Chapter One

DISCOVERING SELF-COMPASSION

This kind of compulsive concern with "I, me, and mine" isn't the same as loving ourselves . . . Loving ourselves points us to capacities of resilience, compassion, and understanding within that are simply part of being alive.

—SHARON SALZBERG, *The Force of Kindness*

IN THIS INCREDIBLY COMPETITIVE SOCIETY OF OURS, HOW MANY OF us truly feel good about ourselves? It seems such a fleeting thing—feeling good—especially as we need to feel *special and above average* to feel worthy. Anything less seems like a failure. I remember once as a freshman in college, after spending hours getting ready for a big party, I complained to my boyfriend that my hair, makeup, and outfit were woefully inadequate. He tried to reassure me by saying, "Don't worry, you look fine."

"*Fine?* Oh great, I always wanted to look *fine* . . ."

The desire to feel special is understandable. The problem is that by definition, it's impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same

time. Although there are some ways in which we excel, there is always someone smarter, prettier, more successful. How do we cope with this? Not very well. To see ourselves positively, we tend to inflate our own egos and put others down so that we can feel good in comparison. But this strategy comes at a price—it holds us back from reaching our full potential in life.

Distorting Mirrors

If I have to feel better than you to feel good about myself, then how clearly am I really going to see you, or myself for that matter? Let's say I had a stressful day at work and am grumpy and irritable with my husband when he gets home later that evening (purely hypothetical, of course). If I'm highly invested in having a positive self-image and don't want to risk viewing myself in a negative light, I'm going to slant my interpretation of what transpires to make sure that any friction between us is seen as my husband's fault, not my own.

> "Good, you're home. Did you pick up the groceries like I asked?"
>
> "I just walked though the door, how about 'Nice to see you, dear, how was your day?'"
>
> "Well, if *you* weren't so forgetful, maybe I wouldn't have to always hound you."
>
> "As a matter of fact, I did pick up the groceries."
>
> "Oh . . . Well, um . . . It's the exception that proves the rule. I wish you weren't so unreliable."

Not exactly a recipe for happiness.

Why is it so hard to admit when we step out of line, are rude, or act impatient? Because our ego feels so much better when we project our

flaws and shortcomings on to someone else. *It's your fault, not mine.* Just think about all the arguments and fights that grow out of this simple dynamic. Each person blames the other for saying or doing something wrong, justifying their own actions as if their life depended on it, while both know, in their heart of hearts, that it takes two to tango. How much time do we waste like this? Wouldn't it be so much better if we could just fess up and play fair?

But change is easier said than done. It's almost impossible to notice those aspects of ourselves that cause problems relating to others, or that keep us from reaching our full potential, if we can't see ourselves clearly. How can we grow if we can't acknowledge our own weaknesses? We might *temporarily* feel better about ourselves by ignoring our flaws, or by believing our issues and difficulties are somebody else's fault, but in the long run we only harm ourselves by getting stuck in endless cycles of stagnation and conflict.

The Costs of Self-Judgment

Continually feeding our need for positive self-evaluation is a bit like stuffing ourselves with candy. We get a brief sugar high, then a crash. And right after the crash comes a pendulum swing to despair as we realize that—however much we'd like to—we can't always blame our problems on someone else. We can't always feel special and above average. The result is often devastating. We look in the mirror and don't like what we see (both literally and figuratively), and the shame starts to set in. Most of us are incredibly hard on ourselves when we finally admit some flaw or shortcoming. "I'm not good enough. I'm worthless." It's not surprising that we hide the truth from ourselves when honesty is met with such harsh condemnation.

In areas where it is hard to fool ourselves—when comparing our weight to those of magazine models, for instance, or our bank accounts

to those of the rich and successful—we cause ourselves incredible amounts of emotional pain. We lose faith in ourselves, start doubting our potential, and become hopeless. Of course, this sorry state just yields more self-condemnation for being such a do-nothing loser, and down, down we go.

Even if we do manage to get our act together, the goalposts for what counts as "good enough" seem always to remain frustratingly out of reach. We must be smart *and* fit *and* fashionable *and* interesting *and* successful *and* sexy. Oh, and spiritual, too. And no matter how well we do, someone else always seems to be doing it better. The result of this line of thinking is sobering: millions of people need to take pharmaceuticals every day just to cope with daily life. Insecurity, anxiety, and depression are incredibly common in our society, and much of this is due to self-judgment, to beating ourselves up when we feel we aren't winning in the game of life.

Another Way

So what's the answer? *To stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether.* To stop trying to label ourselves as "good" or "bad" and simply accept ourselves with an open heart. To treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend, or even a stranger for that matter. Sadly, however, there's almost no one whom we treat as badly as ourselves.

When I first came across the idea of self-compassion, it changed my life almost immediately. It was during my last year in the Human Development doctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley, as I was putting the finishing touches on my dissertation. I was going through a really difficult time following the breakup of my first marriage, and I was full of shame and self-loathing. I thought signing up for meditation classes at a local Buddhist center might help. I had been interested in Eastern spirituality from the time I was a small child, having been raised by an open-minded mother just outside of Los Angeles. But I had never taken meditation seriously. I had also never examined Buddhist philosophy, as my exposure to Eastern thought had been more along California New Age lines. As part of my exploration, I read Sharon Salzberg's classic book *Lovingkindness* and was never the same again.

I had known that Buddhists talk a lot about the importance of compassion, but I had never considered that having compassion for *yourself* might be as important as having compassion for others. From the Buddhist point of view, you have to care about yourself before you can really care about other people. If you are continually judging and criticizing yourself while trying to be kind to others, you are drawing artificial boundaries and distinctions that only lead to feelings of separation and isolation. This is the opposite of oneness, interconnection, and universal love—the ultimate goal of most spiritual paths, no matter which tradition.

I remember talking to my new fiancé, Rupert, who joined me for the weekly Buddhist group meetings, and shaking my head in amazement. "You mean you're actually allowed to be *nice* to yourself, to have compassion for yourself when you mess up or are going through a really hard time? I don't know . . . If I'm too self-compassionate, won't I just be lazy and selfish?" It took me a while to get my head around it. But I slowly came to realize that self-criticism—despite being socially sanctioned—was not at all helpful, and in fact only made things worse. I wasn't making myself a better person by beating myself up all the time. Instead, I was causing myself to feel inadequate and insecure, then taking out my frustration on the people closest to me. More than that, I wasn't owning up to many things because I was so afraid of the self-hate that would follow if I admitted the truth.

What Rupert and I both came to learn was that instead of relying on our relationship to meet all our needs for love, acceptance, and secu-

rity, we could actually provide some of these feelings for *ourselves*. And this would mean that we had even more in our hearts to give to each other. We were both so moved by the concept of self-compassion that in our marriage ceremony later that year, each of us ended our vows by saying "Most of all, I promise to help you have compassion for yourself, so that you can thrive and be happy."

