



# ACT DAILY JOURNAL

Get Unstuck & Live Fully  
with Acceptance & Commitment Therapy



Diana Hill, PhD & Debbie Sorensen, PhD

Hosts of the *Psychologists Off the Clock* podcast



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# Contents

	Foreword: The Joy, Pain, and Value of Practice	vii
	Welcome: Painting the Golden Gate Bridge	1
Week 1	Prepare the Ground	13
Week 2	Being Present—Live in the Now	37
Week 3	Cognitive Defusion—Greet the Monsters in Your Head	63
Week 4	Acceptance—Courageous, Willing, and Open	87
Week 5	Perspective Taking—Take In the View	113
Week 6	Values—Choose Your Direction	137
Week 7	Committed Action—Fall on Purpose	163
Week 8	Flexible Integration—Hive Mind	189
	The Labyrinth Ahead	213
	Additional Resources	217
	Acknowledgments	221
	References	223

# Foreword



## The Joy, Pain, and Value of Practice

Aristotle once stated, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Practice means to put into action a behavior you would like to learn or change. Sounds simple enough. But as many of you know, practice also takes discipline. A much harder thing to put into practice! Nonetheless, these two are intimately entwined in the ever-evolving process of learning and growth.

As humans, we will experience our own measure of joy and pain. We will meet incredible challenges and wonderful times of peace. We will rise and fall in life as we encounter the unpredictable, often chaotic, and amazing experiences of being alive. Our journeys will have many winding roads and undeveloped paths. How you walk those paths will matter. When your journey is finished and you look back along the road you have traveled, will you have traveled it well?

There may be many ways to answer this question; perhaps you will find that it was hard and your journey ended with a feeling of being disappointed or “beat up” by life. Perhaps your journey was sweet, an attitude of optimism carrying you through to the end. Whatever the case of your journey, it will be filled with obstacle after obstacle. Life works like that. A deep valley, a ragged crevice, an overly wide and long sunbaked field: we do not, for the most part, get to choose which obstacles will be placed in our path. Given the inevitability of life, however, we can choose how we show up to the obstacles, bringing what matters most to bear with every hindrance we meet. This will be the stuff of your purpose, the stuff of your personal meaning. It will be the stuff that makes life worth living.

Here I am talking about your values and how you bring them to bear in your everyday journey. In the *ACT Daily Journal*, authors Diana Hill and Debbie Sorensen invite us to look at how we will practice our values in our everyday lives. How can we bring meaning to moments of joy and moments of pain? How will you approach the ragged crevice? The steep path? What intention will you bring to this journey? *ACT Daily Journal* invites us to bring a hallmark of well-being—psychological flexibility—to each and every moment of our existence. If we can practice with discipline the ability to be present, living more fully in the here and now; if we can disentangle from the stories our minds feed us that hinder our progress; if we can learn to take perspective on stepping into the many different views that can be explored on any journey; if we can be courageous—opening up to what we feel and sense—and then take that next step on the path with intention linked to values and commitment, we will build something. We will build something important, something powerful. A life created by you, lived in and moved through by you in the way that you intended. Loving, laughing, crying, struggling, being in pain, being in peace, creating, playing, building, progressing—tasting all that life has to offer. Truly showing up to life in all of its fullest moments.

Your way of being in the world will be defined by what you do. And as Aristotle said, we learn by doing. We must practice with discipline how to be present to and engage in what matters to us most. The journey is amazing, but it is also short. Let the *ACT Daily Journal* guide you forward, opening you to the possibilities and curiosities awaiting your arrival. So, prepare the ground that will help you face your inevitable challenges. And let this book guide you into a lifelong practice—a lifelong discipline such that when you turn and look back at your path, you can say, my journey to the grave was not fraught with actions of safety and work to preserve every inch of my body, never taking the courageous path. Instead, just as Hunter S. Thompson did, you can loudly proclaim, “Wow! What a Ride!”

—Robyn Walser, author of *The Heart of ACT*

# Welcome



## Painting the Golden Gate Bridge

There's a tale that Diana's dad used to tell her as a little girl: *It takes so long to paint the Golden Gate Bridge that as soon as the job is finished, the painter has to turn around and start all over again.*

In your life have you ever felt like that painter? Do you keep facing similar problems, get stuck painting the same spots, or get so busy painting you forget to take in the view? Do you struggle against the discomfort of it all or start wondering if you're cut out for the job? Or do you find yourself painting for endless hours without a sense of why it's even worthwhile or in what direction you should head?

Life can feel a lot like painting the Golden Gate Bridge. That's why we developed *ACT Daily*, an eight-week collection of daily practices to help you paint the bridge of your life more fully, with more vitality, and in line with your deepest personal values.

To find meaning on the bridge of your life, it's important to:

- Have compassion for yourself when you make mistakes
- Pause from time to time and take in the view around you
- Make room for discomfort when things get boring, hard, or scary
- Hold your thoughts lightly when they're discouraging or unhelpful

- Identify the parts of your life that matter most to you, and do your best at those parts
- Look toward the work ahead with a sense of direction and perspective
- Keep at it—day after day after day

*ACT Daily* will help you with these important tasks. Give yourself eight weeks to try it out, and you just might find that it helps you, as it has helped us and our clients, live more freely, with more meaning, and with a deeper understanding of your inherent humanity.

## Psychological Flexibility: The Key to Psychological Health

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT, pronounced like the verb “to act”) lies at the heart of this program. ACT is a modern, evidence-based approach that offers a unique perspective on well-being. You might think that therapy is about getting rid of “bad” thoughts and feelings and encouraging “good” ones. ACT is different. It helps you *make room* for uncomfortable thoughts and feelings—because not only is discomfort part of life, it’s inherently linked to what you care most about (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 2012).

Hundreds of research studies show that the ACT processes taught in this book are beneficial, not only if you’re struggling with psychological distress, such as depression or anxiety, but also if you want to improve your relationships, develop healthier exercise and eating behaviors, cope better with pain or health conditions, or make positive changes in the world (Hayes 2019).

ACT’s aim is to build your *psychological flexibility*, the ability to be aware of the thoughts and emotions you’re having and be flexible, even when they are painful, so you can make conscious, values-driven choices. If you’re psychologically flexible, you’re less caught up in struggling with difficult thoughts, emotions, and urges, and you’re free to act more in line with your values (Hayes 2019). And ultimately, when you’re psychologically flexible you can keep moving in the direction of the things

that really matter to you, even when you encounter challenges along the way. When you're psychologically flexible, you:

- Are present in the life you have
- Know what you care about and live in a way that's consistent with your values
- Accept and allow discomfort and pain instead of avoiding it
- Notice and unhook from unhelpful thoughts
- Connect with an observer self, one who can see your experience from many perspectives
- Take committed action toward what matters most in your life

The reality is that discomfort and pain are embedded in every fulfilling life. And you're *even more* likely to experience discomfort when you engage in activities that matter deeply to you. When you're psychologically flexible, though, you're able to fully engage in your life and, as our colleague Jill Stoddard (2019, 74) says, be “the Me you want to be,” even when strong emotions and inevitable problems arise.

Psychological flexibility looks like:

- Starting a new relationship even if you fear vulnerability
- Making a change to pursue meaningful work even when it's intimidating
- Being a caring parent even when your child is pushing your buttons
- Moving your body even when your mind screams *I don't want to!*
- Taking meaningful action even when it's uncomfortable or exhausting

*Psychological flexibility builds resilience.*

In order to build a life that matters to you, it helps be able to respond effectively to life's natural stressors. Just as deep roots and flexible branches keep trees from

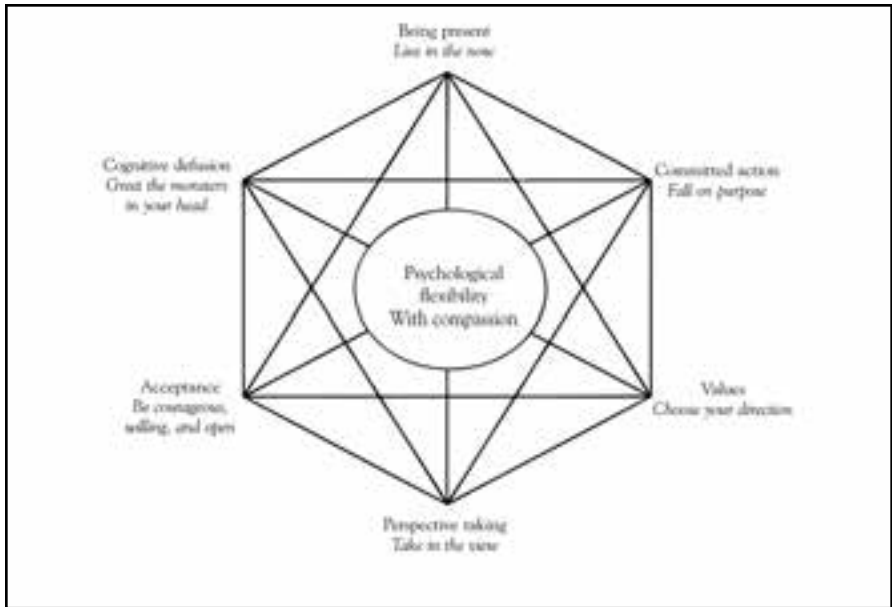


falling over in windstorms, psychological flexibility will help you better withstand the turbulence of life by rooting you in your values and helping you be more flexible in your responses. Psychological flexibility also makes us more resilient as a human species. We need it now, more than ever. Our ability to flexibly adapt and collaborate compassionately is key to meeting the challenges of our communities and our planet (Biglan 2015).

## Your Eight-Week Program to Psychological Flexibility and Health

*ACT Daily* will teach you the core processes that make up psychological flexibility. These ACT processes aren't psychological "tricks" but rather ways of *being* that contribute to thriving and psychological health. Just like an experienced cook who can make a stir-fry with whatever's in the fridge, once you learn these core processes you can apply them to any ingredient that shows up in your life! The processes are dynamic and interconnected, and they are enhanced when you engage in them with compassion. They're also meant to be lived out in your daily life. Like your physical health, your psychological health depends on the small, consistent actions you do daily. For each day of this journal you will build psychological flexibility by doing a set of simple exercises—some reading, some writing, and some experiential practices—that will help you learn the processes associated with psychological health.

