

# TAMING THE SURVIVAL INSTINCT

**A PATH TO INNER AND OUTER PEACE**

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# The Survival Focused Brain

My goal in writing this book was to share an approach to feeling better that has helped me personally and that I use to help people who see me in my therapy practice. I hope it will give you a roadmap and tools to guide you out of pain and into peace.

The main message in this book is that to feel internal peace we need to tame our powerful survival instinct. This instinct is wonderful for keeping us alive and not so wonderful for giving us happiness. Before I really get into this, I already need to put you on alert because as you take steps to feel better, **your survival-oriented brain will fight you**. Mine fights me. Our brains mean well, but parts of them often work against our goals for happiness. This is a big reason why we get emotionally stuck.

The brain is like a big company with lots of departments. In general, they are all working for the good of the company but each of them has their own specific goals. Each department competes with the others to get what it needs to meet its specific goals. Some departments win the competition in one set of situations, and others win in different situations.

The human brain is like this. The department that contains your conscious self, the one reading this sentence right now, might be saying *"I definitely want to feel better – I'm going to read this book and hopefully get some strategies I can use."* Unfortunately, there is another, more powerful department in your brain that sits in your subconscious. It is linked to your survival instinct. This department has lots of rules it likes to follow because it believes those rules keep you safe in the world. That's the department that is going to fight you. (Note that this is an oversimplification of the brain but captures the big picture view of how it works.)

Normally we all would love that our brains are fighting hard to keep us safe in the world. But I don't know if you noticed that I said the subconscious brain has rules *it believes* will keep you safe. The problem is that, sadly, **the brain often believes things that aren't true**.

I am going to talk about this at length later, but for now, I want to emphasize the warning. If you want to feel better, be aware that your subconscious brain will fight you. This fight will likely occur as you read this book, which is why I am putting this warning at the beginning. I might say something that gets your subconscious brain worried that a change may happen, and it may nudge you with a message like *"This is stupid. She doesn't know what she's talking about. I'm done with this."* And your brain might be right! I might be out to lunch or a quack or a con artist. I don't want you to throw away your critical thinking

skills - they protect you from being conned. But I want you to start noticing there is a difference between a critical thinking reaction and a *“there’s something deeper here”* reaction. The latter might be a sign that you’re getting close to a rule that your brain doesn’t want you to mess with, for good or ill. Here’s an example of what I mean.

I recently read a library book on how the brain tricks us into believing things that aren't true. At one point in the book, the author started talking about the controversy about vaccine use. Someone who had read this library book before me wrote a stream of curses next to this section. This person clearly had a reaction to what the author said. I continued to read the book and found that each time the author talked about the vaccine controversy, the person wrote an angry response. The author talked about many different topics, but this was the one that the person's brain reacted to. I was impressed that the reader hung in there and didn't throw the book away in disgust as soon as the topic came up. At the same time, the curses suggested that this was not a critical thinking reaction. If you are having a critical thinking reaction, you will feel a surge of emotion but it won't overwhelm you into acting out in ways you normally wouldn't be okay with (like lashing out with curses).

If you have a reaction like that reading this book, try to survive it, note it, but don't believe your subconscious brain's message completely until you have looked deeper (I will show you how to do that). If you then find that your subconscious brain was 100% right and your reaction was justified, then please do chuck this book and go on with your life. It's what I would do.

Okay, enough about that for now. Let's start taming the brain.



# My Dear Sweet Lying Brain

People get emotionally stuck for a few key reasons. One is that their human needs aren't being met. If I am living in an abusive situation, I will feel terrible. My human need for a safe environment is not being met and my brain will bombard me with painful emotions to remind me of that. It wants me to take action so it will keep making me feel bad until I do. If I feel completely alone in the world then I will likely also feel terrible. My human need for connection is not being met. Human needs have to be met in order for us to feel okay and be healthy.

Another reason people get emotionally stuck is the focus of this book. Before I talk about it though, I need to be really clear about something. When you are hurting emotionally, know that what you feel is real and what you feel is valid. Feelings (aka emotions) always come from something real. There is always truth in our pain. Unfortunately, that isn't the whole story. If it was, we wouldn't get emotionally stuck. So although I'm a little worried that your subconscious survival-oriented brain is not going to like what I'm about to say, I'm just going to dive in and say it ...

**When we are stuck in emotional pain, it means our brains are trapped in lies.**

These aren't straightforward lies. They are special lies. They are lies meant to keep us safe. Usually they contain some elements of truth mixed in with the lies, which just adds to the confusion. The fact is that the survival-oriented brain cares more about safety than it does about truth, which in many ways is wonderful. The problem is that in many ways this isn't wonderful because **it is the lies of the brain that give us most of our emotional troubles.** To tame the brain, we need to clean out the lies.

## How lies get in the brain

Even though the brain lies to us, it really is a dear, sweet organ. It honestly is trying to help us. It is extremely focused on its primary goal, which is survival. The lies of the brain were put there because at one point in our lives, they helped us through a tough situation. Usually this was a situation that the brain interpreted as a survival risk. Unfortunately, the brain interprets a lot of situations incorrectly. It does this intentionally to save time and energy. It isn't looking for precision and accuracy – it is looking for fast and safe. The brain operates as a *“better safe than sorry”* machine and a *“close enough”* machine. That opens the door for a lot of lies to get stored in the brain.

Another way lies get in the brain is they sneak in during childhood. During childhood, several factors combine to make our brains more open to storing lies as truths. The first is that children are operating

with a partially developed brain. When stuff happens to them, it may occur before they have the brain capacity to really analyze the truth of it. The second is children are wired for survival reasons to believe their caregivers are healthy and safe, and sadly, this is not the case for many people. In this situation, the child brain tries to work from this premise and as it does, it stores lies. It is trying to make sense of its world without letting itself go to the place of *“my parents are messed up”*. I believe that is why it is common for child abuse survivors to get stuck in the *“it was my fault”* space. The brain is trying to understand how things went wrong and it has as a given that parents, or other adults, are reliable and safe so it must be my fault. This is a huge, painful lie that many survivors have to battle.

One job of adulthood is to revisit what our brains stored during childhood. Many of the beliefs have never been reviewed by a fully functioning adult brain. Those beliefs will drive your emotions and behaviors. Bringing them into conscious awareness gives you a chance to shift them.

### **The truth will set you free**

Humanity has known about the lying brain for thousands of years. The Greek philosopher Epictetus said *“What disturbs people, these are not things, but the judgments relating to things”*. The Bible says *“the truth shall set you free”*. The Buddha said that the root of suffering is ignorance of the truth. Yet when we hear this, we still don’t get it. When I first came across the Buddhist version of this idea, probably 20 years ago now, I thought it was a bit flaky. But I was intrigued by it and so just for fun I started testing it out in my own life. I was shocked to find out that no matter what I applied it to, it worked. When I was in emotional pain, I was able, after exerting some effort, to find the lies in my thinking. When I cleaned out the lies – again with some effort – I felt better and I made better choices. This has made a huge difference in my life.

This doesn’t mean I am okay with everything that goes on in my world. I’m not. I am not okay with the oppression of people for any reason. I am not okay with unnecessarily harming living things. There are many things that I am not okay with. The difference is I don’t stay stuck in anger (or guilt, or worry, ...) I notice it, register the message it is sending me of *“I’m not okay with this”* (in the case of anger), and then, because I have cleaned up the lies on the issue, my feelings turn into motivation to take action (if possible) mixed with a healthy sadness for the situation.

### **My emotional cluelessness**

Just to put it out there, I wasn’t raised to know all this. I learned it as an adult. This awareness and knowledge is part of emotional intelligence and for most of my life, I was emotionally clueless. It was probably not until my mid-30s that the lightbulbs started coming on for me, and even more so in my 40s. The key facilitators of my emotional growth have been Buddhist ideas and cognitive therapy. I feel sadness and regret for the hurt I caused while I was in my emotionally clueless state, and embarrassment for how annoying I must have been to others. I have learned to forgive myself and have made peace with my past. I don’t stay stuck in painful feelings because I’ve cleaned out the lies that used to trap me there. This is what I will show you how to do as well.

By the way, I do still have some areas of my brain that have lies that kick me around a bit at times. These tend to be related to painful school and friendship experiences as a child. They don't really get in my way that much and so I've decided they aren't worth doing more work on at this point. Know that you don't have to clean everything in your brain. You can decide what it is getting in your way right now and focus there.

## Healthy emotion vs unhealthy emotion

I want to say just a bit about emotions before we dive into the tools to clean up the lies of the brain. It is important to recognize that emotions originate in the brain. The subconscious brain decides that it needs to send the conscious brain a message and it uses emotions, aka feelings, to do so. Feelings are messages and they are also motivators. They have an energy to them which push us to behave in a particular way. When I see my partner, my brain sends me positive feeling sensations to say *"this is good – he's nice, we can connect with him, we like connection, it is a survival strategy – move towards this"*. When I see a big hairy spider, my brain sends me fear and disgust sensations to say *"this is scary and icky – it could be harmful - move away from it."* If I have a pain in my knee, my brain sends me worry sensations to get me to look after it. And so on.

Our emotions come from judgments of the brain. Most of the time, the judgments are accurate. When that happens, we have healthy emotion. The emotion fits the situation and guides us towards choices that are good for us. Even painful emotion can be healthy. If I am in a relationship and my partner is so depressed that I can't have a good connection with him, then I will feel frustrated, alone, and sad. That makes sense. Those painful emotions are motivating me to find answers to the lack of connection in my relationship. They are moving me towards a healthier relationship. That's good!

But there are lots of cases where the brain gets caught in unhealthy emotion. Unhealthy emotion confuses us and steers us toward choices that are not good for us. Unhealthy emotion is driven by the lies in the brain. For example, if I've had painful life experiences that made me feel not good enough, I will likely be anxious about many things. That anxiety may pop up when I get a call for a job interview. My brain may start to freak out and send me all sorts of anxious feelings and thoughts like *"I'm going to make a fool of myself in the interview"* or *"They aren't going to want to hire me anyway"*. It is trying to protect me from hurt by making me too anxious to go for the interview. This is unhealthy emotion.

I have no idea whether I will make a fool of myself or be rejected and avoiding job interviews does not move me towards a healthy life, one where I can look after myself and feel good about myself. There is a truth in the fear, which is that I have been rejected and hurt in the past, and that it is possible that this will happen again. But there are also many lies, like *"the solution is to avoid the situation"*, *"all people will hurt me"*, *"I'm a failure and a loser"*, etc. Much of our misery comes from the brain connecting the dots the wrong way and storing lies mixed with truths. When you change how it connects the dots, you release a lot of emotional pain. I have seen this happen with others and I use this to principle to find and release pain in my own life.

## But what about...?

Some part of your brain may just have said *“Wait a minute! Not all emotional pain is about lies. What about grief, or abuse, or trauma, or ...?”* Your brain is right about that. As I mentioned before, humans have emotional pain for two main reasons. One is that our human needs are not being met. When that is the case, the brain gives us pain to push us to get those needs met. There are no lies in this kind of pain. These emotions are trying to get us to make certain decisions to give us a healthier life. That’s what we want. It is appropriate and useful.

It is the other reason for emotional pain that we want to work on. That pain happens when the brain has connected the dots in the wrong way. This is the emotional pain we want to get rid of. But first, let’s talk about some of these special situations.

### Grief

If your brain went *“But what about grief? There are no lies in feeling bad when someone dies”*, I agree. Kind of. This is true *if* we are talking about **healthy grief**. Healthy grief is *“my dog died and I miss her. She was wonderful.”* There are no lies in that. Unhealthy grief is *“my dog died and I’ll never be happy again. No dog will ever be as amazing as her. And the vet is to blame – she’s a horrible person!”* This will feel completely true, and there are parts of it that no doubt are true. But it also contains lies. The lies keep us stuck in unhealthy grief.

### Abuse

You might also ask *“but if I’m being abused or bullied and I feel terrible because of it, does that mean I have lies?”* Again, healthy emotion can have pain, but it doesn’t trap us like unhealthy emotion. It is healthy to feel awful when you’re being abused. Abuse exists in many forms, from abusive friends, romantic partners, family members, bosses, and colleagues, to the abuse of systemic oppression like racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, ableism, etc. Abuse damages people and that’s not okay. So if you feel angry about the abuse, that is healthy. If you feel scared about the abuse, that is healthy. In this case, you are not trapped by your emotions; you are trapped by the situation. Your emotions don’t need to change; the situation needs to change. Still, your brain will often give you extra misery about a painful situation in the form of lies. Your brain may say *“I deserve to be with this abusive person”* or *“No one nice would want to be with me”* or many other painful messages. Cleaning these out will give you more strength to deal with the situation in healthy ways.

### Trauma

If you’ve been traumatized, by childhood neglect or an emotionally intense experience or abuse, then your brain will for sure store some lies. However, it will also have some additional injuries that you will need to heal. Trauma disrupts the brain in unique ways. So yes you will feel better if you clean out the lies but you will also likely need to do other things to help your brain heal from trauma. A therapist can help you with that process.



## Physical pain

Chronic physical pain is brutal. It takes a lot of emotional and physical energy to tolerate pain. Physical pain does not have lies in and of itself, but the brain often likes to throw some on the pile. There is a Buddhist analogy that I like. If you are shot by an arrow, you will feel pain. That is pain but not suffering. Suffering occurs when *we shoot ourselves* with a second arrow that contains anger about the first arrow, fear about what it means to have been shot by an arrow, etc. Suffering is what we inflict on ourselves. Pain is what life inflicts. Suffering is held in the lies of the brain. There is a healthy way to think about physical pain that can reduce the misery and an unhealthy way that will increase the misery.

## Beyond the truth

Finally, moving into the truth isn't the only thing we have to do in order to feel good. In my opinion, it is the most powerful and effective way to feel better, because we are targeting and changing specific connections in the brain. But, ultimately, in order to feel better we have to look after our brains in general too (well, really our entire nervous system but I will simplify it by just calling it the brain). And our brains have multiple needs. They need good nutrition, adequate sleep, protection from traumatizing experiences, and, here's one you maybe haven't thought about, exposure to the right amount of stimulation – not too much and not too little.

## Nervous system arousal

In the psychology world this is known as our “level of arousal”. It is the degree of nervous system stimulation that lets us feel good. This will vary depending on several factors. One is whether you are an introvert or extrovert. I am an introvert. I am not on the extreme end of introversion so I can function just fine in social situations. But it still wears me down. My nervous system is not wired for a lot of external stimulation. That's why thrill rides and adrenaline seeking activities are not enjoyable for me; they just make me feel icky. Extroverts are wired differently. They need a different level and type of nervous system arousal to feel okay. We need to understand what our nervous systems need to feel optimal and if we want to feel okay most of the time, we need to work with that.

Another factor is how much internal stimulation your emotional brain is generating. For example, if you are a very anxious person, you may find you can't handle too much clutter in your environment. I believe this is because the brain is already getting a lot of stimulation from all its worrying. If you're someone who has unresolved trauma or abuse, then your brain will also tend to be extra stimulated. It is spending a lot of energy trying to sort out your painful experiences and even more energy worrying; it understandably believes your world is very dangerous. If you are a first responder (e.g., paramedic, police officer, etc.) you likely have an overstimulated brain because of exposure to emotionally intense situations; these situations are hard for the human brain to process, especially in large quantities. You may find that you aren't able to tolerate as much stimulation as you once did. Your brain will tend to be overloaded in settings with lots going on like loud noises, bright lights, and lots of people.

There are steps you can take to help an over-stimulated brain. One is to do therapy to clean up pain related to trauma or abuse you've experienced. Another is to clean up the lies of your brain so your

brain is spending less time in painful emotion. Another step you can take is to incorporate mindfulness practices into your life. These practices force the brain to slow down and strengthen its ability to do so on demand. I have included some basic mindfulness exercises at the end of this book that you can try. By the way, under-stimulation is also a problem. That is one reason sensory deprivation is torturous and harmful if done over long periods. So if you are too bored, your brain can find this stressful.

## Runaway brain

The last thing I am going to say about helping the brain in a general sense is that in order to feel good, we all need strategies to take control of our brains when they are going wild on us. For example, you might have been thinking about something neutral, like going to the movies and trying to decide which one to see. All of a sudden your brain starts reminding you of that time when you went with your old girlfriend and that was when you broke up, and it was awful and painful. Then it reminds you of how bad that relationship was, bringing up memories of when you would fight. Then it pokes you with some sadness that you are single right now. And then it reminds you of all the relationships you've had that didn't work out, and now you are in a pile of emotional pain – and all you wanted to do was pick a movie!

The brain behaves this way because it believes it is helpful (and sometimes it is). When you think about movies, your subconscious brain goes *“hmm, what do we know about movies ... oh here's some stuff ... and oh, wait a minute, here's some stuff about movies that has old pain with it. Pain means trouble so I better remind her about it so she can keep herself safe. Now, let me see, what else do I have here in my filing cabinets that might be related ...”* If you have old, unresolved pain – meaning, you haven't sat down with yourself and sorted it out – then the brain will tend to want to remind you of that. My theory is this happens because the brain is worried about the unresolved parts of that memory. If you haven't given it some answers about a painful experience, it may worry that there are parts there that are still dangerous. After all, there is pain there and to the brain, pain means something is wrong. The brain wants answers so it knows how to navigate the world to keep you safe.

I have a personal story that illustrates this. The year before I started this book, Donald Trump was elected as president of the United States. I didn't realize it, but this event was a big deal for my survival brain. Like many people, I was sexually assaulted as a child by a relative, my uncle to be clear. I was 11 years old when it happened. It took me a year to tell anyone about it, and when I did, the adults that I told said I was lying and did nothing. At the time, this was very upsetting, but as a child, I just had to deal with it and I did.

Well, I thought I had dealt with it. Fast forward several decades later, and it turns out my subconscious brain still had some concerns. When Trump was elected, I had a strong anxiety reaction, almost like a panic. In that panic, I felt *compelled* to tell women in my life that it was not okay that a man who admitted to sexually assaulting women was president of the US. When I say *compelled*, it was like I had no choice. My brain wouldn't settle down until I did it. After a while, the panic feeling eased enough for me to realize that I was feeling and acting in ways that were not normal for me. So I started trying to sort out what was going on and this is what I came up with.

