

# Chapter 1

## How and Why to Use this Book

### **Let us take a look at some problems and find out how this book can help**

All of us have problems, things we do too much or too little of, or avoid doing altogether. They are *problems* because they cost us dearly; they stop us from being the person we want to be and living the life we want to live. This is a self-help book for people who struggle to control their behaviour and manage their emotions (in other words, all of us). If you find your life derailed by unsuccessful attempts to feel better, you will get a lot from reading on. This book can be used by people in therapy, as well as by all of us who want to get our lives back. We do not wish to be slaves to repetitive, addictive, unhelpful behaviour, nor to hide away from life as it passes us by.

Problems are caused by our lives being driven by our *thoughts and feelings*, rather than by the *actions we value* and the things we want to achieve. Fear, anger, resentment, guilt, grief, sadness and hatred can all end up in charge of our lives. Unwanted thoughts or feelings can dictate how we behave, so that we are unable to act as we want to, or to be who we want to be. We may use drugs, alcohol, over-exercising, eating, self-punishment, sex, shoplifting, aggression, self-harm or bullying others to manage our inner state. Although all of these can ‘help’ in the short-term, they are a great way to lose your self-respect and descend into a cycle of hopelessness and self-loathing.

## Get Your Life Back

Those of us who struggle with self-control are often ashamed of the fact and do not tell others about our struggles. These might range from eating disorders to over-use of alcohol. Anxiety (worrying about the future) and depression (hopelessness about the past and the future) often accompany such behaviours. Some of us have too much control; we have narrowed our lives into tiny spaces where we try to hide away from pain. Some of us have too little control.

All of us have some behaviours which are not fully under our control all of the time, even if it is just being unable to stop eating chocolate until the whole bar is gone! When these out-of-control behaviours start interfering with our lives, with who we want to be, we need this book. When we turn away from opportunity and excitement in case it makes us anxious, we lose the joy in our lives and can experience misery and depression as well as, oddly, even more anxiety.

The book covers how to take control of your life using mindfulness, acceptance and behaviour change. The professional understanding and techniques we share are tried and tested. They are supported by research evidence and drawn from the most effective treatments to date.<sup>1</sup> Step by step, the book takes us through how to *accept* our own unhelpful patterns, *understand* how they work and so learn how to *change* them.

This chapter gets things started by helping us identify the problems we need to tackle to get our lives back. We aim to assist you to become more loving and more kind towards yourself as you go through the exercises suggested all through the book. In the following pages we ask you to begin to think about why you really need to change. Then we ask you to describe your thoughts and feelings about trying to change, since these can often get in the way. We also provide an outline of all the things we will be working on together in the book.

Have a look at this list of problems (most of us struggle with some of them):

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1 CBT - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, DBT - Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, CFT - Compassion Focused Therapy, ACT - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)

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### Doing too much

*Eating: bingeing, using laxatives, eating rubbish food, dieting*

*Gambling / Driving recklessly / Lying / Spending*

*Hoarding / Smoking / Drinking / Drugs / Self-harm*

*Risky relationships (staying in abusive relationships,  
selecting no-good partners, etc.)*

*Pleasing others at great cost to myself*

*Sexual behaviours (sleeping around, sex with strangers, etc.)*

*Anger (losing my temper, feeling angry all the time, planning revenge)*

*Putting others down / Putting myself down / Gossiping (the nasty stuff)*

*Hearing voices which upset me / Being addicted to porn*

### Doing too little

*Eating: restricting (not eating enough)*

*Avoiding risks (e.g. relationships, job interviews, adventures)*

*Not leaving the house or really not wanting to*

*Turning down opportunities (jobs, relationships, etc.)*

*Not trusting anyone / Not socialising / Not asking for my needs to be met*

*Not looking after myself (washing my hair, cleaning my teeth, etc.)*

*Not exercising / Not seeking opportunities (applying for jobs, etc.)*

*Not allowing myself any leisure time / Not appreciating other people*

*Not noticing beautiful things around me*

*Not calming myself down when I need to*

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### Anxiety

*Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD): checking (plugs, locks, etc.)*  
*Compulsive behaviours (hand washing, hair-pulling, etc.)*  
*Rituals (counting, doing things in a rigid order, etc.)*  
*Compulsive thoughts, 'What if?' thoughts, angry thoughts, etc.*  
*Illness behaviours (thinking I'm sick, keep on seeing the doctor, etc.)*  
*Worrying (about disasters, about being ill, about being mad, about money, etc.)*  
*Panicking, having panic attacks*  
*Being paranoid (thinking others are out to get me)*  
*Clinging to people*  
*Fearing abandonment, that a loved one might leave me*  
*Predicting disaster*  
*Being afraid of everyday things (going out, being close to others, etc.)*  
*Making plans to deal with every 'What if?' thought*  
*High levels of anxiety after trauma*

