ Education/personal growth/self-relationship | ■ Relationship with health and wellness           |

### *Needs in Relationships*

Your needs in a relationship may vary from moment to moment, but they're fairly consistent over long stretches of time. If you take time to consider the needs you bring to relationships and which of

those needs are nonnegotiable, you'll also have a gauge of whether a relationship is actually meeting your most important needs. See the needs list in Chapter 6 if you feel stumped during the inquiry below.

## Needs in Relationships

Working with the list in the Relationship Values inquiry, consider the questions below as they apply to *each type* of relationship.

- What are your nonnegotiable needs in this relationship? What do you not want to live without?**
- What needs are currently met through this relationship?**
- What needs are not currently met through this relationship?**
- If some of your needs aren't currently being met in this relationship, is there another relationship you maintain which could meet those needs? Is your need really a *need*? Or, if you Translated it, would you see it's more of a *desire* for something that may not be realistic in the particular relationship?**



## “Shoulds”

Some of the cognitive dissonance that comes with self-injury is based on “shoulds.” How you *should* be. How life *should* be. How you and your life *should not* be. Once you or someone else hasn't done something that *should* have been done, the meanings and judgments start swirling. It may be a good idea to think about the “shoulds” you apply to yourself, to others, and to your relationships. Some of your “shoulds” may need revision, but some are here to stay. Create relationships that fit you better by aligning your nonnegotiable “shoulds” with what someone else naturally has to offer, and by letting go of the meanings you apply when your “shoulds” don't work out like they *should*.

## “Shoulds”

Consider the qualities each of the relationships (below) “should” possess and what you “should” be able to talk about in each relationship. It's OK if your real-life relationships don't currently mirror what you feel, just focus on what you'd want out of each type of relationship if it were a perfect world. If you're not currently in a particular type of relationship, imagine what the communication or relationship “rules” would be: Who *should* you be able to talk to, and about what? Who *should* be able to talk to *you*, and about what? And, what does it *mean* when you or someone else doesn't go along with the “should” you've listed? Is that meaning *true*? List what kinds of “shoulds” you'd apply to each of the relationship types below.

- Casual, specific-situation friend
- Close, day-to-day chatty friend
- Best, closest friend
- Parent
- Sister
- Brother
- Extended relatives
- Someone you're attracted to, but don't know well yet
- Someone you're dating
- Someone you're living with
- Someone you're married to



Notice that each type of relationship you maintain allows for certain “shoulds.” Some are naturally applied based on the type of relationship, and some are self-imposed on relationships that might not actually offer what you think *should* be there. “Shoulds” come from your values and needs, and some of them aren’t malleable. But you’re the one who ultimately sets your rules and tries to hold yourself and others to some type of self-derived standard. Since you define much of what the world and others *should* be, you also need to take responsibility for how you react when you don’t get (or do) what you think you *should* have. It’s important to recognize the demands you place on the world around you and the demands placed on you in certain relationships. Try to Notice when you’re “shoulding,” and Respond patiently when you don’t get what you demand or when you don’t do what’s demanded of you. Identifying and mindfully regulating the demands placed on yourself or on others through the use of “shoulds” is part of creating healthy relationships.

## Different Definitions

You’ve seen that certain relationships have certain natural limitations, and you can see that you have specific expectations of certain relationships. If a relationship isn’t meeting your expectations, ask yourself why. Is it because you’ve defined the relationship differently from the way the other person has—applying different rules, expectations, and “shoulds” to it?



### Definitions

- In each of your most important relationships, how does your definition of what *should* be seem to differ from the perspective of the other?**
- In your most important relationships, do you have close alignment on what the point of the relationship is—what the relationship does or doesn’t do?**
- Are you keeping yourself closer to your pain by binding yourself to relationships with people who see their role in your life differently than the way you do?**
- Are there any relationship definitions you need to modify? Are there relationships that you’ll need to mend or end because of a lack of agreement on what the relationship is for or because of discord that comes from differences in how each party behaves?**

## Trust

Trusting someone is pretty important when it comes to being real with them. But do you know that you’re looking for only a *particular* type of trust in order to feel emotionally open? The complicated bit about trust is that it isn’t a yes/no, on/off kind of emotion. There are ways in which we trust others and simultaneously do not trust them. For example, even if you can trust your dentist to clean your teeth without creating pain, you cannot necessarily trust her to hear your innermost feelings. You can trust your best friends to hear some (maybe not all) of your innermost feelings, but you likely wouldn’t trust him to clean your teeth. You may not trust a light-fingered coworker with your money, but you may trust her to be punctual. Trust comes in many colors of the spectrum, and more than one can exist at a time. When a certain shade of trust is absent, though, you may have trouble being yourself, being truthful, or you may limit your relationship to cut off the need for the trust you’re missing. It’s hard to define the type of trust necessary to feel heard and seen, but you’ll know if it isn’t there.

# Trust

Choose at least three people who are important to you, and three you know but aren't very close to. For each person, ask yourself, "In what ways do I trust her?" and "In what ways do I not trust her?" Be truthful, and consider that if the person were asking those questions about her relationship with you, she'd be able to pick out ways she could and couldn't trust you. Can you guess what she'd say about your trustworthiness?

Consider your relationship with trust in general.

- Are you in constant conflict between your desire for human attachment, trust, and intimacy on one hand, and the isolation and mistrust that fuels your self-injury habits on the other?**
- Have you become more comfortable in the role of being isolated and distrusting than that of being intimate and open?**



# Caring

It's easy to use the words "I don't care" or "They don't care" without knowing that you (or they) really *do* care, because you haven't looked at what it *means* to care.

Just as with trust, caring is displayed by different people in different ways, and definitions of the concept don't always line up. You, and others, care about things even when you're not actively demonstrating it. You may assume someone knows you care because you expect them to interpret your actions as caring, when they may not see those actions the same way you do.

If you're asking someone to show she cares about you, especially at times when you're nearing self-injury, you have to clarify for her what you think caring actually entails.

# Caring

What does it mean to *care*? What does caring look or feel like?

In general, how do you want others to demonstrate their caring? Define what actions someone takes or mannerisms she employs when she cares about you. Use the list of relationships in the "Shoulds" inquiry and expand on how, in each relationship, you would know if a person cared about you.

- How do you demonstrate you care in the different relationships listed in the Shoulds inquiry? Define the actions or mannerisms you employ to show you care in each of the relationships you explored.**
- In what ways are you feeling an absence of care in your life? When you're self-injuring, what would someone do to best show he cares about you?**
- If you're lacking in care from others, in what ways could you demonstrate those qualities or actions to show care for yourself?**
- Considering what you want when you're struggling, in what ways could you better demonstrate your care for someone in your life when he or she needs your care?**



## Conflict

The fact that you're using self-injury makes it likely that your relationship with conflict could use some attention. Self-injury is great at negating conflict. It totally invalidates it. Self-injury sweeps in and says, "I'm not going to endure this conflict; I'll hurt you so you'll shut up. Then I'll have peace." If others know that you deal with your internal conflict in that way, their knowledge would work pretty well to keep them from asking loaded questions such as "How ya doin'?" or telling you honestly how they feel about aspects of your behavior.

Since it does so well to end conflicting feelings, self-injury and the ways you talk about it, hide it, or wield it may be attempts to avoid both internal and external conflict. When you have something you need to talk about that isn't pretty or easy, feeling free to engage it and put it behind you is essential to keep self-injury from ending the conflict for you. But know if you're avoiding conflict by ending it prematurely and without a real solution. Those conflicts are going to keep coming back up until they get resolved.



### Conflict

- How do you relate with conflict? Do you seek it? Master it? Avoid it at all costs?
- How often do you avoid talking about your thoughts or feelings in order to avoid conflict or uncomfortable feelings that come along with the discussion?
- How honest are you with others when they want to talk about the conflict within you? Do you make a habit of minimizing the conflict inherent in your reality?
- Do you *create* conflict with others in order to distract or avoid talking about the realities of self-injury?
- Do you use your relationships to full benefit when you stay out of the content that could potentially cause trouble—but that may also create deeper connection and understanding and an easing of self-injury urges?
- Would feeling understood help reduce your self-injury urges? Does avoiding conflict make it possible to feel understood?

Consider that it may be necessary to *endure* some conflict in order to get *through* it and reach a solution. It takes patience and practice to expose what's stimulating your feelings. It's a challenge to change the ways you act on your urges to run away from confusing content or difficult experiences.

Like any skill, dealing with conflict becomes easier as you get used to it. It may be scary at first, and may bring up uncomfortable feelings—but since when did avoiding uncomfortable feelings actually *help* you or your relationships?

### Top Three Relationships

Your primary relationships work on you in ways that you feel, and your feelings about the relationship change based on your internal content. It's possible that your relationships are either more or less supportive than you realize, because your relationship with self-injury colors your ability to see what's real in relationships. You may justify or tolerate certain behaviors in relationships when *You* know it's bad for you. You may reject relationships that actually *support* you because they challenge you to be truthful and open.

It's important to take a look at the key relationships in your life and carefully discern the support or harm inherent within that relationship.

## Effects of the Top Three

For each of your three primary personal relationships, consider:

- How does this relationship encourage you to hide your destructive tendencies?**
- How does it protect you from your destructive tendencies?**
- Do you willingly engage in conflict with this person? Do you willingly bring up content that may be touchy? Why or why not? What makes it safe or unsafe to do so? What makes it safe or unsafe for the other person to engage in conflict with you?**
- Do you feel like you matter to this person? Do they prioritize your happiness (and shared happiness) and help you be more *You*? Do you think they feel like they matter to you, and that you'll prioritize their happiness (and your shared happiness)?**
- Are you loved, and is that love demonstrated or spoken? Do you demonstrate and speak your love?**
- Can you be honest with this person about what's real for you and receive empathy? Do you offer a compassionate space for this person to be honest with you?**
- Which perspectives, aspects of mind, traits, or habits of relating do you most commonly use when you interact with this person?**
- Which perspectives, aspects of mind, personality traits, or habits of relating do you think this person uses most often when talking to you?**
- Which perspectives, aspects of mind, personality traits, or habits of relating would you prefer were more common in your relationship?**



## Healthy Sex

There is a lot to say about sexual relationships and how they support or deconstruct self-injury habits. Sexuality is a study of its own, and if sex is a crux of your issues, it's important to seek appropriate help. Suffice it to say that it's not in your highest good to encourage self-injury by forcing yourself to exist in loveless or abusive circumstances. Be careful how you use sex and intimate relationships to reinforce your isolation or how you attempt to be seen through sexual intimacy. Your sex life is yours to create, but don't use sexual intimacy to allow for or distribute abuse, or to create habits that undermine your wellness. If sexual trauma is at the heart of your self-injury habits, support yourself with therapy and relationships that respect your needs. Use healthy sex to help you rewrite the messages in your mind about your innate value and your ability to be safely vulnerable. Don't increase your isolation through the way you manage your sexual relationships.