I believe what happened was my brain, on hearing the news that Trump was elected, went *“hmm, what do I know about this topic? What’s in my filing cabinets?”* and it said *“Oh, I know where else I’ve heard that sexual assault is no big deal – your aunt and grandmother gave you that message when you told them about your uncle.”* When my brain touched this memory, it created a panic in me to make sure other people didn’t have the same painful experience that I did as a child. I wasn’t aware that this was what was motivating me until the emotion had settled down enough for me to analyze it.

While all this was going on, I was feeling very vulnerable. I found myself searching for validation from other people and in the news. I looked for instances where others were saying *“hey, this IS a big deal. It’s not okay that we are ignoring Trump’s sexual assaults.”* Often, finding this message was difficult. I very often found silence or the opposite message, which intensified my panic. My theory is that my survival brain was struggling with the message that sexual assault is no big deal because it knew how painful my experience of it was. It needed to know that not everyone felt this way, because if they did, my brain believed this would be a dangerous situation.

That’s when I thought of the Buddhist community. I knew the beliefs of Buddhism were about compassion, kindness, and respect and I felt safe looking at their views of the election. I found safety and validation in the online world in the Buddhist community and I am deeply grateful to the lovely people who created that safe space (especially LionsRoar.com). I didn’t interact with any of them; I just read what they had to say. Their words helped settle down my panicking brain by giving it an answer to the question *“do people think sexual assault is no big deal?”* My brain is still not completely settled down and I don’t think it will be while Donald Trump is in office. My survival brain still sees the acceptance of his behavior as a threat to my safety even though my conscious brain, for the most part, does not.

A big part of this book is about how to settle down the brain by giving it answers to its upsetting questions, just like I had to do. However, sometimes you just need to get your runaway brain to chill out for a bit. You don’t want to have to fear your brain, which does happen. I see many people in my therapy practice who are afraid to be alone because they know their brains are going to torture them. They keep themselves busy so they don’t have to think. Being busy is fine, but it is tiring if you feel forced to be busy so your brain won’t overwhelm you with misery. To get the runaway brain to relax, you can use mindfulness exercises. I use them myself when my brain is misbehaving. I have included my favorite mindfulness exercises in an appendix so you can give them a try. That is all I wanted to say about the general care of the brain and nervous system. This book is focused on changing the brain by not letting it lie to us. So let’s get onto that now.



# Understanding the Survival Instinct

When you understand the brain's goals, you can spot the lies more easily. Remember that the brain's number one goal is survival (so it can do its number two goal, which is reproduce). At the most primitive level, survival is aided by fighting, fleeing, or freezing.

Pete Walker, a therapist who works with survivors of childhood abuse and trauma, also talks about “fawning” as a survival response. This is the people pleasing, submissive stance we sometimes have to take just to stay safe around harmful people. This makes sense to me because we see it in other social mammals, like dogs. They roll over and show their bellies and other behaviors to indicate submission, to show they are not a threat. I think we do this instinctively too. So don't be hard on yourself if you are a people pleaser; you likely learned to do this as a survival strategy in a harmful environment. It is still reasonable to want to change that behavior, but you don't get to blame yourself for having it. It was probably an instinctual survival response.

## Survival is linked to belonging and connection

At the next level up - the social mammal part of us - survival is about belonging and connection. Our species uses being social to increase our odds of survival. So the brain will fight hard to keep us belonging and connecting, so hard that it will sometimes lie to us to make it happen. It will even keep us belonging when the situation is emotionally harmful (so long as it doesn't threaten survival). Why do people stay in cults? Many reasons but one of the powerful reasons is the sense of belonging. Why do we get so passionate about our sports teams? It gives us a sense of community, which is belonging.

That's good stuff, but realize that your brain has no problem lying to you about HOW good. It just likes that you belong. It has no problem encouraging you to hate the other team because it keeps you tied to your team. Hating another sports team is really bizarre, when you think about it. They aren't a threat to your survival so why have such a strong emotional reaction to them? Because your brain says *“yes they ARE a threat to survival because I need to belong to a group, and I've chosen to belong to THAT group (among others) and anything that threatens my group or suggests that I am wrong to belong to that group is dangerous.”* As we look at the common lies in key emotions like guilt, anger, fear, etc., you will see these themes over and over again.

Okay, onward to the meat and potatoes of this book – getting the brain to see the truth. One last time with my warning (sorry to be a nag but it is THAT important) ... be on guard for that self-protecting part of your brain. It might be catching on already that you are thinking of changing something and it will be

afraid that you are going to threaten its survival. Remember to notice the push from your brain but don't buy into it until you've had a chance to sort it out.

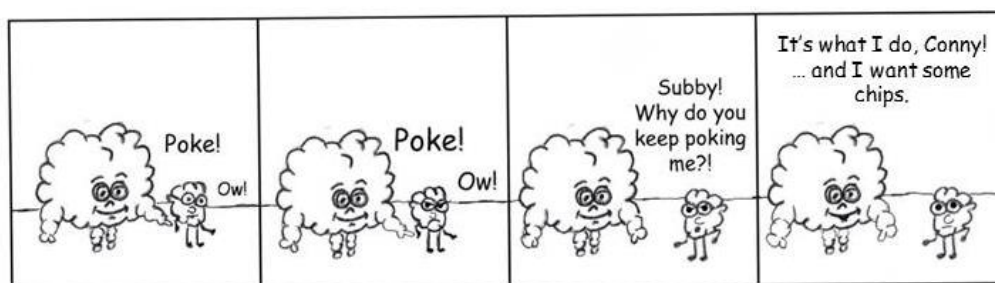


# The Signposts of Lies

There are certain indicators that will signal that your brain is lying to you. I call these signposts and they are principles you can use to keep your brain in check.

## Signpost 1: You know you are stuck in the brain's lies when you feel upset for more than a few minutes.

This may seem like an exaggerated claim, but hear me out. Painful emotions have a purpose. They are messages from the subconscious brain – aka “Subby” - to the conscious brain – aka “Conny”. Subby is powerful; s/he has all the power of our survival instincts, and that’s a lot of power. Conny is the part of you reading this book right now. Subby uses painful emotions to get Conny’s attention because we notice pain. But once we get the message - whether it is the message of anger which is “*I’m not okay with this*”, or the message of guilt which is “*I need to fix something*”, or the message of fear which is “*I need to get away from this*” - we don’t need to hang onto it. We’ve got the message; now we need to make sense of it and figure out which action to take. Once I tell Subby my plan for addressing the problem, s/he will relax (but heads up! Subby will come back to nag me if I take too long to solve the problem).



## Feeling numb

I need to mention some exceptions to this rule. The first is feeling numb. Many people who see me for therapy say they can’t really feel any emotions. They just feel numb. A common reason for this is that they have had an emotional burnout. Their brains were feeling too much (usually anxiety, worry, stress, or frustration) for too long. This happens when we have had to push through unhealthy situations like toxic workplaces or toxic relationships or trauma. When we ignore the emotional messages of the brain and stay in the situation that it isn’t happy about, we can burn out. Subby was trying to get our

attention, giving us anxious feelings or feelings of stress, but we ignored her/him. Subby eventually reaches a crisis point and takes over, saying *"Times up, Conny! You've ignored me and now I'm shutting us down because I have nothing left, I can't feel anymore."* When that happens, you end up with an exhausted nervous system that can't generate feelings. Subby then keeps you feeling numb and fatigued so you don't put yourself in stressful situations. S/he keeps you there until your nervous system recovers. There is an important message here, which is **if you ignore Subby for too long, s/he will take control.**

### Feeling sad

The second exception to the rule of only feeling emotion for a few minutes is sadness. Sadness is about healing loss and this takes time. In order to heal, we need to let ourselves feel the sadness a bit, and then take a break. I like to tell people you want to visit sadness, but you don't want to live there. One way to visit is to let yourself think of the loss. I did this when my dear little cat died. I would look at her picture every day and let myself cry a little, and I would talk to her and let her know I missed her. Then I would take a break. Over time, it became less and less painful to think of her. I still have a small wound, several years later, but it isn't a sharp pain.

If we keep doing this, the sadness will heal and we will be able to function again. The brain principle behind this is if you stay in avoidance, in this case of painful feelings, the brain doesn't have an opportunity to reorganize itself so it gets stuck. When you approach fear or pain, your brain has to take out what it has stored on it from its filing cabinets. When you are done thinking about the memory, it puts stuff back in the filing cabinets, but it changes it slightly, because it has to add that you looked at it today and what you thought and felt about it (this is an oversimplification but gets at the gist of the process). So the thought and feeling memories get modified bit by bit and this helps to shift the pain. This is only true, however, if our brain hasn't added some lies to our sadness.

### Signpost 2: You know you are caught in lies when you have Thinking Traps in your thoughts.

David Burns created a list of mental traps, called *cognitive distortions*, that are commonly seen in people struggling with their emotions. I prefer to call them Thinking Traps because that is exactly what they are – traps. If your thoughts have Thinking Traps, you know your brain is lying to you. Here are just a few of the Thinking Traps our human brains get caught in:

<b>Thinking Trap</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>All or nothing thinking:</b> Assuming all good or all bad <i>This is a lie because life really is more complex than that.</i>	I only got a B on my exam. I'm a failure.
<b>Mind-Reading:</b> Assuming you know what others think and that it is negative <i>This is a lie because we really can't read minds.</i>	Everyone thinks I'm a terrible parent.
<b>Fortune-Telling:</b> Making and believing negative predictions about the future <i>This is a lie because we suck at predicting the future. If we were good at it, we'd all be rich!</i>	If my son goes away to college, he will drink, become an alcoholic and his life will be ruined.
<b>Emotional Reasoning:</b> Reasoning from your feelings <i>This is a lie because feelings aren't facts. They are fuzzy messages, sometimes about the present moment, often about the past. They require interpretation – we can't take them at face value.</i>	I feel like a terrible person which means I am a terrible person.
<b>Should Statements:</b> Using the word <i>should</i> to demand that you, others, or the world be different <i>Should's are lies because they are really feelings pretending to be facts.</i>	I should have known better. He shouldn't have cut me off. The train shouldn't be late when I'm in a hurry.
<b>Labeling:</b> Insulting yourself or others <i>Labels are lies because they pretend to say something truthful when they really are just our "fight" response attacking with abuse.</i>	That mistake was stupid. I'm such an idiot.

I will show you how to break out of these Thinking Traps as we go along. Now that you know about the signposts of lies, you will be able to spot when your brain is in an unhelpful self-protection mode. You will also need to know how to spot the signposts of the truth. Let's go there next.





# The Signposts of Truth

Not only do I need to know the signs for when my brain is lying to me, but I also need to know the signs that indicate I have found the truth. When I see them, I know I'm on the right track.

## **Signpost 1: You know you have found the truth when your thoughts are free of Thinking Traps.**

This makes sense given that Thinking Traps trap us with lies. They are the result of the shortcuts of the brain. Remember, the brain likes fast and “close enough for safety” thinking. I will show you how to break free of the traps as I go through the scenarios later. For now, I want to speak to one of them, the “should” trap, because understanding how to break free of it can be very powerful. It was for me.

### **Should on yourself**

You might be wondering that if you're not allowed “shoulds”, then what do you do with beautiful thoughts like “*I should pay my rent*” or “*I should be kind to others*” or “*I shouldn't kill people*”? Although these thoughts won't usually take someone to a bad place, I still want to get rid of the “should”. I don't need it and it adds the risk of being trapped. Instead, I want to be clearer with my thoughts and by this I mean more truthful and fact-based. It gives less opportunity for my brain to get stuck. So if I get to the truth of these “shoulds”, this is what I am really saying:

- Instead of “*I should pay my rent*” I say “*I have the choice of paying my rent or not paying it. If I don't pay it, there will be consequences that I don't like, so to avoid those consequences, I am choosing to pay my rent.*”
- Instead of “*I should be kind to others*” I say “*I am choosing to be kind to others because it makes me feel good and it increases the likelihood of healthy relationships. No one is forcing me to be that way – I am choosing it.*”
- Instead of “*I shouldn't kill people*” I say “*I am choosing not to kill people because I would feel terrible if I did and I will lose my freedom if I'm caught, and I like my freedom. No one is forcing me not to kill people – I could go out and do it anytime. I choose not to because it fits with my values and the consequences are not what I want.*”

When I have a “should” on myself, very often I am ignoring that I am actually choosing something. If I shift these “shoulds” in that direction, I start to own my actions more and not feel so controlled by the world, because frankly, I can do pretty much anything I want. But all things have consequences and I get to pick and choose which consequences I’m okay with. For me personally, this was a very empowering realization. It made me question all the “shoulds” that were driving my life. I now keep an eye out for them sneaking back into my brain and when I find them, I shift them to a healthier, more truthful place. When I do that, I feel emotionally clear again.

### Should on others

What about “shoulds” on others, like *“people should be considerate of each other”*? When I have this kind of thought, I am really trying to share a longing or a feeling (usually sadness or worry). My brain doesn’t want me to feel these painful emotions so it keeps me in the more energizing feelings of anger and frustration that accompanies a “should”. I’m really saying *“I wish people were considerate of each other”* or *“I am hurt and angry because someone was inconsiderate to me”*. These are truthful, factual thoughts but they touch sadness, or hurt, or worry. So our brains resist taking us there.

By the way, it is also not legitimate to say *“people should ...”* unless I am ruler of the world (and I’m not). It is factual to say that I want it to be so, or I would prefer if it was so. I can even say I plan on getting into politics so I can make it a law that people are considerate, and that would be my right. But even if there was a law, it wouldn’t be okay to use the “should”. The truthful thought is *“the law says people have to be considerate. If people break that law, they will face the consequences.”* I don’t get to tell other adults how they should be. That is not my right and frankly it is disrespectful of their rights. The law defines the broad parameters of acceptable behavior and my boundaries define the rest.

### Should on life

Finally, what about *“the world should be fair”*? This is another longing or feeling thought hidden in a “should”. I’m really saying *“I’m sad and frustrated that I or others have been treated unfairly.”* That’s a healthy thought; there are no thinking traps in it. Even *“I would like the world to be fair”* is a healthy thought and is a legitimate desire. If my self-protecting brain still isn’t happy with these alternatives, it is usually because it has legitimate fear related to the unfairness. I may have been hurt by the injustice that comes with systemic oppression like racism or sexism or any of the other hurtful “isms” out there. In that case, the anger in *“the world should be fair”* energizes me to fight and also to be on guard. Still, I will have more energy if I get rid of the “should” (even if all it does is get me out of having to debate with someone about this “should”, that will save me energy). This is how I have let go of the Thinking Trap in this thought: *“I would love the world to be fair. It hurts to be treated unfairly and to be disrespected. Still, we aren’t there yet as a species. We’ve come a long way but we are still a work in progress. We have to tame our self-protecting survival-focused brains in order to be fair to each other, and most of us don’t know that yet. I’m sad that I have to live at a time where we still struggle with our survival instincts, but I could have been born 500 years ago, and that would have been worse, especially as a woman. So I can make peace with the fact that I live at a time when I have a job to do, which is to*

*keep pushing our species forward into a more emotionally intelligent place so future generations can have a kinder and more fair world."*

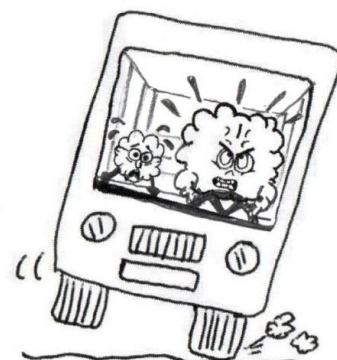
## Should and Blame

One of the problems with "shoulds" is that they push us into blame. "Shoulds" on ourselves result in self-blame. "Shoulds" on others result in other-blame. Blame is another trap. Why? Because there are lies in blame. Whenever there are lies, we get trapped. We need the truth to make good decisions, decisions that will give us long-lasting positive results. Let's look at the lies in blame.

Let's say I'm in a painful relationship and am telling myself *"I shouldn't have got into this relationship. My partner isn't reliable with money or keeping commitments and now this is a real problem for us. I saw it from the beginning but I ignored it. I am to blame for getting myself into this mess."* There are some beautifully healthy and truthful parts to this, but there are also some lies. The truthful parts are *"Yup, I did ignore the red flags and so to some degree, I brought this on myself."* The lies in self-blame, however, are usually flavors of a single lie. It looks kind of like this:

***I was able to make a different choice and I didn't make it.***

Here's why this is a lie. It assumes that you have complete control over yourself, and guess what, you don't. Neither do I. Subby is in charge. If Subby is happy, only then will s/he let Conny drive. Conny is the part of you that chooses. If Subby isn't happy, Subby will force her or his choices by pushing with emotion, clouding your decision making, making you too tired to fight for what you know is right, etc. The truth is we can only make choices based on what we *know* is true if our feelings let us. Feelings have more action energy than knowledge. That is our biology. Conny is about knowledge. Subby is about feelings. If we don't address our emotion, i.e., make Subby happy, Subby takes charge. Conny has to sit in the passenger seat and watch Subby drive into the ditch. This is the big lie in self-blame.



What about other-blame? Let's look at an example. Let's say I have a brother-in-law who is difficult to be around (which I don't, by the way). He says critical things about me or my partner but says he is only joking around and that I'm *"too sensitive"*. A healthy reaction on my part is to be angry because it is not okay for others to use criticism as a joke. From that anger, Subby will likely give me a thought like *"He's such a jerk! Next time I see him, I'm going to give him a taste of his own medicine!"* That's a normal thought to have. I would have that thought in a heartbeat. It is my wonderful survival instinct kicking into fight mode, working hard to protect me from the harmful behaviors of others. Blame comes in when Subby convinces us that the reason I'm so unhappy is because of his behavior, something like *"That was a terrible evening and it is all his fault!"*

The lie in other-blame looks something like this:

***My happiness is in your hands. I have no control. So you have to change for me to be happy.***

I sure hope this isn't true! If it is, life will be pretty crazy. Having my happiness be completely in the hands of other people would be a rollercoaster of emotion. And frankly, it just isn't true. Emotions are chemicals in *my* body, released on instructions from *my* brain. That's *my* brain and only I have access to it (unless someone has opened my skull and is poking around in my brain). So other people can't make me feel anything. Sometimes an element of this may be true, for example, if someone else has all the available food and aren't giving me any, then it will be pretty hard for me to feel happiness because of starvation. But even in that extreme case, I could argue that I may feel pain and sadness, but I don't need to feel the emotional misery that comes from anger. That is still on me.