The core ACT processes of being present, cognitive defusion, acceptance, perspective taking, values, and committed action together comprise psychological flexibility. These processes work together, centered around compassion for yourself and others, to build a more flexible, resilient, and meaningful *you!*



## Week 1. Prepare the Ground

Often when we're trying to grow and learn something new, we get in our own way. If you're hyperfocused on your imperfections or neglect your self-care, you're less likely to make progress toward what really matters to you. During this week of focusing on compassion, self-care, and intention you will:

- Uncover the critical inner voice that keeps you stuck
- Cultivate a compassionate inner coach
- Learn how your brain's threat, drive, and caring systems influence the degree to which you're critical or compassionate
- Develop simple self-care practices for emotional and physical well-being
- Learn to use your time with intention

## Week 2. Being Present—Live in the Now

By becoming more aware of the present moment, you can fully experience your life as it's unfolding now and make more conscious decisions. During your week practicing *being present* you will:

- Move from living on autopilot to living with intention
- Savor more moments of your daily life
- Have greater self-awareness of your body's sensations, thoughts, and emotions
- Find a steady center in the face of difficulty
- Bring more awareness to your relationships and work

## Week 3. Cognitive Defusion—Greet the Monsters in Your Head

Getting stuck in your own head is one of the biggest barriers to living life effectively. During this week, you will learn a process called *cognitive defusion*, which will help you:

- Notice your chatty mind
- Step back and create space from your thoughts
- Use humor and playfulness to get unstuck from thoughts
- Let go of trying to control your thoughts
- Get more flexible with rules, being right, and shoulds
- Pay attention to thoughts that are helpful, not harmful

## Week 4. Acceptance—Courageous, Willing, and Open

Psychological flexibility means opening up to all aspects of your emotional experience, even the unpleasant ones, in order to do the things that matter to you. During your week focusing on *acceptance* you will:

- Explore the messages you've been taught about emotions
- Recognize your avoidance strategies, such as numbing out, distracting yourself, turning down opportunities, or speeding through life
- Uncover the consequences of avoiding pain and discomfort
- Increase your willingness to face all of your emotions, thoughts, and sensations, pleasant and unpleasant alike

## Week 5. Perspective Taking—Take In the View

The ability to shift perspective helps you open your mind beyond the stories it has about yourself, placing you on a grander, more flexible vantage point. During your week practicing *perspective taking* you will:

- Identify self-stories that keep you stuck
- Become more flexible with labels you assign to yourself
- Step into your “sky mind,” a perspective that makes room for all of your inner experiences
- Zoom out and take perspective over time
- Explore broader possibilities in your life

## Week 6. Values—Choose Your Direction

What brings you meaning, purpose, and vitality in your life? What do you really care about? And what type of person do you want to be? During your week focusing on *values* you will learn to:

- Identify what you want your life to be about
- Explore your values within important life domains, such as family, work, community, and health
- Realign with your values when you get off track
- Explore impermanence as a way to uncover what matters most to you

## Week 7. Committed Action—Fall on Purpose

*Committed action* is the process of taking ongoing steps in the direction of our values, even when those steps are difficult. This week you will use the science of behavior change to:

- Increase your motivation to change using values
- Focus on the process of taking action, rather than on outcome
- Develop small achievable habits
- Explore obstacles to behavior change
- Create contexts, consequences, and a team to support your valued actions
- Develop a flexible and sustainable action plan

## Week 8: Flexible Integration—Hive Mind

During the final week you'll put together all the processes you've learned. You'll experience how each of these processes inform and influence each other, like bees working together in a hive, to help you build your psychological flexibility. You'll fluidly move between them and apply them beyond yourself, *ACTing* daily to create a life you can feel proud of.

### How to Use ACT Daily

*ACT Daily* is a guided journal. Many journals are focused on introspection and expressing thoughts and feelings. *ACT Daily* is different; in addition to developing such insight, you'll learn about the processes that make up psychological flexibility, so you can apply them in small ways, every day, to create a more vibrant life. We designed this journal to help you learn and practice actionable skills and develop daily habits to build psychological flexibility and take steps toward living a more vibrant life. Whether you are new to ACT, or have years of ACT experience, there's always room to strengthen your ability with its processes and apply them more regularly in your own life. On most days of this eight-week course you will:

- Read a short passage about that day's ACT process
- Do a brief guided writing exercise
- Try a brief exercise on the spot
- Write about ACT in your life (In each day's "ACT in My Life" section, you'll have space to note the main values you want to focus on for the day, jot down your daily goals, reflect on the day's reading passage, or write about your personal experience practicing ACT.)
- Learn a simple practice to try in your daily life

*ACT Daily* invites you to focus on each psychological flexibility process for seven days. Our aim is for you to do each day's reading and writing in about fifteen minutes and then practice the ideas in your daily life.

With our therapy clients, we've seen that psychological flexibility processes are only helpful if people use them regularly in their life. To really understand ACT, you can't just read and write about it; you have to put it into practice. Still, we know you're busy, and we are too. As you'll learn in Week 7 (on committed action), habits are more likely to stick if you keep them small and apply them consistently—and that's what we'll help you do.

Although consistency is important, so is flexibility. You can start this journal at the beginning and work your way through each week in order, or you can start with the process you want to work on first. Consistent practice is helpful, but if you skip some days now and then, or if it takes you longer than a week to work through a given process, don't sweat it. Just pick up where you left off and keep moving forward.

## About Us

We are both clinical psychologists, cohosts and creators of the *Psychologists Off the Clock* podcast, and good friends who care a lot about values-based living. We share a value of using cutting-edge and effective ideas from psychology research to help our clients and others thrive in their daily lives.

*ACT Daily* is a culmination of what we have learned from years of academic study, interviewing more than 150 experts in the field of psychology, and thousands of hours of clinical practice. We've both trained extensively in several different forms of therapy and have found ACT to be the most helpful approach in our own lives and the lives of our therapy clients.

*ACT Daily* also draws heavily from our own personal fumbles and successes in using research-based principles from psychology in our own lives. As busy working parents, daughters, partners, and friends, we often struggle to put the ideas we've learned as psychologists into practice on a daily basis. Like everyone, we sometimes lose track of what's important, get stuck in our own thoughts and emotions, and get

caught up in our day-to-day problems. Throughout this book, you'll hear our stories and learn how we've used these concepts ourselves to live more flexibly, and with more purpose. With a healthier mind, heart, and body, *ACT Daily* will help you live a more satisfying life. We hope you value the process of using *ACT Daily* as much as we valued creating it for you!

## ACTing Daily: A Lifelong Process

In closing, it turns out that the story about the Golden Gate Bridge is only a tale; the painters don't start at one end, paint all the way through, and start over. In reality, a crew of painters works continually to maintain the bridge. And much like the painting of the bridge, engaging the processes of psychological flexibility is a lifelong endeavor.

The two of us have been practicing ACT for many years, both professionally and personally, and there's still more for us to learn and practice every day. We hope that even after you've finished this eight-week course you will continue to use ACT in your daily life. Consider this journal to be a maintenance handbook for when the paint starts chipping off your life, as it inevitably will. This journal can help you continue to live a values-driven life.





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# Contents

introduction	1
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part one:

## **Be Good to Yourself**

<b>1</b>	Be for Yourself	<b>12</b>
<b>2</b>	Take in the Good	<b>17</b>
<b>3</b>	Have Compassion for Yourself	<b>22</b>
<b>4</b>	Relax	<b>26</b>
<b>5</b>	See the Good in Yourself	<b>29</b>
<b>6</b>	Slow Down	<b>33</b>
<b>7</b>	Forgive Yourself	<b>37</b>
<b>8</b>	Get More Sleep	<b>42</b>
<b>9</b>	Befriend Your Body	<b>46</b>
<b>10</b>	Nourish Your Brain	<b>50</b>
<b>11</b>	Protect Your Brain	<b>54</b>

part two:  
**Enjoy Life**

12	Take Pleasure	58
13	Say Yes	60
14	Take More Breaks	64
15	Be Glad	68
16	Have Faith	72
17	Find Beauty	76
18	Be Grateful	79
19	Smile	82
20	Get Excited	85

part three:  
**Build Strengths**

21	Find Strength	90
22	Be Mindful	93
23	Be Patient	98
24	Enjoy Humility	102
25	Pause	106
26	Have Insight	109
27	Use Your Will	113
28	Take Refuge	117
29	Risk the Dreaded Experience	120

30	Aspire without Attachment	126
31	Keep Going	130

part four:

### **Engage the World**

32	Be Curious	134
33	Enjoy Your Hands	138
34	Don't Know	141
35	Do What You Can	146
36	Accept the Limits of Your Influence	149
37	Tend to the Causes	152
38	Don't Be Alarmed	156
39	Put Out Fires	160
40	Dream Big Dreams	164
41	Be Generous	167

part five:

### **Be at Peace**

42	Notice You're All Right Right Now	172
43	Honor Your Temperament	176
44	Love Your Inner Child	182
45	Don't Throw Darts	186
46	Relax Anxiety about Imperfection	190

47	Respond, Don't React	194
48	Don't Take It Personally	198
49	Feel Safer	202
50	Fill the Hole in Your Heart	206
51	Let Go	212
52	Love	216
	References	221

# introduction

## Using Your Mind to Change Your Brain

**T**his is a book of practices—simple things you can do routinely, mainly inside your mind, that will support and increase your sense of security and worth, resilience, effectiveness, well-being, insight, and inner peace. For example, they include *taking in the good*, *protecting your brain*, *feeling safer*, *relaxing anxiety about imperfection*, *not knowing*, *enjoying your hands*, *taking refuge*, and *filling the hole in your heart*.

At first glance, you may be tempted to underestimate the power of these seemingly simple practices. But they will gradually change your brain through what's called *experience-dependent neuroplasticity*.

Moment to moment, whatever you're aware of—sounds, sensations, thoughts, or your most heartfelt



longings—is based on underlying neural activities; the same goes for unconscious mental processes such as the consolidation of memory or the control of breathing. Exactly *how* the physical brain produces nonphysical consciousness remains a great mystery. But apart from the possible influence of transcendental factors—call them God, Spirit, the Ground, or by no name at all—there is a one-to-one mapping between mental and neural activities.

It's a two-way street: as your brain changes, your mind changes; and as your mind changes, your brain changes. This means—remarkably—that what you pay attention to, what you think and feel and want, and how you work with your reactions to things all sculpt your brain in multiple ways:

- ✦ Busy regions get more blood flow, since they need more oxygen and glucose.
- ✦ The genes inside neurons get more or less active; for example, people who routinely relax have improved expression of genes that calm down stress reactions, making them more resilient (Dusek et al. 2008).
- ✦ Neural connections that are relatively inactive wither away; it's a kind of neural Darwinism, the survival of the busiest: use it or lose it.
- ✦ “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” This saying from the work of the psychologist Donald Hebb means that active synapses—the connections between neurons—get more

sensitive, plus new synapses grow, producing thicker neural layers. For example, cab drivers who have to memorize the spaghetti snarl of streets in London have a thicker *hippocampus*—a part of the brain that helps make visual-spatial memories—at the end of their training (Maguire et al. 2000). Similarly, people who routinely practice mindfulness meditation develop thicker layers of neurons in the *insula*—a region that activates when you tune in to your body and your feelings—and in parts of the *prefrontal cortex* (in the front of your brain) that control attention (Lazar et al. 2005).