## When You're Feeling Fritzy

When your brain is spinning with thoughts, emotions, and unmet needs, relating with others can be seriously challenging. It may add up to wishful thinking to hope that your partner, parents, or friends can handle both your extreme emotions and their own reactions to them when the conversation gets loaded. Can you handle the extreme reactions of others and hold yourself together without some effort? It is incredibly rare to find (or be) a person who can remain present during the deepest experiences of pain, without having to run away from it or take the pain on yourself. You may actually have to *pay* for a relationship that allows you to express yourself freely when little of it makes sense (thank you, counselor!). This isn't because life isn't fair or you're messed up or people generally suck; it's because people are *people*. People change from day to day,

moment to moment. It's hard enough to navigate the minefield of staying present, saying the right things, or reflecting what you're hearing without having added the explosive power of self-injury to the mix.

Your ability to relate to what's happening inside yourself is only slightly less difficult than relating to what's happening inside someone else. Add the emotional complexity of self-injury and the difficulty with honest communication, and it can be pretty hard to relate to *you* when your self-injury mindset is running the show. Relating takes real effort in the best of times. When you're trying to get someone to go into emotional territory with you, be aware that it will be easier for him to do so if you've done a little NPLTR to pave the way. Appreciate that though he may want to be there for you, he may also have no idea how to handle the situation. It's your job to help him hear and support you—don't expect him to ask all the right questions, say all the right things, or do your NPLTR work for you. A healthy relationship needs to consider the communication needs of each party, but sometimes our own blocks get in our way of allowing healthy relating. Try to forgive those who don't want anything to do with your reality or your self-injury episodes—that resistance is about them, not you.

## Why Relate at All?

It's important to maintain casual relationships that don't go near the topic of self-injury, but it's also important to find at least one person—paid or otherwise—to talk to in detail about self-injury. There are times when simply feeling heard, comforted, or accepted as you are now can lift you out of despair. Simple actions of connection can keep your Hulk at bay or convince the Kids on the Bus running amok to stop the bus before it ends up in a ditch. Give yourself the experience of fully embracing the differences in your many relationships. Allow yourself simple or deep connections with others based on what's available. Connecting may not change the sources of your pain, but it can change the way the pain gets to you, which can change your self-injury urges.

When all else fails in relating with others, and in times of great crisis, don't try to talk it all through. Ask for a hug. Relate energetically with body language, touch or eye contact. Ask to sit quietly and calmly. Don't force yourself or others to talk about your internal content if the timing, energy, or qualities of the relationship don't allow it. Relating isn't about hiding or ignoring what's real, but expressing what's real to the appropriate people at appropriate times, with respect for what resistance or openness they bring to the relationship. Y'know, interacting with others by *relating*.

## About the People Who Love You

There are so many different relationships and ways to look at them. Take a minute to consider the people in your life who love you. Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, and there are special ways you can break down barriers to understanding in loving relationships. But no matter how much love is present, getting to what's true before trying to relate is necessary—for you, and for others.

People who love you may simply not understand what's happening inside you, despite their best efforts. Self-injury, especially to those who have never had an urge, can seem a strange language. Keeping others out of it may seem easier in some ways, but at some point, relating to the people you love and who love you becomes critical to living life with your tendencies in mind. Relating to others can minimize your risk of relapsing into self-injury and take some of the power away from your pain by exposing it.

The journey away from self-injury will likely be bumpy for you and your loved ones, but there are ways to make it easier. Start by trying not to hide, avoid, or amplify what's real for anyone involved. Use your best communication skills to get to what's true, and live in a way that respects that each person you relate with has a different experience of life and a different role in your life. Everyone acts in accordance with his or her current ability to handle what life is offering. Relating from a place of compassion for one another is the key to supporting your relationship while addressing self-injury.



## *We're Not Going to Go There (Because We Don't Like It)*

You have a very personal understanding of self-injury. Even with your first-hand knowledge, it can be hard to get your mind around what's happening inside you or find words to convey the subtleties of your experience. But, identifying your internal state and relating about it can be difficult purely because self-injury, shame, abuse, and confusion are uncomfortable topics. You don't *like* the feeling of digging into the content that fuels self-injury. You don't *enjoy* talking candidly about shameful or difficult topics, especially to people who aren't emanating the right combination of energy, body language, tone, and words. It's easier for you not to talk about it because you simply don't *like* the feelings associated with talking about self-injury.

Well, get ready for the big news—people who love you don't like talking about difficult topics either, and they don't like the fact that their lack of understanding of self-injury gives them virtually no grounding in a conversation with you. Besides, plenty of relationships can exist without ever talking about deep stuff. Loving someone allows you to simply overlook some aspects of their experience or actions. You can maintain a relationship even while omitting certain connection points, even if the act creates limitations to understanding. Someone can love you, know you self-injure, and never allow for conversation about it, but that doesn't mean they don't love you. Sometimes they just don't know what to say, and you don't either.

Try to be patient with yourself and the people in your life who clearly have no idea what to do for you. Love doesn't have all the answers, but with compassion and patience, it might make space to find them. Try to be properly respectful of the people you're trying to connect with about your challenges with self-injury. Develop reasonable expectations of others when it comes to dealing with your self-injury. There are some people you may never be able to communicate with about self-injury, the workings of your relationship, or the ways they trigger your deepest issues. You have to see the person you're trying to talk with clearly if you're going to ask for the same thing in return. Part of any relationship is allowing for what's actually possible in the moment, freeing yourself and others from the demands of what the relationship can't currently provide. Those who love you do so even though you self-injure. That's a pretty good starting point if you want to bridge the gap between you.

Consider that people who don't have to manage a self-injury habit may have no idea what you're dealing with or how much energy and mental real estate it can take up. They may not understand the degree of internal conflict you're trying to quantify, convey, or control. They may not like how often you need to talk about the "same old things." They may not understand how easily their disdain and lack of understanding is communicated through a look or intentional emotional disconnection when you're clearly asking for help. They may not like your self-injury habit, and they may think you're nuts for using self-injury in the first place. It may be that their tolerance, not compassion, is the most you can hope for. Give people who love you a break, because it's likely they don't understand your self-injury habits, and you're asking them to come up against their own emotional limitations when you ask for their feedback. If it's simply not possible to relate with someone about what's really happening for you, pushing it may just push you over the edge to self-injury.

Just because people love you, that doesn't mean they'll ever really "get" you. There are far more aspects to your character than self-injury, so you're plenty loveable even if others may not understand the depths of your pain. It's not your job to force someone to understand you, and it's not skillful to internalize others' *lack* of understanding as a comment on your OK-ness or what's possible in your future. Your isolation from or closeness to the people you love doesn't change your needs to manage your relationship with yourself. You'll need to Notice the ways limitations in relationships affect your self-harming habits and decide if the relationship or your relating methods need adjustment. You'll also need to appropriately *receive* the love and support the relationship offers.

The way you express your needs for love and understanding may create disharmony, tension or quarrels of epic proportions. Others may be mad at *you* for being affected by their behavior, or for being affected by life so deeply. They may run for cover if you express to them that you *hurt*; they may stay away for good if you

hurt about something *they've* done. You may want to ask for something that's hard to ask for, and you may make relating harder through your belief that you have no right to ask for help at all. But hiding what's real for you or skewing the truth because it may cause a little trouble isn't really relating, and it doesn't help you.

It's normal for people you love not to want to talk about self-injury, or not to understand what makes you tick, even though they may be adding to your pain, but be careful with the meanings you make out of other people's actions. Don't let someone's inability to relate to what's real for you make you think you're not worth relating to—and try to love others even when they're not acting like you want them to. That's what you want, too.

## *Seeing Both Sides*

It's difficult to see what's true for you in chaotic moments, or to understand what's true for someone else when they're afraid to tell you what they think about your self-injury habits. If you have relationships that are suffering from the weight of self-injury, it may be necessary for you to clarify what's happening for you and to hear how the other person is affected by what you've been doing. The sample writings and inquiry that follow are intended to get you thinking about what you might need to say to someone who loves you and what they might need to say to you. Ground Rules and communication skills, please.

### *What You Might Say*

If you could clearly convey what was happening inside you, what would you say? Read through the example below and consider how your own experience relates. Make notes about what you'd say in your journal as you read. They'll come in handy for the next inquiry.

Knowing you may not understand makes it hard to talk about this patiently; there are so many subtle elements to it. Sometimes I feel my brain starting to turn self-injury urges on; I can feel "something" taking over my mind and it changes my primary thoughts and sensations. I know that soon, all my worst experiences and the meanings I've made of them will be unpacked. I have only a short time to act on my own behalf as my self-injury mindset starts to take over. That's the only moment in a self-injury cycle when I feel like I may have enough awareness of what's happening to try to step in and change it, but it's hard to know what to do in such a confusing moment. The "something" riles up all the meanest Kids on the Bus and pokes and prods at my most shameful memories and deepest fears.

I try to rationalize what's happening, but this "something" that drives self-injury doesn't speak traditional logic. It just twists every thought in my head into more evidence that I'm broken, unlovable, and unable to be fixed. When I feel like this, if I don't get some kind of emotional relief or a certain kind of connection from someone else, self-injury is nearly guaranteed. Fighting it doesn't work, and though I know I can relieve the tension with effective communication, it's hard to find words or express myself clearly when my brain is spinning. It's also hard to talk to you or anyone else about it without feeling ashamed of my reality and pressured to say the right things when I can barely produce a cohesive sentence.

As I self-injure, I go into something like a trance state, and I don't feel an emotional response to what's happening. The peace and numbness of it is satisfying compared to the feelings of being consumed by confusion and mental chaos I don't understand and can't seem to control. I know there's a part of me that thinks I'm a decent person, but it's often buried under habitual thoughts and feelings that tell me that I deserve to suffer.

Sometimes I feel strong, as if I've fended off the urges. "I'll be OK now," I think—then BAM! A trigger is tripped, and I'm hurting myself, visualizing pain or wishing for my life to end. It's like a direct channel to my pain opens, and I'm out of touch with anything but my internal chaos, unable to act consciously. It's incredibly frustrating to feel strong in some ways, and in other ways, incapable of controlling my own mind or actions.

My feelings for you and others change depending on my current emotional position, and so does my

faith in the future and in my own ability to handle reality. I don't trust you to support or comfort me, and I don't ask to be comforted when I need it. I don't want you to see how weak I am, which may lead to my being judged or taken advantage of. So much has built up inside me that it's all a jumble, and I need help to sort it out. I feel powerless to do the sorting on my own and terrified of asking for help that I don't deserve or know how to use—help that will be offered grudgingly or that won't be available consistently. Opening up takes so much effort and makes me so raw and vulnerable that I almost always choose not to talk about it unless I feel really safe with someone. I fear that telling anyone else what I do to cope with my pain would cause them to reject me, proving how repulsive I am and how different I am from others. If I express my fear or anger, I won't be seen or loved the same way, and it may cause the person I depended on to back away from me when I really need closeness.