The other lie in here is *"you have to change for me to be happy."* Actually, in the case of my brother-in-law, I have other options. The most obvious one is I get to choose to not be around him. And that is what is called a boundary. We address harmful behavior through boundaries. We use boundaries to protect us instead of doing what anger wants us to do, which is fight. Boundaries are the rules we set to protect our health. We can have boundaries to protect our physical health (e.g., people are not allowed to hit me), emotional health (e.g., people are not allowed to yell at me), financial health (e.g., I don't loan money to people), etc. Good boundaries are necessary for good health. When I use boundaries, I can shift out of blame – which feeds anger – and into accountability. In the scenario with my brother-in-law, I could do this by saying to myself *"His behavior is not okay. He clearly is struggling with himself – I can tell Subby is running his life. That sucks for him. Regardless, I have the right to protect myself from damaging behaviors. I need to put in some boundaries. This will allow me to not get hurt and also not stay trapped in anger. I'm going to talk to my spouse about this and we will come up with a plan so I don't have to put up with this nonsense."*

The boundaries I set in this situation can range from no longer having contact with the person to having limited contact in safe settings. The bottom line is that I protect myself from emotional (and physical, if relevant) damage. That is really what boundaries are – rules that protect my health. I have the right to protect my health. If I want to, I can choose to tolerate small doses of bad behavior from my brother-in-law (because, for example, it allows me to keep my relationship with his kids). But I can only do that if it isn't harming me so much that I struggle to recover from our interactions. If it is breaking me down, I need stronger boundaries, which may include a sacrifice, but looking after my emotional and physical health is not optional.

I am able to shift out of other-blame and judgment when I acknowledge that boundaries are my responsibility. If I know that I need better boundaries with someone and I don't put them in place, as soon as my blamey self starts complaining, I remind her *"hey, you know you need some boundaries here. Work on your fear of that and this will be solved. Don't blame him – he's trapped in his clueless state."*

Aside: Why is criticism so difficult for us?

Here's my theory of why criticism, including constructive criticism, is so hard to take. Criticism feels like an attack to the brain. If someone in my group is criticising me, that's a threat to my survival because humans use social connection as a

survival strategy. So when I'm criticised, my survival instinct kicks in; I can't help it.

This means I have to work hard to get my survival instinct to behave when I'm around my brother-in-law. That's a lot of work which makes my relationship with him high maintenance. If his goal is to end our relationship, he is on the right track because I don't do high maintenance. In other words, he is creating the conditions for me to say *"being around you is not worth the hassle."*

Does this mean no one can criticize me? Nope, but it means when they do, it has to be extremely clear that they are coming from good intentions. There has to be a lot of trust and positive history for the brain to recognize that this person is speaking with kindness and concern for my well-being.

Also, the nature of the criticism needs to be relevant to the relationship. If my co-worker says to me *"gee Karin, I don't know if you realize this, but you really are a terrible singer"*, a healthy response on my part would be *"and this affects you how?"* If I am torturing my co-worker with my singing, then yes, she has a right to say something but EVEN THEN, it needs to be shared differently, as in *"Karin, I don't want to hurt your feelings but I am finding it difficult to concentrate at work because of your singing. I would be fine if you just hummed or maybe we can soundproof your office or something. Can we explore some options together?"* Now if it was my voice coach that made the comment, then it would be different. There is an implicit contract in that relationship for feedback on my singing.

I can even use boundaries to protect myself from self-blame. The difference is that the boundaries are on Subby. For example, if I know my subconscious brain likes to get me into trouble with alcohol, or around certain people, or in certain settings, etc., then I act with accountability by putting in rules that I follow to keep me safe in those situations. Subby may overpower me sometimes and make me break the rules, but if the consequences are important enough to me, I just keep strengthening my boundaries until Subby has no option but to behave.

Letting go of blame and judgment is an extremely powerful strategy for finding truth and thus peace. There is a beautiful line in an old Persian poem by the poet Rumi which speaks to letting go of blame:

*"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."*

There is joy in that field and I want us all to meet there.

## **Signpost 2: You know you have found the truth when you are feeling peace, joy, or sadness.**

If you are not feeling peace, joy, or sadness, chances are you have not yet found the truth. You might wonder about the sadness part. If the goal is happiness, how does sadness fit in? Feeling peace and joy sounds great, but how is sadness a part of happiness? When you live in the truth, there will be sadness

because the reality of being a human on this planet is that there is sadness. That is a fact. However, this is a healthy sadness, unlike the sadness that comes with depression. That is a different feeling and is not healthy; you can actually feel the difference in your body. Healthy sadness can co-exist with peace and joy; unhealthy sadness can't. The reason is that the unhealthy sadness is mired in the lies of the brain, which keep us stuck in misery.

I think a lot of us get stuck in emotional pain because of a fear of feeling sadness. I don't think this is a conscious fear; I actually think it may be a glitch in how the brain works. Here's what I mean. Sadness is painful and our brains are wired to have us avoid pain. I have a tentative theory that the brain gets trapped in misery when it doesn't know how to resolve a situation where both options have pain, even if one is healthy pain. I think it gets caught in a loop like *"this relationship I'm in is unhealthy and not fixable; it's so painful and I need to end it; but oh no that means I will have to feel the pain of loss and sadness, which hurts a lot, so I need to avoid that, but then what about the painful relationship? I don't know what to do!!! Both paths mean pain! I guess there's no answer so let's go watch some TV."* And then we get stuck. My theory is that sadness feels more painful than fear so the brain pushes us to stay in fear rather than have the pain of sadness.

The good news is we can override this brain tendency once we become aware of it. One way we can do that is to remind our brain of an important fact, one that it forgets about when it is stuck in the trap:

*"Dear brain, sadness is temporary but the pain of a damaging relationship goes on and on. I prefer to have temporary sadness over forever pain so I am going to end this relationship and take the hit of the temporary sadness. We can do it brain! Work with me!"*

FYI, I often talk to my brain. It helps me stay on track. It isn't enough because Subby is way more powerful than Conny. So I can't muscle my way past Subby, I have to outsmart her (which is why just relying on will power doesn't work – will power is Conny's domain, so a bit wimpy.) I have to help Subby see the truth in many ways for her to be okay enough to give me control. For example, I have been trying to get my snacking under control in the evenings and have had to put many strategies in place to keep Subby from sabotaging my plans. I have recently added looking at myself in the mirror each morning and saying to Subby *"I'm in charge. I'm doing this so back off, girlfriend."* I think it gives me a little extra oomph when Subby says *"let's have pretzels"*, but she still wins the battle more times than I would like.

### **A fun exercise – say hi to Subby!**

If you want to see your subconscious brain in action, you can do this exercise. Read it through first and then give it a try. Set aside 10 minutes to sit quietly with no distractions. Take a few deep breaths to settle yourself and then put your attention on your breath going in and out. Try to keep your focus on your breath. As soon as your attention wanders, guess what? That means Subby has arrived!

Bring your attention back to your breath and watch what Subby does. Here's what happened when I did this exercise:

*My attention gets pulled to a pain in my elbow ... I notice that and continue keeping a light focus on observing my breath and a light focus watching where my brain goes next.*

*A thought comes up "I wonder if anything cool is going to happen" ... I notice it and keep watching.*

*A thought comes up "I haven't phoned my parents in a while" and I feel a stab of pain in my stomach ... I realize my brain just squirted some "worry" chemicals with that thought and I notice that it tried to hook me into worrying right now. I ignore it and put my attention back on my breathing.*

*All of a sudden I notice that I'm in a Harry Potter movie and I am Harry Potter. I realize my brain hooked me into watching a movie in my brain ... funny! I refocus again on my breath.*

*A noise outside grabs my attention ... I notice that my attention was grabbed and then return my focus to my breath.*

*A thought comes up "Is it time yet? I need to check how much time is left" ... I smile inside as I notice my brain trying to push me into checking the time. I ignore the push and keep watching my brain while lightly noticing my breath.*

When I did this exercise for the first time, I was blown away at how pushy my brain is. When we aren't aware of that pushiness, Subby gets to do what s/he wants, and that isn't always what our conscious selves want. By the way, if you are the kind of person who struggles to get out of bed in the morning, that too is a time to say hi to Subby because s/he is the one arguing with you to get "10 more minutes".

Remember to look for the signposts of truth – they will guide you to peace.



# Releasing Lies

If you are ready to feel better and want to start cleaning up your brain's lies, there is a process you can follow. This is based in the therapy approach developed by David Burns, author of "Feeling Good", "When Panic Attacks", and other books. David Burns is a pioneer in the field of psychological therapy. I recommend his books to my clients and have used them on myself. His approach to changing the brain is straightforward, practical, and effective. The process I am going to describe here includes some of his powerful strategies and is similar but not identical to his approach.

Please note that it is hard to fight your own brain! You can make a lot of changes to your brain on your own, but some areas can be so sticky that you just won't be able to shift them without the help of another brain. So don't be shy about getting some therapy if you are feeling stalled.

Rooting out the lies of the brain is a 4 step process. You will need to:

- 1) Validate the truth in your pain.
- 2) Identify your upsetting thoughts.
- 3) Understand the healthy motives for your feelings and decide whether you want to change them.
- 4) Hunt for the lies and release them.

Rather than talking about each step, I want to show you how this works using several scenarios. These are situations that cause many people unhappiness. Even if these scenarios don't apply to you, I recommend reading through them because they show common brain traps that we all find ourselves in at times. I will then talk more generally about the lies that the brain settles into for specific feelings like anger, guilt, shame, etc. and how to get your brain to break out of these painful places.

**Scenario: "I'm unhappy because I am not getting along with my mother (or father or sister ...)"**

*Step 1: Validate the truth*

This is a painful situation for many people, whether it is with a mother, father, sibling, or other family member. That pain needs to be validated because there is truth in it. This is the first step. I need to **validate the truth in my pain.**



Many people get emotionally stuck because they don't understand that validating feelings is *necessary* for emotional health. They think they have to “*stay positive*” and that if they say “*this sucks*”, they are doing something wrong. I understand how people can fall into this trap. Some people who think this way may have grown up around people who complained constantly about their pain. This is hard to be around. As a reaction to that, the brain might store a rule that says “*do not complain about your feelings; it is hurtful and annoying to others.*”

Another reason people may have a “*stay positive*” rule is that they tried sharing their feelings with others and repeatedly got an invalidating response. They may have been told to “*suck it up*” or that they were being weak. In this case, the brain might store rules like “*you are a loser if you talk about your painful feelings*” or “*do not share your feelings with others; they will reject and hurt you if you do.*” These are classic examples of how the brain gets close to the truth, but not quite, and ends up storing lies. The truthful rules that the brain needed to store were “*only share your feelings with people who are kind and validating*” and “*share your feelings but don't dwell in them; if you are in pain, find out why and solve the problems.*”

We have to validate feelings before they will go away. To do that, we look at why it makes sense to feel the way we do. In this scenario about a painful family relationship, I would do this by reminding myself that it is normal and healthy to feel hurt, sad, angry, and a whole host of other feelings when I am not getting along with someone who is important to me. It is healthy to want positive and warm relationships with people, especially those closest to me, like my mother. My feelings make sense! I then would sit with this truth for a few minutes, saying it to myself a few times, and let it register in my body.

Sometimes self-validation isn't enough. So realize that it is normal to want to get those feelings validated by a safe person and have your brain not be satisfied by self-validation alone. In my therapy practice, many people have told me that they have felt a shift inside just by my saying that “*yes, that WOULD be hurtful and upsetting. I would feel that way too.*”

### *Step 2: Identify upsetting thoughts*

The second step is to **identify the upsetting thoughts** linked to your pain. These are the sentences the brain uses to store the pain. We can get at these thoughts by saying to ourselves “*I feel upset because*” and the part after “*because*” is the upsetting thought. For example, I might be thinking “*I feel upset because ...*”

*“My mother is so negative; it is painful talking to her.”*

*“She shouldn't be that way.”*

*“She should care about my feelings.”*

*“I desperately want a close and loving relationship with my mother – it is terrible that we don't have that.”*

We **must** write these thoughts down! If we don't write them down, we give Subby an advantage. Writing slows down the brain and gives some control back to Conny. We think at lightning speed, too fast to work on thoughts in our heads. We also need to write these thoughts as full sentences. If you have thoughts that are questions, change them to statements. Questions keep us stuck in a loop in the brain. So instead of "*why does she treat me so badly*", reword it to what you're really saying which is "*I'm not okay with her treating me so badly*" or "*Maybe I'm doing something wrong that causes her to treat me so badly.*"

### *Step 3: Understand and decide*

In the third step, we need to understand and acknowledge the **good reasons Subby wants us to hang onto the pain**. This may seem strange but remember that the brain is always trying to help us. If it is keeping us stuck in pain, it believes this is helpful. We need to understand how it sees this as helpful and positive before it will loosen its grip and let us out of the pain. There are two questions we can ask ourselves to identify the brain's positive motivations:

- (1) *How does thinking and feeling this way help me in my life?, and*
- (2) *What wonderful things does it say about me that I think and feel this way?*

The first question is about usefulness; the second is about good values. Here are some good reasons to hang onto the pain about the relationship with my mother:

- My angry feelings show that I am not okay with bad treatment from people. That's healthy self-respect and good values.
- My sad feelings show how much I long for a healthy relationship with my mother; that means I have strong values about family. That's good stuff!
- My thoughts and feelings show that I am a fighter – I am fighting for what I want, a good relationship.
- If I stop feeling upset about this, I might worry that this will make me a pushover and let my mother treat me however she wants. I might use my anger to protect myself from worse treatment.

There are probably another 10 reasons that I could list. All are legitimate, truthful reasons for me to feel the way I do. These reasons are my subconscious brain working hard to keep me safe. The brain needs to have these reasons acknowledged. I need to let myself feel the truth of these reasons for a couple of minutes. I can do this by reading each one and saying to myself "*YES, that really IS true.*"

So now I have a decision to make. These legitimate reasons for my pain may be reason enough to stay in the pain. The usefulness and good values may be exactly what I want and need right now. It is okay to decide to stay in the pain because it is helping me. I am a free agent and so long as I live within the law, I am free to do what I like. No one has the right to pressure me to change. I would let myself think about this for a few minutes.

At this point, many people will feel stuck, torn between not wanting to feel the misery of the situation but also not wanting to let go of the pain because of so many good reasons. That is normal. One way out of the stuck place is to consider **dialing down the feelings** rather than eliminating them completely. So instead of feeling, let's say 100% angry and 100% hurt and 80% sad, I would dial those feelings down to about 30% and only hang onto that much. That 30% can give me the benefits that I get from my feelings without overwhelming me with misery. The 30% (or less) is usually a more appropriate level of feeling for the situation.

Once I have decided to dial down the pain or get rid of it completely, then I am ready to move onto the last step.

#### *Step 4: Release the lies*

The fourth step is to find and remove the lies in my upsetting thoughts. Remember the principle: *"if you are in misery for more than a few minutes, then there are lies in your thoughts."* The pain is embedded in the lies. This is the trickiest step because we have to tease apart the layers of lies mixed with truths that the brain has put in place to protect us. These will be different for each person but there are often common themes. We need to work each upsetting thought, one-by-one, although what usually happens is that once you start to see the lies in a few of them, they become blindingly obvious in the remaining thoughts.

- *"My mother is so negative, it is painful talking to her."*

We need to sort the facts from the fiction to find the lies. The lies are the stories of our brains and that is where the pain is held. Let's take each piece of this thought.

First, *"my mother is so negative."* We can tell whether this is a fact by **examining the evidence**, which is a useful strategy for any upsetting thought. I might ask myself *"is it only me who sees my mother's negativity or do many other people see it too?"* If the answer is *"lots of other people see it too"*, there is my evidence that yes, my mother is negative. So no lies in that part.

The next section is an expression of feeling, rather than a thought, *"it is painful talking to her"*. How I feel is how I feel – that is a fact so does not contain lies. So this first upsetting thought doesn't contain any lies, it is just a statement of fact. Excellent! We don't have to do anything with it other than validate the truth that, yes, my mom IS negative and talking to her IS painful. The pain in this thought is really just a reminder from my brain that it's not happy with this situation; constantly negative people aren't healthy to be around so it is giving me pain to remind me to do something about it.

- *"She shouldn't be that way."*

We again sort the facts from the fiction. This thought has a glaring indicator that it is not a fact. It has the word "should" in it, which is one of our Thinking Traps. Saying someone shouldn't be who they are or how they are isn't a fact; it is a wish for the world to be different. It is a wonderful wish. It makes sense to want people to be kind and positive. That would make them

happy and the world a better place. That's good values and is practical too. But sadly, it is still only a wish.

To get rid of the lie, I have to lose the "should". The "should" traps pain in my brain. So first I have to change this thought into what it really is and say "*I wish she wasn't that way*". Every time my brain tries to give me a "*she shouldn't be that way*", I immediately change it to "*I wish she wasn't that way*." When I do that, I will probably start to feel some healthy sadness. That's because it IS sad to not be able to have a loving and kind relationship with my mother. I then let myself be with that sadness and don't buy into any new lies that my brain might try to give me like "*oh no, sadness is awful! I'll never recover*." This is healthy sadness; it will pass.

That usually takes away some of the pain but often we have to go one step further and answer the question "*But why is she that way?*" If we don't come up with a truthful answer for that, we can stay trapped in the pain of anger. This happens because the brain will be hanging onto its own explanations like "*she is that way because she is a terrible person*", or "*she is pure evil*" etc. These explanations aren't facts. We know that because of the words "terrible" and "evil", which are impossible to objectively measure; they are really emotional reactions pretending to be facts. They are also the **labelling** Thinking Trap. If we let the brain hang onto these kinds of explanations, it will stay trapped in lies, and as we know, lies hold misery.

Here is another way to answer the "*why is she that way*" question.