After getting my Ph.D., I did two years of postdoctoral training with a leading self-esteem researcher. I wanted to know more about how people determine their sense of self-worth. I quickly learned that the field of psychology was falling out of love with self-esteem as the ultimate marker of positive mental health. Although thousands of articles had been written on the importance of self-esteem, researchers were now starting to point out all the traps that people can fall into when they try to get and keep a sense of high self-esteem: narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteous anger, prejudice, discrimination, and so on. I realized that self-compassion was the perfect alternative to the relentless pursuit of self-esteem. Why? Because it offers the same protection against harsh self-criticism as self-esteem, but without the need to see ourselves as perfect or as better than others. *In other words, self-compassion provides the same benefits as high self-esteem without its drawbacks.*

When I got a job as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, I decided that as soon as I got settled I would conduct research on self-compassion. Although no one had yet defined self-compassion from an academic perspective—let alone done any research on it—I knew that this would be my life's work.

So what is self-compassion? What does it mean exactly? I usually find that the best way to describe self-compassion is to start with a more familiar experience—compassion for others. After all, compassion is the same whether we direct it to ourselves or to other people.

Compassion for Others

Imagine you're stuck in traffic on the way to work, and a homeless man tries to get you to pay him a buck for washing your car windows. *He's so pushy!* you think to yourself. *He'll make me miss the light and be late. He probably just wants the money for booze or drugs anyway. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll just leave me alone.* But he doesn't ignore you, and you sit there hating him while he washes your window, feeling guilty if you don't toss him some money, resentful if you do.

Then one day, you're struck as if by lightning. There you are in the same commuter traffic, at the same light, at the same time, and there's the homeless man, with his bucket and squeegee as usual. Yet for some unknown reason, today you see him differently. You see him as a *person* rather than just a mere annoyance. You notice his suffering. *How does he survive? Most people just shoo him away. He's out here in the traffic and fumes all day and certainly isn't earning much. At least he's trying to offer something in return for the cash. It must be really tough to have people be so irritated with you all the time. I wonder what his story is? How he ended up on the streets?* The moment you see the man as an actual human being who is suffering, your heart connects with him. Instead of ignoring him, you find—to your amazement—that you're taking a moment to think about how difficult his life is. You are moved by his pain and feel the urge to help him in some way. Importantly, if what you feel is true compassion rather than mere pity, you say to yourself, *There but for the grace of God go I. If I'd been born in different circumstances, or maybe had just been unlucky, I might also be struggling to survive like that. We're all vulnerable.*

Of course, that might be the moment when you harden your heart completely—your own fear of ending up on the street causing you to dehumanize this horrid heap of rags and beard. Many people do. But it doesn't make them happy; it doesn't help them deal with the stresses of their work, their spouse, or their child when they get home. It doesn't

help them face their own fears. If anything, this hardening of the heart, which involves feeling *better* than the homeless man, just makes the whole thing that little bit worse.

But let's say you don't close up. Let's say you really do experience compassion for the homeless man's misfortune. How does it feel? Actually, it feels pretty good. It's wonderful when your heart opens—you immediately feel more connected, alive, present.

Now, let's say the man wasn't trying to wash windows in return for some cash. Maybe he *was* just begging for money to buy alcohol or drugs—should you still feel compassion for him? Yes. You don't have to invite him home. You don't even have to give him a buck. You may decide to give him a kind smile or a sandwich rather than money if you feel that's the more responsible thing to do. But yes, he is still worthy of compassion—all of us are. Compassion is not only relevant to those who are blameless victims, but also to those whose suffering stems from failures, personal weakness, or bad decisions. You know, the kind you and I make every day.

Compassion, then, involves the recognition and clear seeing of suffering. It also involves feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help—*to ameliorate suffering*—emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is.

Compassion for Ourselves

Self-compassion, by definition, involves the same qualities. First, it requires that we stop to recognize our own suffering. We can't be moved by our own pain if we don't even acknowledge that it exists in the first place. Of course, sometimes the fact that we're in pain is blindingly obvious and we can think of nothing else. More often than you might think, however, we *don't* recognize when we are suffering. Much of

Western culture has a strong "stiff-upper-lip" tradition. We are taught that we shouldn't complain, that we should just *carry on* (to be read in a clipped British accent while giving a smart salute). If we're in a difficult or stressful situation, we rarely take the time to step back and recognize how hard it is for us in the moment.

And when our pain comes from self-judgment—if you're angry at yourself for mistreating someone, or for making some stupid remark at a party—it's even harder to see these as moments of suffering. Like the time I asked a friend I hadn't seen in a while, eyeing the bump of her belly, "Are we expecting?" "Er, no," she answered, "I've just put on some weight lately." "Oh . . ." I said as my face turned beet red. We typically don't recognize such moments as a type of pain that is worthy of a compassionate response. After all, I messed up, doesn't that mean I should be punished? Well, do you punish your friends or your family when they mess up? Okay, maybe sometimes a little, but do you feel good about it?

Everybody makes mistakes at one time or another, it's a fact of life. And if you think about it, why should you expect anything different? Where is that written contract you signed before birth promising that you'd be perfect, that you'd never fail, and that your life would go absolutely the way you want it to? *Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the "everything will go swimmingly until the day I die" plan. Can I speak to the management, please?* It's absurd, and yet most of us act as if something has gone terribly awry when we fall down or life takes an unwanted or unexpected turn.

One of the downsides of living in a culture that stresses the ethic of independence and individual achievement is that if we don't continually reach our ideal goals, we feel that we only have ourselves to blame. And if we're at fault, that means we don't deserve compassion, right? The truth is, *everyone* is worthy of compassion. The very fact that we are conscious human beings experiencing life on the planet means that we are intrinsically valuable and deserving of care. According to the Dalai

Lama, "Human beings by nature want happiness and do not want suffering. With that feeling everyone tries to achieve happiness and tries to get rid of suffering, and everyone has the basic right to do this. . . . Basically, from the viewpoint of real human value we are all the same." This is the same sentiment, of course, that inspired the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." We don't have to earn the right to compassion; it is our birthright. We are human, and our ability to think and feel, combined with our desire to be happy rather than to suffer, warrants compassion for its own sake.

Many people are resistant to the idea of self-compassion, however. Isn't it really just a form of self-pity? Or a dressed-up word for self-indulgence? I will show throughout this book that these assumptions are false and run directly counter to the actual meaning of self-compassion. As you'll come to see, self-compassion involves wanting health and well-being for oneself and leads to proactive behavior to better one's situation, rather than passivity. And self-compassion doesn't mean that I think my problems are more important than yours, it just means I think that my problems are *also* important and worthy of being attended to.

Rather than condemning yourself for your mistakes and failures, therefore, you can use the experience of suffering to soften your heart. You can let go of those unrealistic expectations of perfection that make you so dissatisfied, and open the door to real and lasting satisfaction. All by giving yourself the compassion you need in the moment.