### Hopelessness

*Hopeless thoughts such as 'It will never work',  
'I can't do it', 'What's the point?'*  
*Self-loathing (I am worthless, no good, a failure, stupid, etc.)*  
*Rumination (dwelling on the past – if only, I should have . . .)*  
*Believing I do not deserve things*  
*Can't see a way forward*  
*Envy (I wish I were my rich neighbour, etc.)*  
*Bitterness (life has treated me badly)*  
*Feeling depressed*  
*Jealousy (I don't trust my partner)*  
*Staying in bed all day*  
*Zoning out*

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### Law breaking

*Shoplifting*

*Stalking*

*Porn (illegal stuff)*

*Criminal damage*

*Stealing*

*Being in a gang and doing law-breaking stuff*

*Fighting*

*Physically abusing my partner*

*Thinking about or planning to harm other people*

*Harming other people*

*Cyber-bullying*

*Trolling*

### Trauma (after bad things happen)

*Flashbacks (reliving parts or all of horrible events)*

*Images and sensations from the trauma/Nightmares*

*Numbing out (not feeling anything)*

*Feeling unreal (body unreal or world feels unreal)*

*Being as if in a fog ('depersonalisation')*

*Thinking I'll never feel safe again*

*Staying over-alert for danger*

*Bad thoughts of blaming myself or others*

*Irritability / Mood swings*

*Being jumpy and startling easily*

*Problems remembering parts or all of the trauma*

*Concentration problems*

*Avoiding trauma-related things (the place, people, thoughts, talking about trauma)*

## *Get Your Life Back*

Pick up a pen and draw a circle round those problems that apply to you. If you are concerned about privacy, take a piece of paper and write them down there or write them down on your computer. If your problem is not on the list, write it down anyway. Try to notice any thoughts, feelings, urges or body sensations as you are doing this. Depressing, huh? You have just taken a courageous step: you have been willing to stand back and take a real look at how things are. All of us have some of these problems. Many, many people have struggled with these problems before – a quick look on YouTube will tell you that. There is most definitely hope.

### **Why use this book?**

So why bother to use this book and get involved in all the work it is going to take to change your life? Why not just carry on as you are? Write your own answer here:



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Remember this answer. We will need it when you reach a low point further on and wonder why you ever started! It will help to keep you going. So what floats your boat? Why do you bother to get up in the morning? What gives you delight, joy and satisfaction? If your mind is telling you 'Nothing', think back to when you did get joy, delight and satisfaction from life. What did it for you then?

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Write your own answer here:



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This answer is also important. It is the description of the kind of life you want, giving some direction to getting your life back. We will come back to this later.

‘OK, I am interested,’ we hear you say. So what is in the rest of the book? Here is a brief description to give you an idea of what to expect.

The book is divided into four sections. Part One, ‘Stories’, tells the stories of some people who have problems they are working on. It also gives an update on their struggles and successes so far. Part Two, ‘Reasons to change and acceptance’, helps us get clear about the things we value most in life, and about what we want to achieve. Then it shows how to practise acceptance, using mindfulness and validation (do not worry, these are explained a lot more in the chapters). Part Two asks us to lay out our own personal resources, the things we already have and can do, which will help us on our way. Part Three, ‘What and how to change’, begins with how to understand problem behaviours. Then it takes us step by step through how to change them. Deciding which problem to work on first is important. The pattern of the behaviour and how feelings and thoughts play their part is described here. Part Three gives us skills for developing self-control. Part Four, ‘Getting your life back’, helps us really commit to taking action. Good action planning is the key. Part Four also shows how to build and keep motivation. It explains how to cope when we feel like giving

up and how to deal with setbacks. You will be invited to have another look at your own personal story, using new ways to understand yourself. There are FAQs, resources to read and sources of support in this section. Lastly, a glossary lists many of the words and terms used in the book so that you can quickly check when you need to.