Though I want to let go of self-injury, I kind of don't want to. It's been the only sure thing in my life for a long time, and wanting change doesn't actually mean I *can* change. Other people's overreactions to my self-injury make me think *they* don't believe I can change. I want to stop, but I fear that if I try and fail, I'll punish myself for trying. I may just be doomed to self-injure and stupid for thinking I could have or deserve a life without constant reminders of my lack of worth. I hate self-injury, but that's what makes it such a good punishment for being who I am.

I feel invisible when you act like I don't self-injure when you *know* I do, and when you won't look at or acknowledge evidence that you obviously see. It's not that I want pity or shock, I just want you to see me—what's real—even though you don't like it. I don't like it either, and I do it because I can't find a way to talk about what's happening inside me. Your choice to ignore this aspect of my life doesn't help me; it helps me think I deserve to go through this alone, that my pain is obvious but not important enough to talk about.

I understand that you have the right not to want to talk to me about it and not to like it. I just need consistency—you should either stay out of it, or stay available without judging what it means that I need help. When you react with shock or dismay after I've opened up to you, it makes me wonder if I should be talking to you at all; I don't feel safe, and I wonder why you'd expect me to open up to you when you're so easily shocked by my words or actions. Intimacy and secure connection are vital to me, and they evaporate when *you* lose your cool because *I* hurt myself. I want you to be comfortable talking casually about it, so I don't have such good reason to fear myself and to fear expressing what I'm working with right now. I want to be comfortable talking to you without shame.

I feel so much pressure from you to somehow prove that I've stopped self-injury forever so you can stop being worried or horrified about my coping choices. I know you want assurance that the habit is gone, but even if I stopped, I can't prove that I'll really be done forever. I need you to love me, believe in me, and be willing to see me as I really am, not as if self-injury is all I am or as if I am a disappointment. Being seen clearly and loved anyway might help me put the habit down.

### The Other Side: *What They Might Say*

If someone who loved you could talk to you about how they feel about your self-injury, they may say something like the example below. Consider how at least one person who loves you might describe their experience of your self-injury. Make notes about what they may say to you in your journal and use them during the next inquiry.

I'm scared of what you do to yourself. It confuses me. I just don't understand what makes you so desperate or unsatisfied that you'd go to such lengths. It seems like you aren't able to handle your problems, and I'm not sure how I should or can help you. I want to intrude into your privacy and ask you questions about what you feel and why you self-injure, but I've never done that before, and I don't want to make things worse for you by probing. I'm angry about being in a position where I'm supposed to help you but am *incapable* of helping. I don't want to say anything that hurts you, but that fear keeps me

immobilized, afraid of making a connection with you that we both need. It seems that neither of us knows how to handle this effectively. I want you to tell me clearly how I can help and to be patient with me when I don't understand why you do what you do.

I want to stay calm when issues around your self-injury come up, but it's hard for me to keep my own feelings in check. I feel gun-shy about talking to you about how your self-injury affects our relationship and changes the ways I can interact with you and love you. I feel guilty when I wish you could just stop it already. I don't know what it will take for you to change your behavior, but maybe I've done all I can. I've been helpful, I've changed my way of relating, and it's as if you don't see how I've tried to be what you need. It's as if the communication you say you want is never enough to actually improve things for you. Even if you don't self-injure for a period of time, it seems to come back if you don't manage your life carefully. I know you don't have consistent energy to take care of yourself, so it feels like you may always use self-injury and I can't be the one that changes it. I don't want to have to talk about how self-injury affects you every day while you change over time. I want it to go away so I can have you without self-injury.

It gets hard for me to see you clearly because, when I look at you, I see a person who isn't coping well and does something extreme to manage the pain. I can sometimes remember other aspects of who you are, but self-injury has become the first thing I think of when I think of you. I know you need me to be empathetic when I know you're struggling, but I'm tired of the way your pain affects my life. Sometimes, as a sign of disapproval, I ignore it when I know you're self-injuring; if I don't acknowledge it, maybe you'll know I don't think it's OK. I don't know how to get used to seeing the damage you do to yourself, so it's not all that appealing to me to ask why or how you did it. It's hard to see why you react to things people have done to hurt you by hurting *yourself* even more. I don't understand why you can't talk about it logically and manage your emotions without violence. I feel sorry for you, but I don't know how to help you. I don't really want any part of that element of your life, but at the same time, I feel guilty for abandoning you with your problems."



## Write It Down, Get It Out

Using your best communication skills and making as many editing passes as necessary to get to what's true, write in your journal about what using self-injury is like for you. Create clear, non-victimizing or blaming statements about what it feels like to have your brain offer you the choice to self-injure, what it's like to try to talk to other people about it, and what it's like to be in the particular relationship that you want to work with. Write this even if you won't show it to anyone. Know that if you can get your experience out in a way you can access when self-injury comes up in a relationship, you will have already looked at how things work for you, so you won't be struggling to figure it all out when you finally have an opportunity to talk.

Someday, when you're ready and have the opportunity, share your writing with the person it's directed toward. Either ask her to read what you've written, or sit with her and read it aloud. Then give her an opportunity to take time to consider her side. Ask her to write about what it's like to love someone who purposely hurts themselves. What's her relationship with you, and how does self-injury change that relationship? When she's ready, let her read to you or ask you to read her writing.

Work only with one person you love or are seeking understanding from at a time, instead of trying to summarize your feelings about all relationships at once. Take on the feedback of one person at a time in a way that's manageable—when you're clear and can access your best communication skills to handle the emotionally triggering material that's bound to come up. There are two sides to each of your relationships; make sure both get heard so you can start building understanding from common ground. And try not to be offended that the people in your life don't like what you're doing. You don't either, but since it's happening to you, the topic is more natural for you to deal with than it is for them. To change your relationships, you'll both have to try to accept what *is* and move on from there to what alternatives *can be*.

# Tongue-Tied

You want to talk, and you have your communication and compassion skills handy, but now what? When you have virtually no positive experience relating with others about self-injury or the nuances of pain, how do you begin to talk to the people who really matter to you?

Below are suggestions of ways to open communication with someone you're trying to relate with. Relating about difficult topics can feel more natural if you get to what's true while demonstrating a commitment to the relationship. Relationship security gives permission to each person to talk about things as they really are, without fear of rejection or of the relationship ending.

## *Suggestions for Talking About Self-Injury to Someone Who Loves You*

If you need to talk about self-injury but don't know how to start a conversation, or if it's hard to find words to relate what's happening, try some variation on the suggestions below.

Own your need for help, support, or clarity without acting or feeling like a victim, and expect that if you've chosen to talk to a particular person, you can trust him to hear your requests. Believe in your ability to have a successful conversation about what's real for you, and don't bail out at the first sign of the other person's discomfort. He will be uncomfortable—so will you—but try to keep shame or negative self-talk in check so you can stay present and find a way to relate what you need to.

- "I'm struggling, and I need help, but I don't know how to talk about what's happening. Would you be willing to sit with me for a while so I can try to figure out what I need to say?"
- "I know you find my behavior strange, and really, so do I. It's frustrating for me not to understand why I choose self-injury over other options and not to know how to stop doing it, but telling me to 'just stop it' is a simple solution to a complex problem. Can we talk through some steps I may be able to take that will help me stop?"
- "Please don't see me as uncontrolled. I'm using self-injury to control the intensity of internal content that I don't understand. Please talk to me about what's happening without judging me for the way I'm coping right now."
- "Will you please check in with me once a week and ask how it's going with self-injury? It helps for me to know I'll need to check in and that you'll stay present and listen to how things are going as I'm trying to change my habits."
- "Are there ways in which you cope with stress that actually harm you? In what ways do you self-sabotage or not act in your best interest in spite of your wish to make different choices? Maybe you can understand that self-injury is somewhat like that for me."

Discuss items from your journal or triggers that get tripped in your relationship. Ask if the other person will help you avoid or work with those triggers when they naturally occur. Be specific about what you're asking them to do, and give them suggestions on how to handle a situation where you're overwhelmed and asking for their involvement.

If you're up to it, ask the other person what she knows you freak out about. As gently as possible, and without judgment, talk about ways in which she sees you struggling and what, specifically, she thinks you should do in those situations. Talk through the whys and why-nots of her suggestions. She may come out understanding you better, and you'll get some practice Listening, Translating and receiving feedback.



## What Do You Want From Them?

Take some time to write a few statements in your journal that you could use when trying to ask for help or when you need to show that you need support, not judgment. Write specific statements for specific people or general statements that could be used across the board when asking for acceptance, support, understanding, or time to talk. If there's someone in your life working through this material with you, ask him to do the same.

Trade what you've written and share feedback: Will those suggestions work to open the door you're trying to walk through? Do they communicate what you're really asking for or what you're willing to do? What would need to change in your wording, delivery, or energy to allow the statements to come across as compassionately and truthfully as possible—to create authentic connection with the person you want to relate to?

### *Suggestions for Talking to Someone Who Self-Injures*

If someone in your life self-injures and you've run into obstacles talking about it, try a variation on the suggestions below. Just remember that when you're going to try to talk to someone who self-injures, there are a few things you can do to set yourself up for success. First, don't say you want to talk if you're also trying to dance around the subject. If you're obviously uncomfortable with the topic, your manner is not going to invite free and open communication. Confess your discomfort; be direct enough to tell it like it is. Self-injury isn't an easy thing to talk about, especially knowing that the person you're talking to may hurt themselves after reacting to your words, but if you're going to talk about it, talk about it. Be there completely.

Try to broach the subject in a conversational manner, not in a heavy, dreading tone. The underlying idea is not to judge the self-injury, but to see it as an indication of something deeper amiss in a person's life. Try to listen without judgment to find out what's underneath the violence, and without expressing your horror with contorted facial expressions or exuding I-just-don't-get-you energy. Your personal disdain or bewilderment should carry little weight if you're actually attempting to understand, support, or talk about what's real. Kid gloves aren't necessary to avoid creating shame or triggering someone who self-injures, but compassion and patience are. You don't have to understand self-injury or ask all the right questions; you just have to set up a situation where the other person feels comfortable while you open the topic willingly. She wants to talk; she just wants to know she's *safe* to do so. It's likely she's not going to bring it up herself, because she doesn't want to make herself vulnerable and invite the additional pain of your disapproval. She knows you don't want to talk about it, so why would she ask you to do so without you having opened the door a little? To open that door, try statements like the ones below.

- "I'd like to talk about your self-injury habits, but I'll need you to be patient with me while I get more comfortable talking about it. I want you to know I love you, and though I'm a little scared I'll say something wrong, I really would like to know what's going on with you. As we talk, can we please try not to become frustrated? We're both learning how to communicate about the complexities of what's happening."
- "What's the most common reason you hurt yourself? What kind of situations trigger you?"
- "Have you hurt yourself lately? Do you remember why? Do you feel like self-injuring now? Last time we talked you said you'd self-injured for the same reason. Do you want to talk about ways you could try to change how those habitual affect your ability to cope in healthy ways?"
- "You said you were going to do specific things to support yourself. How's that going? Is there anything you want to do to support or distract yourself that I can help with?"