The research that my colleagues and I have conducted over the past decade shows that self-compassion is a powerful way to achieve emotional well-being and contentment in our lives. By giving ourselves unconditional kindness and comfort while embracing the human experience, difficult as it is, we avoid destructive patterns of fear, negativity, and isolation. At the same time, self-compassion fosters positive mind-

states such as happiness and optimism. The nurturing quality of self-compassion allows us to flourish, to appreciate the beauty and richness of life, even in hard times. When we soothe our agitated minds with self-compassion, we're better able to notice what's right as well as what's wrong, so that we can orient ourselves toward that which gives us joy.

Self-compassion provides an island of calm, a refuge from the stormy seas of endless positive and negative self-judgment, so that we can finally stop asking, "Am I as good as they are? Am I good enough?" Right here at our fingertips we have the means to provide ourselves with the warm, supportive care we deeply yearn for. By tapping into our inner wellsprings of kindness, acknowledging the shared nature of our imperfect human condition, we can start to feel more secure, accepted, and alive.

In many ways self-compassion is like magic, because it has the power to transform suffering into joy. In her book *Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart,* Tara Bennett-Goleman uses the metaphor of alchemy to symbolize the spiritual and emotional transformation that's possible when we embrace our pain with caring concern. When we give ourselves compassion, the tight knot of negative self-judgment starts to dissolve, replaced by a feeling of peaceful, connected acceptance—a sparkling diamond that emerges from the coal.

Exercise One

How Do You React to Yourself and Your Life?

How Do You Typically React to Yourself?

- What types of things do you typically judge and criticize yourself for—appearance, career, relationships, parenting, and so on?
- What type of language do you use with yourself when you notice some flaw or make a mistake—do you insult

yourself, or do you take a more kind and understanding tone?

- If you are highly self-critical, how does this make you feel inside?
- What are the consequences of being so hard on yourself? Does it make you more motivated, or does it tend to make you discouraged and depressed?
- How do you think you would feel if you could truly accept yourself exactly as you are? Does this possibility scare you, give you hope, or both?

How Do You Typically React to Life Difficulties?

- How do you treat yourself when you run into challenges in your life? Do you tend to ignore the fact that you're suffering and focus exclusively on fixing the problem, or do you stop to give yourself care and comfort?
- Do you tend to get carried away by the drama of difficult situations, so that you make a bigger deal out of them than you need to, or do you tend to keep things in balanced perspective?
- Do you tend to feel cut off from others when things go wrong, with the irrational feeling that everyone else is having a better time of it than you are, or do you try to remember that all people experience hardship in their lives?

If you feel that you lack sufficient self-compassion, check in with yourself—are you criticizing yourself for this, too? If so, stop right there. Try to feel compassion for how difficult it is to be an imperfect human being in this extremely competitive society of ours. Our culture does not emphasize self-compassion, quite the opposite. We're told that no matter

how hard we try, our best just isn't good enough. It's time for something different. We can all benefit by learning to be more self-compassionate, and now is the perfect time to start.

So how is all this relevant to you, the reader? This and every chapter contain exercises that will help you understand how your continual self-judgment is harming you. There are also exercises to help you develop greater self-compassion so that it becomes a habit in daily life, allowing you to establish a healthier way of relating to yourself. You can determine your precise level of self-compassion using the self-compassion scale I developed for my research. Go to my website—www.self-compassion.org—and click on the "How Self-Compassionate Are You?" link. After filling out a series of questions, your level of self-compassion will be calculated for you. You may want to record your score and take the test again after reading the book, to determine if you've increased your level of self-compassion with practice.

You can't always have high self-esteem and your life will continue to be flawed and imperfect—but self-compassion will always be there, waiting for you, a safe haven. In good times and bad, whether you're on top of the world or at the bottom of the heap, self-compassion will keep you going, helping you move to a better place. It does take work to break the self-criticizing habits of a lifetime, but at the end of the day, you are only being asked to relax, allow life to be as it is, and open your heart to yourself. It's easier than you might think, and it could change your life.

Exercise Two

Exploring Self-Compassion Through Letter Writing

Part One

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure or not "good enough." It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living. Try thinking about an issue that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues, etc.). How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside—scared, sad, depressed, insecure, angry? What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? Please try to be as emotionally honest as possible and to avoid repressing any feelings, while at the same time not being melodramatic. Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are—no more, no less.

Part Two

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind, and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been thinking about. Reflect upon what this friend feels toward you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature and is kind and forgiving toward you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you

didn't necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances—things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend—focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your "flaw" from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the discomfort you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of the person's acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection, and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

Chapter five

BEING MINDFUL OF WHAT IS

You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.
—JON KABAT-ZINN, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

THE THIRD KEY INGREDIENT OF SELF-COMPASSION IS MINDFULNESS. Mindfulness refers to the clear seeing and nonjudgmental acceptance of what's occurring in the present moment. Facing up to reality, in other words. The idea is that we need to see things as they are, no more, no less, in order to respond to our current situation in the most compassionate—and therefore effective—manner.

Stopping to Notice Moments of Suffering

To give ourselves compassion, we first have to recognize that we are suffering. We can't heal what we can't feel. As mentioned earlier, we often fail to recognize feelings of guilt, defectiveness, sadness, loneliness, and so on, as moments of suffering that can be responded to with compassion. When you look in the mirror and decide you're too short, or that your nose is too big, do you immediately tell yourself that these feelings of inadequacy are painful and deserving of a kind, caring response? When your boss calls you into his office and tells you that your job performance is below par, is your first instinct to comfort yourself for going through such a difficult experience? Probably not.

We certainly feel the sting of falling short of our ideals, but our mind tends to focus on the failure itself, rather than the pain caused by failure. This is a crucial difference. The moment we see something about ourselves we don't like, our attention tends to become completely absorbed by our perceived flaws. In that moment, we don't have the perspective needed to recognize the suffering caused by our feelings of imperfection, let alone to respond to them with compassion.

And it's not just the pain of personal inadequacy that we tend to ignore. We are surprisingly brusque toward ourselves when the more general circumstances of our life go wrong through no fault of our own. Let's say your mother becomes seriously ill, or you get rear-ended on the freeway. Most people, even if they don't blame themselves for their current circumstances, tend to immediately go into problem-solving mode in such situations. We are likely to spend enormous amounts of time and energy dealing with the crisis, making doctors appointments, calling insurance companies, and so on. Although all this is certainly necessary, it's also very important to recognize that these experiences take a lot out of us emotionally. We need to stop for a breath or two and acknowledge that we're having a hard time, and that our pain is deserving of a kind, caring response. Otherwise, our suffering will go unattended, and feelings of stress and worry will only mount. We risk getting burned out, exhausted, and overwhelmed, because we're spending all our energy trying to fix external problems without remembering to refresh ourselves internally.