The details are complex, but the key point is simple: *how you use your mind changes your brain*—for better or worse.

There's a traditional saying that the mind takes the shape it rests upon; the modern update is that the *brain* takes the shape the mind rests upon. For instance, you regularly rest your mind upon worries, self-criticism, and anger, then your brain will gradually take the shape—will develop neural structures and dynamics—of anxiety, low sense of worth, and prickly reactivity to others. On the other hand, if you regularly rest your mind upon, for example, *noticing you're all right right now, seeing the good in yourself, and letting go*—three of the practices in this book—then your brain will gradually take the shape of calm strength, self-confidence, and inner peace.

You can't stop your brain from changing. The only question is: Are you getting the changes you want?

## All It Takes Is Practice

That's where practice comes in, which simply means taking regular action—in thought, word, or deed—to increase positive qualities in yourself and decrease negative ones. For example, studies have shown that *being mindful* (chapter 22) increases activation of the left prefrontal cortex and thus lifts mood (since that part of the brain puts the brakes on negative emotions) (Davidson 2004), and it decreases activation of the *amygdala*, the alarm bell of the brain (Stein, Ives-Deliperi, and Thomas 2008). Similarly, *having compassion for yourself* (chapter 3) builds up resilience and lowers negative rumination (Leary et al. 2007).

Basically, practice pulls weeds and plants flowers in the garden of your mind—and thus in your brain. That improves your garden, plus it makes you a better gardener: you get more skillful at directing your attention, thinking clearly, managing your feelings, motivating yourself, getting more resilient, and riding life's roller-coaster.

Practice also has built-in benefits that go beyond the value of the particular practice you're doing. For example, doing *any* practice is an act of kindness toward yourself; you're treating yourself like you matter—which is especially important and healing if you have felt as a child or an adult that others haven't respected or cared about you. Further, you're being active rather than passive—which increases optimism, resilience, and happiness, and reduces the risk of depression. At a time when people often feel pushed by external forces—such as financial pressures, the actions of others, or world events—and by their reactions

to these, it's great to have at least some part of your life where you feel like a hammer instead of a nail.

Ultimately, practice is a process of personal transformation, gradually pulling the roots of greed, hatred, heartache, and delusion—broadly defined—and replacing them with contentment, peace, love, and clarity. Sometimes this feels like you're making changes inside yourself, and at other times it feels like you're simply uncovering wonderful, beautiful things that were always already there, like your natural wakefulness, goodness, and loving heart.

Either way, you're in the process of developing what one could call a "buddha brain," a brain that understands, profoundly, the causes of suffering and its end—for the root meaning of the word "buddha," is "to know, to awake." (I'm not capitalizing that word here in order to distinguish my general focus from the specific individual, the great teacher called the Buddha.) In this broad sense, anyone engaged in psychological growth or spiritual practice—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, agnostic, atheist, or none of these—is developing a buddha brain and its related qualities of compassion, virtue, mindfulness, and wisdom.

## The Law of Little Things

Now, if a practice is a hassle, most people (including me) are not going to do it. So the practices in this book involve either brief actions a few times a day—like *finding beauty* (chapter 17)—or simply a general attitude or perspective, such as *relaxing anxiety about imperfection* (chapter 46) or *not taking life so personally* (chapter 48).

Each moment of practice is usually small in itself, but those moments really add up. It's the law of little things: because of slowly accumulating changes in neural structure due to mental activity, lots of little things can wear down your well-being—and lots of little things can get you to a better place. It's like exercise: any single time you run, do Pilates, or lift weights won't make much difference—but over time, you'll build up your muscles. In the same way, small efforts made routinely will gradually build up the “muscle” of your brain. You really can have confidence, grounded in the latest brain science, that practice will pay off.

## How to Use This Book

But you have to stick with it—so it really helps to focus on one main practice at a time. Life these days is so busy and complicated that it's great to have *just one thing* to keep in mind.

Of course, it's got to be the right “one thing.” For forty years, I've been doing practices—first as a young person looking for happiness, then as a husband and father dealing with work and family life, and now as a neuropsychologist and meditation teacher—and teaching them to others. For this book, I've picked the best practices I know to build up the neural substrates—the foundations—of resilience, resourcefulness, well-being, and inner peace. I didn't invent a single one: they're the fundamentals that people make New Year's resolutions about but rarely do—and it's the *doing* that makes all the difference in the world.

You can do these practices in several ways. First, you could find one particular practice that by itself makes a big difference for you. Second, you can focus on the practices within a section of the book that addresses specific needs, such as part 1 on being good to yourself if you're self-critical, or part 5 on being at peace if you're anxious or irritable. Third, you could move around from practice to practice depending on what strikes your fancy or feels like it would help you the most right now. Fourth, you could take a week for each one of the fifty-two practices here, giving yourself a transformational "year of practice."

Whatever your approach is, I suggest you keep it simple and focus on one practice at a time—whether that time is an event or situation (e.g., a ticklish conversation with your mate, a crunch project at work, a meditation), a day, or longer. And in the back of your mind, other practices and their benefits can certainly be operating; for example, *not taking things personally* (chapter 48) could be in the foreground of awareness while *taking refuge* (chapter 28) is in the background.

Know what your practice is each day; the more you keep it in awareness, the more it will benefit you. Besides simply thinking about this practice from time to time, you could rest your mind even more upon it by putting up little reminders about it—such as a key word on a sticky note—or journaling about it or telling a friend what you're doing. You could also weave your practice into psychological or spiritual activities, such as psychotherapy, yoga, meditation, or prayer.

Working with just fifty-two practices, I've had to make some choices:

- ✦ The practices are super-succinct; more could be said about each one of them. The title of each chapter is the practice. Chapters begin by answering *why* to do that practice, and then tell you *how* to do it. Chapter lengths vary depending on their subject.
- ✦ With the exception of the very last practice, I've emphasized things done within yourself—such as *being grateful* (chapter 18)—rather than between yourself and others. (If you're interested in interpersonally focused practices in the *Just One Thing (JOT)* style, you might like my free e-newsletter by that name at [www.RickHanson.net](http://www.RickHanson.net).) Meanwhile, you could apply the practices in this book to one or more relationships, or engage in them with a buddy—such as a friend or a mate—or as a group (e.g., family, team at work, reading group).
- ✦ Most practices here involve taking action inside your mind—and of course it's also important to take action in your body and in the world around you.
- ✦ There are three fundamental phases to psychological and spiritual growth: *being with* difficult material (e.g., old wounds, anger); *releasing* it; and *replacing* it with something more beneficial. In a nutshell, you let be, let go,

and let in. You'll find practices for each of these phases, though I've concentrated on the third one because it's often the most direct and rapid way to reduce stress and unhappiness and develop positive qualities in yourself.

- ✦ While I experience and believe that something transcendental is involved with both mind and matter, I've stayed here within the frame of Western science.

As you engage these practices, have some fun with them. Don't take them (or yourself) too seriously. Feel free to be creative and adapt them to your own needs. For example, the *How* sections usually contain multiple suggestions, and you don't have to do all of them; just find the ones that do the most for you.

Throughout, take good care of yourself. Sometimes a practice will be too hard to sustain, or it will stir up painful issues. Then just drop it—for a while, or indefinitely. Draw on resources for practices; for example, deepening your sense of being cared about by others will help you *forgive yourself* (chapter 7). Remember that practice does not replace appropriate professional mental or physical health care.

## Keep Going

People recognize that they've got to make an effort over time to become more skillful at driving a truck, running a department, or playing tennis. Yet it's common to think



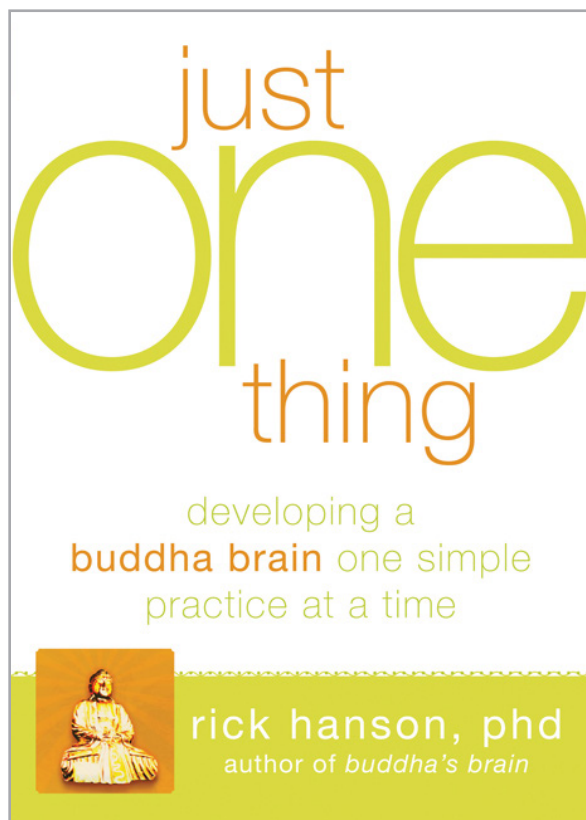
that becoming more skillful with one's own mind should somehow come naturally, without effort or learning.

But because the mind is grounded in biology, in the physical realm, the same laws apply: the more you put in, the more you get back. To reap the rewards of practice, you need to *do* it, and keep doing it.

Again, it's like exercise: if you do it only occasionally, you'll get only a little improvement; on the other hand, if you do it routinely, you'll get a large improvement. I've heard people talk like making efforts inside the mind is some kind of lightweight activity, but in fact it's always a matter of resolve and diligence—and sometimes it's very challenging and uncomfortable. Practice is not for wusses. You will *earn* its benefits.

So honor yourself for your practice. While it's down-to-earth and ordinary, it's also aspirational and profound. When you practice, you are nourishing, joining with, and uncovering the very best things about you. You are taking the high road, not the low one. You're drawing on sincerity, determination, and grit. You're taming and purifying the unruly mind—and the jungle that is the brain, with its reptilian, mammalian, and primate layers. You're offering beautiful gifts to your future self—the one being in the world you have the most power over and therefore the greatest duty to. And the fruits of your practice will ripple outward in widening circles, benefiting others, both known and unknown. Never doubt the power of practice, or how far your own chosen path of practice can take you.

I wish you the best on your path!

