

# DETOX *your* THOUGHTS

**QUIT NEGATIVE SELF-TALK FOR GOOD &  
DISCOVER THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED**

**ANDREA BONIOR, PHD**  
*Washington Post* "Baggage Check" columnist

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ANDREA BONIOR, PHD,  
AND *DETOX YOUR THOUGHTS***

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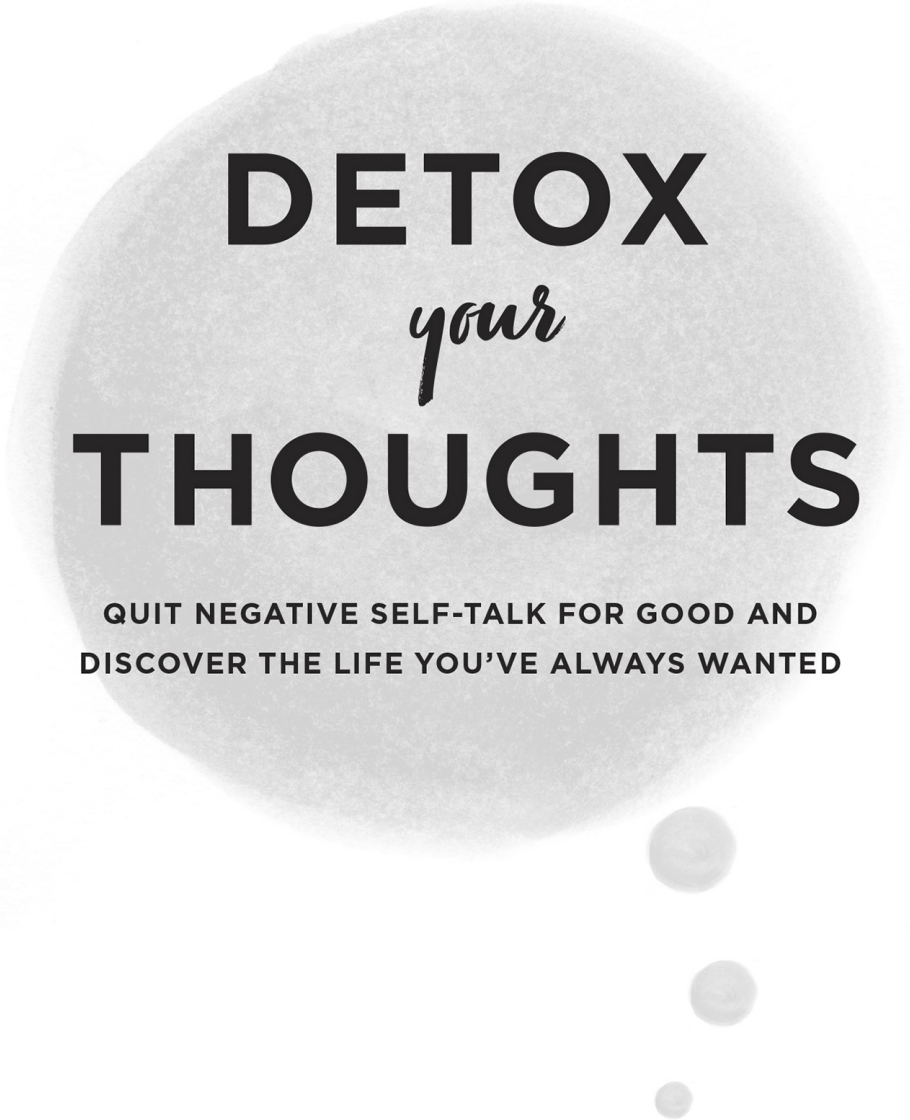
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**CHRONICLE PRISM**

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*To Andy and our three,  
worth every bit of  
mental space,  
and then some*

*And in memory  
of Brian Kinlan,  
forever bright*

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# INTRODUCTION

## WELCOME.

You are here, and that says a lot. I'm so glad you picked up this book, or scrolled to this page on a screen, or are listening to these words while wondering whether you'll get a seat on the subway—I really am. And if you're wondering (or doubting) at this early moment whether this has even the slightest chance of paying off, I want you to know there is hope.