- “I don’t want you to feel shame when I ask this, but do you think you’ll be able to stop? How long do you think you’ll use self-injury? What’s so attractive about it?”
- “Are you hurting yourself because you don’t know how to direct that anger at someone who hurts you? Do you want to take a self-protection class together? It may be a good way to learn to put the hurt on an attacker instead of yourself.”
- “I know you’ve been struggling this week. Why don’t we go out and do something fun? You choose what we do.”
- “I want to know how it’s going for you, but I also don’t want to harp on you all the time. Can we make an agreement that you’ll tell me any time you self-injure, and I’ll make myself available to talk about it as immediately as I can?”
- “I think we both know that you’d benefit from learning healthier ways of expressing your pain and managing your emotions. What do you think you need? What can I do to help?”

## Last Word on Relationships

You know this already, and you know it’s a burden, but it’s your responsibility to change your self-injury habits. No one else is going to do it for you. And you can do it—even if you really do have to do it alone. Likely, though, you don’t *have* to do it alone, even though the journey may feel incredibly lonely sometimes. Remember to be grateful for any relationship in your life that supports you in *any* way that feels real, because you need support, no matter how simply that support is conveyed. But also be mindful of how, and how heavily, you rely on people who love you for support with your internal issues. If a relationship that meets certain of your needs doesn’t offer you a space to work through what’s happening inside you, don’t try to force it. Allow yourself to love and to be loved with conditions on what can be expressed, or shed any relationship that harms you. There’s much more to life and to your relationships than self-injury, so let yourself relate to those you love on the levels that are available. Find others to talk to who understand self-injury (a counselor, perhaps?), and unless it creates internal discord, give the people you love a free pass if finding the qualities of mind that can engage your self-injury habits isn’t on their list of things to do. They need compassion, too. If you *own* your boundaries, Translate your thoughts and feelings and communicate compassionately you can build healthy relationships. Interacting with people you’ve set a foundation of understanding with can set you free from the isolation inherent in self-injury.

# Section Four Wrap-Up

Developing your inherent ability to be mindful will help you get to know yourself more intimately and Notice what works and doesn't about your choices, actions, and methods of soothing. Bring this mindfulness into your telling of your story so that when you highlight what's real, you're doing so with as little emotional loading of the situation as possible. Throw in a Translation step when you hear your stories repeating extreme but not-quite-true messages. Remember to add some compassion and patience to keep painful emotions in check while you're telling your story or relating with other people.

Learning to be truthful about what's happening for you will give you time to reconsider the ways you set and maintain your boundaries, and living with your own nature in mind can help you own your decisions without shame or resistance. The boundaries you set based on your understanding of yourself or your coping talents may not always be clear. It's important to take a close look at how your boundaries affect your ability to interact authentically with yourself and others, and also how you use those boundaries to allow others to hurt you.

Know that you have a choice to communicate compassionately and to cultivate safety in the relationships you want to have in your life. As you become mindful of how relationships affect you, you'll create healthier ones. It will also become easier to let go of the types of communication and relationship limitations you've been willing to accept even while they trigger you. The awareness you bring to your life, the way you use your boundaries, your relationships, and your communication can dramatically change your self-injury habits. Just remember that it takes time and practice to change habits. Be kind to yourself and to others as you grow into mindful living and healthier relationships. Build a life you love with your words, actions and interactions.



# *Supports*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:

# Breath, Body, Mind

**T**his section is all about breath and body activities that supplement the practices of NPLTR and mindfulness. Each activity is intended to allow you to change the quality of your thoughts and redirect your focus by using the body or breath for soothing. Some of the activities can be read as you perform them, but others need to be spoken to you so that reading the instructions doesn't distract you from the effect of the activity. Use the audio recordings available at [www.stopselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopselfinjuring.com) to drop out of your "reading mind" and into your "listening mind." Or, better yet, record versions for yourself! You'll achieve a deeper state of release and greater acceptance of the words in some of the activities if you use your own voice to direct your mind and body. If you have the technology to do it, record yourself reading the material, using a tone of voice and pacing that suits you best. Throw in some of your own music or guiding ideas if you know what you really need to hear.


## Natural Soothing

It's likely that right alongside your self-injury habits are other tension-building habits: Holding in your breath, your energy, and your thoughts. To soothe self-injury urges and release the energy that's vying for expression through violence, work with the natural abilities of your breath and body. Read through this section and pick a handful of activities to try out when you're clear, so that you're familiar with the basic concepts when you're in a crisis. Each of the activities can help you redirect your awareness away from chaotic thoughts and toward the more stable elements of your current experience.

Play with any or all of the activities when you want to widen your Pause; Notice sensations *other than those* that accompany chaotic thinking. Adapt the activities as you see fit, based on what works for you, to come up with your own personalized tactics to get out from under your thoughts. Don't dive into your thoughts; the point of all these suggestions is to calm you, not agitate you. You're intentionally attempting to shift your awareness to your breath or body to redirect chaotic thinking or create sensations of ease.

## Out of Your Thoughts and . . . Into Your Breath

The breath is often taken for granted. Many of our life-animating breaths are, sadly, brought in and out of existence without our awareness, controlled by the governor of bodily processes we don't have to think about. Finding the energy to take more conscious control of your breath can create relief when you're mentally overwhelmed. The activities below are intended to help you calm or refocus your mind by controlling your breath. As you become more aware of the way your breath, body, and thoughts respond to one another, you'll be able to dive into your breath instead of your thoughts when you Notice sensations of distress. Most of the breath activities direct airflow in and out through the nose, with the mouth gently closed and lower jaw relaxed. This is naturally calming to the body and mind. Mouth-breathing usually occurs when you are forcefully exerting energy, or when you're breathing mindlessly.

Time spent working with your breath is not time to think, cry, or ruminate on your pain. If you're having trouble sitting still or keeping your thoughts from spinning, try a different exercise that more firmly directs your attention, and come back to breath exercises when your mind is a little less feisty. Remember your Ground Rules. Remember also that activities denoted with  are available online as audio files at [www.stopselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopselfinjuring.com).



## *Using What's Natural*

Consider the natural movements of your breath. When you get a sudden fright, your breath moves inward as you react. When you need to calm down, you naturally lengthen your exhale into a long sigh. Work with this natural tendency of your breath when you're trying to calm your thoughts and emotions or energize a weary heart.

When you need calming, focus on long, slow out-breaths; when you need to elevate your energy, focus on powerful, directed in-breaths. When you're about to Hulk, it may be difficult to find the patience to endure the one to five minutes it may take to experience the brain change that focusing on the breath provides. But if you tune closely into the movements of your breath instead of letting your thoughts jump in, the time will go by faster, and you'll be more likely to move self-injury urges into the background. Just remember, long, soft inhales and exhales through the nostrils to calm your body and mind, and deep, direct inhales and forceful exhales through the mouth to energize your body and mind.

## *Three-Burst Exhale*

When you're about to Hulk out, try this: take a long, deep inhale, and exhale in three short bursts with pauses in between (Inhale. Exhale—Pause—Exhale—Pause—Exhale). Contract the abdomen to press all the air out of the lungs after the last pause, letting the next inhale come on its own. Repeat until you feel calm enough to find ways to distract yourself or to Listen, Translate, or Respond to your crisis.

## *Simple Breath Awareness*

Sit comfortably cross-legged on the floor or in a straight-backed chair. Sit with your back straight, but not rigid. Slowly begin to deepen and lengthen each breath. Place your hands on your ribs. Notice how they move as they receive and release the breath. Become aware of the upward and outward movement of the torso as you inhale and the downward and inward movement of the torso on the exhale. Close your eyes and sit for three to fifteen minutes, maintaining an awareness of the internal expansion and contraction that coincides with your breath.

## *Exploring the Lungs*

Sit comfortably. Begin by taking the first ten to fifteen breaths to focus on the front side of your lungs. Breathe into and out of the nostrils and feel the forward and outward movement of the front of your lungs as the breath moves in and out of your body. Resist dramatic movement of the back and sides of your body; focus the breath as if you could breathe only into the front of your lungs, expanding and releasing the front of your body.

For the next ten to fifteen breaths, shift your attention to the back side of your lungs and their outward and backward movement, as the back of each lung receives and releases each breath. Resist dramatic movement of the front or sides of your body; focus the breath as if you could breathe only into the back of your lungs and the back of your body. Feel the expansion and release in the back of your body as the breath moves.

For ten to fifteen more breaths, shift your focus to the outer sides of each lung as the breath is received and released. Notice the sides of your rib cage expand on each inhale and relax on each exhale. Direct

your breath to expand and release the sides of your body without dramatically expanding the front or back of the body. Notice the sides of your body breathing.



For another ten to fifteen breaths on *each side*, tune into each entire lung in turn—the left lung as if you could breathe into the front, back, top, bottom, and sides of it equally while the right lung has a rest, then the front, back, top, bottom, and sides of the right lung while the left has a rest. What does it feel like to Notice the expanse of each lung separately?

Finally, connect your awareness to both lungs at the same time. For the next twenty breaths, breathe as if you could expand your lungs equally in all directions—front, back, top, bottom, and sides. Notice the three-dimensional nature of the breath, and feel the lungs as they function inside the container of your physical body.

## *Complete Abdominal Breathing: Versions I and II*

Despite the change of direction in these breathing activities, each creates a swelling of the abdomen on the inhale and a contraction of the abdomen on the exhale. Practicing conscious abdominal breathing eventually trains the body to do it unconsciously, which naturally calms the mind and body. When you become tense, deepening your breath can be an effective tool to turn away from the chatter of the mind and create mental and physical relaxation. Almost universally, when we're stressed out, our breath shortens and becomes restricted to the upper lobes of the lungs. Notice that, when you're struggling, it can be a real challenge to move the breath out of the upper chest and into the abdomen. Each of these two breathing variations is intended to equalize and distribute the breath to all points that can receive it. This reduces stress hormones and encourages a state of relaxation in bodily systems that can be, but aren't always, directed by your conscious mind.

It may take some practice, but as you work with calming and lengthening your breath, you'll Notice a natural pause at the top of each inhale and the bottom of each exhale: Inhale—Pause—Exhale—Pause (a "four-part breath"). These pauses are natural and signal a state of deepening relaxation. As you achieve each pause in your breath, Notice the state of your body and mind inside the pause. There's time here where everything is calm. Become aware that as your breath extends to create these natural pauses, your body welcomes the moments of stillness, then lets that stillness transition naturally into the next breath when the time is right. The body intuitively rests without breathing, then begins the inhale or exhale on its own.

▷ **Version I (Bottom-to-Top Inhale/Top-to-Bottom Exhale):** Sit comfortably with your spine long and shoulders relaxed. Allow your mouth to gently close and your tongue to fall to the bottom of the jaw. Inhale through both nostrils, and, as if you were pouring your breath into your abdomen as you would pour orange juice into a glass, feel the air fill the abdomen and rise up to fill the midchest and back, upper lungs and upper back; feel the breath rise all the way up to your throat and the back of your neck, even under your chin. Become aware of all the places in your body which receive the breath.