It's not surprising that we often ignore our own pain, given that we're physiologically programmed to avoid it. Pain signals that something is

wrong, triggering our fight-or-flight response. It screams PROBLEM, GET AWAY, DANGER!!! Imagine if pain couldn't signal something as basic as "finger caught in car door, open door and remove finger immediately!" Because of our innate tendency to move away from pain, it can be extremely difficult to turn toward our pain, to hold it, to be with it as it is. This is why so many people shut themselves off from their emotions. It's a very natural thing to do.

Jacob was one of these people. He avoided conflict and was quick to appease anyone who showed any signs of getting upset. He just didn't want to deal with any sort of emotional intensity. Jacob was a good man, but he was unwilling to face up to the pain of his past. His mother had been a well-known television actress who was seriously devoted to her acting career. She often left Jacob in the hands of nannies while she worked on various production sets. On an unconscious level, Jacob deeply resented all the time his mother spent away from him, feeling that she prioritized her career over him. If he were to allow his feelings of anger in, however, he was afraid he'd start hating his mother, destroying the feelings of love and connection he felt with her. So basically, he just suppressed his rage.

Several years ago, Jacob became depressed and entered therapy. The therapist helped him to realize that his depression stemmed in part from the deep wells of anger he was harboring toward his mother, and the effort it was taking to repress his rage. What he needed was to get in touch with his true feelings. When Jacob did finally turn toward his anger, however, rather than simply holding it in mindful awareness, it took him over, and he ended up wielding his anger like an assault rifle. He dove into his rage with full force, getting more and more riled up as he thought about the "horrible" way his mother had treated him. He started seeing her as a narcissistic monster—Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard.* In short, he became hysterical rather than mindful. Unfortunately, this type of extreme pendulum swing is common when people first start working with difficult emotions.

Running Away with Painful Feelings

Like Jacob, suppressing and then exploding with our emotions is something most of us have experienced. I like to term this process "overidentification." Our sense of self becomes so wrapped up in our emotional reactions that our entire reality is consumed by them. There's no mental space left over to say, "Gosh, I'm getting a bit worked up here. Maybe there's another way to look at this." Rather than stepping back and objectively observing what's occurring, we're lost in the thick of it. What we think and feel seems like a direct perception of reality, and we forget that we are putting a personal spin on things.

I remember once my mother and mother-in-law were both visiting from out of town and they borrowed my car for an outing with my son, Rowan. I have a silver Toyota hybrid with keyless technology, meaning that you just have to hold the key near the car door and it will open. There is no button to push or key to insert. This novel technology made them a bit nervous—they just didn't trust it. After going on the outing and coming back to the parking lot, they tried holding the magical key thingy next to the car door and, of course, it didn't work. My mother tried the key over and over again, and nothing happened. "See! You can't rely on these newfangled gimmicks!" They both got very upset—here they were, almost an hour from home, stranded with a confused child, all because of some goddamned modern technology. What were they to do?

They called the local Toyota dealership, who told them to call a locksmith. Once the locksmith had been arranged and was on his way, they saw a parking lot security person. Maybe he could help in the meantime. "Sir, we're locked out of our Toyota hybrid that has this weird key thing; have you ever used one of these before?" The man looked at the key, then looked at the car. "Uh, ladies, you said it was a Toyota hybrid? This car isn't a hybrid. It isn't even a Toyota." My car was actually three spaces down. They had become so lost in their reactions that neither of them thought to take a very sensible next step: checking to

see whether they were trying to get into the right car! In the immortal words of Charlie Chaplin, "Life is a tragedy when seen in a close-up, but a comedy when seen in a long-shot."

There's another reason I call this process overidentification. Extreme reactions—or perhaps more accurately, overreactions—are especially common when the sense of self is involved. If I am afraid of other people judging me—let's say I have to give a public speech and am nervous about it—then the feelings that come up when thinking about the speech will tend to wildly distort reality. Rather than simply noticing that I am nervous, I might create elaborate scenarios in my mind of rejection, people laughing at me, throwing rotten vegetables, and so on.

What often drives this type of emotional overreaction is the attempt to avoid seeing ourselves as flawed or "bad." When our self-concept is threatened, things ramp up very quickly. I can think of a recent example (very recent, I must admit), of my own "overidentified" reaction. I thought I'd lost an important tax certificate sent to me by the IRS, which I had applied for months earlier and had just received in the mail. The deadline for filing the certificate was fast approaching. I was about to send it to my accountant but couldn't find it anywhere. I looked and looked but to no avail. Panic ensued. I was racked with anxiety. What a catastrophe! I'm in deep jeopardy! I became angry, distraught—losing it, in other words. Underlying my reaction was the fear that I was just a screwup, that my lack of organization skills (mail tends to pile up on my kitchen table like leaves in autumn) had finally come back to haunt me. Luckily, I eventually recognized what was happening and was able to be mindful of my reactions. Yes, I was feeling anxious about losing the certificate, but was it really all that bad? I could always ask the IRS for another copy, which, though a hassle, wouldn't be the end of the world. I even managed to remember to have compassion for the anxiety I felt, and to recognize that my life was very busy and I was actually pretty organized considering everything. I stopped to comfort myself in this painful situation, remembering that these things happen.

A few hours later, my husband, Rupert, came home with a sheepish look on his face. He told me that he had accidentally used the back of the IRS envelope for a shopping list, so it wasn't really lost after all. Rather than lambasting him, which I probably would have done if I was still wrestling with the self-judgment that I was incompetent, I was able to laugh at the whole situation. How often do we make mountains out of molehills? How often do we create the illusion that things are worse than they really are? If we can be mindful of our fears and anxieties rather than overidentifying with them, we can save ourselves from a lot of unwarranted pain. As the seventeenth-century French philosopher Montaigne once said, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortune, most of which never happened."

Mindfulness brings us back to the present moment and provides the type of balanced awareness that forms the foundation of self-compassion. Like a clear, still pool without ripples, mindfulness perfectly mirrors what's occurring without distortion. Rather than becoming lost in our own personal soap opera, mindfulness allows us to view our situation with greater perspective and helps to ensure that we don't suffer unnecessarily.

Awareness of Awareness

When we notice our pain without exaggerating it, this is a moment of mindfulness. Mindfulness entails observing what is going on in our field of awareness just as it is—right here, right now. I remember quite clearly the first time I experienced mindfulness. I was about twelve years old, home alone after school. My mother had a copy of Ram Dass's book *Be Here Now* lying on the coffee table. Although the book had been there for several months, one day, for whatever reason, I actually thought about what the words meant. BE HERE NOW. Hmmm. I *am* here, and it *is* now. I walked across the living room. Still here, still

now. Then I walked into the kitchen. Still here, still now. Where else could I be but here? When else could it be but now? Then it dawned on me—there is *only* here and *only* now. No matter where we go or what we do, we are here, now. I felt a giddy excitement and ran around the house laughing with amazement. HERE! NOW! HERE! NOW! HERE! NOW! I had gained insight into one of the most fundamental truths of life—*that conscious awareness only exists in the here and now.*

Why is this important? Because this insight allows us to see that thoughts about the past and the future are just that: thoughts. The past doesn't exist except in our memories, and the future doesn't exist except in our imagination. Rather than being lost in our train of thought, therefore, we can take a step back and say—ahh, this is what I'm thinking, feeling, and experiencing *right now.* We can awaken to the reality of the present moment.