You've shown it already, by being here. There's something in you that wants to change the way you think, and at least a part of you—even if that part is the size of a walnut—is ready to do something about it.

You've most definitely come to the right place. The techniques you'll learn in this book represent the very best that research into cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT, developed by Steven C. Hayes), and mindfulness has to offer. Modern science backs up what clinical psychologists like me have been noticing for years: A lot of people have just had enough. They're anxious, stressed, and steeped in a cycle of feeling bad (and feeling bad *about* feeling bad). They have negative, worried thoughts that follow them around and get in the way of their moods, relationships, and work. Do any of these descriptions sound familiar to you?

Maybe you have tried traditional therapy or antidepressant medication, but still feel like your inner voice is your worst enemy: the ever-present itch, the darkness that you just can't get away from. You may be doing so much work to try to feel better, and yet it just doesn't feel like it's making much difference.

The numbers tell this story too. More than 20 percent of Americans meet criteria for an anxiety disorder in any given year, as that category of conditions gradually overtakes depression as the most common mental health diagnosis in the United States. Depression still remains heavily prevalent, with around 20 percent of the population suffering at some point in their lives. By most accounts, mental health problems across the board are increasing, and their growth among younger people is especially startling.

Now, it's true that more people are seeking help, which is wonderful, and therefore being counted. But that doesn't come close to explaining the whole increase. The *World Happiness Report* and the *General Social Survey* both show significant recent declines in overall happiness in the United States, even with economic upturns, which is quite unusual. People are hurting. Even those not seeking mental health help are typically reporting more stress and loneliness than in the past.

So if we know more about these problems, and have more treatments available than ever before, how could suffering, by many measures, be increasing?

We're beginning to understand the answer. And underlying it is a frustrating truth: The most common approaches to handling distressed moods often backfire. Like a crash diet that denies us the ability to feel satisfied (and as an added bonus throws our metabolism into a tailspin, making us *gain* weight—hooray!), our relationship to our negative thinking is often one of bingeing and starving.

We cajole, plead, and beg ourselves to “be positive” or to “look on the bright side.” *Think happy thoughts!* we say. *Believe in yourself!* It's a very crash diet mentality—to simply banish negative thoughts and adopt a sunnier outlook. But unfortunately, the research shows that the “Just be happy!” approach rarely works. If this mind-set has failed

you as well, take heart. Let's recognize right now that the typical motivational advice in this vein doesn't seem to bring many changes for *anyone*. It's not you. Not you at all.

But new research illuminates a path forward. Studies increasingly suggest that depression and anxiety disorders are not caused by negative thoughts. (In fact, every last one of us has negative thoughts at times.) Instead, depression and anxiety are caused by negative thoughts *becoming sticky*. Even medications for depression and anxiety, like SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), are now thought to decrease depression and anxiety by reducing this stickiness factor, rather than just reducing negative thoughts themselves. The good news is, the cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness techniques in this book can do this too. And we've got the data to prove it.

But it does take some work, including rethinking the very nature of your mental life. In this book, I ask you to open yourself up to understanding your thoughts—and your body—in a fundamentally different way. To start recognizing in your own life the cognitive traps that zap your energy, kill your motivation, and upset your calm. You might have carried these around for years, and it will take time and true effort to change these patterns. So many of us have been sabotaging ourselves for a very long time, over and over again. And then we sabotage ourselves once more by imagining there's something wrong with us since we can't seem to get our emotional lives on track. If this is you, you are far from alone.

For more than twenty years, I've studied, taught, and practiced the science of thoughts, emotions, and behavior. I'm a licensed clinical psychologist who has long specialized in treating anxiety, depressed thinking, and the ways in which stress affects our health and relationships. I've spent nearly a decade and a half teaching about dysfunctional thinking patterns, and the disorders that arise from them, on the faculty of Georgetown University.