What I have learned about human behavior is that are 3 reasons that people behave badly:

(1) They were born with bad brain wiring and therefore have bad behaviors. This is the case for some sociopathic individuals. In other words, they weren't born with normal human brain functioning. This is such a tiny percent of the population that it is unlikely that this explains my mother's behavior. I have sadness for people like this; they were ripped off in many ways. Yet, that sadness does not mean I invite them over for dinner! Sociopathic individuals are not safe to be around so I put boundaries in place to protect myself from them.

(2) They are emotionally clueless (just like I was!) In our cluelessness, we make lots of mistakes and create pain for others. If this is the reason, then I might be able to have a conversation with the person and improve the situation. The clueless person may struggle to hear what you have to say at first. You may get some immediate defensiveness, but afterwards you may get "*I'm sorry – I had no idea*." If the problem is just cluelessness, that's what tends to happen. Unfortunately, cluelessness is often also mixed with emotional pain, which is the third reason.

(3) They are in emotional pain. Most of the time people act badly because they are clueless AND they are trapped in feelings of fear, inadequacy, shame, anger, etc. These feelings drive their behavior. Usually people don't realize this is what is going on for them. Sometimes even when they do realize it, they don't know how to change it so

they remain at the mercy of those feelings. The Buddhists would say these people are not “awake” or not “enlightened”. In my view, enlightenment means you see the truth, and the biggest truth is that our brains gets trapped in emotions constantly and push us around by making us believe lies. When people are in that state, they behave badly because they are acting from their survival instinct in situations where survival is not threatened. Hence, their behavior doesn’t fit the situation.

For people like this, I have sadness. They didn’t ask to be this way. The pain that is keeping them stuck was dumped on them by others, usually in childhood. They haven’t realized it and so they do the best they can but still end up hurting others. Like I said, I have sadness and compassion for that, but I still don’t allow it around me. I don’t hold hate in my heart, because there are lies in hate and I want to live in the truth. These aren’t hateful people, just lost people. So I wish them well and keep good boundaries so their pain can’t damage me.

So getting back to my upsetting thought, I could now say *“I wish my mother wasn’t this way but if I really think about it, I can probably understand why she is that way. She was never coached on how to handle her feelings and she had painful experiences that she didn’t know what to do with. She is still spinning in that pain and confusion.”* **Realize that understanding why someone behaves badly does not give them a free pass to hurt you.** Getting to this fact lets you release the anger but the problem of bad behavior remains. That needs to be solved with boundaries, which are the rules we put in place to protect ourselves from harm (e.g., I will only talk to her for 5 minutes maximum on the phone and if she yells or insults me during that time, I will hang up.)

- *“She should care about my feelings.”*

We have another easy indicator of lies in this thought – another “should”. I can say back to my brain on this one that *“I wish she cared about my feelings.”* I might even be able to say *“She probably does care about them in her own way. It just isn’t a way that is healthy for our relationship.”* If my brain is really fighting me on this one and saying *“No! She really SHOULD care! She is my mother for goodness sake!”*, then I can try reminding my brain that there is no law that mothers *must* care about their children’s feelings. Ultimately, adults are allowed to live their lives as they like so long as they obey the law. I am welcome to get into the legal profession or politics and work towards creating a law like this, if I feel really strongly about it, although I’m not sure it would be enforceable.

Really, the healthy place to go is to let myself once again touch the sadness that I was born too soon to be guaranteed emotionally healthy parents (to me “emotionally healthy” means being compassionate, assertive, and having Subby under control). Most of our parents grew up in emotionally and often physically tough conditions. They weren’t given the emotional nurturance they needed to develop into emotionally healthy people. They were given enough to allow them to survive and function reasonably well in our world. That was all their parents could manage because of the times they lived in. This is a fact. So instead of getting caught in a “should” about

how I wish the world was, which is a trap, I could say to my brain that I will commit to being an emotionally healthy parent myself so the future is better for my children and their children. These thoughts don't have lies and let me have healthy sadness.

- *"I desperately want a close and loving relationship with my mother – it is terrible that we don't have that."*

Let's break this thought into the two obvious chunks and deal with each of them.

First, *"I desperately want a close and loving relationship with my mother"*. This is a statement of feeling so is a fact. Saying how I feel is always a fact; there are no lies. However, I wonder about the intensity of the word "desperately". Why is the feeling so strong? Why is there desperation? That intensity suggests a thought like *"I have to have a close and loving relationship with my mother in order to be okay."* I totally understand someone feeling that way. As children, we are biologically wired to long for closeness with our parents. And that wiring doesn't automatically turn off when we become adults. So it is normal for the brain to hang onto the belief that *"I won't be okay unless I am close to my parents."* But is it true?

If as an adult I won't be okay without a close relationship with my parents, I would say something is wrong. I might not like it, I might prefer it was different, but I hope I will be okay. My job as an adult is to be able to look after my needs. That does include having connection with others, and yes, it would be wonderful if it was my family, but it doesn't have to be. If it did HAVE to be with my family, then people who lose their families or have abusive families would be doomed to misery, and guess what, they're not. Many people who have nothing to do with their families live happy, full lives. Do they have some sadness when they think about not having family contact? Probably, but it doesn't get in their way because it is healthy sadness.

If we look at the second part, *"it is terrible that we don't have that"*, we can tease out the facts and fiction starting with the word "terrible". "Terrible" isn't a fact word; it is a judgment and a label. One way we know that "terrible" isn't a fact word is if we think about asking 100 people whether it was terrible that someone did not have a close and loving relationship with their mother, we have no idea how many would say "yes". The word "terrible" says *"I don't like it"* but without saying it. This way of thinking hooks in painful emotion. If we remove the **labelling** Thinking Trap and change the wording to *"I don't like that we don't have that"* we will immediately feel less pain than when we think *"it is terrible that we don't have that"*. Words matter because our brains seem to get caught in certain kinds of wording and not in others. We want to use wording that doesn't get the brain stuck.

But let's go even further with this thought and see if we can find the fear that needs to be released. Under most pain, you will find fear (yup, that's the old survival instinct again). Here we can use our next lie-detecting strategy, asking ourselves: **if that were true, why would it be upsetting?** I need to ask myself: if it were true that I could never have a close and loving relationship with my mother, why would that be upsetting to me? I then write down the answers to that question as new upsetting thoughts to clean up. Here are some possibilities:

- *It would be upsetting to me because I would feel alone, like no one had my back.*
- *It would be upsetting to me because I've always wanted a close family and I don't have that.*

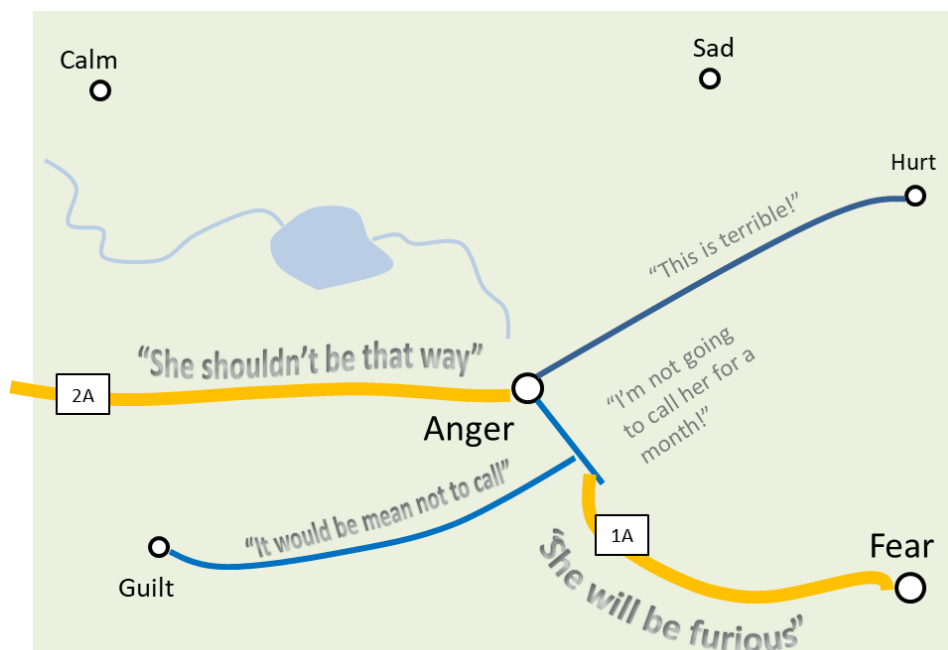
Can you see the brain's survival fear in the first thought? It is very normal to have a fear that if I am alone in the world, I am not safe. It is normal because we are a species that uses social connection to enhance survival. We are wired to feel that way. At the same time, it is not true. We can be alone in the world and be safe. We won't feel great because we are a social species, but our safety is not at risk. If we can take the fear out of this thought, we can find a way out of the trap. For example, here is how I would talk back to Subby's survival message if she gave me this thought:

*"Dear brain, you're right that it would be upsetting if I felt I had no one to back me up. I don't want to be a loner in the world. At the same time, I don't need to solve that problem using my mother. If as an adult I have to solve my "being alone" problem using my mother, then I'm doing something wrong. I need to ask myself why I am not choosing to create healthy relationships with other adults. Am I afraid of rejection? Do I lack the skills or fear I lack the skills? If so, am I using my relationship with my mother to avoid feeling scared, hurt or rejected? If I am, I need to stop avoiding and fix those problems (which are all fixable, dear brain) so I can have lots of options for close relationships. And dear brain, I agree that it is sad that I can't have the close family I always wanted. It is sad but not terrible or dangerous. Just normal living sad. And if I acknowledge that sadness, the intensity will decrease and it will just be a mild 'ouch' instead of a big 'ow ow ow'."*

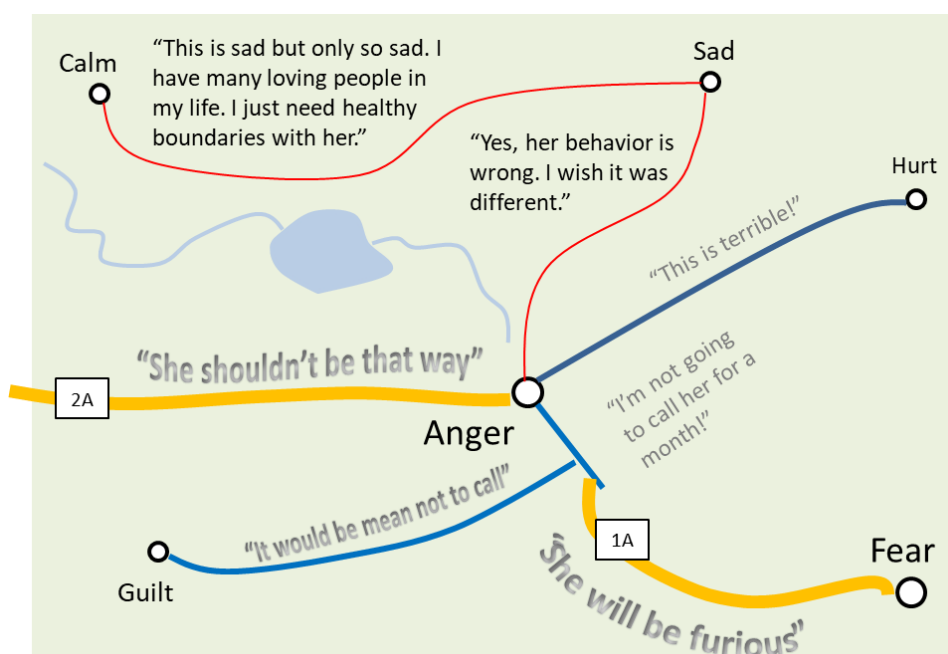
So at this point, I hopefully have released some of the lies in my brain on this issue and will feel a little better, or maybe even a lot better. However, my brain may still be fighting to hang onto the pain and I will know it if I get messages like *"yeah but what about ..."* from my brain. If I do, I write those messages down as upsetting thoughts and go through the same process with them. I want to honor all the concerns of my brain, which means take them seriously and see which concerns are facts and which are fiction.

By the way, doing this once will not magically make my brain go *"oh ha ha ha, my bad, so sorry for the lies, how embarrassing that I believed that, I won't let it happen again"*. Nope, it doesn't work that way. Some of my upsetting thoughts will be gone forever, but for many, my brain will try to hook me again and again. The reason is that it has a long track record of thinking that way, so it will take a little practice to get it to shift to another track. That practice involves reminding it of the new, fact-filled, fiction-free version of the thought that I now believe. As I do that, my brain may come up with some more nuances, saying to me *"yeah but what about ..."* as it tries to hook me in. When it does that, I have to write that down as a new upsetting thought and go through the same process of rooting out the lies. I also have to live my life according to my new belief, rather than my old one, which often means having courage and doing things that are scary but safe. After a period of time, my brain will usually cooperate and hook me less and less.

Why does it work that way? Think of the brain like a street map. It has lots of roads, some big and some small. The roads were put on the map by learning and life experiences. Some roads are travelled every day and so are super highways on the map. Others are travelled rarely and so are small, single-lane dirt roads. The map is always changing. Let's look at my map before I rooted out the lies about my relationship with my mother.



Notice how there are no roads to Calm and Sad. My brain doesn't know how to get there on this issue. Here is the map after I've rooted out the lies:





Notice how my new roads are still just skinny little one-lane side streets. They aren't highways yet, well-travelled, multi-lane and high speed. I have to travel my new side streets repeatedly before my brain turns them into new highways and decides they are easier to use than the old highways (which, when I stop using them, will become neglected and less likely to be travelled). Travelling those side streets will involve regularly reminding my brain that this really IS the truth, through both my words AND my actions. This means grabbing my courage and doing what I know is right and true even though it might be scary. For this scenario, the scary act is putting boundaries in place. If I want to be emotionally healthy, I will have to do it. Courage is essential for emotional health. The good news is that when I start living the truth through my actions, my side streets get beautiful lampposts, brand new asphalt every year, and become a joy to drive.

By the way, if I had tried to respond to my upsetting thoughts with platitudes like *"things happen for a reason"* or *"it will all turn out okay"*, etc., Subby would laugh at me and demolish those roads in a heartbeat. There is not enough truth, and hence not enough power, for the brain to buy it. It has enough experience to know that lots of stuff happens for no good reason at all and that things don't always turn out okay. When I say things like that to myself, it can take the edge off the moment temporarily, but it doesn't create real change. Real change requires living in the truth. The truth creates roads that can't be denied.

That's not to say there is no place for phrases like this; they just have to be true to have power. I call these "grounding statements" and there are a couple that I use and find helpful. One is to tell my brain *"I'm safe"* or *"we're safe"* (meaning Subby and I). That is a true statement in most situations. The other phrase I use requires a bit more background; it is *"one-hundred billion galaxies"*. When I learned the fact that there are at least 100 billion galaxies in the universe and each contains at least 100 billion stars, I went *"wow, my problems are just SO insignificant in the grand scheme of things"*. When I say to myself *"one-hundred billion galaxies"*, it reminds me of the big picture and helps me put my troubles in perspective.

Before we move onto the next scenario, I want to remind you that you can find more lie-detecting strategies in David Burns book *"When Panic Attacks"*. Now let's look at another scenario and walk through the process again.



## Scenario: “I’m so angry with my spouse; all we do is argue. There is no closeness anymore.”

### *Step 1: Validate the truth*

This is a common source of pain for people. We are wired for connection and when we can’t connect, it really hurts. If this is my situation, I would first need to validate the hurt, sadness, and loneliness that I feel when this happens and recognize that it makes sense to feel that way. I also need to validate the truth in my anger – my spouse likely IS doing things that are frustrating my attempts to connect or solve problems. What s/he is doing likely is not good relationship behavior and I have a right to be angry about that. I need to remind myself that my feelings are legitimate even while I am trying to shift them into a healthier place.

### *Step 2: Identify upsetting thoughts*

Next I need to figure out what upsetting thoughts are spinning in my brain on this topic. I ask myself the question “*why am I upset?*” and the answer leads to my thoughts. Here are some possibilities (I’ll use a male spouse in this example for simplicity):

*“He doesn’t care at all about my feelings.”*

*“He is so selfish – he only cares about himself.”*

*“I can tell that he doesn’t want to be in this relationship anymore.”*

*“He is so unreasonable; he argues with me about everything!”*

*“I want to feel loved and cared about and instead I just feel angry all the time.”*

I write down all these thoughts so I can work with them in step 4. Notice how I only write down sentences, not questions like “*why is he such a jerk?*” If your upsetting thought is a question, change it into a statement like “*he is such a jerk!*” Remember that questions keep us stuck in loops in the brain so to break the loops, we need to change them to statements.

### *Step 3: Understand and decide*

Now we need to look at why our subconscious brain wants us to think and feel this way. There are many great reasons to do so when you really look at it. Remember that our survival-oriented brain is always trying to protect us. It wants us to be safe and it wants us to be free of pain (because pain is a danger signal). How do these thoughts and feelings give us protection? Here are some ideas:

- Being angry with my spouse helps me keep my guard up against more hurt.
- My relationship is struggling so my painful feelings are reminding me about that so I won’t let it continue forever.
- My worrying that he doesn’t want to be with me anymore is helping me prepare for the end so it won’t blindsides me. It will still hurt but not as much if I’m expecting it.

- My anger is protecting me from feeling sad about the situation. I don't want to feel sad because then I feel scared that it might be over.

There are probably more examples of how my brain is trying to protect me with these feelings and thoughts. But what about the second question – what wonderful values are exhibited in my thoughts and feelings about this? Here are some ideas:

- My anger says I value being treated well. That is self-respect, which is healthy and good.
- My anger and hurt say I value a loving relationship. That's wise and healthy.
- According to attachment theory, my anger is a protest at the loss of connection with my spouse. Protesting is just what I should do! I want to connect with him and my anger shows that.
- My worry about the possibility of the relationship ending shows my courage to face the truth of the situation. Courage is an important quality for a healthy and happy life.

And so on. At this point, I need to sit with this and validate that these really are good reasons to feel and think the way I do. I may need to continue to feel this way for now because I have to protect myself in the relationship. I may want to hang onto the anger so I don't keep getting hurt.