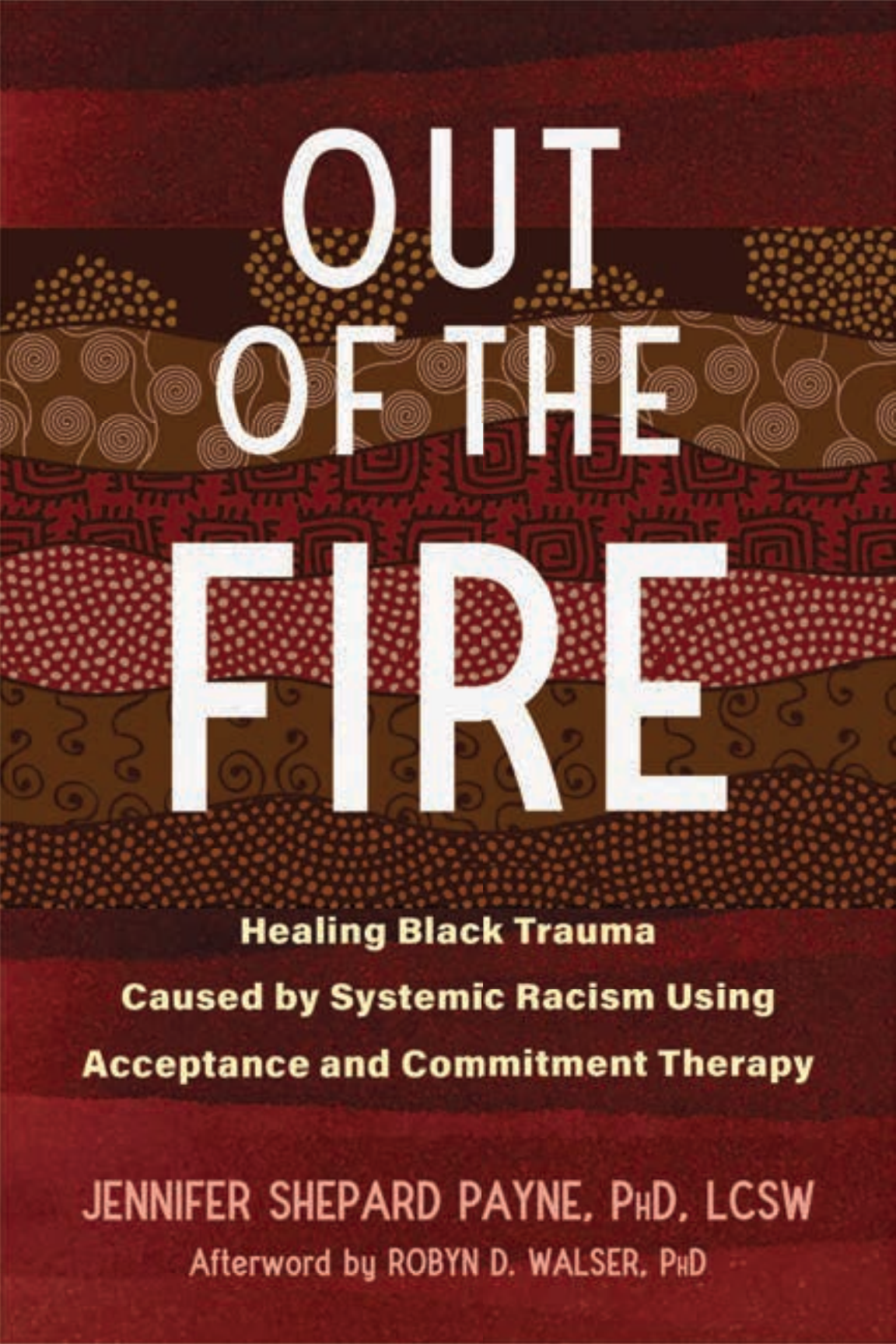


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# OUT OF THE FIRE

**Healing Black Trauma**

**Caused by Systemic Racism Using  
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**

**JENNIFER SHEPARD PAYNE, PhD, LCSW**

Afterword by **ROBYN D. WALSER, PhD**

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# Contents

Preface		vii
Introduction	We Are Continuously Burned by Fire	1
Chapter 1	Suffering and the African American Experience	7
Chapter 2	Moving from Fire to Psychological Flexibility	23
Chapter 3	“It Is What It Is”—Acceptance	41
Chapter 4	“Freedom to Let Go”—Cognitive Defusion	61
Chapter 5	“In the Here and Now”—Present Moment Awareness	79
Chapter 6	“More Than What I’ve Been Through”—Self-as-Context	91
Chapter 7	“Living Our Life Like It’s Golden”—Values	109
Chapter 8	“Getting it Done”—Committed Action	127
Chapter 9	Bringing It All Together: Hexa-dancing with Blacks in America	145
Chapter 10	In the Fire, Yet Not Consumed	159
Afterword	Building a Life That’s Golden	167
Acknowledgments		171
Appendix A	The POOF (Pulling Out Of Fire) Model	173
Appendix B	Collective Committed Action Resources	176
References		181

## INTRODUCTION

# We Are Continuously Burned by Fire

*Fire does not make fire, only ashes.*

—African proverb, author unknown

I can recall the fiery inferno that burned in me the day that George Floyd died as if it were yesterday. May 25, 2020, on a Monday. I am a university professor, and I was using that Monday to do teaching preparation. I sat at my desk in my home office, something that all of us professors had been doing since March because of COVID-19. The viral video of George Floyd's murder was circulating at that time.

I don't always click on videos. Lord knows that there have been many other videos before this one. But I clicked. And my life immediately changed.

There had been so many police incidents before this one, but this one stood out, even more than Rodney King's verdict. Rodney King had been ruthlessly beaten by police officers on a Los Angeles street in 1992, and the video of it was available for all to see. I still remember the brief flood of anger, helplessness, and confusion as the "not guilty" verdict for all the officers involved was read back then. I was working at a public community health center in the heart of South Los Angeles. We nurses, doctors, and medical case workers watched the verdict read on a small TV set in the waiting room as we did our jobs. While disturbed at the injustice, I did not feel the ongoing fire of anger and rage back then like I do now. Truthfully, I do not know why Rodney King's verdict did not hit me as hard as the George Floyd incident. Maybe it was because Rodney King lived while George Floyd died. Perhaps it was because I was not as socially aware as I am now. Possibly it was because I may have internalized some of the negative statements said about Blacks in society early in life, so maybe I was numb. However, although I did not feel the ongoing fire of anger and rage back then, I understood my husband's, family members', and community's anger. I did not condone the LA Rebellion that resulted, but I absolutely understood it.

But this time, on this Monday, May 25, I felt a depth of feelings that I have never felt in my over fifty years of existence. Violence toward us has been a part of Black American existence since we were forced on ships from Africa to the United States. Yet, this George Floyd murder sparked a flame that lingered. The strangulation was so brazen and

bold. A grown man begged for almost nine minutes for his own life, even calling on his deceased mother, and yet was still killed. His life was so carelessly taken. Someone who was sworn to protect and serve tossed away a life like he was scraping gum off his shoe.

I remember the burning fire I felt that week—intense emotions that I was unsure if I could rein in. Indignation. Rage. Feeling lost. Disinterest in everything that used to matter. Fear of walking away from it all. Fear at my level of outrage. Uncontrollable crying. Irritability at everyone and everything. Desire to isolate. Insane levels of anxiety. Extreme exhaustion. Stress levels through the roof. Embarrassment that I had not really been present regarding this “stuff” before. Feeling disconnected from others. Feeling a lack of belonging. Hopelessness. A desire to run and go anywhere but here in the United States. Unraveled. Undone. Broken. Shattered. Perhaps you felt this way, too.

I know I am not the only one who felt the flames of overwhelming despair and pain. I am sure that I am not alone in experiencing the fire of ongoing systemic racism. If you are not Black in America but are empathetic with George Floyd’s plight (and Breonna Taylor’s plight, and Eric Garner’s plight...the list goes on), then I can imagine that you feel the pain of social injustice as well. If you are Black in America, I am sure you have your own story of how you felt when you experienced an epiphany regarding the Black experience. I can imagine the pain you felt. The thing about this pain is that it continues. It is ongoing pain, a burning chronic pain that needs to be managed, rather than a one-time acute pain. My question is: how are you handling that pain?

## Types of Fire in Our Lives

Pain and fire have much in common. Like fire, pain starts from something that fueled it. It could have begun from the fuel of a traumatic experience or a loss. It could have formed from the fuel of injustice or discrimination. The pain could have been fueled by someone very close to us (through domestic violence or family loss) or someone we did not



know (like rape or systemic inequity). Somehow, a chemical reaction occurs between the precipitating event—the fuel—and our perception of it—the oxygen. Like fire, once the pain starts, it does not need much encouragement to continue. Our perceptions can feed into the fire and fan the flames or reduce the fire's intensity. The fire of pain is still there; no one is saying that it isn't. But our perceptions of the pain can increase or decrease the fire's intensity and damage.

Uncontrolled and overwhelming pain will do nothing but consume us and devour us. Like a raging wildfire, unchecked pain can destroy our motivations, drive, will, and esteem. We need help if the fire of pain is too much for us to handle or bear. I hope this book can begin to help because pain is inevitable and universal. None of us can magically avoid pain. Pain is a part of life, and everyone will experience it at some point.

I wrote this book amid the COVID-19 pandemic that affected all parts of the globe. Along with its spread came after-effects—hundreds of thousands of persons dying unexpectedly and prematurely. Millions of lost jobs, lost businesses, and foreclosed homes. Millions of family members grieving over loved ones no longer with them. Dreams were dashed as thousands of those who did survive the virus still live with permanently damaged lungs, barraged kidneys, and weakened hearts. Homes that were financially stable at the beginning of the year were suddenly thrust into a fearful time when financial survival was questionable. Places of worship closed down with windows shuttered and doors locked. Parents worked from home via Zoom while teaching and entertaining children out of school. And we lived with constant uncertainty about the future. Will I get the virus? Will my family or a loved one? Will there be an end to all this? When?

And while the COVID-19 experience has affected everyone, it has been devastating for Blacks in America. For example, the CDC identified the death rate among African Americans as 92.3 deaths per 100,000 persons, which is higher than Hispanic/Latino, white, or Asian persons. Thus, while Blacks in America have a smaller population, they die from COVID-19 in higher numbers than many groups. This means

that Black families are being affected severely by COVID-related deaths.

This time of life has been very uncomfortable for many people, and it is outright painful for some. The truth is, there are no guarantees in life that things will permanently stay as they are. We all age and potentially lose some of the youthful vitality we had in our early years. We all have or will experience death and loss of some kind. We all make mistakes and have disappointments, betrayals, accidents, rejections, and embarrassments. We all have the possibility of experiencing health problems or having someone hurt us physically or emotionally. Pain is universal. We need to shine a light on the reality that pain and discomfort meet everyone at their doorstep at one time or another.

However, in addition to the pain that meets everyone at their doorstep, Blacks are disproportionately affected by structural and systemic racism that causes us to die at higher rates at the hands of law enforcement or vigilantes. It is no wonder that there may be many individuals suffering from grief, loss, sadness, depression, anxiety, and trauma in the Black community.