But many of you know me from the work I do with “everyday people.” Not just my clients or students, but those who have written to me over fifteen years’ time for my Baggage Check column and chat in the *Washington Post*, my blog for *Psychology Today*, or from the very first seed of this book, planted in the Detox Your Thoughts challenge I created for *Buzzfeed*.

What strikes me most is just how common the struggle against dysfunctional thinking is, across all walks of life. I’ve heard from so many of you over the years: a wide span across ages, genders and gender identities, races, ethnicities, education levels, sexual orientations, incomes—the problematic thinking patterns we take on are an epidemic. But as sad as it is that so many of us are suffering, we can take comfort in the fact that it connects us in a very human way. We’re in it together. And whether someone is coming to me for therapy, meeting me during my university office hours with an apologetic request for personal advice, or writing a desperate note to me from halfway across the world—I see this struggle over and over again. *I see you. And I hear you too.*

In this book, I’ve sought to create, all in one place, an action-oriented, systematic plan for learning the techniques that are usually taught only in certain newer types of psychotherapy. So many of us know we need a better way of relating to our brains, but the “how” and even the “what” can be particularly hard to figure out. And yet, the answers are out there. They are buried in the research—but they shouldn’t be. They are the light behind my clients’ newfound calm; they are the Baggage Check updates I get, filled with gratitude about how the techniques have helped. Because the techniques *do* help. And now it is time for even more of you to learn these tools, to start on the path toward substantial, positive change.

So, I am here to tell you: There is not just hope. There is specific, concrete help.

And it works.

No one is a fundamentally flawed human being. Not you, not your neighbor, and not even that jerk who cut in front of you at the tollbooth. And no one's thought patterns are fundamentally flawed, either. They just need a shift, with some genuine effort and the desire to change for the better. The potential for neurological change is even baked into our biology. The type of newer, healthier thought patterns that are taught in CBT and ACT not only measurably help our moods and behavior, but they also cause fundamental, observable changes in the brain. Neuroplasticity—as much as it sounds like some sort of Botox from hell—is the quality of our brains that allows for physiological change and growth. You can change not just the way you think, but the way your brain is wired. And you can truly get those changes to stick, through practice and habit. The new pathways you build through every moment of effort with this book will become more ingrained the more you are willing to work at them.

These changes are yours for the taking. And if you are ready for this next step, there is no one “right” way to do it. Some of you will choose to read this book cover to cover, learning about each one of the tools in order, and practicing them systematically. Others will flip around until you find something that looks interesting or hits home, and go from there. Still others will quickly scan the whole book, flip to the very last line to see if it sparks a life-changing revelation, and then half-heartedly flip back through to see if at least there are any naked pictures.

(There are not.)

However you choose to use this book, though, I have two suggestions to help you maximize its effects and make the most of the precious time you spend. These are:

*Read Chapter 1 no matter what.* Seriously. It's not needless warm-up (we kept that here, in the intro!). And it lays the foundation of the techniques you'll want to practice throughout. This book can be

consumed in random-chapter order, but think of Chapter 1 as the dough of the pizza. Without it, the subsequent chapters don't have nearly as strong a foundation, and things could very well get greasy.

And second, *make a note of what resonates with you*. For most concepts, we'll try different ways of looking at them, with different exercises, metaphors, and examples. Some will resonate, and others may make you decide it's time to go have some nachos. That's all OK. But when something clicks, keep it close. Write it down; make a list; take a picture; highlight it; keep a journal. Keep coming back to it. We're aiming for you to be able to practice and reinforce these concepts as we go along. The more specific and detailed your highlight list, the stronger and more personalized a resource you will have for yourself at the end of this process. Then we can put it all together and solidify your own individualized, strengthened plan for moving forward.

For those of you who will choose to work through these chapters systematically (and there are definite benefits to that), know that this book is divided into four parts. Each part contains common mental traps that significantly affect your mental and emotional life, grouped by theme. (Of course, virtually all of the traps affect your mind-set, emotions, and behavior, and some of them combine with each other in insidious ways to do even more damage.)