## **Part One: Stories**

To show how we are all in the same boat, **Part One** tells stories. **Chapter 2** tells the stories of some people who struggle. We, the authors, are both clinical psychologists and the characters are based on our real life experience with our clients and with ordinary people in our lives. Each character is a mix of different people we have met and not directly based on any one person. We will take a look at your own personal story too. This might show us what you have learned about yourself, growing up. Most of us learn things in our earlier years which can be less than helpful in our adult lives. We can learn how to put ourselves down or compare ourselves negatively with other people. You will be invited to write a statement of kindness to yourself at the end of this chapter. **Chapter 3** tells some success stories to show how life can be a daring adventure rather than a fearful ordeal. How can you drive your car with the top down, so to speak, instead of worrying about the rain? How can you live a life with meaning and purpose in it? Though called ‘Success Stories’, this chapter is actually about ongoing work. We need to keep on and on, stepping towards getting our lives back.

## **Part Two: Reasons to change and acceptance**

Motivation building happens in **Chapter 4**, ‘Why Change? Values and Goals’. Here, we get maximum clarity on why we want to get our lives back and what that life will look like. What gets you up in the morning? What has meaning for you? Getting this clear means we know which direction to travel towards the life we want. Even when life is being cruel we will know how we want to behave and who we want to be. We will encounter obstacles

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to our progress. These will include thoughts, feelings and behaviours which hold us back, so we need to disentangle ourselves from them. We need to be in charge of our lives, not our problem behaviours. **Chapters 5 and 6** cover acceptance. Which might seem odd, given we are all about change. But as you might have noticed from circling your problems, being willing and able to describe exactly how things are right now is essential. Otherwise, how can we think about it? If we only think about it whilst beating ourselves up or blaming the world or other people, we just get nowhere.

Write down what you think about your problem here. For example, 'I drink too much every evening. My problem will never go away, I have tried so hard, and it is hopeless'. Write down your description of your problem here:



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Now try describing exactly what your problem behaviour is, *just as it is*, without any judgement words here (e.g., *should* be able to, *ought* to, *never* can, *always* have to). For example, 'I drink four gin and tonics every day. I think my problem is very difficult to change. So far I have not managed to change it'. The difference here is that we have just described the current situation and taken out the *judgements* about how it will never change and it being hopeless. Write down your description of your problem here, leaving out your judgement thoughts:



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There is much more about this coming up and we will get better at it as we go along.

**Chapter 5** teaches ‘mindfulness’ skills and **Chapter 6** ‘validation’ skills. These are both ways to increase *willingness and acceptance*. Willing acceptance of experience, good and bad, pleasurable and painful, is what we are aiming for. This is the key to freedom from struggling against the way things are. Not that we have to like how things are, or not want to change them, just that we need to get in touch with them. If you are in quicksand and you struggle, you will sink faster: you need to stretch out your arms and make maximum contact with the quicksand. Similarly, we need to get in touch with our experience, but not get overwhelmed by it. Your mind may now be telling you that this is impossible. Thank your mind for that thought and read on. **Chapter 7** lays out your personal resources and strengths, the treasure trove of things you know and can do, people who love you, groups who support you, past achievements, etc. These are your provisions for the journey ahead.

### Part Three: What and how to change

**Part Three** looks at exactly *what* to change: which behaviours are causing misery in your life? You will learn to identify them precisely. Then we can analyse how they work: in other words, why you keep doing them! All of our behaviours work for us in some way, even though we might not see how right now. **Chapter 8** looks in detail at *specific problems*, such as those you have circled. You will prioritise which problem to work on first. **Chapter 9** explains how *feelings* are tied up in it all. Many behaviours

work by helping us to avoid painful feelings. **Chapter 10** shows you how to understand the problem behaviours which are ruining your life. We do this by working out the pattern of each behaviour. Behaviours tend, boringly, to keep repeating themselves. Once we have worked out the pattern, we can see exit points where we can break free.

Mindfulness comes back again as **Chapter 11** shows you how to make these changes with *acceptance, understanding and kindness* to yourself (*compassion*). We need to be patient and kind to ourselves as we learn new things. Imagine having a new puppy and beginning to train him. Would you do this with loving kindness and patience? So, you have just the same right to be treated kindly as your imaginary puppy does. **Chapter 12** is about practical ways to handle difficult thoughts. **Chapter 13** illustrates tried and tested skills for developing *self-control*. These skills really are skills – they can be learnt, just as we can learn to use a new computer or to cook. Self-control skills are things like how to calm ourselves down, resist urges, deal with conflict and look after ourselves physically. **Chapter 14** demonstrates how to make a behaviour chain about your problem behaviour, showing the links made up of thoughts, feelings, body sensations, urges and behaviour that lead up to the problem behaviour itself. **Chapter 15** shows you how to use this chain to decide to break some of the links that lead up to it. Next time the behaviour starts up, we can *do something new*. Often this takes a few goes, but guess what? We always get another go as long as the behaviour is still hanging around. So we can always try again. Eventually, our brains learn new habits. The new behaviours we are practising come to replace the old ones.