Mindfulness is sometimes seen as a form of "meta-awareness," which means awareness of awareness. Instead of simply feeling anger, I am aware that I am now feeling anger. Rather than just feeling the blister on my heel, I am aware that I now feel the blister on my heel. Not only am I thinking about what I'm going to say at the meeting tomorrow, I am aware that I'm now thinking about what I'm going to say tomorrow. This may seem like a vague, insubstantial distinction, but it makes all the difference in the world in terms of our ability to respond effectively to difficult situations. When we can see our situation with clarity and objectivity, we open the door to wisdom. When our awareness narrows and gets lost in our thoughts and emotions, we can't reflect on our reactions and question whether they are out of line. This limits our ability to act wisely.

A commonly used analogy among those who write about mindfulness is that of a movie theater. When you're lost in the story line of a movie—perhaps a thriller—sometimes you suddenly remember that you're watching a movie. A moment earlier, when you thought the heroine might be pushed out of the window by the villain, you were gripping

your armrests in fear. Then the man next to you sneezes and you realize that there isn't really any danger—*it's just a movie.* Rather than being totally consumed by the plot, your awareness broadens and you recognize what is actually happening in the present moment. You are simply watching pixels of light dancing across a scene. So you loosen your grip on the armrest, your heartbeat returns to normal, and you allow yourself to become lost in the story once again.

Mindfulness operates in a very similar manner. When you focus on the fact that you are having certain thoughts and feelings, you are no longer lost in their story line. You can wake up and look around you, taking an outsider's perspective on your experience. You can turn your awareness in on itself, as if you were gazing in a reflective pool and see an image of yourself gazing in a reflective pool. Try it right now. You've been reading the words on this page without realizing that you were reading, but now you can read this sentence with the *awareness* that you are reading. If you're sitting, you probably haven't noticed the sensations in your feet as they touch the floor. Now focus on the fact that your feet feel a certain way. Not only do your feet tingle (or are warm, cold, cramped, etc.), you are now *aware* that your feet feel this way. This is mindfulness.

Fortunately, Jacob finally learned how to become mindful of the anger spurred by his mother's acting career instead of just "letting it all hang out." His therapist taught him how to fully feel and experience the hurt and resentment he had been harboring toward his mother all those years, without necessarily believing that the story line he was telling himself was *real and true.* The anger was true, but the gentle, nonjudgmental awareness that held his anger helped him realize that his mother's deep love for him was also true. Yes, she loved her career and was devoted to it—perhaps to a fault—but this was partly because it gave her the financial resources needed to provide the advantages in life she so wanted for him. Before confronting his mother with angry accusations, therefore, Jacob was able to calm and center himself with mind-

fulness. He then had a frank but kind conversation with his mother about the difficulties of his childhood that actually ended up bringing them closer together. If he had not chosen the path of mindfulness, he might have caused a destructive rift in their relationship that would have taken years to heal.

Shining the Light of Consciousness

One key to understanding mindfulness lies in distinguishing awareness itself from the contents of awareness. All sorts of different things arise within the frame of our awareness—physical sensations, visual perceptions, sounds, smells, tastes, emotions, thoughts. These are all contents—things that come and go. And the contents of awareness are always changing. Even when staying perfectly still, our breath rises and falls, our heart beats, our eyes blink, sounds arise and pass away. If the contents of awareness didn't change, we'd be dead. Life, by definition, entails transformation and change.

What about the awareness that holds all these phenomena, however? The light of consciousness that illuminates the sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts? Awareness does not change. It is the only thing in our waking experience that remains still and constant, the calm foundation on which our ever-changing experience rests. Experiences continually vary, but the conscious awareness that illuminates those experiences does not.

Imagine a red cardinal bird flying across a clear blue sky. The bird represents a particular thought or emotion we're experiencing, and the sky represents mindfulness, which holds the thought or emotion. The bird might start doing crazy loops, take a nose dive, land on a tree branch, whatever, but the sky is still there, unperturbed. When we identify with the sky rather than with the bird, or in other words, when our attention rests in awareness itself, rather than the particular thought or

emotion arising within that awareness, we can stay calm and centered.

This is important, because when we are mindful, we find our resting place—our seat, as it's sometimes called. Rather than having our sense of self caught up in and carried away by the contents of awareness, our sense of self remains centered in awareness itself. We can notice what is happening—an angry thought, a fear, a throbbing sensation in our temple—without falling into the trap of thinking that we are *defined* by this anger, fear, or pain. We can't be defined by *what* we are thinking and feeling when our consciousness is *aware* that we are thinking and feeling: otherwise, who is it that is being aware of our thoughts and feelings?

Exercise One

Noting Practice

(Also available as a guided meditation in MP3 format at www.self-compassion.org)

An important tool used to develop mindfulness is the practice of noting. The idea is to make a soft mental note whenever a particular thought, emotion, or sensation arises. This helps us to become more consciously aware of what we're experiencing. If I note that I feel angry, for instance, I become consciously aware that I'm angry. If I note that my back is uncomfortable as I'm sitting at my desk, I become consciously aware of my discomfort. This then provides me with the opportunity to respond wisely to my current circumstances. Perhaps I should take a few deep breaths to calm down or stretch to relieve my back pain. The noting practice can be used in any situation and helps engender mindfulness in daily life.

For this exercise, find a relaxed position and sit down for about ten to twenty minutes. Get comfortable, close your eyes, and simply note whatever thoughts, emotions, smells, sounds, or other physical sensations arise in your awareness. For example: "breathing in," "sound of children playing," "itch in left foot," "wondering what to wear for the party," "insecurity," "excitement," "plane flying overhead," and so on. Every time you become aware of a new experience, acknowledge the experience with a quiet mental note. Then allow your attention to settle on the next experience it is drawn to.

Sometimes you'll find yourself lost in thought and realize that for the last five minutes you've been thinking about your lunch and have forgotten entirely about your noting practice. Not to worry. As soon as you notice that you've been lost in thought, simply note "lost in thought" and turn your attention back to your noting practice.

We can train our brains to pay better attention and become more aware of what's happening to us moment to moment. This skill offers a big payoff in terms of allowing us to be more fully engaged in the present, and it also provides us with the mental perspective needed to deal with challenging situations effectively.