Allow the exhale to start naturally at the throat. Feel your upper chest and upper back yield the breath first, and then allow the midchest and midback to release the breath; finally, contract your abdomen to push all the air out at the end of the exhale, emptying the breath completely.

Let the next inhale come naturally, and continue breathing with an awareness of pouring the breath into the abdomen, allowing the inhale to fill you up; then letting the exhale come naturally, releasing the breath from your upper body, midbody, and finally your abdomen. As you breathe in this way for ten to fifteen breaths, focus on the shape and quality of the container of the breath when the breath has filled your body, and when it has left the body. Notice the sensa-



tions of fullness and emptiness alternating naturally, your breath slowing and deepening throughout each breath cycle.

Next, focus on your body's response to the breath as it moves from your abdomen into your chest and throat on each inhale. Feel the gentle release as the exhale starts at your throat and empties your upper chest and midchest, completing the breath with a slight squeeze of the abdomen. Continue breathing in this manner for ten to fifteen breaths, allowing each breath to slow and deepen. As you deepen each breath, you may start to notice short pauses coming in at the top of the inhale and the bottom of the exhale. Notice the stillness within the pauses, and allow your body to breathe naturally: directed, but without force. What does it feel like to breathe consciously?

At the end of an exhale, release control of the breath and allow the next breath to come unguided. Notice how your body and mind feel. Has focusing on the breath changed your internal experience at all? Does your body naturally carry the rhythm you've created as you take a few more breaths?

▷ **Version II (Top-to-Bottom Inhale/Bottom-to-Top Exhale):** Sit comfortably, face and jaw relaxed, mouth gently closed. Let the shoulders fall away from the ears. Inhale through both nostrils, directing the breath into your throat and the back of your neck, and allow the breath to move down to fill your upper chest and upper back, your midchest and midback, finally allowing the breath to fill your abdomen. Notice the extension of your abdomen at the end of the inhale; feel the fullness of the breath. Become aware of the areas of your body receiving the inhale.

Allow the exhale to start naturally at the abdomen. Gently contract your abdominal muscles to start to press the air up and out, releasing the breath from your abdomen, midchest and midback, upper chest and upper back, and finally, expel the last of the breath out of your throat and the back of your neck.

Let the next inhale come naturally as you repeat the breath. Inhale first into your throat and fill your midchest and abdomen. Start the exhale at the abdomen, pressing air up and out of your midchest, upper chest, and throat. Notice that the breath slows and deepens throughout each cycle. Keep your focus on the sensations in your awareness over the next ten to fifteen breaths, as the movement of the breath expands and releases your body.

Over the course of the next ten to fifteen breaths, notice each breath slow and deepen, and sense your body as a container for the breath. You are a three-dimensional breathing body: top, bottom, sides, front, and back, expanding on each inhale and releasing on each exhale. As you notice the pauses that come naturally at the top of each inhale and the bottom of each exhale, tune into the stillness for a moment, then let your body naturally continue with the breath when it's ready.

On the end of an inhale, release control of the breath and allow the next exhale to come unguided. Notice how your body and mind feel. Has focusing on the breath changed your internal experience at all? Does your breath maintain the rhythm you've created after you've stopped controlling it?

## Out of Your Thoughts and . . . Into Your Body

Dropping into your body when thoughts become overwhelming is one way to interrupt, and perhaps avoid, a self-injury episode. Notice how often you walk around with no consciousness of your body—as if all you are is a set of eyes attached to a brain. There are many good ways to quickly step out of your thoughts and connect with your body without much physical movement. Reconnecting with your body without the use of violence is a great way to get out of your head and reduce the intensity of self-injury urges. The following activities are intended to provide an experience of soothing by using the natural abilities of your body. Allow the sensations available in your physical experience to redirect your thoughts and move the self-injury mindset to the background.



## Light and Dark

To stop thoughts and drop into sensations, sit with half your body in the sun and half in the shade. Sense which parts of your body are in contact with the heat, light, and energy of the sun and which parts are in contact with the calm, cool, stillness of the shade. Can you feel the line on your body where the shade meets the light? Sit, simply Noticing the sensations present in each side of your body. Notice that you are *able* to sense the subtle difference in the amount of energy reaching your body.

## X-Factor

Stand straight, feet hip-width apart, eyes open, relaxed, and settled back into the sockets as if you were looking at the world from the *backs* of your eyes. For at least a minute on each side, play with the visualization of a straight line between:

The back of your right heel and the back of your left eye socket

The back of your left heel and the back of your right eye socket

Notice the sensations in your eyes, your heels, and every part of the body in contact with the visualized line. Keep your eyes, face, and hands relaxed.

## Oil It Down

When your head is spinning with thoughts and you need some grounding, use an oil-sugar scrub. In a shaker-type container, combine 1 cup organic safflower oil with 4 tablespoons organic brown sugar and shake well. Take this mixture into the shower with you. Before you start the water, stand naked in the shower and use small portions of the sugared oil as a body scrub. The skin will flush and become a bit red; this is natural. Scrub your entire body below the neck, and sit down when scrubbing your feet. Sit or stand with the scrub on for a few minutes before using warm water and a wet, hot hand towel to rinse the sugar off and wipe the excess oil. Be careful when you're rinsing your body off, since oiling your feet in a shower brings up some pretty serious slipping risks. Some oil will (and should) remain, so be mindful that you're using towels and clothes that can take a little oiling. And for heaven's sake, be careful in the shower!

## Sensing Energy in the Heart and Hands

Sit comfortably, hands relaxed in your lap, palms facing the sky. Allow your shoulders to fall away from your ears. Relax your face and let your open eyes settle back into the sockets, as if you're looking softly at the world from the back of your eye. Relax your mouth; let your tongue fall to the floor of the jaw. Slow your breath, patiently inhaling and exhaling through your nostrils.

Tune your awareness into the center of your heart and breathe as if you could bring breath directly into and around your heart. Allow the heart center, chest, back, and sides to expand and contract as the space inside and around your heart receives and releases the breath. Notice the sensations in your chest as you bring the breath into and out of it. Notice the inhale move your body outward from your heart in all directions; as you exhale, try to retain a sense of the space the breath left behind. Take five more breaths this way: slowly inhaling and exhaling, focusing your awareness on the breath moving in and out of the heart center. Sense the energy in your heart as you breathe.

Slightly tuck your chin and gaze down at your palms. Sense the energy in the palm of each hand, as if a palm-sized ball is floating just above the skin. Feel the pulse in your hands, the warmth of the blood pumping through your palms and fingers, the slight sizzle of your own energy. Notice the power that lives in your palms. Feel the potential for action, for creation. Sense—see—the energy in the palms of your hands.



Keeping an awareness of the energy in your hands, start to direct the palms to areas of your body that could use some attention. As your palms hover near your body, Notice that your body is also radiating energy. Can you feel or create something like a force field between the energy in each hand and the energy radiating off your body? Play with that energy field. Move your hands and your energy in any way that creates ease. Notice how the sensations of your energy change when your eyes are closed.

Slowly bring both palms to face the heart. Allow the energy from your hands to merge with the energy at your heart center. As you breathe into the heart center, visualize the entire center of your chest shining, radiating light full of peaceful energy, brilliant with clear, white space—the entire chest cavity filled with your own light.

Into the center of the light in your chest, plant an intention. An intention to find more time for yourself, to release harsh judgments—any intention that you know would bring more ease into your life. Imagine your intention being planted in the core of your heart center where, over time, in the light, it will grow and express itself through your actions. Place your intention for yourself deep within the light inside your heart center.

Slowly release your palms to your lap and reconnect your awareness to the energy in your heart and your hands. Sit for a few minutes before slowly rejoining your day.

## *Basic Body Scan*

Reading this text while performing the body scan will familiarize you with the idea of body scanning, but to get a stronger bodily sense of this activity, use the audio file available at [www.stopselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopselfinjuring.com) (or record and listen to your own version).

Make yourself comfortable in a relaxation position and support yourself in any way that helps you fully release your body. As your body begins to find relaxation, tap into a sense of fluidity and comfort, settling deeper into your support, as if you're releasing into the most comforting embrace you can imagine. Notice the breath as it moves into and out of your body.

Inhale through the nose and sigh out the mouth. Take five more breaths this way, and Notice your mind and body settling deeper into relaxation every time you exhale. Once you complete the five breaths, release control of the breath and allow it to flow naturally.

Move your attention to the right big toe, to all the toes, the soles of the feet, the heels, the tops of the feet, the ankles. Notice the lower legs, the shins and calves; the knees and thighs. Notice the hips, pelvis, buttocks, and lower back.

Notice your entire navel center and abdomen. Notice the midback, solar plexus, chest—the entire barrel of the chest—front, sides, and back. Notice your heart, shoulders, collarbones, upper arms, elbows, lower arms, wrists. Notice both hands—all the fingers. Notice the center of your throat, the back of the neck, the chin and jaw, the forehead, the face and skull, the crown of your head.

Notice the entire body: head, shoulders, arms and hands, heart and chest, back and abdomen, hips, legs, and feet. Notice every part of you at once. Notice the entire body.

Notice your sensations. What internal sensations, impulses, signals, or messages can you identify? Notice what it's like to sense and scan the body. Which of your sensations stand out the most? Relax here for a minute, allowing your awareness to explore the sensations, sounds, colors, or vibrations in your body.

Move your attention back to the right big toe, the entire right leg, the entire left leg, the pelvis and hips, the lower back, the abdomen, the solar plexus, the entire chest, both shoulders, the entire right arm, the entire left arm. Notice the throat and the back of the neck, the chin and jaw, the face, the



crown of your head. Notice your entire body—the entire head, neck, shoulders, arms and hands, heart, chest and abdomen, hips, legs, and feet. Notice the entire body.



Slowly bring your attention back to the feeling of your body resting into its support. Begin to make small movements with your fingers and toes; rock your head back and forth and gently stretch your body in whatever way feels best. Pause here and breathe a few slow, deep breaths, cultivating a sense of gratitude for the body you reside within—all its greatness, all its limitations—your body. The vehicle that carries *You* through this world. Take a long, deep breath in through the nostrils. Sigh it out the mouth. Sit with your eyes closed for a moment, sensing your body, your energy, and your mind.

When you get used to doing body scans, you can direct your own experience, vary the time your awareness lingers on any spot, vary what you do mentally when you're focusing on a certain spot in your body, and choose which direction you move your awareness (head to toes, toes to head). The only rules with body scans are: (1) after you've rotated your awareness through various parts of your body, focus on the body in its entirety so that you come back to a sensation of wholeness, and (2) Notice along the way if particular areas of your body are more or less receptive to your awareness or need more or less attention than other areas. Try moving your awareness randomly through your body to keep your thoughts guessing, or mentally place an image (cross, Om symbol, leaf, heart, kiss) in different parts of your body as your awareness moves. The point is to connect your awareness to your body and sense what's going on in there instead of letting a chaotic mind drive your action. There are many ways you can tune into your experience, just keep it focused on how it feels to be in a body instead of in your thoughts.