People in this kind of relationship pain very often get stuck here. That's because there really ARE good reasons to stay angry and the subconscious brain is using all its power to keep us feeling that way. But if I do decide that I don't want to feel this way anymore, then I might choose to dial down the anger to maybe 20% intensity, enough to remind me that I need to do something but not so much that it is debilitating. Then I would go to the next step and root out the lies in my thoughts, because *if I am in emotional pain for more than a few minutes, there are lies in my thoughts.*

#### *Step 4: Release the lies*

Once again, I go through each thought, one by one. This takes courage because we have to touch our pain; that's something we don't want to do. It is also something Subby doesn't want us to do. S/he fights us and whispers *"just skip this step"* or *"let's go see what's in the fridge"* or *"this is stupid. I'm done with this approach."* That's why people get stuck – Subby sabotages us, albeit with good intentions. Yup, the human brain is really rather annoying at times.

- *"He doesn't care at all about my feelings."*

I know I have lies when I see my brain wording thoughts as **all or nothing**. This is one of the Thinking Traps. It is a common shortcut of the brain that sometimes is harmless and other times gets us stuck. When I see my brain saying *"he doesn't care at all"*, I know that can't be true because it is saying every minute of every day, my spouse has no caring feelings about me. I can probably find many examples where that isn't true. Often we use this kind of language as a way to communicate the intensity of our feelings. The healthier approach is to just be clear about our feelings instead of implying them with this wording. The first step is to reword the thought, as in: *"I am really struggling to see that he cares about my feelings."* That is a fact. Here's an important tip: notice how I changed the start of my thought from "he ..." to "I ..." Very often,

starting with “I” is a way out of lies and into truth. It is also therefore a way out of the never ending pain of anger and into the temporary and healthy pain of sadness. The sadness will guide us to actions that will help the situation. The anger will not.

Once I’ve removed the lie, I can continue with my new thought, as in: *“I am really struggling to see that he cares about my feelings. That makes me feel sad. I want to feel close to him and I don’t know how to get there.”* This will move me to a tender place that is likely to give me good guidance and not make the situation worse (also important). At this point, I would hopefully then think about what actions I could take to resolve the sadness, like talking to my spouse about my sadness (rather than my anger because that will probably trigger his survival instinct and escalate the problem), or talking to a friend, or suggesting we do some couples therapy, or going to therapy myself to figure out next steps, etc.

- *“He is so selfish – he only cares about himself.”*

This thought feels so believable when we have it. But there is a **labelling** Thinking Trap in it. Whenever we call people names, like selfish, or lazy, or stupid, etc., we are getting trapped in our brains. Why? Because it isn’t fact-based thinking. It is emotion-based. When I say *“he’s so selfish”*, I am really saying *“His behavior is hurtful to me and I don’t understand his motives, so I’m going to assume it is because he is a bad person.”* That is a factual thought but our brains don’t like to be this clear and thorough – it is too slow and uses too many calories (the brain likes to save calories.)

By the way, there is no such thing as a selfish person. Did your Subby just go *“whaattt?”* I know this may be hard to take in, especially if you’ve been hurt by other people’s behaviors. Selfish-looking behavior is really just the self-protecting survival-oriented brain doing its thing. We all have that brain. We all have the ability to act in selfish ways, which are really about fear. When my self-protecting survival brain is running the show, I won’t be able to be kind and considerate. My brain is too worried about a survival threat, and survival trumps everything. So I’m not selfish, I’m in survival mode. People who are in survival mode can cause a lot of hurt. The rest of us have the right to protect ourselves from that hurt, not by hanging onto anger, but by using boundaries.

Getting back to the scenario, I can reword my thought to be more factual and say *“My spouse’s behavior looks selfish to me (fact). This must mean he is in self-protection mode (fact). I wonder what he feels he needs to protect himself from? Maybe I’m doing something to trigger it, or maybe it is his pain from the past coming up? I need to find out so we can move forward.”*

Note that this does not give my spouse a free pass to be inconsiderate. If his brain is in self-protecting survival mode, he needs to be made aware of that in some way and deal with it so he can be a good partner. What I’ve done in rewording my upsetting thought was get closer to the truth so I can release some unnecessary pain and come up with more useful solutions.

- *"I can tell that he doesn't want to be in this relationship anymore."*

This thought would bring up a lot of fear and sadness. Even just writing it down to work on it would give me pain, so much so that Subby may just try and distract me and not have me deal with it. But I need to in order to feel better. This thought might be true – he may want out. The sadness I feel would be healthy grief, so I don't need to change that, even though healthy grief still hurts. There are no lies in healthy grief. But there is one potential lie in this thought and that is *"I can tell ..."* This is the **mind reading** Thinking Trap. I might be right, maybe the signs are obvious. But it is risky and disrespectful to assume you know how someone is thinking and feeling. If I am unsure about someone's feelings, it is respectful to ask. This invites intimacy and closeness because it gives the message *"I care about your feelings – I want to know about them."* It also builds trust because it gives the message *"I'm mature enough to ask how you're feeling rather than making assumptions."*

This doesn't mean you shouldn't give a tentative guess at how your partner is feeling. It is important to show that you are trying to be attuned to their emotional state. So I might say *"I'm sitting here assuming you are really unhappy and want out of this relationship, and I've realized I need to give you the chance to tell me how you feel, rather than guess."*

But back to our upsetting thought ... I need to reword it so I remove the lies. Here's what I might say: *"I'm scared that he doesn't want to be in this relationship anymore (fact). His behaviors suggest that this is true (fact). But I owe him the courtesy to ask, even though it is a scary question."* When I do ask this scary question, I can reduce the scariness by being really clear about how much I care about my spouse's happiness, and that I want our relationship to work, etc. That way he will know that I'm asking because I want the relationship, and not because I want out of it.

- *"He is so unreasonable; he argues with me about everything!"*

Can you spot the lie in this thought? Here's a hint – there are some Thinking Traps in there. Once again, I am using **labelling**, criticizing my spouse by calling him unreasonable. Here's a fact – there is always logic behind people's behaviors. When people look like they are being unreasonable, it just means I don't understand the reasons. It doesn't mean they are unreasonable. It may mean they are acting from emotion, which has its own logic, and if that is the case, then I need to say that to myself. So instead of saying *"he is so unreasonable"*, I need to say a fact, like *"I don't understand him"* or *"He's very emotional about stuff and this is getting in our way."*

There is also **all-or-nothing** thinking again. It is highly unlikely that my spouse is arguing with me about *everything*. It is okay for me to say that *"it feels like we argue about everything"* – that's a factual statement. You may be thinking I'm splitting hairs at this point, getting so caught up in the wording, but here is why I'm not. The way we word our thoughts impacts how they are stored in the brain. You can *feel* the difference. Also, certain wording will lead us to solutions whereas other wording will not. When I say to myself *"he is so unreasonable"*, my brain goes

*“yup, he sure is. Well, I guess we’re stuck then because that’s just his character.”* If I say to myself *“I don’t understand him”*, this opens up a possible solution, which is to try harder to understand where he is coming from.

So when Subby throws this thought at me, here is how I will respond to her:

Subby: *He is SOO unreasonable; he argues with us about everything!*

Me (Conny): *It definitely feels that way, Subby, but I want us to think more factually. He certainly looks unreasonable to me but that just means I don’t understand his reasons. If I really stopped to think about it, I could probably guess that he is hurting too and this hurt is driving his behavior. It is still not okay that he is acting out from his hurt, but it helps me see that he isn’t happy either. We need to figure out how to resolve this so we both get out of this misery.*

- *“I want to feel loved and cared about and instead I just feel angry all the time.”*

This is a healthy thought. How do I know? Because it is stating facts. Whenever I say how I feel or what I want, that is a fact. It also is a sad thought. Remember that you know you’ve found the truth when you feel peace, joy, or sadness. I don’t need to change this thought. I just need to touch the sadness and let it motivate me from a tender place to fix the problems in my relationship.



**Scenario: “I’m unhappy because of the hurt I’ve caused others (e.g., when I was drinking; when I was doing drugs; when I was committing crimes; etc).”**

*Step 1: Validate the truth*

The regret that accompanies our mistakes can be deeply painful. That pain needs to be validated because there is truth in it. It *does* hurt to remember how we’ve let ourselves down or let others down. There is real loss in those memories. There is also guilt. Some of that guilt is appropriate. It shows good values. Validating the truth of your pain is the first step. I would do this by reminding myself that it *makes sense* to find this upsetting. It’s normal and healthy to not want to make hurtful mistakes. I would sit with this truth for a moment and let myself feel it in my body.

*Step 2: Identify upsetting thoughts*

The second step is to identify the upsetting thoughts linked to this pain. Remember, we can get at the thoughts by saying to ourselves “*I feel upset because...*” For example, I might be thinking “*I feel upset because ...*”:

*“I hurt people and that’s not okay.”*

*“I knew better but I still did it anyway.”*

*“I will never be able to repair some of the relationships I’ve damaged.”*

*“I have damaged my body so much that I will probably have major health problems.”*

Remember that we have to write these upsetting thoughts down. If we don’t, we will likely not be able to slow the brain down enough to sort out the pain. And we have to write the thoughts as full sentences. This helps to highlight the lies; they are harder to hide in full sentences than in a phrase like “*damaged body*”.

*Step 3: Understand and decide*

Now we need to understand and acknowledge the good reasons for hanging onto the pain. Remember that the brain is trying to help us when it gives us emotional pain. We ask ourselves the following two questions: (1) *How does thinking and feeling this way help me?* (2) *What wonderful things does it say about me (that I think and feel this way)?* We then write down the answers. Here are some good reasons to hang onto this pain:

- My feelings show that I am not okay with hurting people. That’s a good value to have.
- My feelings show that I value being accountable; I do not want to give myself a free pass when I do something hurtful. Again, good values. There is integrity in this stance.
- My feelings show that I am a realistic thinker. I acknowledge the truth that I may not be able to salvage some of the damaged relationships and that I may have damaged my body. These may be real consequences and I am not in denial about them. There is courage in that.

- My feelings of shame and regret give me a way to punish myself for bad behavior. It is a way to atone for my mistakes. That shows accountability.
- My feelings may help me stay on track with my sobriety. I may worry that if I let go of these feelings that I will increase the risk of abusing alcohol or drugs again. I want to use that pain to fight against cravings, which can be very strong. This can help focus my brain. It makes sense to try that.

These are some possible reasons for me to feel the way I do. All are legitimate, all are truthful. These reasons need to be acknowledged. I let myself feel the truth of them for a couple of minutes. I can do this by reading each one and saying to myself “yes, that *really is* true.”

So now I have to decide whether these legitimate reasons for the pain are reason enough to stay in it. The usefulness and good values may be exactly what I want right now, and that’s okay. If instead, I want to feel differently, then I would dial down the feelings to a number that feels better to me, like 20% embarrassed, worried, regretful, etc. and move on to step 4.

#### *Step 4: Release the lies*

The fourth step is to find and release the lies in my upsetting thoughts. Let’s go through each upsetting thought and as we do, I will show you additional lie-detecting strategies.

- *“I hurt people and that’s not okay.”*

We need to sort the facts from the fiction to find the lies. Let’s look at the facts in this thought. It is a fact that I hurt people when I was drinking. It is a fact that hurting people is not okay. Well, kind of. This is a hidden should. What I’m really saying to myself is “*I should never hurt people.*” There is a wonderful value represented in this should statement but it is still a problem because it has the word “should”. You might think I’m being really picky, but here’s why I’m not.

The truthful, factual version of my should is “*I want to not hurt people.*” That’s a good human goal and is a fact (because all “*I want*” statements are facts). The “should” version of my thought is a problem for many reasons, some of which I’ve already talked about. Here’s another reason: “*I shouldn’t hurt people*” confuses the ownership of feelings. I am not responsible for whether people feel hurt. I am only responsible for taming my brain so I can be a consistently respectful and kind person. If I haven’t yet tamed my brain and I am still thrashing around hurting people, then those around me need to put boundaries in place to protect themselves from my behavior. This isn’t a moral rule; it is a practical rule. Yes, I still have to own that I’m the one doing the hurting, but others have to own putting boundaries in place to protect themselves.

This does NOT mean I judge or blame adults who are staying in situations where they are getting hurt. Absolutely not. There are completely understandable reasons for people to do so. Sometimes people are carrying so much old pain they just aren’t able to set healthy boundaries. Often they don’t even know what those are. Sometimes their current situations are so abusive (emotionally, physically, etc.) that they are completely broken down. They just don’t have the



strength to set boundaries. That happens and is not their fault. No one is at fault, because blame isn't valid. It contains lies. Switch to the truth by focusing on accountability. No one is to blame but everyone is accountable for protecting themselves. Sometimes they aren't strong enough to protect themselves, and I have compassion for that, but it doesn't change that they own this. Those of us around people in this situation can help by providing emotional support (not pressure) to help them find their strength.

The principle I am emphasizing is that healthy boundaries are *necessary* for healthy relationships. In order to be a healthy human, I need to work through any barriers that are preventing me from defining and enforcing healthy boundaries. If I am a child, then it is up to the adults around me to help put those boundaries in place.

My last point on the problems with this "should" statement (who would have thought such a small sentence would be so problematic?) is that it is also invalid because it suggests that if people are hurt by my behavior, it means I'm doing something wrong. This isn't always true. Many times people are hurt by things that are healthy and appropriate. If I leave an unhealthy relationship that I know won't change and my partner doesn't want me to, he will be hurt. Does that mean it is wrong to leave? No. So I can't say that it is wrong to hurt people. I need to have compassion for people's hurt, which means feeling sad that they are hurting. I then get to remind myself that sadness is healthy and shows I cared. I can be sad while making healthy choices because I know that healthy choices will lead me to happiness.

So after all that, I want to respond to my brain's original thought, which was "*I hurt people and that's not okay.*" Here's what I might say to my brain on that:

*I agree with you, dear brain, that I don't want to be hurting people. That is why I am now working hard on getting this addiction under control. At some point I will have to forgive myself for my awful behavior when I wasn't in control of myself. When I have made amends, I think I can do some of that. In the meantime, it won't help me to beat myself up with self-criticism so I am releasing all "shoulds".*

- "*I knew better but I still did it anyway.*"

This is a guilty or remorseful thought. Those feelings show wonderful integrity. On the surface, this thought has no lies. It is true that "*I knew better*" – everyone knows that excessive drinking (or drugs, or committing crimes, etc.) is harmful. And yes it is true that "*I still did it anyway.*" So where's the lie? Again, there is a hidden should. I'm really saying to myself "*I knew better but I still did it anyway, and I shouldn't have.*" I have to get rid of the "should" or I will stay stuck in this emotional trap. I first change my thought to "*I knew better but I still did it anyway, and I wish knowing better had been enough to stop me.*" That is all factual. The "should" was hiding the lie that if humans know the right thing to do, they will do it. Given how many of us don't regularly exercise (yup, that's me!), clearly this is not how humans work.

The way humans really work is closer to *“If I know better AND my emotional self is not maxed out dealing with old or current pain AND I don’t have other priorities that need to be addressed first AND this is important to me, then I might just act on my knowledge.”* We are organic machines with finite capacity. I can’t deal with everything at the same time – I only have so many physical, mental, and emotional resources. Chances are good that if I was stuck in an addiction, I was feeling maxed out by my old or current pain and my limited coping choices (also given to me by my history, so not my fault that they were limited). My human brain won’t let me resolve the situation until a little space gets cleared up inside OR my situation becomes so painful that I have to find answers just to keep going.

- *I will never be able to repair some of the relationships I’ve damaged.*

Anytime we are predicting the future, we have the **fortune-telling** Thinking Trap going on. If I was that great at predicting the future, I’d pick all the best stocks and be rich. Well, I’m not so I have to admit that I suck at fortune telling. So I have to first get rid of that trap and I can do that by saying the truth which is *“I’m not sure if I will be able to repair all the relationships I’ve damaged.”* This thought will give me sadness rather than the self-critical guilt of the original thought.

I may still not be feeling great, so I could try another strategy to help me shift things further. It is called **talk to a friend** (David Burns calls it the double-standard technique). I can pretend that I have a friend who is like a clone of me and this is her story. I pretend that my friend is coming to me for advice and says to me *“You know, I have had this drinking problem and I feel terrible about all the people I’ve hurt. And I’m not sure if I will be able to repair all the relationships I’ve damaged which makes me feel awful. What do you think about that, Karin?”* Now I have to tell my friend what I think about that. I don’t want to just tell her what she wants to hear; I need to be honest but kind. Here’s what I might tell my friend:

*“I’m so happy that you’re getting your life back and I hear your sadness about the hurt you’ve caused. You might be right that you won’t be able to repair all the relationships you’ve damaged but you won’t know for sure until you try. I am on your side no matter what because I know what a good heart you have.”*

Sometimes this strategy is even more powerful if you use someone important to you, like your child. I sometimes get people to imagine their child is an adult now and that this is their story and they are coming to their parent for advice. Thinking about the situation from this perspective sometimes opens up a new way of looking at it.

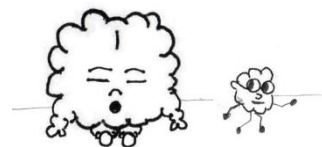
My next step would then be to make a plan to address the situation. That will help me with my sadness and guilt. I might say to myself something like *“I need to address the hurt I caused, even though it is scary. Maybe I can start with the relationships that are most important to me. If I approach each person with sincere remorse for my behavior, respect for their choice if they no longer want me in their lives, and a clear message of how I am making myself a safer person to*

*be around, then hopefully, some of those people will give me another chance. If not, I can at least be proud of my own behavior in trying to make amends."*

Note that if this is my plan, Subby may panic a little with the part about respecting people's choices to not want me around anymore. She may give me new upsetting thoughts like *"Oh no! If they don't want us in their lives that will be terrible!"* or *"We'll be so alone – that will hurt so much!"* or *"That would mean we really ARE a failure and a loser!"* I would need to write these thoughts down, and work through them like all the rest.

- *"I have damaged my body so much that I will probably have major health problems."*

This would be a very scary thought and it may be completely true. There is another instance of **fortune-telling** here so to get back to the facts I would need to reword this to something like *"I have damaged my body so much that I might have major health problems."* From there, I can take two approaches. The first is I can face my fear and go to my doctor to find out the truth. I can ask for a physical and see what is likely. That will then prepare me for what to expect, which can be helpful. This will be scary and Subby may give me a whole bunch of fear thoughts to try and stop me, but as always, I just write them down and work through them (or tell Subby to go take a nap and sneak out to the doctor's without telling her.)