Like fire, pain can sometimes be helpful. What would we do without fire to warm us and cook our food? And pain, controlled, is functional as well. It is a barometer or a thermometer that helps to direct us (“Don’t touch that—that’s toxic”) and warn us. And if we had no sorrow in life, we could not readily appreciate joy. Pain can be a refiner’s fire for us. Like fire shapes wood and makes it unrecognizable, pain can help to mold us and shape us into better people—if we allow it to. It can refine us so that which doesn’t propel us toward our vision, that which is distracting or useless or wasteful, can be shed in the fire of pain. Pain can purify us if we allow it to.

There is a tool that has helped many to move toward facing their pain and help refine their walk in the fire. That tool is called acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT for short. It is a psychological intervention that allows us to use our pain to get closer to what we care about and value. This book features tools and exercises to help you on

your healing journey. There are also various worksheets available for download at the website for this book, <http://www.newharbinger.com/49883>, as well as a clinician's guide. If you are willing, let's explore together how ACT may help us navigate the fiery pain of our moments of suffering.

## CHAPTER 1

# Suffering and the African American Experience

*I had no idea that history was being made. I was just  
tired of giving up.*

—Rosa Parks

When I think about the intense pain that overwhelms some of us, I see it as a raging fire, and some are afraid they will be wholly consumed. Sometimes, converging life events are so all-consuming, and the pain is so intense, that a person can feel paralyzed by the pain without any idea of how to get out. The fire of suffering, in these instances, can appear alarming because fire is unpredictable. Fire is difficult to contain. And often, with fire, everything in its wake is left charred, damaged, and sometimes unrecognizable. With no idea about when the fire of pain and suffering will end, or how hot and intense it will get, some folks are just stuck: in too much pain to move, yet too much in pain to stay in pain.

Recovering from trauma in all its forms is something that we desperately need as Blacks in America. As a community, we should know that a therapeutic method exists that can be a culturally embracing framework for us to heal from trauma. Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) can be a tool for our pain. When compared with other interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, ACT is relatively new. It was created in 1986 by Steven Hayes, along with Kelly Wilson and Kirk Strosahl (Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson 2004). ACT is a useful therapy for several reasons:

It is evidence-based and well-studied, which means a great deal of research shows that it works.

It is a strength-based approach because being diagnosed with something (an anxiety disorder, a depressive disorder, as examples) is not necessary for it to work.

ACT looks at human responses to pain and normalizes the experience of suffering instead of blaming the victim who is experiencing pain.

ACT is an empowering intervention because it helps a person focus on moving toward their own life values.

These qualities of ACT—the non-pathologizing approach, the normalization of the experience of suffering, and the empowering focus on life values—are all characteristics that have been shown in prior research to be culturally appealing to us as Black Americans. ACT is

non-pathologizing because you do not need a diagnosis or psychological label in order to use or benefit from ACT. ACT is normalizing because it promotes the view that all humans suffer, not just certain races or other demographics. And ACT is empowering because it focuses on identifying those things that truly matter to us and then moving forward toward them.

Yet, few Blacks utilize ACT. More specifically, few Black clients are offered ACT as a talk therapy choice, and few Black clinicians provide ACT to their clients. Why? There are many reasons. First, less than 5 percent of mental health professionals in the United States are Black. Of those who are clinicians, many have not yet been exposed to ACT training. ACT is not being provided in communities of color on a large scale. And many Black Americans who are hurting are not aware that ACT exists, or that it may be of help to those of us who suffer. Suppose you already had an awareness of ACT before reading this book, and you are Black. In that case, you are one of a few. Thus, this is why this book was written—acknowledging and recovering from trauma in all its forms is something that we desperately need as Blacks in America.

## Digging Deeper into the Experience of Pain

Indeed, everyone has experienced grief, sadness, anxiety, or some other feeling of distress. Possibly you have heard of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), referred to by some as the “clinician’s bible” where all psychological diagnoses are categorized (APA 2013). Mental health professionals categorize persons through the DSM because Medicare and Medicaid and other financial sources need a diagnosis (called medical necessity) to provide care. Another reason for the categorization system is to provide a common language among therapists to describe mental health syndromes. But let’s hypothesize about this categorization system for a moment and do a “what-if” exercise. Suppose we lump all types of DSM diagnoses (which were socially constructed, by the way) into one general area of suffering.

Then, those “diagnoses” (anxiety disorders, trauma-related disorders, depressive disorders, and so on) would just be different ways of manifesting pain. But how useful are these categorizations to us as individuals who are trying to heal from pain? As John Lewis, the US congressman and civil rights icon, said in 2020:

Sixty-five years have passed, and I still remember the face of young Emmett Till... Despite real progress, I can't help but think of young Emmett today as I watch video after video after video of unarmed Black Americans being killed, and falsely accused. My heart breaks for these men and women, their families and the country that let them down—again. (Gallon & Seals 2020)

The pain is real and it does break hearts. What if pain expression was actually on a continuum—instead of a yes or no answer to diagnostic criteria? This discussion regarding the DSM is not coming from a novice; I have been a mental health professional for over two decades, and I have been teaching and training other clinicians on the DSM's specifics for more than ten years. My dissertation chair was one of the most well-known spokespersons regarding the DSM—Dr. Stuart Kirk, distinguished professor emeritus from UCLA. I am not downplaying the utility of the DSM regarding how it works to provide a clinical categorization system. However, when we begin to self-identify with a diagnosis, it creates more problems than solutions.

I will give you an example: The latest version of the DSM, the DSM-5, says that if you have five or more specific depression symptoms for two weeks, you have major depressive disorder. Yet, the book does not differentiate whether that person is depressed in general, or if that person is grieving someone who died recently. A person struggling with depression in all situations is lumped together with a person who just lost their loved one.

*You have permission to feel. Everything we go through is not a diagnosis!*

Some reactions are normal. It is normal to grieve a loss. It is normal to feel stressed in situations where danger is present. Yet, receiving a diagnosis without a therapist taking your full situation into account can feel stigmatizing. Mental illness is already a taboo subject in our culture. As Blacks, many of us have been negatively labeled in so many ways that receiving a psychological label feels damaging. It feels like unnecessary guilt and shame added to our grief and pain.

However, it is normalizing to know that we need not be ashamed of our pain. All human beings will go through situations or events that cause pain. This is just a normal part of life. Our loved ones die. Sometimes relationships end. Natural disasters happen. Sometimes, we have to make decisions that feel uncomfortable or unfavorable. Pain is a universal human experience—but *suffering* does not have to be.

## The Difference Between Pain and Suffering

Even though we may feel alone, ashamed, broken, or defective while going through it, the truth is that pain is familiar to us all. We try to hide that the pain hurts. We try to pretend that we are doing okay with it. We do this because we think that the very presence of pain points a crooked finger at us, accuses us, judges us as weak or limited or incompetent, or not “enough.” Because the pain is evidence of that. That is just not true. ACT teaches that *pain is inevitable, while suffering is not*. There is a difference between pain and suffering.

Painful events cause pain. My pastor used to say, for example, “Hurting people hurt other people.” And no matter how wise, careful, or sweet we are, we all will experience pain in life.

Suffering, on the other hand, is caused by trying to wiggle away from the pain—trying to squash it, avoid it, self-medicate to dull it, or control it. We all experience pain, but we do not have to experience suffering (Follette & Pistorello 2007). To illustrate this, I will tell two stories.



## Story: A Broken Glass

*The first is a story about a boy named Marcus. Marcus, age twelve, broke one of his mother's favorite glasses. He dropped it on the kitchen floor and it shattered into many pieces. One of the shards cut his left foot because he was barefoot in the kitchen when he dropped the glass.*

*There were two ways that Marcus could have handled the situation. Marcus could have immediately told his mother what happened and apologized. He could have asked for help with his foot. If asked, his mother likely would have checked his wound to see if there was any glass still in his foot and carefully removed it. His mother would have probably cleaned the wound (although it would have been painful), added some antibacterial ointment to the injury, and protected the damage with a bandage. His mother would likely have forgiven Marcus's accident and helped clean the glass shards from the kitchen.*

*However, that was not the way that Marcus handled the situation. Instead, when he dropped the glass and cut his foot, Marcus began to have thoughts. "I broke one of her favorite glasses." "She's gonna hate me for that." "I'm so stupid." "Why can't I do anything right?" "I'm such a loser."*

*From his thoughts, Marcus began to feel embarrassment, guilt, shame, anxiety, and fear. These feelings were not attached to the pain he was feeling in his foot—these feelings were related to the thoughts he was thinking. Because his thoughts were painful, Marcus decided to hide the situation. He did not tell his mother about the incident. Marcus tried to hide the glass shards so his mother would not know the glass was broken. He covered up his wound by trying to hide it—he put on some socks. He did not clean the wound or put a bandage on it to protect it. Instead, Marcus tried to hide it and not think about it anymore.*

*Two weeks later, he was in much more pain than he was the day he broke the glass. Marcus had difficulty walking on his left*

*foot. His wound had gotten infected, and dirt accumulated in it. His foot had lots of pain, swelling, and foul-smelling drainage. Marcus had to eventually tell his mother, and they had to go to the hospital, get antibiotic treatment, and lance the abscess that had grown on his foot.*

*In the first scenario, Marcus felt pain. In the second scenario, Marcus felt additional pain as his shame led him to hide the incident, which caused ongoing suffering.*

### *Story: From Childhood Pain to Adult Suffering*

*Now, let's talk about Jacquie, a twenty-five-year-old Black woman. When she was younger, she went to a junior high where she was one of only a few Blacks. During her junior high years, she was constantly bullied and called the N-word. A handful of students taunted her and called her dirty because of her skin color and made animal noises as she passed. Also, she was sexually abused by a white male student who she found out was just dating her to see what Black girls' privates looked like. Her junior high years were extremely painful, but she tried to deal with them valiantly by ignoring the incidents and being a "good" girl. She did not want to burden her extremely hardworking parents with what was going on at the school. So, she never talked with her family about her experiences, and she never addressed them.*

*Flash forward to age twenty-five. Jacquie, over the years, has tried to avoid thinking about the situation in junior high. But some words continued to surface in her mind later, long after she graduated from college. "I am less than." "I am not as good because of my race." "I am ugly." "I have to work twice as hard just to be accepted in any environment." "Maybe I am lazy." As a result of her thoughts, she feels ongoing personal shame, guilt, ongoing sadness, anxiety, and fear.*

*Instead of addressing the pain from being bullied, she tried to avoid those thoughts, and the pain became suffering. Jacquie's*

*thoughts trickled into her relationship choices. She chose abusive, dismissive, rude, or absent men as partners. Painful thoughts leaked into her job choices. She never thought she was good enough to try for the jobs that she really wanted. She began to isolate more, and she shied away from potential friendships. She started to avoid opportunities when they arose. She avoided her pain.*