## **Part Four: Getting your life back**

**Part Four** of the book reflects on the life you want and invites you to *commit* to getting it. **Chapter 16** is called ‘Taking Action to Get Your Life Back’. We do some more work on getting clear what we want and how we want to be. Then we make decisions to move each day towards that life. We lay out practical, achievable steps that we can take in the direction we have chosen. We invite you to commit to following your chosen path

## Get Your Life Back

with *willingness* to experience fully all that it will bring you, good and bad, including wanted and unwanted feelings.

Write here any thoughts you have right now about being able to get your life back, along with any feelings (anger, frustration, sadness, despair, excitement, etc.):



Thoughts \_\_\_\_\_

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Feelings \_\_\_\_\_

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Take a moment to notice these thoughts and feelings, and also anything going on in your body right now (tension, headaches, knots in the tummy, etc.). Notice how your mind judges things very quickly and easily. Try to stand back and look at the thoughts and feelings as if they are emails arriving in your inbox: they could be junk or they could be useful. If the thoughts are not useful right now, they are probably junk. Just because you think them does not make them true! Thank your mind for sending them to you. It is doing its best. Let us notice they are there (for all of us), and move on.

In **Chapter 17** we notice that progress is not always smooth. It is not 'every day in every way I get better and better'. Life is just not like that. We hear

about good days and bad days. We discover that ‘bad’ days can be great opportunities to put our new skills into practice. Also, that we are in for a marathon, not a sprint. Taking a longer view and being able to see our progress over time is important.

Now we have come this far, it is time for **Chapter 18**, ‘Revisiting Your Story’. Here, we take another look at your own personal story. This time it is about how our stories might hold us back. For example, my mind might say to me, ‘You can never be a [writer/good mother/businessman/lover], because you had such a bad childhood you will never recover’. That kind of stuff is going to hold me back, prevent me from going for the things I want in my life. I need to stand back and see what is going on here. Then I need to write my story differently, so that it will not hold me back. I might say, ‘I’ve been through the mill and I have so much to say as a writer’ or ‘I want to use the determination I learned as a child to help me drive my business towards success’.

Any new skill needs to be practised so **Chapter 19** gives us the chance to practise our new behaviours in lots of different ways. We look around at our world and think, ‘Where could I use my new asking for things skill?’ or ‘How might my new mindfulness skills help in tonight’s date?’ Practice does not always make perfect, but it certainly makes us better at what we are doing.

As we journey along our new, chosen roads, we will come across obstacles. **Chapter 20** is especially for those who experience flashbacks. These can be big obstacles to getting our lives back. Here, there are techniques for handling flashbacks and advice about when to seek further help. **Chapter 21**, ‘When Things Go Wrong’, will help us in our journey. On a real road, there will be potholes, mud and road closures. We might be tempted off the road to take alternative directions that seem to offer an easier way forward. Other things may make us feel that the journey is impossible, such as getting ill, feeling worn out or making slow progress. We might be tempted to take a turn back towards our old habits (old habits can seem very appealing from a distance). This will probably happen along the way. Giving a big sigh and travelling back onto our chosen road is the thing to do. This chapter offers hints and tips about what to do when things go wrong.

**Chapter 22** gives answers to some frequently asked questions about getting your life back. **Chapter 23** gives you more resources, including books to read, support organisations and the chance to go public and support each other. We know that if we make a public statement about our goals, they are more likely to be reached. This is a great way to keep commitment going. You can build your personal community of support using the website [www.getyourlifeback.global](http://www.getyourlifeback.global). For example, you can blog about your own journey, share stories with others and receive support. You can also download free mindfulness, validation and other exercises. All the tables and worksheets from this book are there too. **Chapter 24** is a glossary of terms used throughout this book. We have done our very best to be jargon-free, but you may want to glance here if you need to know what a word means.

As you go through the book you will find places to write things down. There are exercises to do as you read. You will make plans to take action out there in the real world between your readings. It is best to work through this book from one end to the other: we are building a ‘tower of change’ and we need to lay down the foundations first. You could also think of it as getting a ‘toolkit for life’. First, put on the tool belt, then add into it one tool at a time. Eventually, you will have all the tools you need and know which tool to use for what job.

Getting your life back is not a one-off effort. We can all choose to step towards our valued life every day until we have no time left on this earth. So let us get started!