Responding Rather Than Reacting

Mindfulness provides incredible freedom, because it means we don't have to believe every passing thought or emotion as *real and true.* Rather, we can see that different thoughts and emotions arise and pass away, and we can decide which are worth paying attention to and which are not. We can question the accuracy of our perceptions and ask if our thoughts and emotions need to be taken quite so seriously. The real

treasure offered by mindfulness—its most amazing gift—is that mindfulness provides us with the opportunity to *respond* rather than simply *react.*

When I am lost in the story of a powerful emotion—let's say I feel insulted by something my friend just said and I'm feeling hurt and indignant—I am likely to react in a way I'll later regret. For instance, I was once talking with a friend on the phone and we got into an argument. I was trying to convince her that a choice I was making was in fact a good one. At first it was just a discussion—I was presenting my reasons for making this choice and my friend was presenting her concerns about whether or not it was actually right for me. At some point, however, my friend voiced her fear that I was being "naive." It's funny how quickly the tenor of the discussion changed. I felt insulted, then angry. I started raising my voice and was soon shouting. I was defending my point of view as if my life depended on it, exaggerating my claims to know what was right for me and portraying my friend as the one who was ignorant and confused. Before I knew it, I had hung up on her.

Luckily we're old friends and I called her back a few minutes later to apologize. Once we started talking calmly, I realized she didn't mean to be insulting by voicing her fear that I was being naive about this particular issue. She was really concerned I was making a decision without having the experience or knowledge needed to make a good one. Sure, it wasn't the most politic choice of words on her part, but her intentions were good and I certainly overreacted. The fact that I had had a stressful day at work that day probably hadn't helped things either.

If I had been able to be mindful during our conversation, I would have been able to say to myself: *I am aware that I am feeling hurt, insulted, and angry right now. I'm going to take a deep breath and pause before I start shouting accusations. What are her motives—is she really trying to hurt me?* In other words, when we're able to recognize what we're feeling in the moment, we don't have to let those feelings immediately propel us into action. We can stop to question whether we really

want to say what's on the tip of our tongue and choose to say something more productive instead.

To have any choice in how we respond, however, we need the mental space to consider our options. We need to be able to ask ourselves—what is really happening right here, right now? Is the danger real, or am I only having *thoughts* of danger, like pixels of light dancing on a screen? What is the *actual* situation that needs to be responded to? This is how we gain the freedom needed to make wise choices.

And even when we aren't able to be mindful in the moment—which is admittedly very difficult to do when our emotions are running high—mindfulness allows us to recover from our overreactions more quickly. No, I wasn't able to stop myself before hanging up on my friend. But I didn't have to spend the next few hours, days, or weeks justifying my behavior either. I was quickly able to recognize what had just happened, to be mindful of the reality that I regretted my behavior, to make amends, and move on.

There is remarkable power in mindfulness—it gives us the breathing room needed to respond in a way that helps rather than harms us. And of course, one of the ways we harm ourselves most is through the reactive habit of self-criticism. Whether due to our parents, our culture, or our personality type, many of us have built up lifelong patterns of beating ourselves up when we fail or make some mistake. Our automatic reaction when we see something about ourselves we don't like is to put ourselves down. Or when faced with adversity, our first reaction might be to immediately go into problem-solving mode without first stopping to tend to our emotional needs. But if we can be mindful, even for just a moment, of the pain associated with failure or the stress and hardship entailed by difficult circumstances, we can take a step back and respond to our pain with kindness. We can soothe and comfort ourselves with compassionate understanding. We can reframe our situation in light of our shared humanity, so that we don't feel so isolated by adversity. Not

only am I suffering, *I am aware that I am suffering,* and therefore I can try to do something about it.

After some practice you can actually make a habit of this, so that as soon as you notice you're suffering you automatically embrace yourself with compassion. Think of it as pushing the reset button on your computer when it gets locked up. Rather than staying stuck in painful feelings of self-judgment or merciless stoicism, you can reboot your heart and mind so that they start flowing freely again. Then, whatever actions are needed to help your situation can be carried out with more calm, stability, and grace—not to mention effectiveness.

Suffering = Pain x Resistance

Suffering stems from a single source—comparing our reality to our ideals. When reality matches our wants and desires, we're happy and satisfied. When reality doesn't match our wants and desires, we suffer. Of course, we have about a snowball's chance in hell of our reality completely matching our ideals 100 percent of the time. That's why suffering is so ubiquitous.

I once went on a meditation retreat with a wonderful teacher named Shinzen Young, who gave me words of wisdom that I'll never forget. He said that the key to happiness was understanding that suffering is caused by *resisting* pain. We can't avoid pain in life, he said, but we don't necessarily have to suffer because of that pain. Because Shinzen was a bit of a Buddhist "nerd" (he even wore horn-rimmed glasses), he chose to express these words of wisdom with an equation: "Suffering = Pain × Resistance." He then added, "Actually, it's an exponential rather than a multiplicative relationship." His point was that we can distinguish between the normal pain of life—difficult emotions, physical discomfort, and so on—and actual *suffering,* which

is the mental anguish caused by fighting against the fact that life is sometimes painful.

Let's say you get caught in a nasty traffic jam. This situation may be mildly stressful and annoying. You'll probably be a few minutes late for work and somewhat bored while sitting there. No big deal. If, however, you resist the fact that you are caught in a traffic jam, mentally screaming "THIS SHOULD NOT BE HAPPENING!!!!" you are likely to suffer a great deal. You'll become much more upset, agitated, and angry than you would be otherwise. Road rage incidents are due to precisely this type of overreaction. There are about three hundred serious injuries or deaths caused by road rage in the United States alone each year.

Our emotional suffering is caused by our desire for things to be other than they are. The more we resist the fact of what is happening right now, the more we suffer. Pain is like a gaseous substance. If you allow it to just *be* there, freely, it will eventually dissipate on its own. If you fight and resist the pain, however, walling it into a confined space, the pressure will grow and grow until there is an explosion.

Resisting pain truly is banging your head against the wall of reality. When you fight against the fact that pain is arising in your conscious experience, you are piling on feelings of anger, frustration, and stress on top of the pain. This only exacerbates your suffering. Once something has occurred in reality, there is nothing you can do to change that reality in the present moment. *This is how things are.* You can choose to accept this fact or not, but reality will remain the same either way.

Mindfulness allows us to stop resisting reality because it holds all experience in nonjudgmental awareness. It allows us to accept the fact that something unpleasant is occurring, even if we don't like it. By mindfully relating to our difficult emotions, they have the chance to take their natural course, arising and eventually passing away. If we can wait out the storm with relative equanimity, we won't make things any worse than they already are. Pain is unavoidable; suffering is optional.

Exercise Two

Mindfully Working with Pain

Conduct this small experiment to observe how mindfulness and self-compassion can help us suffer less when we're in pain.

1. Hold an ice cube in your hand for several seconds (this will be mildly uncomfortable). Just react as you normally would, and put the ice cube down when the discomfort becomes overwhelming. Notice how intense your discomfort was, and how long you could hold the ice cube before needing to put it down.