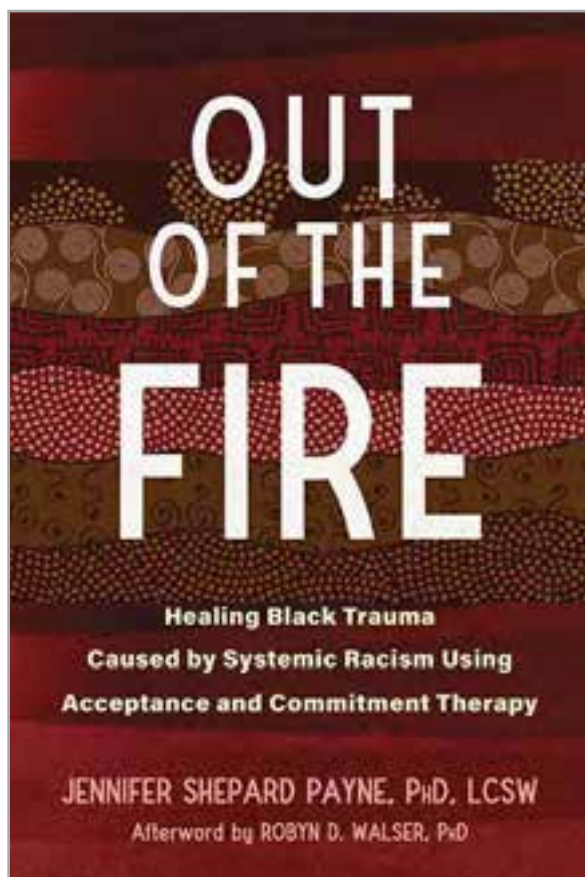
*Jacquie tried to make herself feel better through perfectionism, workaholic behavior, hyper-religiosity, legalism, superficiality, and other self-medicating distractions. Way before COVID-19, Jacquie was already wearing a mask in public. It was a mask of her own making—an impenetrable facade as she pretended to be what she thought she should be in public. Instead of facing her racial wound, she hid her pain and pretended that it was not there. Sadly, as a result, Jacquie continues to suffer to this day.*

## Is All Human Suffering the Same?

It is true that all humans suffer and go through pain. But some individuals have more pain (more intense pain, more frequent pain, or both) thrust upon them via their environments than others. I saw a *USA Today* article that quoted Justin Bieber via Instagram, talking about his own mental health struggles. He said:

*It's hard to get out of bed in the morning with the right attitude when you are overwhelmed with your life, your past, job responsibilities, emotions, your family, finances, your relationships... You start foreseeing the day through lenses of 'dread' and anticipate another bad day. (Yasharoff 2019)*

Being famous, young, wealthy, and talented does not preclude anyone from pain. All humans, even famous ones like Justin Bieber, can struggle with pain. However, Justin Bieber's struggle with pain is different from a homeless mother's struggle on Skid Row. Justin Bieber's battle with pain is different from the struggle of a young Black male



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# Anxiety Happens

52 WAYS TO FIND  
PEACE *of* MIND



JOHN P. FORSYTH, PhD  
GEORG H. EIFERT, PhD

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# Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
	Introduction	I
<i>1</i>	LIVE Your Life	7
<i>2</i>	Find Connection	12
<i>3</i>	Creating Space	15
<i>4</i>	Live with Intention	18
<i>5</i>	Release the Fear	22
<i>6</i>	Exploring the Costs	25
<i>7</i>	The Struggle Trap	29
<i>8</i>	Letting Go	32
<i>9</i>	Flip the Switch	36
<i>10</i>	Do the Opposite	39
<i>11</i>	Taking a Leap	42
<i>12</i>	Voices of Anxiety	45
<i>13</i>	On Autopilot	48
<i>14</i>	Whole, Complete, Enough	51
<i>15</i>	Kindness and Self-Care	55

<b>16</b>	Cultivating Allowing	58
<b>17</b>	Popping the Illusion	63
<b>18</b>	Not Buying It	66
<b>19</b>	Getting Unstuck	69
<b>20</b>	Humanizing the Mind	73
<b>21</b>	Words, Letters, and Ink	76
<b>22</b>	Be Patient	80
<b>23</b>	Disarming Anxiety	84
<b>24</b>	Who Am I, <i>Really</i> ?	87
<b>25</b>	The Expansive Self	90
<b>26</b>	Let It Be	93
<b>27</b>	Drop the Stories	97
<b>28</b>	Behavior Matters!	102
<b>29</b>	Discover Your Passions	105
<b>30</b>	Finding Your North Star	109
<b>31</b>	Opening the Right Doors	112
<b>32</b>	Making Wise Choices	115
<b>33</b>	Do, No Trying	118
<b>34</b>	Exercise Kindness	121



<i>35</i>	Don't Feed It	124
<i>36</i>	Body Surfing Emotions	128
<i>37</i>	Refocus, Reconnect, and Redirect	132
<i>38</i>	Moving with Barriers	136
<i>39</i>	Lay Off the But(t)s	141
<i>40</i>	Unhooking from the Past	144
<i>41</i>	Grounding in the Now	148
<i>42</i>	Releasing Attachments	151
<i>43</i>	Drifting Along	155
<i>44</i>	Take Good Care	158
<i>45</i>	Reclaim Your Power	161
<i>46</i>	The Gift of Gratitude	165
<i>47</i>	Paying It Forward	169
<i>48</i>	Taking the Reins	172
<i>49</i>	Inhabiting Your Body	175
<i>50</i>	Growing Through Adversity	179
<i>51</i>	One Step at a Time	182
<i>52</i>	The Journey Ahead	187

# Introduction

We live in an age of anxiety. It's an experience shared by millions of people on this planet. You may know what it's like. You feel it. You think it. You may confront it from the moment you wake up until you go to sleep at night. Even then, sleep may offer no comfort.

There's no escaping this simple truth. Anxiety has been with us for as long as we know. Our ancestors needed it to survive. We need it too. But in our modern industrialized world, few of us are facing down predators on a daily basis. Still, many experience anxiety and fear daily, and, in a way, it can feel like being followed by a hungry lion wherever you go. Over time, anxiety can strip away your passion and zest for life. And it can literally take over your life and *become* your life. It's bad enough just to have anxiety. But when it begins to rob you of your freedom, you have a *problem* with anxiety. Yet it doesn't have to be this way.

This little book offers fifty-two ways to break free from the snares, the traps, and all the false hopes and promises that anxiety and fear set for you. Like a child throwing a tantrum, anxiety forces itself into our awareness and can deplete our energy, resources, and resolve. It screams, "*Pay attention to me or else!*" It makes it seem like your life is at stake. But the biggest "or else" message is this: "You won't be happy, so long as you feel anxious or afraid." This is a natural

setup for endless struggle. Anxiety is no longer an emotion that can be felt and experienced. Anxiety is now a problem that must be overcome before you can have the kind of life you so desperately want. Yet it doesn't have to be this way either.

## The Struggle Is Costly

Ancient wisdom and modern science teach us that anxiety and fear are two of many unpleasant emotions that all human beings will experience as long as they're alive. In fact, you wouldn't be reading this book without them. But the struggle with anxiety is different. It is the source of great hardship and pain—and it is mostly unnecessary. This is important to understand.

Often, when anxiety and fear show up, we see them as the enemy. We harden, shut down, and withdraw. Naturally, then, we want to struggle to bury them, fight them, or run away from them. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. Moments spent struggling to feel less anxious or afraid add up, and the cumulative effort starts to take its toll. If you allow this to go unchecked, you may find yourself one day looking back and facing the worst kind of pain—the pain of missed opportunities and regrets.

Anxiety in and of itself, without the struggle, can be useful in many ways. Our ancestors needed it to stay safe and alive. We need it in the modern-day world too.

Sometimes anxiety is a warning call, telling us that something is wrong or even harmful or dangerous. It may even give you a nudge to accomplish goals. Or it may alert you to something amiss in your life. Maybe you're off course and far from the life you wish to lead. Anxiety will show up then too. Anxiety may also be a sign that something is so important to you that you care intensely about it. So intensely, in fact, that you fear losing it.

What you don't need is the constant struggle with anxiety. Paradoxically, the more you try to get rid of anxiety, the more it gains a hold on you. It often increases over time. Learning to *let go of the struggle* is a powerful antidote to the misery caused by endless unsuccessful struggles with your emotional pain.

## **The Freedom to Create Your Best Life**

Since the dawn of time, millions of people all over the world have felt the self-limiting blows of crushing anxiety and fear. We certainly have too. Many have also found enormous grace and healing by walking themselves through the material we're about to share with you. And their lives are better for it. This can happen for you too.

This book offers you hope and a way into the life you want, one in which you're not held back by your struggles with anxiety. This new approach is based on several streams of solid research, our own and that of others, spanning

emotion science (that is, work showing that suppression and control of thoughts and feelings makes them worse), mindfulness-based interventions such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and contemporary research supporting positive life changes, human thriving, and psychological health and wellness. We won't be covering the science in this book—this is not the place for that. Rather, we are offering you a set of tested strategies that will help you tip the scales back to where anxiety becomes just a normal part of living fully. But this is hard to do unless you're willing to look at things differently.

There is a space between you and what you think and feel—a moment in time when you can choose how to respond and what you will do. In this space, you can choose to relate differently with your anxious mind and body—and your life. You can learn to let go of the struggle and start moving in directions in which you want your life to go. This is the way to create genuine happiness, peace of mind, and a wholehearted life. This book aims to start you on this journey.

Some ideas and teachings in this book may seem odd, backward, even strange to you. But if you stick with them, you'll gain freedom from suffering and the turmoil that anxiety creates in your life. You'll learn how to transform your relationship with anxiety. No longer tormented by it. No longer a slave to it. You'll learn to tap into your inner strength and courage to let anxiety be without getting

knocked around by it. Then, and only then, will you be free to do what you really care about.

We invite you to dive into this book with an open mind and a willingness to try something new, opposite, and different from what you've done before. As you do, be mindful that we're not asking you to like what you think or feel. Nobody likes anxiety or fear. Nor will we ask you to condone past wrongs committed against you. What we'll teach you is how to *move beyond anxiety and fear* and create the optimal conditions for your own genuine happiness and *peace of mind*. This is something you can do.

## Use This Book Wisely

This book will teach you fifty-two ways to stop running from your anxiety, fears, and worries and instead spend more time creating the life you want to live. To benefit, you don't need to believe what we say. You don't even need to understand all of it.

The simple, short, and powerful exercises in this book offer you new experiences, skills, and ways of approaching anxiety *and* your life. Do the exercises in a quiet place where you feel comfortable and distraction is limited. Let's call this your peaceful place, your safe refuge. Simply read the instructions twice and follow them as best as you can.

We guarantee that your mind will throw many arguments at you as to why this or that sounds impossible, is too

difficult, or doesn't make any sense. When such thoughts show up, thank your mind for each of them. Then move on. There's no need to argue with your mind. Don't get stuck trying to convince yourself of anything.