Tap into the natural abilities of your breath and body when you need to come away from your thoughts. There are *instant* remedies to tension and emotional strain available to you if you can remember that you even *have* breath and a body. Your thoughts may try to demand all your resources, but just by deepening the breath or scanning the body, you diminish the hold your thoughts have on you.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE:

# Relaxation and Restoration

**Y**ou've learned a lot of skills in your life, and as you've read this book. Many of your most useful skills relate to *doing* something—using directed action to understand, identify, create, reason, or plan. Doing is good, fine, and necessary, but you can do some of the most powerful *doing* in the emotional realm by purposefully *undoing*. By acting *only to create ease*.

When all your various mental perspectives are sitting around the water cooler comparing their usefulness, they're able to put something that they *do* up for comparison with the other aspects of mind. The mind's sense of worth comes, in part, from how well the doing gets done. And the doing is usually measurable: Did you meet the predetermined goal, or can you see the results of your actions? When the aspects of mind that *do relaxing* hold up their product—the ease and restoration of the mental and bodily systems that support the functioning of your entire life—your other perspectives can scoff and purport that nothing good was ever born from *relaxing*. After all, what can you *build* with relaxing? What does relaxing *do*, and why would it be considered a valid use of time? How would you measure your success at relaxing? And when all the getting-things-done thoughts do just fine rolling on their own, why stop *doing* just to focus on doing “nothing”?

Relaxing is far from doing or creating nothing. The results are concrete. When self-injury urges contract you into a tight little ball of stressful emotion, the action of relaxing can stop the episode by bringing to the stage the aspects of your mind that are naturally calm and enduring. The choice to do nothing *except* create ease gently ushers the self-injury mindset into the background and allows other, more productive, aspects of mind to come forward. That's a result you can *feel*.

Real mental stability is demonstrated by your ability to choose your reaction to a situation, to select the parts of your mind that will operate at any given time. It's not about being happy all the time or ignoring pain, but coming to the moment with the most ease you can muster so you're more able to craft skillful solutions to the challenges specific to that moment. When you commit to consistently and frequently using relaxation or restoration methods, you're also practicing the art of creating *stability*—giving yourself a safe, supportive place to come home to. When it's time to quiet self-injury urges and select the aspects of mind or traits that you want to govern your Response, it's useful to have skills and tools that enable you to quickly turn off the chatter of your mind and go into a place of mental stillness. Not only does it feel better, but it helps clear away unnecessary mental clutter so you can make better choices.

Sometimes, we don't take time to relax into internal silence because we're concerned that, if we do, we may create space for the release of things we're trying to keep in. Relaxing is about purposely directing the mind toward *stillness*, not toward *thinking*. Restoring is about thinking only of regenerative actions and Noticing their effects. If relaxing or restoring gives pain time on your mind or allows for uncontrollable mental chatter, it's not really relaxing or restoring. It's up to you if you intentionally do nothing but calm your frenzied mind, just try not to be afraid of making space for your painful thoughts. You can actively tap into the parts of your mind that create ease without opening doors to your pain. Besides, even if it's a challenge at first, you could use some practice quieting all *but* that one Kid on the Bus that really knows how to chill out.

The suggestions in this chapter can be used both when you're clear and when you're attempting to stop self-injury urges. When you engage your internal spaces through any relaxation activity, focus on creating a feeling of deep calm and stability. Expect to remain in a supported position, preferably on your back, for five to twenty-five minutes. Take your comfort seriously when relaxing. Resting in awareness of your body, breath, or energy is easier if you're not fighting a backache. If you're not sure what position to relax in, search online for restorative yoga postures or try one of the positions described later in this chapter (or online at [www.stopsselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopsselfinjuring.com)).

You're shooting for a sense of the most wonderful, helpful, supportive, grounded, truly nurturing energy you can muster, which will feel soothing. If your shoulders start squeezing up to your ears, your face puckers into a grimace, and you feel contraction instead of relaxation, it's a sure sign your chaotic mind is resisting your attempts to bypass it. As long as it isn't triggering you, keep trying to drop back into the relaxation activity to build your ability to tap into your calmer aspects. Practice makes . . . better.

Don't forget to set aside time for relaxation when you're clear. Each day, try to use at least one relaxation and restoration method to purposely connect with a sense of deep ease. Pay attention to the way you use your brain and your imagination when you're relaxing. If you think relaxation creates a time crunch, consider how much time you lose ruminating over painful thoughts. The twenty minutes a day you spend purposely relaxing is probably nothing compared to the time you spend in your thoughts and pain, or recuperating from the emotional and physical realities of a self-injury habit. Taking that twenty minutes a day may cut down on how much time you spend in pain, so when you relax, *really relax*. Notice your *ability* to relax. If relaxation agitates you or brings up urges to self-injure, it's time to reconsider the tactics and imagery you're using. Ground Rules, yes?

Welcome to relaxing and restoring. Start by creating your Comfort Zone, and then explore the additional supports and suggestions. There's bound to be at least one suggestion here that can give you a sense of ease.

## Create Your Comfort Zone

Make yourself comfortable in any relaxation position. Take a long, slow inhale through your nostrils and sigh it out your mouth. Again, a long, slow inhale through the nostrils, and sigh out the mouth. Take five more breaths this way, feeling your body release tension on each lengthening out-breath.

Begin to visualize a place where you feel completely at ease. A beachfront, a cozy cabin in the woods, the top of a mountain. Build out a mental image of any real or imaginary place where you have everything you need to feel comfortable, safe, trusting, and open. Add or remove elements from this Comfort Zone to make it a place without fear, exacting standards, self-doubt, or harsh judgment—a place where you can let go of any nagging thoughts and feel easy and free. In this visualized space, you can completely relax into yourself as you really are, with no masks, releasing tension and connecting with the parts of you that are still, at ease, and hopeful.

Take some time to develop the imagery of your Comfort Zone, detailing it with all the elements that support, nurture, inspire, and motivate you in healthy ways.

Start to pay closer attention to how you feel in this safe space. See yourself, *feel* yourself in a space that encourages a softening body, open heart, and clear-sighted perspective separate from thoughts or beliefs—a space that's your creation, your property, and your resource when you need to touch into a sense of calm and stability.

Look around the mental space you've created.

*What does the general view around you look like?*

*What's the most defining element of the space?*

*What elements in particular soothe or protect you?*

*What are you in this visualized space? Are you a physical participant? Are you energy overseeing the space?*

Spend some more time continuing to build, explore, and change your visualized space into the most comfortable, supportive, nourishing place you could ever be. Make this your Comfort Zone, the place you come when you need to remember feelings of ease and safety. Notice your *ability* to create a mental space that soothes your body, calms your thoughts, and gives you real comfort.

Take a mental snapshot of the space you've been creating and exploring. Set an intention to maintain a mental or spiritual connection to this comforting and nourishing place. Remind yourself to connect to your capacity for ease, and know that this place exists solely for that purpose. Then, give yourself permission to come to this Comfort Zone when you're suffering, to give yourself real soothing through your ability to *visualize* ease.

Releasing your visualized space, allow your mental images to resemble the room you're in. Gently wiggle your fingers and toes. Turn your head gently from side to side. Take a deep inhale through the nostrils and exhale softly. As you move on with your day, especially if you have painful feelings to endure, try to maintain a connection to your Comfort Zone. Ease is within you, even if you have to go to your Comfort Zone to find it.

When you're suffering and need to escape painful thoughts, try to reconnect with a sense of security and ease by diving into your Comfort Zone. Notice how your body settles as your mind shifts from painful thought-imagery to purposely pleasant visualizations. Make it a habit to comfort yourself by imagining the most nurturing mental space possible, and alter the visualization in whatever way works best in the moment. Know that in this space, self-injury can't exist as an option for comfort—only real comfort is offered here. Your Comfort Zone contains only the elements, supports, and tools that actually work to make you feel more capable, strong, and encouraged.

As you regularly visit this landscape, Notice which elements change. Do you have different experiences of the feelings or colors inside the space, or do the supportive elements change? Do the sensations of what or who you are change? Start to Notice what's constant about you and your needs for support, and what changes over time. As you become less likely to self-injure, Notice which elements of the space disappear completely. There may be elements that were there solely to support you while you worked out particular issues that fuel self-injury. As your relationship with your pain changes, also Notice how your motivations for *seeking* ease change. You may begin seeking out ease simply because it feels good, rather than as an escape from being overwhelmed.

## Basic Types of Relaxation and Restoration

There are many styles of relaxation, and you could stress out just trying to choose a method, let alone one that would work in every situation. Some valuable relaxation and restoration practices exist within the texts of yoga, and their value comes from an equal focus on compassionate and adaptive methods. Each of the practices detailed below can aid in letting go of self-injury as a coping tool as you enhance your connection to your sense of ease. Yogic relaxation isn't in any way denominational, and though I don't think any gods will be offended by the practice of actions that are simple, effective, and minimize self-harm, consult your own beliefs accordingly and apply methods that work within your value system. There are plenty of ways to relax, and more great information about the methods below is available in bookstores and online. Find more information on these or other relaxation and restoration methods that work for you, and use them regularly. It's *always* a good use of time to quiet a chaotic mind and let a stressed-out body relax.



## *Restorative Yoga*

Restorative Yoga can be done by anyone, at any time because the postures are highly adaptable and are always done in a supported manner. There are many qualified yoga teachers that lead weekly or online sessions, and free yoga videos online. The practice of Restorative Yoga creates ease by allowing the body to release completely into the support of blankets, bolsters, weights, or pillows for an extended period of time. The physical body is fully supported in very deliberate positions during the practice, so that the mind and body can relax (up to fifteen minutes in each comforting position). Thoughts aren't necessarily directed by a teacher or the participant during the practice, but mental activity tends to melt away as the body releases into support. From this place of mental and physical stillness it's possible to explore the boundaries of the body while releasing into a delicious mental space that isn't quite sleep, but feels deeply refreshing. You can use the positions from Restorative Yoga at home for a mind and body recharge that takes less than twenty minutes.

## *Savasana*

Though it's most commonly used as the last pose in a yoga practice to create "restful meditation" which is aided by physical fatigue, Savasana can be done by anyone, at any time—with or without a posture practice. It's basically lying on your back and releasing thoughts and effort while staying mentally aware of the sensations, messages, and internal directions that rise into awareness as the body releases into the floor. It's common for people to fall asleep during Savasana, but the intention is to use the self-directed experience to achieve a sense of bodily and mental stillness. Savasana is a good substitute for a full Yoga Nidra session (see below) and can reboot your mental systems within three to seven minutes. Savasana is best when you can keep your mind broadly focused on the sensations of relaxation present instead of getting wrapped up in specific thought content.