The second approach is called **acceptance**. When I have a fear-based thought, usually the most powerful way to defeat it is to say *"Okay, let's say that's true. How would I want to handle it?"* This is powerful because it is pretty scary. Facing our fears goes against what the survival instinct usually prefers, which is to run away. Buddhist practices encourage us to face our monsters rather than run from them because when we do, we find they aren't as scary as we thought. That is the power in acceptance.

As I was writing this book, I had an interesting nightmare that spoke to this. In my nightmare, a tsunami had hit my city. I was afraid and running, looking for higher ground to avoid being swept away by the water. I remember running up streets, and climbing stairs in buildings to get to the top floor, and then seeing the water catching up to me and then running to the next building. At one point, I was at the top of a building, out of breath, and I looked out the window and I saw a T-Rex dinosaur. I don't know why my brain decided to put a dinosaur in my dream, but there he was, trashing the city, kind of like Godzilla. At that point, I remember in my dream being angry and saying *"WHATT? Now there are dinosaurs I have to deal with? Forget it, I can't fight this."* And then I woke up. That is acceptance. When I say *"go for it, do your worst"* only then can I see that the worst was a mirage, a fantasy, and really there is nothing substantial in my fear.

When I move into acceptance, often sadness is involved, as it would be for the thought that my drinking has permanently damaged my body. I may need to cry that I've shortened my life, and any new upsetting thoughts that come up, I need to write down. As I try to accept this, my brain may give me thoughts like:

- *That's not fair! I didn't ask to have the trauma that lead me to drink.*
- *I don't want to die young!*
- *I'm going to be in a lot of pain when I get old – it will be brutal.*

Moving into acceptance in this scenario brings up many basic human fears: fear of death, fear of pain, fear of illness. Most of us try to distract ourselves from thinking about these fears. That sometimes works, especially if you are feeling generally okay. Your brain will have enough capacity to just push it away for a while. Another approach is to make peace with these fears. This is the way I prefer because it is a more powerful way to settle down my brain. There is a Buddhist meditation that is all about making peace with these and a few other scary truths. It is called the **Five Remembrances** meditation.

### The Five Remembrances

You can do this meditation a few different ways but the essence of it is to regularly force your brain to sit with the hard truths of being human. These are:

- I will grow old. There is no way to escape this.
- My body is prone to illness. I cannot escape having illness.
- I will die.
- Everything and everyone I love will change or end. There is no way to escape this.
- My actions are mine to own. The consequences of my actions are mine to own. I cannot escape this ownership even if I want to.

These truths are painful. Some bring up fear, others guilt or sadness. It is not fun to think about this. But if we try to avoid thinking about it, we can give our subconscious brains more problems because they often will go: *"Oh dear, Conny is afraid to think of this stuff – it must be dangerous. I better make a note of that – certain thoughts are dangerous so let's freak out if we think them."* And now we've linked fear not to growing old or being ill, but to *thinking* about growing old or being ill. This creates a brand new hassle for us to deal with.

Instead, you can meditate regularly on the 5 Remembrances so your brain learns that just thinking about painful or scary things isn't dangerous. Here are a few different ways you can do this:

- Breathe deeply and slowly as you say each remembrance to yourself.
- Pick one and say it to yourself. Then sit and observe the feelings and thoughts it brings up. Do not judge your reaction, just observe it.
- For each remembrance, you can say something like this to yourself:  
*"Breathing in, I know I will get old. Breathing out, I know I can't escape getting old."*

I don't do the meditation myself. Instead, I just remind myself regularly of these truths. I also came up with some antidotes to the Five Remembrances that help my subconscious brain relax. Here they are in case they are useful for you too:

- Although I will grow old and there is no way to escape growing old, there are gifts in growing old, like confidence and the freedom to be authentic. Also, many never get the opportunity to grow old. I can be grateful that I have lived long enough to experience being old.
- Although I cannot escape illness, I don't need to fear ill health. Any pain I have will be managed or be temporary since all things are temporary. Even if I lose some physical abilities it does not mean I have to be miserable. Misery is optional. The loss of one ability can open the door to others I would never have explored.
- Although there is no way to escape death, I don't need to fear death. Death is natural and normal and makes way for new life. My survival instinct won't be happy about it, that's for sure, but I don't want to live from that space. I don't need to be greedy about life. I can make space for others when my time comes. I also know that death in many ways is just a transformation of matter. All my molecules will get recycled on the planet and I feel peace thinking of bits of me in trees, and birds, and shoes.
- Although all that is dear to me and everyone I love will change or end, I need not fear this. Change is healthy and I want those dear to me to be healthy, even if it means I have to work through my sadness at losing them. Sadness is healthy and temporary. If I can only be okay if everything stays the same, then Subby is driving my bus and I need to take back the wheel.
- It is true that my actions are my only true belongings and I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. There is nothing to fear here. I can have sadness for the mistakes I have made and the hurt I have caused, but I can also forgive myself because I am working on being a better human. In some ways it is freeing to realize that all I need concern myself with are my own actions. If I am reading this, then I am already doing the work to be responsible with my actions. I am already on the path.

If I now revisit my upsetting thought that “*I have damaged my body so much that I will probably have major health problems*” and use acceptance, I might say this to my brain:

*Dear brain, you may be right. It is very likely that I will have health problems because of my drinking. It is also likely that this means I will die younger than I would have otherwise. I am sad about that but only so sad. I've lived longer than many others and I'm grateful for that. I don't need to be greedy about life. When my time comes, it will still be hard, that is just part of being human. But today I can make peace with it and know that many people have lived and died on this planet already and it is not a tragedy. Some of their molecules are probably in me and my molecules can be part of future living things.*

I could go on and on with scenarios. Instead, I am going to shift the focus to finding the lies underneath specific emotions like anger, guilt, fear, and shame.

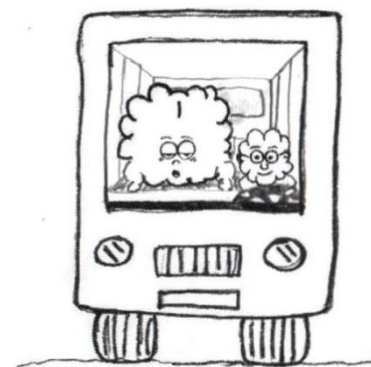


# Releasing Anger

Here are some sample angry thoughts that most of us have either had or heard from others:

- *People are so inconsiderate and self-centered!*
- *That guy cut me off! He's a jerk!*
- *People shouldn't have voted for Donald Trump!*
- *My boss should treat me better!*
- *The health care system sucks!*

Here's a tip for getting out of anger: if you have anger, the word "should" is in your thoughts. It is often a hidden should, as in "*People are so inconsiderate and self-centered [and they shouldn't be]*" or "*The health care system sucks [and it shouldn't]*". If you get rid of the **should** Thinking Trap, you can release a lot of anger. This doesn't mean you can't be upset about a situation – there is always truth in our feelings. It simply means that instead of Subby driving the bus in an angry rage, Conny takes the wheel with acknowledgement of the anger and a plan to address the situation, if possible, and a coping statement that allows healthy sadness, if not.



Here are the ways that I would root out the lies and release the anger of the thoughts above:

- *People are so inconsiderate and self-centered! [and they shouldn't be]*

One of the lies in this thought is that people have to behave well. Actually, they don't. So long as people are following the laws of the land, they are allowed to behave however they want. That's what freedom is, and I like freedom. The good news is that if I don't like how people behave, then I have the right to not have a relationship with them. That's where my power resides.

The reason many of us get stuck in this kind of thought is that often there is a price to not having a relationship with someone who irritates us. If it is a boss, then I may have to find another job. If it is a friend, I may have to let go of that friendship. Paying that price usually involves loss, pain, and fear. Our brains don't like those feelings so prefer to keep us blinded by the anger. However, the anger hides the truth, which is I have choices. I may not like the choices, but I do have them. If I choose to stay in a situation I don't like, then I don't really get to be mad at someone else for that choice.

There are many other lies in this thought. One exists because I need to **be specific**. When thoughts are vague, they often hold lies. For example, which people are so inconsiderate? Everyone? Does that include me, or am I the only one on Earth who's wonderful? Do I have evidence that all people on the planet are inconsiderate? If I make this thought specific, I get closer to the truth. I need to say something like *"That woman at the grocery store was very rude to me. She is so inconsiderate and self-centered."* I'm now getting closer to the truth. I'm still not there because I have the **labelling** Thinking Trap, so I have to get rid of that. The lie is there because I have no idea if the woman is consistently inconsiderate – she may just have had a bad day, just like I have bad days. That's not a free pass to be disrespectful, but it is very human and normal. Even wonderfully kind people slip up occasionally.

People usually have this kind of thought because they've been terribly hurt by others, and usually those others were supposed to look after them. That hurt gets morphed by the brain into self-protective anger and mistrust of all people. And if that is where you need to be right now to keep yourself safe, you can choose that. That is your right. Feel free to mistrust others and have strong boundaries. Just live in the truth when you do so and you will have more peace.

Here's a healthier version of this thought, free of Thinking Traps:

*That woman at the grocery store was rude to me. It really upset me because it reminds me of how my father treated me when I was a child. She was likely just distracted or has her own pain, so I'm not going to label her. I'm just going to make sure I keep strong boundaries with people and only let in people who are consistently respectful. In the meantime, maybe I'll go to the grocery store when it is less crowded so I am less likely to run into people like her.*

- *That guy cut me off! [and he shouldn't have] He's a jerk! [and he shouldn't be]*

This thought has a problem similar to the first one. It is not against the law to cut people off. It isn't good driving etiquette, it does create a safety issue, but it is not illegal. Neither is being a jerk against the law. I am still allowed to have temporary anger at the safety issue that his behavior caused. At the same time, I also need to acknowledge the truth of driving a car, and that is: *Human brains were not designed to drive cars, so they make lots of mistakes. This means being a driver on the road comes with risks. If I don't want to take on the risks of this choice, that's okay. No one is making me drive. If I choose to not take it on, it may mean a big change to my life, and I have the right to decide whether that is worth it to me.* All of that is truthful and factual.

This might not be enough to shift your brain out of anger. So here is another angle to look at. When people have road rage, anger usually hooks into thoughts like *"he thinks he can disrespect me like that??? No \*bleep\* way, I won't stand for it!!"* A lot of anger comes from people feeling disrespected. The question is: why is being disrespected important to the brain? Why does it care?

Here's my theory. We know that survival is the number one concern of the brain. We also know that humans are a social species and the reason for that is it enhances survival. So having good social ties is important for survival. You see this in other social species, like dogs or wolves. They work together

to ensure the best results for all members of the pack. They have complex social structures, where there are hierarchies and rules. Some dogs have more status than others and those are first at meals and with mating. Status matters.

I believe that our human brains have some of that status wiring. Status matters to us because status means survival, the brain's first goal, and status means mating options, which is the brain's second goal. So if I feel disrespected, this touches on status which relates to both of the brain's most important goals. Knowing that our brains work this way can help us. If I am cut off in traffic, I can't help my automatic reaction which is fear then anger. However, I can help my next reaction, which will determine whether I recover quickly, slowly, or not at all. My next reaction can be a message to my brain that looks like this: *"That sucked! But I am not in danger, that driver is not disrespecting me, and even if he is, it doesn't matter. I don't need status to be okay or to have mates in our world. So relax, dear brain. We've made driving errors too. Maybe that was his one for the year – I can cut him slack for that because he really is not a survival or reproductive threat to me."*

If this angle isn't enough to shift your brain out of the anger, don't despair. It just means you haven't found the street that will take your brain out of Anger-town and over to Peace-ville (like on the map in scenario 1). Your subconscious brain is pushing back until you give it some other truths that it can buy into and still believe it is keeping you reasonably safe. Those truths do exist. How do I know? Many people don't stay angry when they are cut off, meaning there really are roads out of Anger-town.

- *People shouldn't have voted for Donald Trump!*

(Just in case your Subby just poked you and went *"oh great, liberal snowflake, now I know I can't trust anything she says"*, let me tell you to hang in there. I am not going to talk politics here.) If I have this thought, the first step here is to get honest with myself. Remember, "shoulds" are longings pretending to be facts. So let me be honest with myself and state the longing: *"I wish people hadn't voted for Donald Trump but frankly, it was their right to vote for whoever they wanted."* This can take some of the anger out of my thought but then I will probably be left with feeling worried.

Under anger is usually (perhaps always) fear – this makes sense because anger is the "fight" response of our survival instinct, which is all about detecting survival threats; in other words, stuff that worries our brains. So what are the worries under a thought like this? Here is one I might have in this situation: *"Clearly I can't trust people to make good voting decisions and so I am at risk of living in a world where someone dangerous is put in a powerful position."* If Subby gives me this worry thought, what she is really saying to me is *"OMG, we're not safe!"* In order to calm her down, I need to validate the truth and tease out the lies. I can find the lies by using any of a number of strategies, including ones we've already seen like **examine the evidence** or **talk to a friend** or **be specific**. Once I do that, I may be able to say something like this to my nervous brain:

*"Subby, you're right. We can't always trust people to make good voting decisions and so dangerous people can be voted into office, in our country or anywhere in the world. At the same time, there are often processes in place, namely the law and the free press, that put checks and balances on extreme*



*craziness. Still, I recognize your fear because these checks and balances can fail. Dear brain, I have to tell you something difficult – we are only ever so safe. There is no guarantee that we won't die in the next minute. I promise I will do all that is reasonable to keep us safe but I want you to work with me on making peace with the fact that everything is temporary, including us. Maybe you and I can do a 5 Remembrances meditation later to help you with that. In the meantime, let's enjoy being alive right now and taking all reasonable steps for our safety."*

This might not be enough to release the worry or the anger for you. All this means is you have to try other lie-detecting strategies to clear it out. Keep working it until you feel peace, joy, or sadness. Then you know you've found the truth.

- *My boss should treat me better!*

The first step in this thought is to remove the "should" with something like *"I wish my boss treated me better but she doesn't."* Now I'm in the facts. But if my brain really wants to fight me, it might need another push to understand why it isn't a rule of life that bosses should be better behaved. The truth is bosses are humans which means they have their own survival instincts fighting them. Plus I believe power hierarchies, like those in businesses, feed into the insecure parts of us, making it even harder for us to act from an emotionally grounded place. If I have access to power to get my needs met, my brain is going to push me to use that power. It's just easier than being emotionally mature. Being emotionally mature takes effort and the brain doesn't like to exert itself if it doesn't have to. It takes emotional awareness and energy to manage the brain's tendency to abuse power.

Given this truth, I can now add to my new thought and say *"I wish my boss treated me better but she doesn't. I guess I understand, even though I don't like it, because she is human and has her own issues."* We're getting there, but often this isn't enough to shift our feelings. Many people I see who are feeling distress because of work will feel hurt by their bosses' behaviors. It will feel like a personal attack or betrayal. I believe this happens because the brain naturally tries to use the rules of family or friend relationships, like loyalty, in a business relationship. If my brain does that, I start having personal relationship feelings, like hurt and betrayal, when my employer makes a business decision I don't like. My employer still needs to treat me with basic human respect when making a business decision, which means I need to be told whenever possible about decisions that affect me. But I need to shift the way I look at the relationship. It is a business contract, not a personal relationship.

I might now have shifted out of anger and hurt, but it would be normal to then feel some anxiety, because I may still feel trapped. I need to find a way to get my power back in the situation. One way to do that is to recognize the choices I have. For example, no one is forcing me to stay at this job – I am choosing it. I might be choosing it because I have bills to pay and I don't believe I can get a better job. That's legitimate. Still, I can't blame my boss for the fact that I don't have options.

This doesn't mean I switch over to blaming myself for my lack of options. There are many legitimate albeit sad reasons that people end up in this situation. If I am in an oppressed group then it is true to say that many of my choices have been taken away from me due to discrimination. That is a fact. If I

grew up in an abusive home, then I likely have been just trying to survive and recover from that trauma and haven't been able to focus on creating job options for myself. That's a fact and not my fault. It is not valid to blame myself ever, actually, because we really are always making the best decisions we can given what we know and, more importantly, where we are emotionally.

Still, the idea of choice can help me clarify a plan for myself. I need to look at how to create more options for myself so I don't have to be at the mercy of an abusive boss, partner, parent, etc. Even if I have limited choices because of discrimination, it isn't true to say I have no choices. I have to work the choices I have while acknowledging to myself (and to others if I want to and feel I can be safe doing so) that it is wrong that those choices are limited by oppressive attitudes and institutions.

I then will likely need to do something hard. How do I know? Because if it weren't hard, I would have solved this problem already. Something hard usually means a sacrifice is required and that every option has disadvantages. For example, one option is to stay at my job and suffer, but be able to pay my bills and keep myself financially on track. Another option may be to move in with my parents temporarily while I go back to school and retrain. Another option may be that I have to move to another city where I know I can get work. All these choices have down sides which make them very hard to look at. When all our choices are crappy, Subby often says *"this is too much – I can't handle thinking about this. Let's go have an ice cream."* It's okay to let Subby do this to us once or twice, but more than that says Subby is driving the bus, and that's always a recipe for pain.

My rule of thumb in this situation, because I have had times in my life where all my options sucked, is to pick the solution which gives the highest likelihood of sustainable happiness. If every option is going to hurt, I want something for that hurt. I want a good return on my pain investment. Essentially, I want to know that the hurt is taking me to a higher probability of lasting happiness.

Given all this, here is one way to talk back to Subby's complaint that *"my boss should treat me better!"*:

*I wish my boss treated me better but she doesn't. I guess I understand, even though I don't like it, because she is human and has her own issues. If she crosses a line into abuse, then I have the law on my side and I can file complaints or even charges to see if it will change the situation. This won't be ideal but it's an option. If I need to do this, I won't let myself feel guilty because this is a business relationship, not a personal relationship. In the meantime, I need to sit down with myself and figure out what I need to do to give myself more choices over my work life. This won't be easy but a plan will help me feel in more control and give me something to work toward, even if it takes a few years. That will help me cope because I know there will be an end to the situation.*

As I wrote this out, I saw all sorts of spots where Subby would be able to give me a *"yeah but what about ..."* When that happens, write that down as a new upsetting thought and work through it the same way.