The only thing we ask is that you stay open. Do the exercises and check out whether, over time, they start working for you. You have little to lose and much to gain by approaching your anxiety problems in a radically different way. We'll show you that way.

Of course, you don't have to keep on doing *all* the exercises forever. The whole point of the exercises is to teach you a new way of navigating life's ups and downs so that you can live in alignment with what matters to you. Make a note of the exercises that work best for you, and then keep on practicing those! After a while they will become a habit. It's also a good idea to go back and reread chapters that deal with issues you continue to struggle with.

Keep in mind that this book offers a journey of change, growth, and self-discovery. To make a real difference in your life, you'll need to start doing something new and unlike anything you've done before. That's what this book offers you—the hope of a new life even with anxiety. When you wholeheartedly and genuinely work with this book, it will work for you. You'll find that you're freer to exercise your capacity to create your own destiny without anxiety limiting you. That much we know from our own research and experience. So let's get started.

# 1 LIVE Your Life

All of us wish to be genuinely happy and to thrive. But this isn't easy to do. Life will inevitably offer obstacles, problems, and pain. No one can escape this simple truth. But this doesn't mean you have to be miserable. It doesn't mean that you have to live in fear.

Anxiety happens. It's not a choice. But you can live your life without anxiety controlling you. This doesn't mean that you'll never feel any painful emotions again. You will. We will. Every person on this planet will. But feeling these emotions when you feel them doesn't mean that you have to suffer.

Emotions happen. We have little control over them. But you can control how you respond to your emotional life. Anxiety doesn't have to control you. It is you who can decide whether anxiety and fear control you or not. You can learn to feel whatever you feel and think whatever you think *and* go forward to create the kind of life you wish to live. This is the path to unlocking your inner power to control your life and create genuine happiness.

You can create the conditions for your genuine happiness and peace of mind. You don't have to remain stuck in anxiety and fear, or mired down in the difficulties that life offers. The trick is learning to live well when life is hard and



unkind. This is the heart of the LIVE approach in this book:

*Letting go.* You've probably heard it said that "what you resist, persists." And what you resist will amplify your pain and suffering while draining your energy and robbing you of your freedom. The way out of this cycle is to learn to let go of the struggle with what your mind and body offer you. In this way, you free up your precious energy and resources to do what you really care about and LIVE without fear controlling you.

*Inviting.* Nobody chooses anxiety. But you can choose how you relate with it. Instead of resisting, you learn to open up to what you're experiencing anyway. You get curious. You learn to welcome all aspects of you—everything that your mind, body, and emotional life dish out. You watch and welcome your experiences with kindness and compassion—with love. Stepping back and allowing will help you find peace and joy, even in difficulty, and LIVE your best life.

*Valuing.* Without a clear sense of direction, our choices in life can lead us astray—or worse, toward dead ends. To really LIVE, you'll need to know what you wish to LIVE for. You'll need to clarify what really matters to you—your values—and then make wise choices that

support the kind of person you wish to be and the kind of life you wish to lead.

*Engaging.* No matter how you cut it, your life is created by what you spend your time doing. To do more of what you really desire in life, you'll need to set intentions that are in line with what matters to you and then take action—in short, you'll need to do something with your mouth, hands, and feet (that is, speaking, creating, stepping in a direction). This is how you LIVE out your important values. As you engage your values and your life, you'll be armed with a new set of skills from this book to help you move with any challenges that show up along the way and to LIVE wholeheartedly.

The following brief exercise will give you a small taste of the LIVE approach.

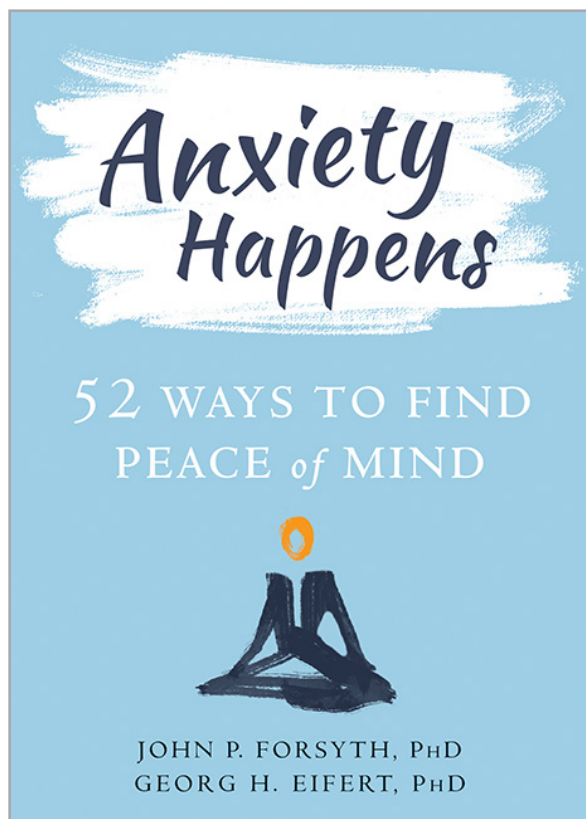
## WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE

- Recall a recent time when you found yourself running late or stuck waiting in traffic or a store checkout line. Bring the scene to life as we walk you through each piece of LIVE.
- **Letting go**—Let go of your old struggle with anxiety and fruitless attempts to control what you're experiencing in your mind and body.

- **Inviting**—Open up and notice the thoughts and feelings you're having as you sit or stand there, stuck. Notice the judgment, complaining, huffing and puffing under your breath, and expletives. Notice the effect this is having on your body. Do you feel tension, anger, anxiety, stress, frustration, even fear? See if you can simply watch all this activity—step back and notice it for what it is, with some kindness and friendliness. There's nothing to do except to be right where you are.
- **Valuing**—Step back further, as if watching yourself, and ask what you want to be about right now, as a person, in this situation. See if you can connect with what matters to you, which may include the reason you're out and about in the first place. You have somewhere you want to go, something you want to do.
- **Engaging**—Imagine yourself doing something other than getting all worked up about being delayed, stuck, and waiting. What would you do? What do you want to be about as a person? What would that look like right now? Whatever it is, see yourself using your mouth, hands, and feet to do something that

reflects what you want to be about in this situation—what you value and care about.

If this exercise didn't flow easily for you, don't worry. The point is to see how struggle and suffering can show up in common, everyday situations and how we can learn to let go, open up, connect with what matters, and LIVE. As you read on, you'll learn how to master the skills inside the LIVE approach and be able to use them with anxiety or in other challenging areas of your life.



**Break free from anxiety—  
once and for all!**

**Learn more**



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“These mindfulness rituals open us to the beauty, goodness, and potential for awakening that is available every day of our lives.” –TARA BRACH, author of *Radical Acceptance*

52 SIMPLE  
MINDFULNESS PRACTICES  
TO SLOW DOWN,  
RELIEVE STRESS &  
NOURISH THE SPIRIT

A MOMENT *for* ME

CATHERINE  
POLAN  
ORZECH



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# Contents

Introduction	1
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## JANUARY: NEW BEGINNINGS

<b>Ritual 1</b>	Intention and Attention	8
<b>Ritual 2</b>	Releasing Striving, Abiding in Wholeness	11
<b>Ritual 3</b>	Mind the Gap	14
<b>Ritual 4</b>	Creating a Compass	17
<b>Ritual 5</b>	Meditation: An Act of Love	21

## FEBRUARY: MOVING INTO THE HEART

<b>Ritual 6</b>	A Drink of Love	26
<b>Ritual 7</b>	Should-ing All Over Ourselves	29
<b>Ritual 8</b>	Disarming Our Hearts	33
<b>Ritual 9</b>	You Are the Love You Seek	37

## MARCH: STORMS AND CHANGES

<b>Ritual 10</b>	Allow the Waves	42
<b>Ritual 11</b>	The Refuge of Now	46
<b>Ritual 12</b>	Sitting in All That Is	49
<b>Ritual 13</b>	You Are Here	52



## APRIL: LOSS AND BIRTH

<b>Ritual 14</b>	The Duality of Joy and Grief	56
<b>Ritual 15</b>	Sitting Here in Limbo	59
<b>Ritual 16</b>	Breathing In, Breathing Out	62
<b>Ritual 17</b>	Harmony with Nature's Rhythms	66
<b>Ritual 18</b>	This Precious Present	69

## MAY: MODES OF NURTURANCE

<b>Ritual 19</b>	Pleasure	74
<b>Ritual 20</b>	Mastery	77
<b>Ritual 21</b>	Connection	80
<b>Ritual 22</b>	The Survival of the Nourished	84

## JUNE: REACHING OUT

<b>Ritual 23</b>	Radical Compassion	88
<b>Ritual 24</b>	Freedom from "Othering"	92
<b>Ritual 25</b>	Expecting, Striving, and Fixing	96
<b>Ritual 26</b>	Uncovering the Barriers to Love	100

## JULY: LOVE ALL, SERVE ALL

<b>Ritual 27</b>	For the Benefit of All	106
<b>Ritual 28</b>	Speak Truthfully and Helpfully	109
<b>Ritual 29</b>	If We Were Trees	113
<b>Ritual 30</b>	The Real Work	116
<b>Ritual 31</b>	Path of the Bodhisattva	120

## AUGUST: HARVEST ABUNDANCE

<b>Ritual 32</b>	Soak in the Good	126
<b>Ritual 33</b>	Adoring Perception	130
<b>Ritual 34</b>	Harvest Support	134
<b>Ritual 35</b>	Harvesting Space	137

## SEPTEMBER: BEING A CURIOUS LEARNER

<b>Ritual 36</b>	Love the Questions Themselves	142
<b>Ritual 37</b>	Potholes Again and Again	145
<b>Ritual 38</b>	Radical Self-Honesty	149
<b>Ritual 39</b>	Learning Is Not Linear	153

## OCTOBER: THE PLACES THAT SCARE YOU

<b>Ritual 40</b>	Beasts and Dragons in Disguise	158
<b>Ritual 41</b>	Medusa's Cave	162
<b>Ritual 42</b>	Imposter Syndrome and FOF	167
<b>Ritual 43</b>	Facing the Great Mysteries	171
<b>Ritual 44</b>	Resistance Is Futile	174

## NOVEMBER: GRATITUDE AND APPRECIATIVE JOY

<b>Ritual 45</b>	Gratitude: The Happy Heart	180
<b>Ritual 46</b>	Smiling and Laughter as Medicine	184
<b>Ritual 47</b>	Power of Attention	188
<b>Ritual 48</b>	Loving the Life Within	191

## DECEMBER: DARKNESS AND LIGHT

<b>Ritual 49</b>	Moving into Darkness	196
<b>Ritual 50</b>	Festivals of Light	199
<b>Ritual 51</b>	Noble Silence	202
<b>Ritual 52</b>	Reflecting Radiance	205
	References	209

## Introduction

Many years ago, I underwent months of rehabilitative vision therapy after a concussion. As part of the treatment, the doctors had me wear all different types of lenses that distorted and changed my usual way of seeing in order to activate different parts of my brain.