We'll begin with the traps that most affect how you think about your mind. These habits involve how you perceive your thoughts themselves, and how those thoughts fit into the larger picture of "you." Then we move to traps that affect your moment: They influence how you process the world around you and try to make sense of the here and now. Next come the traps that affect your (metaphorical) heart—habits that play into your deepest emotional experiences, and how you connect with a sense of something greater than yourself. And finally, we'll tackle the traps that influence how you think about your future and the paths you choose in life.



With each trap, you may notice that it feels easier not to try to change, not to let yourself be vulnerable. A lot of what keeps us hanging on to dysfunctional thinking is that it gives us the illusion of control, of remaining comfortable by sticking to the way things have always been. But if that comfort was really paying off for you, you probably wouldn't be here. Learning to let go of some of these negative patterns can be scary at times. But if you are willing to do it, the potential for growth is enormous.

And throughout all of this—through what resonates and what doesn't, what inspires you and what makes you remember that progress takes effort and doesn't have to be perfect—I want to remind you to be kind to yourself. Self-compassion is a very necessary part of this process. None of this is a competition to see how well you can “get” the concepts, or how quickly you can change your thinking and see results. (I see you, perfectionists!) Every step you take in reading, reflecting, practicing, and even just opening yourself up to these ideas—every one of those steps is a nudge in the right direction.

So, take a nice, full breath. Get comfy, diminish your distractions, and allow yourself to open up to change.

Let's start improving your mental and emotional life.

*Please note that any personal stories in this book are heavily altered in their identifying details, to fully protect the privacy and confidentiality of those whose stories it is my honor to share. Moreover, some examples are composites of cases I have seen, or people I've heard from through my "Baggage Check" column or other media. (Except for the story about potentially peeing oneself during a CT scan. Yeah, that was me.)*

# Part I

## *Your Mind*

*“How we spend our days, of course, is how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.”*

**Annie Dillard**

**1**

You Believe That Every Thought Deserves Power

**2**

You Pit Your Body Against Your Mind

**3**

You Hold On When You Need to Let Go

## *You Believe That Every Thought Deserves Power*

### **“I THINK, THEREFORE I AM.”**

Sorry, René Descartes. I call bullshit.

All right, he was referring to the nature of consciousness, and he had a nuanced point that laid the foundation for centuries of philosophical thought. But these days, his words are often misinterpreted to mean “I am the product of my thoughts.”

It has become a popular, so-called inspirational way to think: “If I just visualize it, I will make it happen.” “You are a product of your beliefs.” “If I put this photo of a Tesla Model X with premium black/white leatherette interiors on my vision board, in time it shall appear before me.” Yes, your overall mind-set and attitudes do very much affect your moods and behavior. But any given thought is not truly *part* of you, and need not define you.

Actually, any given thought doesn’t really say much about you at all. Some thoughts are as devoid of meaning as the ones you have while you’re asleep, stuck in a dream where your old algebra teacher is a pro wrestler named Monkey Man.

Here’s the thing: Far too many of us give our thoughts so much weight that they really *do* start to matter, far more than they should—and our mental health goes south. We let our thoughts gain power over us by overidentifying with them. And we pay a very steep psychological price for this.

Each and every one of your thoughts, by its very nature, has the potential to pass. But when we invite negative (or dysfunctional) thoughts to hang around, we empower them to dig themselves in and begin their long-term corrosion of the way we think about ourselves, our world, and our relationships.

*A thought can't be toxic on its own.* A dysfunctional thought only starts to poison us when we give it undeserved power.

It's fascinating how superstitious we can get about the supposed power of our thoughts. I knock on wood as much as the next person, but let's be real: Believing that just thinking something can make it true or that every thought (or vivid dream) has significant meaning is a slippery slope to taking power away from our real selves.

