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The Mindful Way through Depression

Freeing Yourself
from Chronic Unhappiness

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Introduction

Tired of Feeling So Bad for So Long

DEPRESSION HURTS. IT'S THE "BLACK DOG" OF THE night that robs you of joy, the unquiet mind that keeps you awake. It's a noonday demon that only you can see, the darkness visible only to you.

If you've picked up this book, chances are you know these metaphors are no exaggeration. Anyone who has been visited by depression knows that it can cause debilitating anxiety, enormous personal dissatisfaction, and an empty feeling of despair. It can leave you feeling hopeless, listless, and worn down by the pervasive joylessness and disappointment associated with longing for a happiness never tasted.

Any of us would do anything not to feel that way. Yet, ironically, nothing we do seems to help . . . at least not for long. For the sad fact of the matter is that once you have been depressed, it tends to return, even if you have been feeling better for months. If this has happened to you, or if you can't seem to find lasting happiness, you may end up feeling that you are not good enough, that you are a failure. Your thoughts may go round and round as you try to find a deeper meaning, to understand once and for all why you feel so bad. If you can't come up with a satisfactory answer, you might feel even more empty and desperate. Ultimately, you may become convinced that there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

But what if there is nothing "wrong" with you at all?

What if, like virtually everybody else who suffers repeatedly from depression, you have become a victim of your own very sensible, even heroic, efforts to free yourself—like someone pulled even deeper into quicksand by the struggling intended to get you out?

We wrote this book to help you understand how this happens and what you can do about it, by sharing recent scientific discoveries that have given us a radically new understanding of what feeds depression or chronic unhappiness:

- At the very earliest stages in which mood starts to spiral downward, it is not the mood that does the damage, but how we react to it.
- Our habitual efforts to extricate ourselves, far from freeing us, actually keep us locked in the pain we're trying to escape.

In other words, nothing we *do* when we start to go down seems to help because trying to get rid of depression in the usual problem-solving way, trying to “fix” what’s “wrong” with us, just digs us in deeper. The 3:00 A.M. obsessing over the state of our lives . . . the self-criticism for our “weakness” when we feel ourselves slipping into sadness . . . the desperate attempts to talk our hearts and bodies out of feeling the way they do—all are mental gyrations that lead nowhere but farther down. Anyone who has tossed and turned night after sleepless night or been distracted from everything else in life by endless brooding knows well how fruitless these efforts are. Yet we also know how easy it is to get trapped in these habits of the mind.

In the following pages and in the accompanying CD we offer a series of practices that you can incorporate into your daily life to free you from the mental habits that keep you mired in unhappiness. This program, known as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), brings together the latest understandings of modern science and forms of meditation that have been shown to be clinically effective within mainstream medicine and psychology. The novel yet potent synthesis of these different ways of knowing the mind and the body can help you make a radical shift in your relationship to negative thoughts and feel-

ings. Through this shift, you can find a way to break out of the downward spiral of mood so that it does not become depression. *Our research has shown that the program outlined in this book can cut the risk of relapse by half in those who have had three or more episodes of depression.*

The women and men who took part in our studies had all suffered repeated bouts of clinical depression. But you don't have to have been officially diagnosed with depression to derive significant benefit from this book. Many people who suffer the hopelessness and pain associated with depression never seek professional help, but they still know they've been imprisoned by a chronic unhappiness that subsumes large stretches of their lives. If you've felt yourself repeatedly floundering in the quicksand of despair, inertia, and sadness, our hope is that you will discover in this book and the accompanying CD something of potentially enormous value that can help you free yourself from the downward pull of low mood and bring a robust and genuine happiness into your life.

Exactly how you will experience the profoundly healthy shift in your relationship to negative moods and what will unfold for you in its aftermath are difficult to predict because they are different for everyone. The only way anyone can really know what benefits such an approach offers is to suspend judgment temporarily and engage in the process wholeheartedly over an extended period of time—in this case for eight weeks—and see what happens. This is exactly what we ask of the participants in our programs. To deepen the process and make it more real, we have included the accompanying CD that guides you carefully and with precision in the meditative practices described in the book.