## *Guided Imagery*

Guided Imagery sessions open the door for an experience that lasts anywhere from twenty to forty-five minutes. Basically delivered as an extended Savasana that's coupled with directed imagining, Guided Imagery is used to create certain thought patterns or visualizations that give one a specific insight or experience. During Guided Imagery, the body is supported in a supine or prone position as the mind is led on a fictional, visualized journey. During this passive form of relaxation, the deeper levels of the mind can experience sensations and insights that are typically hidden behind the thinking mind's chatter. The metaphors created through visualization are more detailed and instructive in nature than the sensations available in Restorative Yoga or Savasana. Guided Imagery can be written for any situation, for any inquisitive interest, and can be used any time, as long as the content does not trigger the participant. Sometimes the fantasy journeys taken during Guided Imagery can help a participant to visualize complex thoughts or emotions in a new way and convince the mind to consider new interpretations of, and Responses to, life's challenges. A handful of guided imagery files are available online at [www.stopsselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopsselfinjuring.com).

## *Yoga Nidra*

Done while lying down or in a supported sitting position, Yoga Nidra can take as little as twenty minutes to experience. The term Yoga Nidra literally means "Yogic Sleep," and it is the deepest form of Yogic Relaxation. Yoga Nidra employs a specific sequence of awareness rotation ("rotation of consciousness") where the rationalizing areas of the brain are allowed to busy themselves in the background allowing the subtle, inner awareness to support an experience of self that goes beyond the mind and body. Yoga Nidra is similar to Guided Imagery in the fact that the practice is led by dialogue that creates mental connection to imagery and sensation, but the level of inner inquiry available is significantly deeper in Yoga Nidra than in Guided Imagery.

The imagery in Yoga Nidra is always *real* and focused on sensations of the inner experience; it's not the imagining of scenarios and sensations that Guided Imagery can wander in and out of. In a session of twenty minutes to an hour, the body is led into a state of conscious rest and the mind settles into Delta wave patterns. This enables the witness perspective to take over, offering restoration on a level far deeper than a nap, Savasana or Guided Imagery. Yoga Nidra systematically directs the mind to induce complete physical, mental, and emotional relaxation and then to allow the participant to remain quietly in that fertile space to tap into the deepest levels of awareness. In that fertile ground of stillness and detached awareness, the participant plants seeds of action that will grow behind the chatter of conscious thought.



## Meditation

In general, meditation is used not to implant or work with thoughts, but to step back and watch them—to Notice, without judgment, what's happening inside the mind. The practice of meditation is intended to cultivate your ability to bring your mind back to an observer (movie theater) view. The practice of meditation is useful any time mental stimuli pull at your attention in ways that undermine your wellness.

Used effectively, meditation can help change your relationship to mental chaos and emotional pain, helping you to see your inner (and the world's outer) content for what it is. If you have an especially active mind or deeply ingrained self-injury habit, meditation might be the hardest form of restoration. Without some help focusing the mind's attention, you could literally fight with your mind the whole time you're trying to meditate, coming away feeling more triggered than when you started out.

There are many types of meditation, and you may have to try out different ones to find a method that resonates with you. Meditation is most commonly performed in a seated position that discourages sleep. It can be done by sitting in silence while focusing only on your breath, returning again and again to the breath when the mind wanders. It can be done while continuously gazing at an object, attempting to silence thoughts and, in a sense, merge with the object. Meditation can be self-directed or directed by a teacher, but it should only be used if it doesn't allow mental chatter to gang up on you or impose harmful restrictions on your inner experience.

In each of the described relaxation and restoration practices, the point is, at most, to connect with a witness perspective of your vastness and, at least, to disconnect you from thoughts and feelings that will lead you toward self-injury. Each practice gives you a different experience of yourself and of relaxation, and each practice can be modified to suit your physical needs or current mental state. Whether or not you seek out information on the suggestions above, make it a point to find ways to regularly relax your body, still your thoughts, and connect with your deeper nature.

## Setting Yourself Up for Success

Relaxation may be simple, but it's much more delicious if you take care with your body position, the room you choose to be in, and the music or soundscapes you use to encourage your stillness. Consider carefully your relationship to relaxation as you're practicing. Do you have a get-it-done-quick mentality, or a set-it-up-to-be-yummy-even-if-it-takes-a-little-effort mentality? You get what you pay for, so chip in a little toward the time and effort of setting up a relaxation session that actually works. Don't rush into it with pressing deadlines and expect to be relaxed afterward.

## Where You Relax

Pick a room in the house where you don't usually sleep, but that's also typically free from chaotic activity. It's best to rest on the floor, but a reclining chair can work if getting down to and up from the floor isn't

comfortable. Select any surface, except a bed, where you feel comfortable resting and where you won't be disturbed. Try not to use a room that is normally associated with frantic energy; don't try to relax where there are a lot of distractions or noises or a place where you normally self-injure, because those places don't naturally encourage relaxation. Once you've selected a place to relax, try to use the same space frequently to give it the "charge" of relaxation. It's easier to drop into stillness if you're not trying to recreate a relaxing vibe in a different space every time.

## Music or Soundscapes

Sometimes music can be a distraction to relaxation, but when the mind is hyperchaotic, busying the thinking mind with music can make it easier to tune some thoughts out. As always, you're the best judge of your own needs. Use music or don't, depending on how it feels for you. If you do use music during relaxation or restoration, consider the points below.

- **Savasana:** Use music that won't draw your attention away from relaxation and that will allow you to feel held in a sonic "womb." Try soothing, consistent-volume, dreamy soundscapes with flutes or natural-wood instruments, and check out the series of audio recordings called "Liquid Mind." Yum.
- **Guided Imagery:** Use background music for Guided Imagery that serves as inspirational or uplifting support but doesn't draw your attention away from the journey you're taking with dramatic volume or intensity changes. Musical textures are best for Guided Imagery, as they don't draw the ear as easily as structured musical progressions. There are a number of Guided Imagery and Guided Meditation CDs available, and they vary in the use of music or soundscapes.
- **Yoga Nidra:** Since you're trying to get away from your chattering mind, you'll need someone else to direct your Yoga Nidra sessions. Try CDs (iRest CD's by Nole Giulini are great). Most teachers don't use music or soundscapes, as they undermine the Yoga Nidra techniques and keep active parts of your mind you're trying to bypass.
- **Restorative Yoga:** Music for Restorative Yoga can be more active than music for Savasana, but it should be soothing and emotionally supportive. Use tracks that you love—music that makes you feel grounded, held, and safe. Restorative poses are held for long periods of time, so it's best to have long tracks or playlists that can span the time each posture is held.

## Positioning Your Body

Restoration comes in many ways, and your body may request different supports each time you relax. Take time to get comfortable, then listen to your body's suggestions and change your position as needed to increase your comfort. There's no sense in enduring discomfort while you're trying to relax, so give yourself permission to change your position at any time you feel physically uncomfortable (without using the fidgeting as a way to avoid relaxing!). Also consider that many relaxation tracks go right into dialogue, so before hitting Play on a CD or track from the internet, get your supports set up and bring a remote (or the computer) to the place you've chosen to rest, so you can start the track after you've comfortably settled into your relaxation position. Don't start a relaxation session feeling hurried.

Suggestions for relaxation positions follow.

### Supine Positions

What you need: blanket or yoga mat

*Optional supports: couch pillow or bolster, small pillow, block, wall, eye pillow, sandbag, blanket*

Arrange a blanket or yoga mat on the floor. Lie down on your back, taking care to keep your spine long, your lower back comfortable, and your chin tilted slightly downward. To increase comfort, place a pillow under your knees and adjust your pelvis so that your lower back is completely released. Let your legs roll outward, the sides of your heels taking the weight of your feet.



Modify this position in any way that increases your comfort: with your back raised to an incline (as Reclining Butterfly, below), with your legs up the wall, or with support under your arms. Adding weight (sandbag, eye pillow, blankets) will deepen sensations of grounding as your body rests.

## ***Prone Positions***

What you need: blanket or yoga mat

*Optional supports: couch pillow or bolster*

Arrange a blanket or yoga mat on the floor. Lie face down, turning your head to whichever side feels most comfortable, resting the weight of your head on your temple. Let your big toes meet as your heels fall outward, then widen your legs while keeping your foot position intact.

To increase comfort and ease strain on your lower back, you might place a pillow under your pelvis, or arrange a bolster on the floor to support the length of your entire torso as you lie on top of it like a starfish.

## ***Knees at 90 Degrees***

What you need: blanket or yoga mat, two large couch cushions or bolsters

*Optional supports: small pillow, towel, eye pillow, sandbag, blanket*

Arrange a blanket or yoga mat on the floor and place a chair or two stacked couch cushions or bolsters where your legs will rest. Sit down on the floor, oriented sideways to the support. Swing your legs up and onto the chair or cushions while turning on your butt and laying back. Extend the length of your spine along the floor, making your lower back as comfortable as possible. The intention is to get your knees bent at 90 degrees with each calf and foot supported. Your bottom should be as close as possible to the chair legs or pillows to release strain on your lower back.

For further back support, tuck a small pillow or rolled towel under the arch of your lower back, or change the height of the pillows under your legs until you feel completely comfortable. Try adding an eye pillow, sandbag, or blanket to increase sensations of grounding.

## ***Reclining Butterfly***

What you need: two large couch cushions, or a bolster and two yoga blocks

*Optional supports: eye pillow, sandbag, small pillows, blocks, blanket*

Place one large couch cushion on the floor. Place a second large couch cushion to rest on the edge of the first cushion so it forms an angle, a backrest that you will lie against. Adjust the support to create an incline that comfortably supports your back and head in a nice, straight line. If the top cushion is floppy, use additional pillows or yoga blocks to prop up the pillow, so you can lean against it on a comfortable incline. After you've arranged your inclined back support, sit back up to prepare the rest of your support.

While sitting on the floor with your bottom near the support you'll be leaning back on, stretch your legs out in front of you. Bend your knees and bring the soles of your feet together to create a diamond shape with your legs. Place one or more throw pillows under each knee to support the weight of your knees and lower thighs. There should be no muscular tension in your groin—let the weight of the legs rest completely into the pillows.

Keeping your legs in this position, lie back onto the reclining cushion. Add a pillow under your head if your neck needs additional support, and adjust yourself as necessary so that you're completely supported and feel no tightness or holding in your legs, back, or neck.

To increase comfort, place a small pillow under each arm. Add an eye pillow, blanket or sandbags on the knees or chest for a deeper sense of grounding.

## A Good Sit

What you need: a surface to sit on

*Optional supports: couch cushion, bolster or small pillow, wall*

If you don't want to relax lying down, get a good sit going. Place a couch cushion, bolster, or pillow on the floor and sit on it in a way that allows your outstretched legs to fall comfortably away from your body. Allow your knees to bend slightly, and increase comfort by placing a pillow under your knees for support. Try to sit mindfully, using your pelvis to support the length of your spine, so the job doesn't go solely to your back or abdominal muscles. You should feel no strain in the hamstrings or the backs of your knees.