Let's try this: Visualize yourself slipping and falling into a puddle, or say out loud "I'll get the flu tomorrow." Don't want to do it? Why not? Does it feel dangerous to give "voice" to these thoughts, as though you could make those things happen just by thinking them?

If picturing a fully loaded Tesla won't make it magically appear in your driveway, then how can you summon up the flu? (Barring licking a pole on the subway, of course.)

Do we really, truly believe that just by picturing a certain thing we can make it so? Superstition turns problematic when we buy into the idea that any given thought, especially a negative one, carries this mysterious embedded power.

## *Reframing Your Thoughts . . . About Your Thoughts*

The first steps to disempowering your dysfunctional thoughts involve what we call cognitive defusion. Defusion involves *de-fusing*, or separation: separating your thoughts from your sense of self, and also

separating your thoughts from the assumption of their truth. You want to view your thoughts neither as automatically *you* nor automatically *true*.

One way to do this is to engage in what's called self-distancing: taking a step back and becoming an impartial observer of your thoughts. This helps you get out of your own head and untangle yourself from the knee-jerk experience of taking your thoughts too seriously. Some people like to do this by narrating the situation as though they were an outsider:

“Tasha is being very hard on herself right now. She keeps having the thought that she's not a good enough mother, even though that's not valid. Her kids feel loved, safe, and generally happy.”

When you take a step back and view your thoughts and experiences the way you would view, for instance, a friend's, you're likely to be more objective—and less prone to unduly harsh judgments.

So let's take a moment to do this. Allow a specific concern to come to your mind: a fear or worry, something that's gnawing at you. Now narrate it as an observer. So, instead of “What I said in that email was stupid, and that's why no one responded,” you would say “Stephanie is having the thought that what she said in that email was stupid, and she's imagining that's why no one responded, even though people not responding to emails is practically an epidemic these days.”

You might feel hokey, but that's OK. You can even use that. (“Mike is regretting buying this book. He thinks that if he constantly has to do exercises like this, he will actually go insane after all.”) It still counts as practice.

Did it make you see your present thoughts even a little differently?

To further separate your thoughts from weight they've taken on yet don't deserve, you've got to acknowledge that merely having a thought doesn't make that thought a fact. Instead of thinking *I screwed up* or *Things aren't going to get better* or *This party is going to*



*be a disaster*, separate the thought from the assumption of reality. It's only a thought. Label it as such. "I'm having the *thought* that I screwed up." "I'm having the *thought* that things won't get better." "I'm having the *thought* that this party is going to be a disaster." For Tasha, "I'm not a good enough mother" instead becomes "I'm having the *thought* that I'm not a good enough mother," which is stripped of its assumption of truth.

So it's not the presence of our thoughts we need to change. It's how we view them. With that in mind, let's meet Maggie.

## *Maggie and the Worries of Work*

Maggie was a thirty-nine-year-old manager at a nonprofit - organization who was looking for help. She came into therapy because, in her words, she just couldn't turn off her brain—specifically, her worries about work. "I know it doesn't make sense, but when I make even the slightest mistake, I worry I'll get fired. I know there's no evidence for this, and I remind myself that I'm valuable to my organization, get decent performance reviews, and my boss recognizes my strengths, but it doesn't help. The worries start back again all the same, and they just make my perfectionism worse." Maggie struggled with not wanting to go to work each morning. Sunday nights, she'd feel a pit in her stomach, and she was beginning to worry she was sabotaging her career since her thoughts would get in the way of her focus and productivity.

She knew these negative thoughts had something to do with the pressure her parents had put on her to achieve, but knowing this didn't make the thoughts any easier to manage. "How do I get these thoughts to go away?" she asked in our very first session.

It didn't take long before she understood that if she wanted to feel better, she needed to ask an entirely different question.