Along with the meditative practices, we will be encouraging you to experiment with cultivating attitudes of patience, compassion for yourself, open-mindedness, and gentle persistence. These qualities can aid in freeing you from the “gravitational pull” of depression by reminding you in key ways of what science has now shown: it is actually okay to stop trying to *solve* the problem of feeling bad. In fact it is wise because our habitual ways of solving problems almost invariably wind up making things worse.

As scientists and clinicians we came to a new understanding of what is and what is not effective in dealing with repeated depression by a somewhat circuitous route. Until the early 1970s, scientists had concentrated on finding effective treatments for acute depression—for that devastating first episode often triggered by a catastrophic event in one's life. They found them in the form of antidepressant medications, which remain enormously helpful in treating depression for many people. Then came the discovery that depression, once treated, often returns—and becomes more and more likely to recur the more often it is experienced. This changed our entire concept of depression and chronic unhappiness.

It turned out that antidepressant medications “fixed” depression, but only as long as people kept taking them. When they stopped, depression came back, even if not until months later. Neither patients nor doctors liked the idea of anyone taking lifelong medicine to keep the specter of depression from the door. So in the early 1990s we (Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale) started exploring the possibility of developing an entirely new approach.

First, we set to work to discover what keeps depression coming back: what makes the quicksand more treacherous with every encounter. It turns out that every time a person gets depressed, the connections in the brain between mood, thoughts, the body, and behavior get stronger, making it easier for depression to be triggered again.

Next we started exploring what could be done about this ongoing risk. We knew that a psychological treatment called *cognitive therapy* had proven effective for acute depression and protected many people against relapse. But no one knew for sure how it worked. We needed to find out—not just out of theoretical interest but because the answer had huge practical implications.

Until that time, all therapies, both antidepressant medication and cognitive therapy, were prescribed to people only once they were already depressed. We reasoned that if we could identify the critical ingredient in cognitive therapy, we might be able to teach those skills to people *when they were well*. Rather than waiting for the catastrophe of the next episode to happen, we could, we hoped, train people to use

these skills to nip it in the bud and prevent it from happening altogether.

Curiously enough, our individual lines of research and inquiry ultimately led us to examine the clinical use of meditative practices oriented toward cultivating a particular form of awareness, known as *mindfulness*, which originated in the wisdom traditions of Asia. These practices, which have been part of Buddhist culture for millennia, had been honed and refined for use in a modern medical setting by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Kabat-Zinn had founded a stress-reduction program there in 1979, now known as MBSR, or *mindfulness-based stress reduction*, which is anchored in mindfulness meditation practices and their applications to stress, pain, and chronic illness. Mindfulness could also be described as “heartfulness” because it is really about a compassionate awareness. MBSR has proved to be enormously empowering for patients with chronic diseases and debilitating conditions, as well as for psychological problems such as anxiety and panic. These benefits could be seen not only in changes in the way people felt, thought, and behaved, but also in changes in the patterns of brain activity that we know underlie negative emotions.

Despite some initial skepticism about what our colleagues and patients might say if we suggested we were considering meditation as a preventive approach to depression, we decided to take a closer look. We soon discovered that the combination of Western cognitive science and Eastern practices was just what is needed to break the cycle of recurrent depression, in which we tend to go over and over what went wrong or how things are not the way we want them to be.

When depression starts to pull us down, we often react, for very understandable reasons, by trying to get rid of our feelings by suppressing them or by trying to think our way out of them. In the process we dredge up past regrets and conjure up future worries. In our heads, we try out this solution and that solution, and it doesn't take long for us to start feeling bad for failing to come up with a way to alleviate the painful emotions we're feeling. We get lost in comparisons of where we are versus where we want to be, soon living almost entirely in our heads.

We become preoccupied. We lose touch with the world, with the people around us, even with those we most love and those who most love us. We deny ourselves the rich input of the full experience of living. It's no wonder that we get discouraged and may wind up feeling that there is nothing we can do. But this is exactly where compassionate meditative awareness can play a huge role.

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF THIS BOOK

The mindfulness practices taught in this book can help you take a wholly different approach to the endless cycles of mental strategizing that increase your risk of getting depressed. In fact, they can help you disengage from this entire pattern of mental activity. Cultivating mindfulness can help you let go both of past regrets and worries about the future. It increases mental flexibility so that new options open up to you when the moment before you may have felt there was nothing you could do. The practice of mindfulness can prevent the normal unhappiness we all experience from spiraling down into depression. It does so by helping us get back in touch with the full range of our inner and outer resources for learning, growing, and healing, resources we may not even believe we have.