2. Hold an ice cube in your other hand for several seconds. This time, as you feel the discomfort, try not to resist it. Relax around the sensation and allow it just to be. Mindfully note the qualities of the sensation—cold, burning, tingling, and so on. As you do so, give yourself compassion for any discomfort you feel. (For example, you might say "Ouch, this really hurts. It's difficult to feel this sensation. But it's okay, I'll get through it.") Put the ice cube down when the discomfort becomes overwhelming. Once again, notice how intense your discomfort was, and how long you could hold the ice cube.

After you're done, compare the two experiences. Did anything change when you didn't resist the pain? Were you able to hold the ice cube for a longer time? Was your discomfort less intense? Were you able to provide empirical support for the proposition that "Suffering = Pain × Resistance"? The less you resist, the less you suffer.

Relating to That Which Is Beyond Our Control

Sometimes—not always, but sometimes—there is the possibility of making changes to your current situation so that your future circumstances will improve. If you relate to the present moment mindfully, you'll be in a better place to wisely consider what you want to do in the next moment. If you judge and resist the present moment, however, not only will you cause yourself extra frustration and anger, you will also cloud your ability to choose your next steps wisely. Mindfulness, then, allows us to consider what proactive steps might be taken to improve our situation, but also to recognize when things cannot be changed and must be accepted.

The serenity prayer—made famous by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs—captures this idea beautifully:

> *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Mindfulness allows us to distinguish between those aspects of our experience we can change and those we can't. If a heavy object falls on my foot, I can take the object off—that's something I can change. But the throbbing I feel in my foot can't be changed, at least in the moment. If I accept that the event has happened—maybe even throwing in a dash of humor—I will still feel the pain but remain relatively peaceful as it fades away. I won't add to my predicament by getting frustrated and agitated, or kicking the offending object in anger (you laugh but you know we've all done it!). My calm state will also help me to make a wise decision, like wrapping my foot in an ice pack before it swells up.

Although it may be counterintuitive, one thing that we have little power to change is what goes on inside our own heads. What arises within our field of conscious awareness is a mystery. Thoughts and emotions arise unbidden and often overstay their welcome. We may wish we had an internal filter for our thoughts and emotions—similar to the lint filter on a dryer—that would prevent any negative thoughts and emotions from entering our awareness. Then all we'd have to do is peel off the accumulated bundle of painful, critical, and self-sabotaging thoughts and throw them in the trash. That's not how our minds work, however.

Thoughts and feelings arise based on our history, our past experiences and associations, our hardwiring, our hormonal cycle, our physical comfort level, our cultural conditioning, our previous thoughts and feelings, and numerous other factors. As discussed in the last chapter, there are untold prior causes and conditions that have come together to produce our current mental and emotional experience—conditions beyond our conscious choosing. We can't control which thoughts and emotions pass through the gates of awareness and which do not. If our particular thoughts and feelings aren't healthy, we can't make these mental experiences go away. However, *we can change the way we relate to them.*

When we judge ourselves for our mental experience, we are only making things worse. "What a horrible person I am for having that thought!" "A nicer person would feel sympathy rather than annoyance in this situation!" Did you choose to have that particular thought or emotion, however? If not, should you be judging yourself so? We can release ourselves from the tangled knot of self-judgment by accepting the fact of our experience in the here and now. "These are the thoughts and emotions that are arising in my conscious awareness in the present moment." A simple statement of fact, with no blame attached. We don't need to lambast ourselves for thinking those nasty thoughts or feeling those destructive emotions. We can simply let them go. As long as we don't get lost in a story line that justifies and reinforces them, they will tend to dissipate on their own. A weed that is not given water will eventually wither and fade away. At the same time, when a wholesome

thought or feeling arises, we can hold it in loving awareness and allow it to fully blossom.

A Native American wisdom story tells of an old Cherokee who is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

The gift of mindfulness, then, is that by accepting the present moment you are better able to shape your future moments with wisdom and clarity. Not only do you reduce your own suffering, you are also able to make good choices about how to act next. It makes perfect sense, if you think about it, but it's not a habit that many of us were taught as children. In the West we are raised to be knowledgeable, to work hard, and to be productive members of society, but no one teaches us how to deal productively with our own emotions, especially the difficult ones.

Learning to Be Mindful

Fortunately, this is starting to change. Western scientists are starting to document the health benefits of mindfulness, bringing attention to an idea that originated in Eastern meditation traditions thousands of years ago. Many hundreds of studies have now shown that people who are able to pay attention to their present moment experience in a mindful way have greater emotional balance. For instance, brain scans using

fMRI technology have shown that people who are more mindful are less reactive to scary or threatening images, as measured by amygdala activation (the reptilian part of our brain responsible for the fight-or-flight response). In short, they are less easily "freaked out" and therefore less at the mercy of circumstance. For this reason, mindfulness skills are commonly taught by therapists and other health professionals to help people deal with stress, addiction, physical pain, and other forms of suffering.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program is one of the most ubiquitous and successful stress-reduction programs in the country. MBSR courses are offered by hundreds of hospitals, clinics, and medical centers around the United States and elsewhere in the world. The eight-week intensive program guides people through a series of exercises to help them learn to be more mindful. Research has shown that learning to be more mindful by taking an MBSR course helps people cope with life challenges with less stress and greater ease. MBSR also helps people cope with chronic pain. One of Kabat-Zinn's early studies, for instance, found that people experiencing debilitating back pain reported substantial decreases in pain (around 50% less) after taking an MBSR course.

One of the key practices taught in MBSR courses is mindfulness meditation. This type of meditation typically involves reducing sensory input by sitting quietly and closing one's eyes, so that it is easier to pay attention to what's arising in one's present moment experience without getting overwhelmed by too many outside sensations. People often start their meditation by focusing on their breath for a period to quiet their minds and sharpen their attention. Then, once the mind is fairly quiet, the attention moves freely to any thought, sound, or sensation that arises in one's field of awareness. The idea is to observe whatever arises without judgment, without trying to push any particular experience away or else hold on to it. One simply allows thoughts and feelings to come and go,

like a bird flying across a wide-open sky. Tracking the arising and passing away of mental phenomena builds skills that increase one's ability to be mindful during the course of everyday life.

It's important to note, however, that although meditation is a powerful way to strengthen one's mindfulness muscle, there are other ways to quiet the mind and break the reverie of thought—like silent prayer, or even taking a solitary walk in the woods. Another tried and true method is to take a few slow, deep breaths, carefully paying attention to all the sensations generated during the in-breath and the out-breath. Mindfulness is not some special esoteric practice we have to pull out of a magician's hat: we're all innately gifted with the ability to be aware of our own field of awareness. This means that it is fully within our power to be mindful. Mostly, the key is *intentionally choosing* to focus on the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that are arising in the present moment in a friendly, nonjudgmental way.