## *Nevertheless, Negative Thoughts Persist*

Maggie was trapped in the struggle of trying to “turn off” her thoughts, and she was certainly not alone. What often happens in this struggle is that the thoughts become ingrained in daily life. And they can become ingrained so severely that it feels like having a certain thought is equivalent to acting on it. This is “thought-action fusion.” A particular thought (*What if I scream in church? Why am I visualizing my neighbor naked? How many germs are on my hand now that I’ve touched that doorknob?*) becomes so bothersome that the fear or shame associated with it feels equal to literally acting on the thought. (*I’ve screamed and disrupted the church service! I am trying to have sex with my neighbor! I’ve now made myself sick and will vomit in seconds!*) This feels terribly distressing, and can even make the person so desperate for the thoughts not to come back that they’ll develop habits or compulsions in a (usually futile) attempt to keep the thoughts at bay.

Thought-action fusion is a particular problem for people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), but even those of us without OCD often become trapped in a fearful fight with our thoughts. This is because *what we resist, persists* (as credited to Carl Jung). Of course it’s true that on occasion, challenging your automatic thoughts (reminding yourself, for instance, that no, you are not stupid, and that yes, your family does love you, and there is evidence for these things) can be helpful. But often, this is inadequate, or—worse yet—it can backfire. When you struggle over and over again with a certain thought, desperately begging it to go away, it exhausts your defenses. You feel hopeless and less in control of your emotions and mood, and the thought takes over even more.

Plus, when you tell yourself not to think of something, your brain starts monitoring for evidence of it. That, unfortunately, requires you to envision the thing itself—like staring at a Most Wanted poster so

that you could identify the suspect later on if you were next to them at the drugstore. This mechanism is explained by ironic processing theory (which, despite its totally bogus-sounding name, is borne out by research).

Think you can force a thought out of your mind through sheer will alone? OK. Try *really, really* hard not to picture a chimpanzee in a sundress toasting you with a margarita.

I'll give you a moment.

I know, right? There she is.

## *A New Relationship with Your Thoughts*

What would it be like to learn to live with negative thoughts, and at times even accept their presence?

Your thoughts can be important, but any given thought does not tell you much of anything about the person you are or the life you lead. Negative thoughts are sometimes just the equivalent of a party crasher or the drunken loudmouth behind you at the stadium. And anxious thoughts are often unreliable narrators.

You don't have to shrink from such thoughts, nor do you have to start shouting back. Again, negative thoughts can naturally pass through, and they can't inherently hurt you if you don't empower them. Sometimes your thoughts are inaccurate, unhelpful, or just arbitrary. But if you keep inviting them to stick, they can easily lead to decreased self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness.

Remember: Negative thoughts stick only if they have trapped you into believing they are worth engaging with, or goaded you into an endless tug-of-war about whether or not they are true.

*I'm asking you to develop a new relationship with your thoughts, which is no small thing.*

You learned how to think about your thoughts in the earliest days of your life, so your relationship with them is quite long-term. And you do want to keep plenty of your thoughts as your companions. You still can. But some thoughts are deserving of nothing more than you swiping them away. These are the thoughts whose profiles should scream “No thanks!” the moment you read them. If you don’t engage with these bad matches, you need not be afraid of them. They will disappear on their own, because you haven’t invited them over.



# **Eight Universal Truths about Thoughts**

This new relationship with your thoughts may not come naturally at first, and it takes time and practice—but we must start somewhere. Are you ready to work on accepting the following eight truths? Make note of which are more difficult for you to believe than others.



- 1 The experience of having a thought—no matter what it is—is always OK.
- 2 Merely having a thought doesn't automatically make it true.
- 3 Thoughts alone are not dangerous. It is how you respond to them that matters.
- 4 Thoughts tend to be fleeting and pass on their own if you let them.
- 5 You can train yourself to observe your thoughts gently and curiously, without harsh judgment of yourself for having them.
- 6 Avoiding or fighting with your negative thoughts will only drain your energy.
- 7 The more you struggle with your thoughts, the stickier they become.
- 8 If you can be flexible in your thinking about your thoughts, you will develop the ability to bend your thinking, rather than letting your thoughts break you.