One vital inner resource we often ignore or take completely for granted, whether depressed or not, is the body itself. When we get lost in our thoughts and try to jettison our feelings, we pay very little attention to the physical sensations from our bodies. Yet those sensations within the body give us immediate feedback about what's going on in our emotional and mental state. They can give us valuable information in our quest to free ourselves from depression, and focusing on them not only keeps us out of the mental trap of leaning into the future or getting stuck in the past but can also transform the emotion itself. Part I of this book examines how the mind, body, and emotions work together to compound and sustain depression and what this view emerging from cutting-edge research tells us about how to break out of this vicious cycle. It brings into sharp relief how we are all prey to habit-

driven patterns—of thinking, feeling, and doing—that curtail the joy inherent in living and our sense of possibilities. It makes the case that there is an unsuspected power in inhabiting the moment you're living in right now with full awareness.

Logic and the knowledge of the latest research findings can be persuasive, but they are not necessarily of practical use in and of themselves, in part because they tend to speak only to the head through thought and reasoning. So Part II invites you to experience for yourself what any of us may be missing when we get totally caught up and lost in our mental gyrations, aimed at "fixing" our state of unhappiness, and lose touch with other aspects of our being and our intelligence, including the power of mindfulness. At this point it may be just an abstraction, another concept, to contemplate what it might mean to cultivate mindfulness of your own mind, body, and emotions. That is why this section is designed to help you develop your own practice of mindfulness and see for yourself how profoundly transforming and liberating it may be.

Part III will help you refine your practice and bring it to bear on the negative thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and behaviors that come together to create the spiral that can change unhappiness into depression.

Part IV brings everything together into one unified strategy for living more fully and more effectively in the face of all of life's challenges and, in particular, the specter of recurrent depression. We share stories of people who have grown and changed by engaging in the mindfulness practices in the face of their histories of depression, and we offer a systematic and easy-to-implement eight-week program for putting together all the elements and practices described in the book in a practical way. It is our hope that reading the book and engaging in the practices themselves will put you in touch with your inherent capacity for both wisdom and healing in the most practical and doable of ways.

There are multiple ways to derive benefit from this approach. There is no need to commit yourself right off the bat to doing the whole eight-week program, although the benefits of doing so could be

enormous when the time is right for that kind of commitment. In fact, you don't even have to have a specific problem with depression to benefit profoundly from engaging in one or more of the mindfulness practices described here. The habitual and automatic patterns of mind we will be examining afflict virtually all of us until we learn to come to grips with them. You may want simply to learn more about your mind and your interior emotional landscape. Or, in doing so, you may be naturally drawn by your own curiosity to experiment with some of the mindfulness practices, perhaps starting with those in Part II. This, in turn, may motivate you to launch yourself wholeheartedly into the 8-week program and see what happens.

Two words of caution before we go further. *First, the various meditative practices that we describe often take some time to reveal their full potential.* That is why they are called "practices." They require revisiting, returning to them over and over again with a spirit of openness and curiosity rather than forcing some outcome that you feel is important to justify your investment of time and energy. This is really a new kind of learning for most of us, but one that is well worth experimenting with. Everything we cover here is meant to support you in your efforts.

Second, it may be wise not to undertake the entire program while in the midst of an episode of clinical depression. If it feels too hard, it may be prudent to wait until you have gotten the necessary help in climbing out of the depths and are able to approach this new way of working with your thoughts and feelings, with your mind and spirit unburdened by the crushing weight of acute depression.

Whatever your starting point, we encourage you to practice the exercises and meditations described here and on the CD with a combination of patience, self-compassion, persistence, and open-mindedness. We invite you to let go of the tendency we all have to try to force things to be a certain way and instead work with allowing them to be as they actually already are in each moment. As best you can, simply trust in your fundamental capacity for learning, growing, and healing as we go along through this process—and engage in the practices as if your life depended on them, which in many ways, literally and metaphorically, it surely does. The rest takes care of itself.

PART I



Mind, Body, and Emotion