- *The health care system sucks [and it shouldn't]!*

We all have anger thoughts like this from time to time and that's okay. It is a problem if we stay stuck in this kind of thinking. If I have this thought, I want to first validate the truth which is the health care system does have a lot of problems. Many people don't get the help they need and many don't get it in a timely fashion. The suffering that is caused is not okay.

I need to get rid of the lie in this thought to shift to healthy anger. The lie is that the health care system should be better than it is. Why should it? It is a complex beast with a lot of historical baggage to overcome. If I throw out the "should" and get to the longing in this anger, it really is *"I wish the health care system was better so that I and others didn't have to suffer and struggle."* That is the truth and I bet everyone would agree with it. I then have to make peace with the sadness in that longing. I do that by looking at the big picture and factoring in multiple truths about the situation. This might look like this: *"It's sad that I was born too soon to have a perfect health care system. It is still a work in progress. I'm glad I wasn't born 100 or 500 years ago because it would have been much worse. I have compassion for the people who had to deal with that. Still, it needs to be better because there is a lot of unnecessary suffering. But I know most people feel that way, so I don't need to convince anyone of it. There are enough indicators that it is heading in the right direction, just really slowly, which sucks because us humans are not good with patience. That's why patience is a virtue – it takes effort."*

Part of the solution to this kind of painful thought is to make peace with the fact that human change is slow. It is slow but trending in the right direction. Credible evidence supports this and you can see it for yourself if your subconscious brain will let you. Remember, Subby likes you being afraid and would prefer to keep you afraid or annoyed rather than sad.



# Releasing Guilt

Here are some common guilty thoughts people have:

- *If I say no to my friend, then I'm a bad friend.*
- *If I hurt people's feelings by my actions, then I'm a bad person.*
- *If I put boundaries up with my family, then I'm selfish and not a good son/daughter/sister...*

The guilt emotion is intended to push us to make amends when we've done wrong. This is useful for a social species. The survival threat under this kind of guilt says *"I need my group to survive so I better make sure we are on good terms."* Where things get wonky is our subconscious brain's *"close enough"* rule often connects guilt to anything that hurts someone's feelings, regardless of whether we did anything wrong. This might also be part of the *"better safe than sorry"* rule. It's safer to assume guilt, make amends, and have the group be okay with me than risk having the group kick me out to fend for myself in the wild.

An interesting problem arises in this situation. Although my brain is doing its *"better safe than sorry"* routine with the guilt, it also has other rules that want to have their say. The brain has rules like *"I will be safe if I have a predictable world"* and *"I will be safe (i.e., get food and physical protection) if my group treats me fairly."* We know these rules exist because we react with anxiety when our world becomes unpredictable (although each of us has a different level of chaos we can tolerate) and we react with anger when we're treated unfairly. The unfairness reaction also exists in other primates. For example, chimpanzees get upset when they see their buddies being given a tastier treat than they themselves received.

If I am taking on guilt when I did nothing wrong, then these other rules start to complain. And when they complain, Subby sends me more unpleasant emotions to get my attention. It says *"hey, that wasn't fair! I need fairness so I know what to expect."* I think this is one reason guilt is such a sticky emotion; it often pulls in competing rules. Again, you can already start shifting your brain by reminding it that you really don't need your group for survival anymore. You have the option now of picking the people you want in your life because you like them, not because you need them to survive.

Sometimes guilt is about letting myself down. I might feel guilty, for example, if I decided to stop smoking and I keep relapsing. Subby sees me relapse and sends me guilt sensations to tell me *"Hey up there! I thought we agreed smoking is bad for us, and then you said we would quit, and here you are"*

*relapsing and now I'm freaking out because I can't trust your word which means things are unpredictable and I don't like that!"* The key part here is I made a commitment to myself and I didn't keep it. Subby likes a predictable world. It helps it feel safe. If I start mucking about with that predictability, it is going to poke me with unpleasant feelings to try and push me in a different direction. What Subby ignores is that the reason I relapsed was smoking is a tough addiction and relapsing is part of recovery. It ignores that truth when it is in freak-out mode; it only cares about survival.

Here are the ways that I would root out the lies in my brain and release the guilt in the thoughts above:

- *If I say no to my friend, then I'm a bad friend.*

The lies in this guilty thought may already be obvious, but in case they're not, I could use one of the techniques we've already seen, like **talk to a friend**. I could pretend it is my friend saying this to me and I have to give her my honest opinion about it. If so, this is what I might say to my friend:

*Actually, saying no doesn't make you a bad friend or a bad person. If you ALWAYS say no, then something is wrong, but it is healthy to be not okay with some stuff. It shows you have a personality. I would want you to say no with kindness, but that's all I would need.*

If this isn't enough to shift my guilt, I could try other strategies, like David Burns' **survey technique**. This one takes a bit more courage because it involves actually asking other people if they agree with my thought. I might ask a relative or a colleague if they think saying no to a friend makes them a bad friend. I could even then work up to asking my friend if that is what s/he believes. If s/he says "Yes, don't you ever say no to me. If you do I will feel so betrayed!" then hopefully a little flag goes up in my brain that says "Wow, she's not that emotionally healthy. I may need more boundaries with this person."

- *If I hurt people's feelings by my actions, then I'm a bad person.*

This is a tricky one. Sometimes we really are worried about hurting people, and that is a wonderfully compassionate way to be. That is healthy. But if I am over-worried about hurting people's feelings, sometimes that is really a fear of conflict. It is healthy to not want conflict but it is unhealthy if we become passive (instead of assertive) to avoid conflict. I see this in a lot of people and it is something I had to overcome in myself. I had to get over the fear of people being mad. That fear has its own lies like "I won't be able to handle it if someone is mad" or "If I make someone mad, they will end the relationship" or even "The other person will lose control and I will be in danger." These beliefs often come from childhood. We depend on our parents and if they are mad at us, that feels pretty dangerous to a child. In childhood, the survival-oriented brain probably stores a rule like "Don't make people mad because then they won't look after you and you will die." As an adult, I need to clean out the lies in this and similar rules to show my brain that as an adult with choices, I can be safe. To clean out the lies, I would use the same techniques as I would for any upsetting thought

In case it is helpful, I will share two things that I have personally found helpful in pushing through the conflict avoidance fear. One is reminding myself that I have the right to say I don't want something so long as I do that respectfully. If I am respectful, I have done my part. If someone has a problem with that, it clearly isn't my issue because this is my right as an adult and free person. The second thing that helped me was learning how to respond to an angry person. There is a way to engage with someone who is upset that will de-escalate emotion without having to change your position. There are many books that teach this skill, including Marshall Rosenberg's "Nonviolent Communication" and David Burns "Feeling Good Together". The Buddhist's call it *compassionate listening* and there are many writers who talk about how to do this. When I learned this skill, it gave me confidence that I could handle any situation when someone was upset. That helped me be less afraid.

Another reason people get stuck in this kind of guilty thought is because of sadness avoidance. They don't know what to do with their feelings of sadness when someone else is hurting. If I say "no" to someone and he feels hurt, it sucks to see his hurt face. I will likely have a lot of uncomfortable feelings inside. I need to know what to do with those feelings so they don't push me around and make me do something I don't want to do, like say "yes". In this moment, the tool that I need is compassion. I need to shift into a feeling of compassion and compassionate behavior will follow. It is pretty straightforward, really. I just need to say to myself *"It's sad that this isn't working for him (then let myself feel the sadness a bit). Still, I have faith in him. It is the right decision and he will figure this out."* It is important to remind ourselves that we don't need to fix sadness. Sadness is healthy so it will pass. All we need to do is let ourselves feel it a little bit, and then switch our focus to take a break from it.

You might not be troubled by conflict avoidance or sadness avoidance and instead have this guilty thought because you just don't want to hurt others. If that is so, then I say you have wonderful values and you are on the right track. Almost. I've already spoken to the problem with telling ourselves that it is not okay to hurt others, and those truths hold here as well. Here's how I would talk back to my brain on this guilty thought:

*You know, brain, I totally understand why you think I'm a bad person if I hurt other people's feelings. I love the kindness inside me that motivates that. Still, if I have to be fake so other people aren't hurt, or put myself second so they aren't hurt, that isn't respecting myself and it actually isn't respecting them either. Being fake isn't respectful, that's for sure. And putting myself second too often or too long will get you, dear brain, to rebel on me, take over, and probably do even more hurtful stuff, which I'm not keen on. So I think I have to just be courageous, learn to be okay with feeling sad that other people are unhappy, and be honest with them. It is the respectful thing to do and the right thing to do.*

Just to be clear about respect, emotional health comes when I am respectful to others AND I am respectful to myself. Both are necessary for healthy functioning.

- *If I put boundaries up with my family, then I'm selfish and not a good son/daughter/sister...*

It shows good values to feel some discomfort about setting up a boundary that others will find upsetting. There is kindness in that discomfort and kindness is an essential ingredient for a happy life and a happy world. Still, if I have to put in a boundary to protect my emotional or physical health, then I have to do that. Letting my emotional or physical health be damaged by others is not an option. If I let that happen, I am not respecting myself and I will pay a price for that, as will others. I will start to deteriorate emotionally and usually physically as well (because emotions are physical – they are physical chemicals in the body). When I deteriorate, it is hard to keep Subby contained. When Subby is in charge, people get hurt.

There is a blatant lie in this thought because it contains the **labelling** Thinking Trap. I'm calling myself names when I say I'm selfish. I need to first get rid of that so I can get to a factual thought. I could say this instead:

*If I put boundaries up with my family, others may call me selfish and say I'm not a good daughter. I don't have to agree with them. I know that it is my right and my responsibility to look after my own health so I know it isn't a selfish act to make sure my health is protected from the damaging behaviors of others. I do need to be sure that I'm not using my boundaries as a punishment or a way to lash out – it needs to be about protecting my health.*

This would be a good start to shifting out of the guilt. When you set healthy boundaries, you often feel relief and sadness. If that's not what you're feeling, then it is important to look at what your feelings are telling you. There may be lies in there. For example, I may feel very superior or self-righteous when I set a boundary and my thought may be "Ha ha! I showed you – you can't control me, you !#@&#!" It would be very normal to have this thought pop up from your subconscious brain. It is a "YAY, we're safe! And you suck!" thought.

What's the lie here? No one sucks. They are just being controlled by their subconscious, survival-focused brain. This means they aren't safe to be around, but it doesn't mean they suck. I don't blame anyone for being human. Not one of us asked to have this flaky, high maintenance brain. Most of the planet doesn't yet know that the brain needs to be tamed. I just make sure I have boundaries in place to protect myself from the people who have yet to figure it out. Once they do and have proven themselves safe, I am happy to welcome them back with open arms.



## Releasing Fear

When you understand the human brain, you realize that releasing fear is at the heart of happiness. Our survival instinct is all about fear and it is that overactive survival instinct that keeps torturing us with painful emotions. This kind of fear is what I call unhealthy fear. It includes panic, anxiety, and worry. Healthy fear is fear that fits the situation. If a grizzly bear is running towards me, it makes sense for me to feel fear. That is healthy fear. I don't need to look for lies.

I believe that our true selves are the people we are when we do not have unhealthy fear. Unhealthy fear distorts. When you get rid of that fear, you will see who you really are. By the way, getting rid of fear doesn't mean you will never feel it. It just means you won't *stay* in it for any length of time. The subconscious brain will always spam you with automatic fear thoughts. When you take on the mission of releasing fear, it means that when you notice that you've been spammed, you look for the lies, move back into the truth, and become emotionally clear again.

It is important to understand that unhealthy fear grows stronger when we avoid it. Our avoidance gives the brain extra proof that there really is something to fear. The Buddhists suggest thinking of fears as monsters. When we avoid, we lock the monsters in the basement but you can still hear them banging at the door, so you really haven't eliminated the fear. Buddhist teaching suggests inviting your monsters, i.e., painful or scary thoughts, up for tea regularly, like welcome guests. Let them sit on the good sofa, ask them how they've been. When the visit is over, tell them it's been good to get to know them better and that you look forward to seeing them again soon. This is what the Five Remembrances meditation does for the basic human fears of death, disease, etc. It invites the brain to contemplate these scary thoughts so it eventually realizes it doesn't need to be so afraid.

It is very common to become afraid of our thoughts. Certain thoughts and memories have pain linked to them and we are wired to avoid pain. So we naturally want to avoid touching those thoughts and memories. This keeps us stuck because in order to clean up pain in the brain, we have to touch it. We have to take it out of Subby's hands and give it to Conny for a while. Conny will be able to interpret it, make sense of it, and store it back in a new way. This helps us heal.

It is annoying that we have to keep fighting our brains unhelpful tendencies but until we can get an upgrade, it is the only way to peace and joy. The good news is that fear tends to release very quickly. A bit of courage is all that is needed. Often, rooting out the lies in the specific fear can help give you that



courage. I'll show you some examples of how to do that with fearful thoughts that I see a lot in my therapy practice.

- *I will never find a loving relationship.*

This is a painful thought for anyone to have. It is deeply tied to our connection longing, which is tied to survival. It makes sense that this thought is scary. Once I've decided that I want to shift out of the pain of this thought, I have to first get more specific. I have to say *why* I believe this. It might be because I think I'm not a good catch. It might be because I think there are no good partners out there. It might be both or something else. In order to tease out the lies of the brain, I have to be specific.

Let's assume the first reason applies. We now clarify the upsetting thought as: *"I will never find a loving relationship because I'm not a good catch."* Again, I need to be more specific. I need another "because" at the end of this thought. Let's say the reasons I think I'm not a good catch is because I'm 50 years old and have been divorced. My belief is that no one will want someone my age and they will be turned off because I've been divorced. Now the fears are getting clear. I need to rewrite my upsetting thought to capture this clarity: *"I will never find a loving relationship because I'm 50 years old and divorced and no one will want someone my age that has been divorced."*

Now I'm ready to see if there are lies here to release. I can start with **examine the evidence**. I can do some research to see how many divorced 50 year olds start new relationships. As I was writing this, I did a quick Google search and found lots of articles indicating this is a great age to be looking for love. So that goes in the column of "evidence against" my fear. I can also research how many people have successful relationships after divorce. If I do this, I will likely find that the evidence suggests being 50 and divorced is not a significant barrier to finding love. I keep doing this until I have a good list of evidence for and against. I then see which side has the most credible evidence and from that make a conclusion that either my statement is true or it is false.

Let's assume I realize that my assumption is false. Know that letting go of this lie will not mean I immediately feel great. That's because I now have to face the scary prospect of dating and it IS scary to put ourselves out there and risk rejection. There is no getting over that. Releasing the lies in fear often just takes down the intensity of the fear – it doesn't completely eliminate it. The remaining fear needs to be addressed through courage. That courage comes from deciding this is what I want and if I don't go for it, I will regret it. Subby will try to keep me scared, to protect me from the hurt of rejection, but I have to remind her that her arguments aren't believable. She may try to hook me with other angles, like *"no one will want you because you're overweight"*. I will feel kicked in the stomach by her nasty comment, but once I recover from that I will just say to her, *"Okay, let me write that down and examine the evidence that the only people who are in happy relationships are slim and beautiful"* (guess what Subby, they're not).

I then pull it all together so I have something clear and powerful to say to Subby anytime she tries to derail me from my goal of finding a loving relationship:

*Subby, I appreciate your kind efforts to protect me from the hurt of rejection. Still, I really want a relationship so I've decided that I'm okay to risk that hurt – it's worth it to me. And I'm really proud of myself that I decided that. It shows great courage and strength to push through my fear – I rock! You haven't given me any solid reasons to hold back. Yes, I'm 50, divorced, and packing a few extra pounds but so are many many people who are in happy relationships. This will still be hard, I get it, and will take effort, but I want it and I'm going for it, so get out of my way!*

I would write out my response to Subby and read it regularly to remind me of this truth. It will give Conny more power and help me build up my courage.

- *I want a different career but I'm too scared to go for it.*

Many people who see me for therapy have a thought like this. This thought is completely true. There are no lies in it. Still it causes pain. If a thought is true and causes pain, I need to look a little deeper to tease out the lies. In this case, I have to ask myself what do I fear? These are the thoughts that I need to work with. Here are some that I might have:

- *I'll fail and regret letting go of my current job.*
- *I don't know how to take the first steps.*
- *My partner won't be okay with the sacrifices that will be required.*

I'll show you how to break out of the pain of the first thought because this tends to be the stickiest one. I would break this thought in two. First is "*I'll fail*". That is a scary thought. Failing hurts. There are costs associated with failing. They hurt. I need to validate these truths. Then, as with all thoughts, I start evaluating the truthfulness of this thought. It is either true, false, or a bit of both. I am going to start with the assumption that it might be true.

This is the **acceptance** approach. I say to myself "*Okay, let's say that's true and I do fail. Will it still have been worth it? Will I still be glad that I tried?*" Usually the answer is "*yes*" and that's because if we don't try things that are important to us, we end up torturing ourselves wondering about what might have been. Also, when we take healthy risks, we grow in ways that help us. We learn things and we develop confidence; both are ingredients for a happy life. It is never a waste to take a healthy risk and strengthen your courage. Courage helps you fight the survival instinct and that is a major cause of emotional misery.

If my answer is "*yes, it will be worth it even if I fail*", then the last part of my thought, "*I will regret letting go of my current job*" is no longer valid. If I decide that it is worth it to try, I won't regret that choice. I might be a bit sad (which is healthy) and a bit annoyed (which would make sense) that I have to go to Plan B when I would have loved Plan A to work out. But I just tell myself Plan B is still pretty decent and better than never having tried and learned (this of course, assumes I made a Plan B, which I highly recommend.)

If on the other hand the answer is "*no*" to my acceptance question of "*will it still be worth it to try even if I fail*", then I know my path. It is okay to say it won't be worth it to me. There may be very

compelling reasons to not take that risk. At this point, I can be proud of myself for taking the time to clarify this. Now I know that I have to shift focus and find other ways to address my unhappiness in my career. Maybe I need to change companies. Maybe I need to learn how to manage my frustration or anxiety better so it is not so emotionally exhausting to be there. Maybe I need to use some of my personal time to do activities that fill me up in ways my job does not. Maybe I need to really dig into the philosophy that it is not our circumstances that make us unhappy but how we think about them. All of these paths are valid and useful.