If that position doesn't feel comfortable, try sitting on your cushion with your legs crossed, knees falling away from your pelvis. For additional back support, try sitting with your back resting against a wall so that your shoulder blades create an additional stabilizing point for your upper body.

No matter the relaxation position you choose, make sure you take your time setting up your supports. You'll achieve a deeper sense of release if you're supported, and learning to support yourself physically allows you to support yourself mentally. After each relaxation session, you may want to take a few minutes to prepare yourself to reenter your day. Some imagery, meditations, or relaxation activities can leave you feeling a little otherworldly—something like a mental massage. Give yourself time to mindfully transition back into the world without rushing.

## Formlessness

In your deepest state of relaxation, there may be subtle traces of emotions, but they're very, very faint and don't seem to have the charge of active desires, wants, wishes, dislikes, or aversions. You experience the consciousness underneath, or that which exists prior to all of the other active mental processes—information that's normally held unconsciously. Being awake in this place of relaxation, being underneath or behind the thinking process, can seem quite strange at first. Gradually, though, the experience brings increasing peace of mind and insight about the nature of who you truly are. You aren't your thoughts or your attachment to them; you become aware of the endless backdrop of stillness behind the inner actors in your life-movie. With practice, the deepest relaxation gives you time in a state where you see the pure potential of your existence without form, without conscious thought. Exploration ceases, and you enter a great state of peaceful emptiness, the silent space in consciousness. Your destination with relaxation is a vantage point where all of your mental activity isn't even Noticed—where you empty any words, thoughts, images, impressions, or pictures in your mind and feel that you're the formless animation of a spirit living a physical life.

You may never achieve the kind of relaxation that alters your experience of time and space. But there are simple situations in your daily, waking life where bringing forward your ability to willfully calm your mind and body can help you change the habitual reactions you have to life. You may be able to think through some aspects of your internal battles, but you're able to do a different kind of work during relaxation and other practices by going *beyond* your thoughts and impressions to a place of stillness and ease. Relaxation and restoration help you see what you are more clearly, so that when you're in a waking state, thinking about what to do or how to act, you have a sense of yourself beyond all the stuff of your mind and your habitual Responses to the world. Even though it may sound like doing nothing, relaxation expands your knowledge of yourself so that your stability is more accessible while you're out living your life. When you need to come out of your pain and bring your awareness to the present moment, relaxation can help you remember the parts of you that can act skillfully when you're faced with an obstacle, challenge, or opportunity. Relaxation and restoration are habits you can maintain during your entire life; modifying the tactics to suit your current needs. Of course, you have to *choose* to give yourself restoration and relaxation; you have to *choose* gentle self-care when thoughts that say relaxing isn't important try to distract you. Try to choose to restore yourself, you've been through a lot in your life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX:

# Takin' it Home

**E**ven when you've recovered from using self-injury, you'll need to keep in mind that violence could still be one of your tendencies when the circumstances are right. You may need to keep hold of your strategies for coping without self-injury, just in case the urges never fully go away. You may feel sad that self-injury or the trigger experiences were part of your life, and you may feel fearful that you'll always need to be aware of how you cope. But that awareness is simply part of living mindfully. You may regret the time lost managing your emotions when, if you'd just had other information or resources, it wouldn't have taken you so long to learn how to live *with* your past, your fears, and your pain. You may worry that you'll never quite catch up to what some people consider normal. You may always have a shadow of self-injury in your life. Or, you may not. Consider that you can't predict the future or grow faster than time and compounding efforts allow.

Try to minimize your regret about the past or your fear about the future. You can't wish away the turmoil that brought the use of self-injury into your life. You can't predict how long you'll have to count your success in hours or days between self-injury episodes. You don't know what kind of life is in store for you yet. The sign on your Bus will change as you grow, and each leg of your journey will be another chapter in your story. Along the way to recovery, try to consciously choose what you focus on, and don't choose regret or fear. Boost yourself up by remembering how strong you were to look at the emotional consequences of your experiences and to sort out your internal baggage. You can pat yourself on the back every day for how much work you've done to create a life you love, despite your pains. As you change, don't shed your connection to the parts of you that *have* healed—keep some compassion aside for the person you used to be, and remember the enormous accomplishment of learning skills that keep self-injury in the background.

Deciding which people to tell about your self-injury habit once it's largely under control can be a challenge. It's not a dirty secret, but it hasn't been, and won't always be, part of your repertoire for expressing yourself and meeting your needs. As you move away from self-injury, don't hold too tightly to the version of yourself that used self-injury, but also be careful not to create a false identity that creates isolation around something that you may need to continue to manage. Don't hide what's been real, but don't put it on a billboard either, else you may keep active those aspects of your mind that you've worked to tame.

It may be frustrating if you self-injure after a long period of coping through other means, and you may feel like you're going backwards. But you'll never go back to square one, now that your brain has been changed by new information and insights. You'll come to a point where you can trust yourself to simply *live*, because you'll have changed the aspects of your mind that amplify your pain, and you'll see your own tendencies in ways that allow you to choose not to self-injure.

If you feel inspired to find a purpose in life, try to Translate that desire for purpose into a goal of honoring the person you are at your core and consciously choosing your own direction. Try to create an ever-evolving goal for your life instead of a purpose. A purpose is something to live up to—something that can doom you to feeling like a failure if you don't achieve it, despite the fact that your life may be pretty great overall. A single purpose can't tap the depth or breadth of you or encapsulate what you have to give to the world

around you. A goal, though, is something you can work toward or aspire to, such as, “I want to create a life that feels like it fits me.” You can feel confident that you’re meeting your goal at any stage along your path when you recognize the ways in which your life fits you. Don’t set a purpose that serves as a benchmark against which you consistently come up short. Set achievable goals or life aims, and continue to evolve your goals as you evolve.

The movements of your mind may frequently cover over your innate equanimity and make you believe that what you do or how you compare to others matters more than your intention, your direction, your deepest essence, and your skill in returning to yourself again and again when you get knocked off course. Challenging and changing any habit takes perseverance. If you’re going to persevere in any aspect of your life, it may as well be toward getting back to *Yourself* so you can live without oppression from your past, the actions of others, or self-inflicted violence.

In time, you’ll be able to take on stress with strength and ease that you may not be able to imagine right now. One day, you’ll Notice the first tingle of a painful emotional overreaction and you’ll Pause, Listen, Translate, and Respond, knowing which thoughts are just a broken record starting up again and which ones need attention. This coping thing will be old hat, and your self-injury habits can gather some dust in the cargo hold of your brain while your Bus drives on, free of those nasty little buggers that currently enjoy tearing *You* down.

Remember to create a home for yourself to come back to mentally when the pain of life makes you forget *Yourself*. Remember to return to *Yourself* again and again. Get to know *Yourself* beyond your experiences and reactions, and continue to come to life trying to stay open despite the inevitable pain of longing, loneliness, and self-doubt. Continue to reach out to safe others and to find a way to connect with those parts of yourself (and of others) that need compassionate attention. Continue to do the work of learning to cope without self-injury until that delicious day when you Notice that it’s not so much work to cope without it.

Even with all the unanswered questions ahead of you, try not to worry about where your life is headed or whether you’ll ever get to your destination. Simplify your life and just do what you like, because you want to create joy and ease in your life. Try to create softness when your pain is at the forefront, and continue moving in a valued direction. Don’t give up. Don’t believe that this very moment is against you, taking you away from stillness or undermining your ability to adapt. You’re doing pretty well, and it’s only going to get better, despite the challenges that lie ahead.

When a Kid on the Bus pipes up and tries to judge your life’s success or failure, consider that the terms “success” and “failure” apply only if there’s a clear, achievable standard that has or hasn’t been met. Life is seldom that cut and dried. It changes; we change. What fits for us and what we strive for today may not fit or matter to us next Tuesday. No matter what you’ve done so far in your life or how you’ve succeeded or failed in your own mind, the only thing to do is to put one foot in front of the other and continue down your life path—even if it just yields more of the same. Yep, even if the path includes more pain and extended out-breaths; even if it includes endless filtering of your well water in a hazmat suit or a never-ending series of challenges you have to rise to with NPLTR. Regardless of what happens next week, next year, or next lifetime, right now you’re learning to identify *Yourself* accurately underneath all the façades you’ve taken on. You’re working to shed the associations you’ve made with the influence of others in your life. You’re bound to be changed and challenged by the work of understanding yourself in new ways, and you’re also bound to the future that will come through the accumulation of your daily efforts. You’re *bound* to have more ease, hope, and joy in your life.

You, my friend, are firmly on your journey and headed toward your destination. It’s going to be interesting, to say the least. Please try to be gentle with yourself and know that I’m rooting for you.

Go you, go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:

# Resources

**T**he books and links below are intended to help you delve deeper into some of the topics covered in this book. Your work is very personal and will lead you in different directions as you evolve your skills. Pick a starting point and let time and perseverance guide you and the Kids on your Bus toward a life without self-injury.

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## About the Author

Maggie Coalson has refined her ideas on compassion, distress tolerance, and living authentically for more than twenty years, learning how to live skillfully with the effects of challenging life experiences first as a student of various schools of yoga and as a patient working with a mindfulness counselor, and later teaching those skills as a private yoga teacher. Maggie selectively applies ideas found in psychology, yoga, meditation, team leadership, and Emotional Intelligence to create personalized relaxation, emotional management, and physical movement programs to support people during major life transitions and during treatment for cancer, eating disorders, self-injury, and addiction.

Visit [www.stopselfinjuring.com](http://www.stopselfinjuring.com) or [www.maggiecoalson.com](http://www.maggiecoalson.com) for more information.

# It Already Hurts Enough

## *Strategies for Stopping Self-Injury*

Learning to manage the inner content that drives self-harm can be a long and challenging process, but each step of the way can be made easier with the frank, compassionate advice in *It Already Hurts Enough*.

Equal parts resource guide, pep talk, and trusted friend, this practical action guide is full of strategies that will help you create healthy coping habits. Combining insights from psychology, neuroscience, yoga, mindfulness, meditation and bodywork, the strategies in *It Already Hurts Enough* offer a multi-faceted approach to answer the question, "How can I stop using self-harming behavior?"

No matter the ways you harm yourself, the comprehensive and thoughtful strategies in this book will teach you to:

- Stop chaotic thinking and calm emotional overwhelm without self-harm
- Respond gently to yourself and others
- Change habits that fuel self-sabotage and self-injury
- Cope skillfully with lasting effects of trauma or abuse
- Communicate truthfully without increasing conflict
- Understand the deeper meaning behind painful thoughts
- Train your brain to respond effectively to emotional crisis

Change your habits by *changing your mind* – and learn how to interact with your thoughts and emotions so skillfully that you don't *need* self-harm.

**It Already Hurts Enough.**  
*Stop using self-harm to cope.*