Exercise Three

Mindfulness in Daily Life

Pick one activity a day in which you'll be mindful. It may be while you brush your teeth, while you walk from the parking garage to work, when you eat your breakfast, or whenever your cell phone rings. You might want to choose an activity that occurs early in the day, to help you remember to be mindful before you get overwhelmed with the daily tasks of life. As you're engaging in your mindful activity—let's say you choose the walk from the parking lot to your office—bring your focused awareness to your actual experience in the present moment.

Try not to immediately start thinking of what you need to do once you get to your office. Simply notice how it feels to be walking. How do your feet feel as they touch the ground? Can you notice the change in sensations as each foot rises and falls? How do your legs feel as they move, as the weight shifts from the right to left? What is the air temperature like as you walk? Warm? Cold? Try to bring your awareness to as many aspects of the experience of walking as possible. It's helpful to focus on one distinct sensation at a time, so that you don't become overwhelmed. If you become lost in thoughts or emotions, simply note this and bring your awareness back to the experience of walking.

What you're doing is sharpening your skills of attention, building your mindfulness muscle. This will eventually help you when challenging situations arise, so that you can be aware of difficult emotions without running away with them. We are all capable of being mindful, but in the midst of our hectic lives, we must choose to slow down and notice—if even just for a moment—what's happening to us right here, right now.

Because mindfulness is one of the core components of self-compassion, when we improve our mindfulness skills, we automatically increase our ability to be self-compassionate. Several studies have demonstrated that participation in an eight-week MBSR course increases self-compassion levels. Similarly, studies have demonstrated that experienced mindfulness meditators have more self-compassion than those who are less experienced.

While increasing our mindfulness skills is an important way to foster self-compassion, the two other components of self-compassion—self-kindness and common humanity—also enhance our ability to be mindful, creating a positive and self-reinforcing cycle. One of the enemies of mindfulness is the process of overidentification—becoming so

carried away by our personal drama that we can't clearly see what is occurring in the present moment. If you're upset because you're lost in self-judgment or are feeling isolated from others, it will be much harder for you to be mindful of your painful emotions. If you are able to calm and soothe your feelings by giving yourself kindness or by putting things into the larger human perspective, however, you can give yourself the space needed to break out of your melodrama, and therefore your suffering. Realizing that you're overreacting isn't so difficult when you feel cared for and connected.

Three Doorways In

The beauty of using self-compassion as a tool for dealing with difficult emotions is that it has three distinct doorways in. Whenever you notice you are in pain, you have three potential courses of action.

- You can give yourself kindness and care.
- You can remind yourself that encountering pain is part of the shared human experience.
- You can hold your thoughts and emotions in mindful awareness.

Engaging any one of the three components of self-compassion when confronting difficult feelings will then make it easier to engage the others. Sometimes you'll find it easier to enter in through one doorway than another depending on your mood and the current situation, but once you're in, you're in. You'll have tapped into the power of self-compassion, allowing you to transform your relationship with the pain of life in a revolutionary, creative way. From the stable platform of self-compassion, you'll be able to wisely guide your next steps in a manner that leads to greater health, happiness, and well-being. Instead of letting

your difficult emotions carry you away, you can carry your difficult emotions to a better place. You can hold them, accept them, and be compassionate toward yourself when you feel them. And the amazing thing is that you don't have to rely on anyone or anything else to give yourself this gift. Nor do you have to wait until circumstances are exactly right. It's precisely *when* you've fallen on hard times and things are looking their worst that self-compassion is most available.

Exercise Four

Self-Compassion Journal

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or as long as you like). Journaling is an effective way to express emotions and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, maybe you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterward, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a self-compassionate way.

Mindfulness

This will mainly involve bringing awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting

and nonjudgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, overreacted, and felt foolish afterward.")

Common Humanity

Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone overreacts sometimes; it's only human.") You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different, my reaction probably would have been different.")

Self-Kindness

Write yourself some kind, understanding words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. *(It's okay. You messed up but it isn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. I know how much you value being kind to other people and how badly you feel right now. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any waitstaff this week . . .)*

Practicing the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode them in your memory. If you're the type who likes to keep a journal regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

My Story: Getting Through the Dark Times

I can tell you from firsthand experience what a lifesaver self-compassion can be. It pulled me back from the precipice of despair over and over again as I struggled to deal with Rowan's autism. When my mind would start to walk down the dark alley of fear—*What's going to happen to him? Will he ever live independently? Will he ever have a job, a family?*—I would try to stay in the present moment. *I am right here, right now. Rowan is safe and happy. I have no idea what's going to happen to him, or what his future holds. It's a mystery, but running away with my fear is not going to help. Let me focus on calming and comforting myself. Poor darling, I know how incredibly difficult it is for you right now . . .* When I soothed my troubled mind with this kind of caring concern, I was able to stay centered without being overwhelmed, realizing that whatever Rowan's future held, I loved him exactly as he was.

At times when I thought I couldn't cope a moment longer, self-compassion got me through. When Rowan would launch into an ear-splitting tantrum because he momentarily mislaid his toy zebra, or because of some other seemingly insignificant trigger, I would try to mindfully watch my breath, sending myself compassion for the pain rather than fighting and resisting it. Autistic children's tantrums are neurological in origin and are often due to an overloaded sensory system. They literally can't stop their reaction or be consoled. The only thing parents can do is try to keep their children from hurting themselves, and wait till the storm passes.

When people gave me disapproving looks in the grocery store because they assumed Rowan was a spoiled brat and that I was a bad mother for not being able to control his behavior (one autism mother told me a stranger actually slapped her child because she thought he needed some "real discipline"), I would send myself compassion. I would hold my feelings of pain in mindful, spacious awareness so that they didn't overwhelm me.

Rowan's autism forced me to surrender any pretense of control, and mindfulness taught me that maybe this wasn't such a bad thing. No matter how much I wanted to be off that airplane, trapped twenty thousand feet in the air as Rowan screamed away, every other passenger looking at us like they wished we were dead, having to run to the bathroom (which was occupied, of course) to change Rowan's poop-filled underpants, I had no other choice but to deal with it. NO OTHER CHOICE. All I could do was try to get through the situation with as much grace as I could muster. Once I surrendered, a sense of deep calm descended. I felt a quiet joy, knowing that my peace of mind didn't depend on external circumstances. If I could get through this moment, I could get through anything.

Self-compassion helped me steer clear of anger and self-pity, allowing me to remain patient and loving toward Rowan despite the feelings of despair and frustration that would inevitably arise. I'm not saying that I didn't have times when I lost it. I had many. But in those times I still had my practice of self-compassion to fall back on. I could forgive myself for reacting badly, for making mistakes, for being human. If I hadn't been aware of the power of self-compassion at that time, I don't know how I would have gotten through those especially difficult early years. And for that reason, I'll always be eternally grateful, knowing that the angel of self-compassion sits on my shoulder, available whenever I need it.

Part Three

THE BENEFITS OF SELF-COMPASSION