### **Envy is survival fear**

When I am envious of the good things others have, this often also is about survival fear. The brain is always worried about scarcity, that resources will not be available. We also feel envy about the status that others have. We envy that they are admired or beautiful or talented. This is fear again. We can't help but long for the status that gives us advantages in the world. Advantages help us survive. They give instant belonging and connection, which our survival brain loves, and easy access to resources, which it also loves.

When I think about corruption in politics, this is the survival instinct running the show. People abuse power to address a variety of fears – fear of not being in control, fear of feeling discomfort, fear of not being able to look after themselves, fear of not being worthwhile, fear of rejection, and so on. If one or more of these fears drive me, I can try to address them through power. With power, I can have money and status and instant acceptance (its fake status and acceptance but Subby doesn't care). People who are driven in this way aren't aware of it. They deny that this is why they do what they do. They say things like they are ambitious because they enjoy the challenge of making money. Yet, an emotionally healthy human would have some feelings about having too much, especially when others do not. That is our social instinct coming out. But if our survival instinct is raging, the social instinct is squashed.

Envy contains anger. A common version of the angry thought is *"It's not fair"*, as in *"It's not fair that Alex can afford an amazing car and I have to struggle. He's a jerk."* Then we have to address it like any other anger thought. Sometimes it turns into the despair of *"I'm not good enough."* This is a shame thought and that's where we'll go next.

### **Aside: What about the fears in OCD?**

I haven't talked about obsessive compulsive fears. These are a little different. They hook the brain in a different way and need a different approach. If you want to address obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors, I recommend seeing a therapist who works in this area.



## Releasing Shame

The brain's big lie in shame is *"I'm not good enough"*. Many people do battle with this painful thought. Remember when I said that the brain is always trying to protect us when it gives us painful thoughts and feelings? It may seem strange, but even the *"I'm not good enough"* thought is protective. The shame emotion motivates us to hide. Hiding is a survival strategy when our world isn't safe. If I believe I'm not good enough, then I won't take risks to stand out or assert myself with other members of my group. This protects me from rejection or other kinds of hurt from more powerful and possibly dangerous group members. Think of it like being a lower status dog in a pack. I know I'm not as good as the alpha dog and that belief keeps me submissive when the alpha shows up. That's a good strategy because it keeps me safe.

You can already start using this knowledge to change how you feel if *"I'm not good enough"* is one of your painful thoughts. Whenever your brain spams you with this thought, you can talk back to it with a truthful statement like *"Dear brain, I'm safe. I'm not in a pack, I don't have to submit to any alpha animals, so feeling not good enough really isn't protecting me from anything. So from now on, whenever you spam me with that thought, I am going to remind you that I'm perfectly safe without it."* This won't be the only thing you need to do to shift this thought, but it is a piece of the puzzle.

The next place to go is to ask your brain why it cares about being good enough. What is it really worried about? Why does it matter? Often the answer is *"I'm not good enough so I'll end up alone."* Being alone is a powerful human fear. We are social animals who rely on connection as a survival strategy. Unfortunately, the brain often gets mixed up about what is a real threat to connection and what is not. For example, if as a child you were often told that you were stupid, or selfish, or lazy, etc., or your caregivers ignored you a lot, your brain would have made a note of *"I suck"*. Once your brain registered this, it would have started to worry that this suckiness would interfere with your ability to connect with others and therefore be safe in the world. So it would push you to be a people pleaser, put your own needs second, strive to be perfect, etc., so that others like you. This would help your brain relax because it would say, *"phew, this is the solution to the connection problem. We will just be extra nice and totally perfect and then no one will leave, even though we suck."*

Do you see what the problem is here though? We don't actually suck! But instead of resolving that inaccurate belief, the brain creates a work-around, like becoming a people pleaser or a perfectionist. All this happens because the *"I'm not good enough"* message tends to get in us as children, when our brains are not developed enough to know that this is a bogus message.

Knowing all this usually isn't enough to make the *"I'm not good enough so I'll end up alone"* thought go away. We need to use the same kinds of strategies that we used before to help the brain create a new roadmap. Let's start with **be specific**. I need to clarify what I mean when I say "not good enough". In what ways? I need to spell these out. Here are some common answers I get when I ask this of people:

- *I'm not smart enough.*
- *I'm not attractive enough.*
- *I'm not successful enough.*

Now that we are getting clear, we have a chance of shifting the brain. I now go to **examine the evidence**. If I work on the *"I'm not smart enough"* thought, I can do some research to see if being smart is necessary to find love. I can search on the Internet. I can think about people I know who are about the same intelligence as me – are they in relationships? I can do the **survey technique** and ask others what they think about this. I can do the same approach with attractiveness and success. I will likely realize that to find love, people don't need to be smart, or attractive, or successful. They usually just need to be kind, loving, and brave enough to risk putting themselves out there. Being a "not good enough" human being does not mean you will be alone. Instead, the real reasons people end up alone are:

- They are afraid so they don't take any chances to connect with people. They are expecting rejection, which is painful, so they avoid that pain.
- They may be lacking some relationship skills and don't realize it or are too afraid to get help for it. So when they try to connect, they make mistakes that push people away.

You can also ask yourself *"when did I become not good enough? Was I born that way? Is a newborn baby not good enough? What did that baby have to do to no longer be good enough?"*

Once you start to feel some give in your brain's view of yourself, you can keep that momentum going by giving it a new belief to hang onto. Here are some suggestions.

*"I am good enough to not be alone. I don't need to be better or perfect to have people like me. Hitler had a girlfriend. Some people are in relationships with murderers. So if I am alone, it is nothing to do with how good I am. It is more to do with my courage and maybe my relationship skills."*

*"I do not need to be perfect to be loved. If I am alone it is because my fear is holding me back, not my lack of perfection. In fact, my perfectionism is a barrier to connection. I can work on my perfectionism."*

*"Good enough to be loved means being kind and wanting to work on a relationship with someone. Those things are in my control."*

## Shame-attacking exercises

David Burns has an intervention called the **shame-attacking exercise**. It is a powerful way to help the brain let go of the fear of not being good enough and related fears of rejection, judgement, etc. I have done some of them myself just to push myself through fear. In the exercise, you choose to do something that will make you stand out to others but more in a goofy way than in an offensive way. For example, I

sang Oh Canada on a busy downtown street in the middle of the day. That may seem pretty tame, but my heart was sure pounding with fear. I also walked into a hair stylist's shop and asked if I could buy a beer. The stylist laughed and told me to come back later and we could have one together. One of my friends took on a tougher challenge and asked the clerk at a nearby convenience store if she could buy really tiny condoms.

The goal is to help the brain let go of its fear that people will be angry or judge you harshly or generally that something bad will happen. After I asked for the beer at the hairdresser's, I told the man working there why I did it – i.e., I'm trying to overcome my fear of looking foolish. He was very warm and kind about it because he could understand having that fear. David Burns makes a great comment about this exercise that not only do you get to push through fear, but you also give other people a fun story to tell their friends and family about. That's a win-win!

Shame is an intensely painful emotion. It is worth finding ways to shift out of it. It comes into play when we need it for self-protection, but once our circumstances have changed, it is time for it to go.



## The Path to Outer Peace

This book has focused on taming the survival-oriented brain so we can have inner peace. I also believe it is the path to outer peace. The lies of our survival instinct push us to do harm to others. Our survival really isn't threatened but our powerful subconscious brain reacts anyway. We react instead of respond. When Subby is driving the bus, we react. When Conny is driving, we respond. There are a lot of Subbys driving in our world because most people just don't know that they need to manage their brains. I don't blame anyone for that. Our species hasn't had the luxury before now to even think about emotional intelligence. We've been busy just trying to get our basic needs met.

This book focused on taming the survival instinct by cleaning out the lies in our brains. But there are other things we can do too, like strengthening our social instinct. The compassion exercises of Buddhism do this. These exercises remind the brain that we all suffer from painful emotion and that at our core, we are all alike. This starts shifting Subby into a realization that my group isn't my family or my neighborhood or my country. My group is humanity, or even better, all living things. They all become my family so now I don't have Subby going into survival panic about not belonging or worrying that someone is going to take my stuff. I have included some compassion exercises in the Appendix if you want to try them out.

Just because all living things are my family, that doesn't mean I want to hang out with them all. I can't do that because some are dangerous, like poisonous snakes. The same is true for some people. They aren't safe because they don't have their emotions under enough control to be reliably kind. I have to protect myself from emotional damage and physical damage. This is why boundaries are essential for emotional health. (Other times I don't want to hang out with people just because I'm an introvert and hanging out with a lot of people is too tiring for my nervous system and that's okay!)

I am rooting for all people to find their way and get their survival instincts under control. I am happy to point them toward the path if they are interested. But I never push them onto it. If I did, that pressure would trigger their survival instinct and they would be even more stuck. Instead, I just focus on what I need to do, which is to be kind and compassionate to myself and others, and keep my survival-oriented brain from grabbing the wheel of my bus.



## Summing It Up

Here is a summary of the steps to tame the survival instinct:

- Every day, look for the signposts of lies: feeling upset for more than a few minutes and having Thinking Traps in your thoughts.
- If you are feeling any unpleasant emotion, do your best to survive the moment without creating more problems or pain for yourself or others.
- After the moment, sit down with yourself and see what your subconscious brain was upset about. Go through the 4 step process of: validating your pain; identifying the upsetting thoughts; identifying and acknowledging the self-protection and good values shown by your pain; and finally, if it makes sense to go ahead, release the lies.
- Look for the signposts of truth: feeling peace, joy, or sadness and no Thinking Traps in your thoughts.
- If there are no lies in your thoughts and you have the signposts of truth, then your pain is appropriate for the situation. You may just need to let yourself feel the pain a little bit and then take a break, as you would for healthy grief. Or you may need a plan to change the situation, as you would for a toxic relationship. Once you have a plan, implement it so your brain will stop bombarding you with painful feelings.
- If Subby then tries to bug you, just remind her/him that you don't believe the lies anymore and you have a good plan for the other stuff so there's nothing to talk about. Then get Subby to relax by doing some lovely mindfulness exercises (see the Appendix).

I wish you a life of gentle peace. The truth will take you there. I leave you with a beautiful poem by the Persian poet Rumi.



## The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

— Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi,  
*translation by Coleman Barks*

## Appendix: Mindfulness Exercises

The brain is like a plasma ball – lots of activity, connections all over the place, busy, busy, busy. When you put your hand on the plasma ball, all the energy channels toward your hand – it gets focused. That is what certain mindfulness exercises do for your brain. It is like you’ve put your hand on your brain and said “*shhh, quiet, I’m here. Let’s focus on this one thing (the breath, a word, a sound, etc.)*” As you force your brain to focus on one thing, all the filing cabinets it has opened about all the stuff you’ve been thinking about slowly get closed. It starts to get more ordered and roomy in there and you begin to feel better.



There are many mindfulness exercises you can try. I’ve included just a few to give you a place to start. The first set are about focusing your brain. The next exercise, *Embracing Feelings*, will teach you how to sit with your brain and not be afraid of what it throws at you. Finally, I’ve included some compassion practices to help you strengthen your social instinct.

### 4-4-4 Breath

The body’s action system (i.e., fight or flight) is engaged when we breathe in and its relaxation system is engaged when we breathe out. So if we spend less time breathing in and more time breathing out, the body will automatically start to relax.

- **Breathe in for a slow count of 4, hold for a slow count of 4, and breathe out for a slow count of 4.** This reduces the time spent breathing in, which limits the time the body is in its activation system. Do this at least 5 times in a row. I do it until I feel better which sometimes only takes 5 repetitions and sometimes takes more. Often I will do some repetitions, then a bit of normal breathing just to take a break, and then back into it.
  - Don’t be afraid to play with the length of time so that it works well for you. The key is to have more breathing out than breathing in. I sometimes do **4-8-4**, or **4-5-6**. I also do a **4-8 Breath**, which is breathing in for 4 and out for 8 without holding the breath.
  - I do this exercise anytime I can’t sleep. It’s a great time to practice mindfulness exercises.

### The Breath with Mantras

*Our brains like to create stories about our feelings. These phrases help the brain to “let go of the story”.*

Start by taking a few deep breaths and then just notice your breath as it returns to normal. As you keep awareness on your breath, you can also say one of the following phrases, or your own.

- *Breathing in, I know I’m breathing in. Breathing out, I know I’m breathing out.*
- *If it’s not happening now, it’s not happening.*
- *Just the breath, nothing else.*

### Simply Sounds

- Name 5 sounds you hear right now. Really listen. If 5 is hard, name as many as you can.
- Now pick one of the sounds. Keep focused on hearing it, noticing how it changes as you listen. Don’t label or judge the sound. Just rest in the sound.
- The mind will wander. When it does, just gently bring it back to listening to sounds.

*The mind is like a puppy. It requires patience, persistence, and kindness to focus it.*

### In this Moment

This meditation is a fun introduction to informal mindfulness. In this type of meditation, you use all your senses to experience the moment you are currently living. You can apply this to any moment in your day (e.g., brushing your teeth, washing dishes, waiting in a line). It will give you a break from the brain’s chatter and let you sit in the peace and quiet of your current experience.

- Get a single raisin, or a single nut or berry, or a piece of popcorn.  
Start with observing it with your eyes. What do you notice about its appearance? Approach it as though you are from another planet and have never seen one. What colors do you see? What shapes? How does the light hit different parts of it? How does it vary in appearance?
- Now use your sense of touch. How does it feel in your hand? Between your fingers? What are the differences you feel in it?
- Slowly lift it closer to your face. What do you smell? How does the scent change?
- Touch it to your lips. Notice how it feels against your skin. Then take the raisin in your mouth but without biting it. Again, experience it with as many senses as you can.
- Slowly begin to chew the raisin. Notice the feel, sound, taste. Notice what you smell. Pay attention to what your mouth does, what your throat does. Linger over this and explore it.
- Eventually allow yourself to swallow the raisin. Notice the sensations connected to swallowing. Sit a minute and reflect on your experience of being in this moment with a raisin.

## Embracing Feelings Practice

This practice invites emotion in so it can efficiently give us its message and then be on its way. We “embrace” emotion by trying to fully experience it, using our attention and focus to really be present with the sensations of the emotion while ignoring the thoughts related to it.

### Exercise 1: Embracing pleasant feelings

- You can practice first with pleasant feelings. Think about a time when you felt really good or had a good laugh. Imagine that time now and sit with it a bit.
- Notice what your body is doing as you remember. What kind of sensations is it giving you? Warm? Soft? Tight? Narrow? Broad? Where are the sensations? All over? In your stomach? Your heart? Your shoulders? Just observe and notice.
- Sit with the feeling and feel it. Watch it fluctuate in your body. Notice how it changes and moves.
- What emotion words would you give it? Joy? Peace? Sadness?
- Stay in this place for a couple of minutes, watching what your body does as you remember something pleasant.

### Exercise 2: Embracing uncomfortable feelings

- Practicing with uncomfortable feelings will show you that you can take control over your emotional life. Note that if you feel overwhelmed at any time during this exercise, just bring your full attention to noticing and naming all the sounds in your environment, or to the feeling of your feet contacting the floor, or to the movement of your breath in and out. Stay with this *anchoring focus* until you feel grounded again.
- Start by bringing to mind something that worries or frustrates you.
- Now switch your focus to your body. Notice what it is doing. What kind of sensations is it giving you? Soft? Hard? Energizing? Quiet? Tight? Pointy? Blunt? Rough? Smooth?
- As you observe the quality of the sensations, also notice where they are in your body. Are they all over? Are there some in your chest or your back? Which kind are where? Just observe what your body is doing with your upsetting thought. How are the sensations moving around or changing in intensity?
- Stay in this place for a few minutes, just watching. If your brain tries to hook you into thoughts or images, just refocus it on the sensations.
- If you are still feeling the sensations, imagine a little version of you going inside yourself and sitting beside your feelings, offering comfort. This comforting version of you can say to the feelings “I’m here for you”, or “I care for this suffering” or “hello my anger” or “hello my worry” or some other comforting phrase.
- Stay with your sensations, exploring them, observing them, and giving messages of comfort. Do this for a few minutes or until the sensations have diminished or completely faded away, which is what they will tend to do.

## Compassion Exercises

These exercises can help shift your brain into a gentler space, out of its survival instinct where fear and anger rule and into its social instinct where joy, connection, and peace reside.

### ***Sitting Compassion***

- Get comfortable. Take a few deep breaths to settle yourself.
- Start by awakening compassion for someone, a person or animal, who generates spontaneous compassion in you. This is someone you automatically feel warmth toward. It can even be someone you don't know personally. Hold their image in your mind and say to yourself one of the compassion invoking phrases listed at the bottom of this sheet, such as:

***May [name] be free of suffering.***

Do this for at least a minute, letting yourself feel what you are saying.

- Now do the same for each of the following, holding the image of the being in your mind as you say the compassionate phrase:
  - Awaken compassion for a friend: “*May [name] be free ...*”
  - Awaken compassion for a neutral person, maybe a cashier at the grocery store or someone you saw at the bus stop: “*May [e.g., the woman at the bus stop] be free ...*”
  - Awaken compassion for someone you find difficult: “*May [name] be free ....*” Note that if this is too hard, go back to the neutral person and try this step again later or skip it for now.
  - Awaken compassion for all beings everywhere: “*May all beings be free ...*”
- It is common to include a self-compassion step in this meditation, usually before awakening compassion for a friend. You would say to yourself “May I be free of suffering” and let yourself feel the gentle caring for yourself that comes from this phrase. Try including this and see how you feel.

### ***Walking Compassion***

- Next time you are walking somewhere, whenever you pass by someone, send them a silent wish of compassion. Say to yourself one of the compassion phrases like: “*May you be free of suffering.*” Let yourself feel that wish for them. You can do this for people or for any living beings you pass.

Other compassion invoking phrases you can use:

*May you be safe. May you be peaceful.*

*May you be filled with loving-kindness.*

*May you be free from inner and outer harm.*

*May you feel loved and valued.*