Not surprisingly, things looked different. But more than that, I found that simply changing the lenses through which I looked at the world altered in some profound way my entire experience of myself and the world around me.

It is the same with developing mindfulness. If you wear a lens of striving or fixing, you will create a certain result. If you meet your life as it arises with a lens of affectionate interest, that will have a different outcome. The very attitudes we bring to mindfulness change our perception of reality and, therefore, our experience of life.

Depending on which lenses of attitude and perception we use to encounter our lives, our experience of reality can be transformed. Mindfulness enables us to study the human heart and mind and to understand the conditions that either give rise to

stress and suffering or to the causes that give rise to their release. What we find when we look inward can lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and a greater ability to live from love. But this requires a kind of curious, investigative attention. If you were a biologist and wanted to learn about the nature of some animal, you'd let it just do its thing in its natural habitat while you carefully observed it. The data that is collected through this study reveals the animal's true nature. We use mindfulness to study the mind and heart to allow us to know their nature and to be liberated from living in a trance—that unconscious state of being carried along by our own mental stories and habitual reactions to life. Mindfulness can provide the clear lens through which we can see the causes of our suffering.

This book does not aim to teach you the specifics of how to meditate. It is a collection of reflections and invitations, along with practices that can help us investigate and develop small and subtle shifts in our attitudes and perceptions in relation to our lives. But these small shifts can have a huge impact on our clear seeing and thus the quality of our lives.

The reflections and practices offered in this book are a deep dive into the heart and soul of what mindfulness is really about. Instead of delving into the popular notions of self-improvement, better concentration, and increased productivity, they aim to cultivate self-knowledge, wisdom, and compassion.

This book is for you if you have never meditated or thought about practicing mindfulness. It's also for you if you have been

dabbling in mindfulness but haven't yet developed a focus on the attitudes of mind and heart that will enrich your learning. And if you have been meditating for years, you can use it to reacquaint yourself with what supports your practice and as a springboard for deepening inquiry into specific areas. The chapters that follow invite all of you into a rich friendship with your own heart and your own life.

*A Moment for Me* is laid out in fifty-two chapters with monthly themes. Each chapter contains a core concept, along with a reflection on that concept, and suggestions for practicing and incorporating that concept as a ritual into your life. The reflection and practice sections are marked by icons:



You can use this book in a variety of ways. Choose the one that works best for you:

- Develop a weekly ritual of following the chapter that corresponds to the week in the calendar year.
- Get a group of friends together and support each other each week, using the book as a discussion platform.

- Look through the themes and focus on whatever calls to you right now.
- Read the whole book and then go back to what stood out to you and specifically focus on that theme for a while.
- Pick up the book and randomly open it to whatever page asks to be read.

The approaches are endless and entirely up to you.

Although I am a teacher and therapist, I am still very much a student of my own teachers. Their wisdom is alive in me, and I have attempted to draw on it in writing this book. I hope that I have represented what I have learned from them faithfully. And if in any way I have not, I ask forgiveness.

Some of the teachers that I want to honor and acknowledge are Tara Brach, Pema Chödrön, and Mark Nunberg, who along with many other dharma teachers have offered some of the richest spiritual food that has nourished me throughout my life. If you are familiar with their teachings, you will likely hear echoes of their wisdom in this book. You'll also hear echoes of Jon Kabat-Zinn and the brilliance of mindfulness-based stress reduction, of Chris Germer and Kristin Neff's Mindful Self-Compassion program, and of the therapists behind the extremely beneficial mindfulness-based cognitive therapy protocol, among others. I draw on my years of learning from these programs while sitting in the role

of teacher and from the hundreds of participants whom I've been honored to have in my classes.

As you enter into this book, taking these moments to pause, reflect on, and practice these offerings, may the qualities of affectionate curiosity, acceptance, patience, and love permeate your heart, mind, and body. May you also discover all the ways in which you already possess the essential ingredients for a life of joy and ease.



JANUARY

NEW BEGINNINGS



## RITUAL

## 1

## Intention and Attention

Almost every class on mindfulness begins with this question: *What brings you here?* What do we need to begin anything—an email, a new book, that long-overdue work assignment we’ve been avoiding?

We start any endeavor with an intention—a sense of resolve, a determination to act in a certain way, or the object of a prayer or devotion. In medicine, “intention” means a manner of healing.

Finding our intention is like finding a secret map from our heart. With that map, we can go on an adventure and explore our heart and mind—full of wonder, hopeful anticipation, and delight in the mysterious unfolding.

When we lose our way, our intention reorients us. Then, what we pay *attention* to can continually realign us with our intention and allow us to discover things that may otherwise remain hidden.

Intentions take faith. When we start out with the intention to walk, we begin each step—without consciously realizing it—by falling. We lift one foot off the floor, swing it forward, then shift our weight and “fall” onto it. Every step is a leap of faith. Will the

ground be solid? Will our balance stabilize us? Will we have enough momentum to move forward?

Attention and intention are the ingredients for the adventure of living. When we align our conscious intentions with our actions, a natural flowering occurs, and eventually we will see the fruits of our intentions.



## What Is Your Intention?

What is your intention as you read this book? If you're not sure, listen deeply to your heart and follow your curiosity.

Become aware of all that currently “holds you.” How does it feel to be supported—by the floor, by your chair, by whatever solid surface is there for you? Allow your attention to expand, and feel your body. Let your awareness be permeated by friendly curiosity, an attentiveness that is accepting and allowing. Can you feel the flow of your breath? Can you feel the faithfulness of the breath and how in this moment it nourishes you?

Now imagine a well of very deep water, and allow the well in your imagination and the felt sense of your body to become one. Let yourself become the well.

Now ask yourself, *What is my intention for reading this book? What do I long for? What do I hope to gain or create?* Allow these questions to be like pebbles that hit the water of your “well,” and watch as an answer “splashes up.”

Allow whatever arises in your heart and mind just to be. Quietly sit with this intention and see how it feels.



## **Be Guided by Your Intention**

Use the guidance from the reflection to assist you in opening your mind and heart to “hear” your intention.

- As you listen, let your intention become a tangible phrase such as “May I deepen my connection to my heart and the wisdom the present moment contains.”
- Start your day by taking a mindful pause even before you get out of bed and then repeat your intention.
- Write your intention on sticky notes and put the notes up in places where you will see them and be reminded of your intention.
- At the end of the day, take another mindful pause and check back in with your intention. Pay attention and see how it showed up for you and flowered throughout the day. This is not to “test yourself” or keep score but to actively practice self-kindness and support.

## RITUAL

## 2

## Releasing Striving, Abiding in Wholeness

For most of my life, I was either outwardly or inwardly asking, “Am I doing it right?” I struggled when people told me to trust myself or my experience. I wanted *outside* proof that what I’d done was acceptable and pleasing to others. I can’t say when this need for external validation began, but I know my fourth-grade teacher wrote about her concerns for my lack of self-confidence. Later, as a professional ballet dancer, that question followed me through the mirrors in the studio or the eyes of a choreographer or director. I didn’t believe I could ever get away from it.

Even as an early student of meditation, I brought this same attitude to my practice. I would ask my teachers, “Am I doing it right?” And the teachers would say, “What do you think is supposed to be happening?” “What do you mean by ‘right’?” They encouraged me to get intimate with my own experience and study my own mind and heart for the answers. Eventually, something in me began to relax around the chronic striving for validation. I

began to see it as striving—just another conditioned human tendency. I grew to know what striving felt like in my body and to recognize the thoughts that drove it—the whisperings of fear about whether I was “okay” just as I was.

The reality is, I am okay—and you are too.



## All You Need Is Here

How would you experience this moment if you knew that all you really needed for *completeness* was already inside you? We often focus on what we perceive as not working. Even if there are parts of you that are sick or struggling, that’s not all of who you are. At this very moment, you have much more that is right with you than wrong. That’s not just a pithy saying, it’s true!

We don’t have to stretch our minds too far to know it is true. We just need to shift our focus. Take the reality that right now, approximately thirty-seven trillion cells in your body are working for your benefit! You are alive right now because of the incredible workings of myriad systems. So, what are we really striving for? What do we mean when we wonder, *Am I okay?*

All of your past is now a memory and all of your future is but a dream. There is only the vibrant aliveness of this present moment. When you really feel this, something inside will begin to ease. You will feel the brilliance of your own symphony self, and you’ll know you are back home.

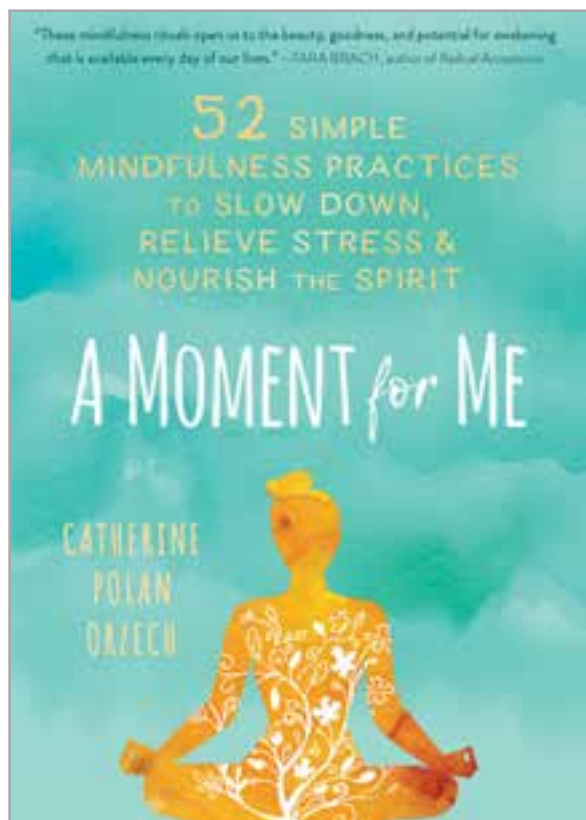


## Opening to Your Wholeness

Try this practice at least once per day this week.

- Take a moment to lie down and stretch yourself out on some cushioning on the floor.
- Let yourself be fully held by the solidity of the floor and soften any extra places of holding and tension within your body.
- Now imagine those thirty-seven trillion cells at work within your body as little orbs of light illuminating and animating your being.
- Feel the whole and vibratory aliveness of your being. Offer some words of acknowledgment and appreciation for all that these cells are doing for you right now.
- Now place one hand on your heart and another on your belly, feel the breath moving through you, and say to yourself, *In this moment, I aspire to abide at the center of my being.*
- Really rest here and soak in this feeling of wholeness, aliveness, and completeness with nothing to strive for.

Take time each day to revel in the reality of your own wholeness.



If you could do one thing for yourself today, why not do a quick mindfulness ritual?

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