## *The Role of Mindfulness*

In the Introduction, I mentioned that negative thoughts don't cause depression and anxiety disorders—it's when such thoughts become *sticky* that they can grow into depression and anxiety disorders. The

way out of the stickiness involves, in large part, embracing mindfulness. Mindfulness isn't just a wellness buzzword—it literally means attending to your thoughts and bodily sensations as a gentle, nonjudgmental observer. It requires engaging with the current moment of your experience with curiosity rather than mentally checking out or running away. When you learn to let thoughts pass without resistance, you transform their very nature—and the effects they have on you.

In this sense, thoughts are like warm water. When water passes over your hands, it wets your skin, but doesn't fundamentally change its form. Your hands eventually will dry naturally, looking and feeling as they did before. But if you soak your hands in a basin of warm water for a longer period of time, the effect is different: Your skin is depleted of its oils, with an altered color and texture. Your fingers even sense things differently as they touch them. The same is true for your brain and negative thoughts. Are the thoughts passing by, or is your brain soaking in them?

Thankfully, as anybody with a hot tub habit has learned, the warm-water pruning is only temporary. But when your brain is soaking in negative thoughts, that easily becomes self-perpetuating, and the effects really *are* long-term. These toxic patterns become entrenched in your neuronal pathways, making you more likely to travel the same thought road over and over again, solidifying your tendency toward anxiety.

But back to the warm water: If your reaction is to be bothered by its fleeting presence, and not let your hands dry naturally, you'll be tempted to grab a scratchy towel and rub them raw and red. Or you'll waste your time with that annoying hand dryer, which never quite works.

Just let the water pass. It will dry in time.

## *Maggie, Stuck in the Struggle*

Let's take a look at Maggie in the throes of her workplace anxiety. A common debilitating thought for her was self-doubt. It always showed up right before presenting something in a meeting.

*You're going to screw up this presentation.*

She'd try and try to defend against this thought, saying, "No, I'm not. I know what I'm doing. At least I think I do. Ugh." But then the thought would see its opening and race back, leading to something like this:

*You are. You're going to screw it up. You should have prepared more.*

And she'd feel she had to respond to the thought.

"Stop it! I can't do anything about that now. I think I'll do OK, or at least I'd better do OK. A lot is riding on this."

*Nope, it's too late now. You're going to screw it up. Like that time people laughed at you in the assembly in seventh grade.*

"Shut up! Why do you always bring that up? I'm an adult now. I know what I'm doing."

*But you still get nervous like you did then. You know you do. Your hands shake, and everyone will notice.*

"They will not! Or at least if it looks like they're going to, then I'll put my hands in my pockets. Wait. Do I have pockets?"

*And we haven't even brought up how your voice gets shaky!*

“It does not! OK, it does. But maybe if I pay a lot of attention to that then I can keep it from happening.”

*You can't, and you won't. You're not up for this. You probably shouldn't even have this job. But it might not be for long anyway, because you're going to screw up this presentation and then who knows if they'll let you even keep your job. You're hanging by a thread.*

“STOP IT! PLEASE, JUST STOP IT! Wait, what? They're ready for me to start my presentation? Yes, Martha, I'll be right in. (Oh, shit.)”

## *First Steps of Mindfulness*

Maggie needed a new way of relating to those thoughts, and it began with cultivating mindfulness: being curious, nonjudgmental, and gentle with herself, no matter which thoughts came up. She needed to notice and observe without entering the struggle.

Here are the basic steps of this process, which we will detail more in time:

**ACKNOWLEDGE** the troubling or intrusive thought, as a gentle, nonjudgmental observer. (“I’m noticing some worry about this appointment.” “I’m having the thought that I’ll screw up this presentation.”)

**LABEL** the thought. (“Hello, Mr. Anxiety.” “There you are, Nervous Itch!”)

**REMINDE** yourself that you have enough space for this thought, and yet it will eventually pass on its own. (“This thought isn’t part of me, but I’m big enough to let it pass through me. I can watch it as it goes.”)