

## WHAT'S NEW IN EDITION TWO?

When I set out to write the second edition of this book (sixteen years after the first one), I was expecting it to be a quick job; just a few minor changes here and there. But I quickly realised the book needed a major overhaul from start to end. When I eventually finished the task, I was surprised to find over 50 per cent of the book was new material! I guess that reflects just how much has changed over the years in the way I think about, talk about, and practise this stuff.

Among many other changes, I've added in a lot of new tools, techniques and exercises; new information about the nature and purpose of emotions (and how to overcome emotional numbness); many new topics and chapters, including how to break bad habits, push through procrastination, stop panic attacks, disrupt worrying and obsessing, deal with values conflicts and difficult dilemmas, overcome 'people-pleasing' and perfectionism; practical tips for those suffering from trauma; and last, but definitely not least, a stack of new material on self-compassion.

On top of all that, I've chopped out a whole lot of waffle, repetition and technical jargon. So if you liked the first edition, I hope and trust you'll get a whole lot more out of this one.

Happy reading,  
All the best,  
Russ Harris

## Troubleshooting

### It feels weird; this isn't me; I don't do this

At first, self-compassion may seem odd or unnatural — like it's not really you. If so, that's a completely normal reaction. This is a new psychological skill. Maybe after you've practised it ten thousand times it *will* seem natural; but it definitely won't to begin with. Are you willing to do something that feels weird, odd or 'not like you' in the service of building a better life?

### It makes me feel anxious

If you've got a long history of deeply entrenched self-judgment, self-hatred or self-loathing, self-compassion might initially trigger anxiety. It's such a radically different way of treating yourself. Your mind is suspicious: 'What is this? I don't know what this. It's different. It's weird. I don't know what might happen.' You may not be aware of those thoughts — you might just feel anxious — but that's what's going on inside your head.

Another way to make sense of this anxiety, is that it's like you're 'breaking the rules'. For a long time your mind has ruled you, like a tyrant: laying down the laws and commandments, and forbidding you to break them. This includes the rule:

### ***'YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO BE KIND TO YOURSELF!'***

Breaking this rule feels risky (something bad might happen if you get caught). So naturally, anxiety appears.

Over time, if you practise self-compassion regularly, until it becomes a familiar experience, that anxiety will reduce; but in the early stages, it will be there. So the question is: are you willing to have some anxious thoughts and feelings, in the short term, in order to build a better life in the long term?

### It stirs up my negative self-talk

Sometimes kind self-talk can trigger a barrage of harsh self-judgment. Over time, you can expect these barrages to reduce, and then stop. Whenever they occur, notice and name them — and if that doesn't help, drop anchor.

### It didn't make my feelings go away

It's not supposed to. It's not a struggle strategy. The aim is to acknowledge and allow your feelings to be present, without a struggle (like resting the book on your lap, in Chapter 4), while also being kind and supportive to yourself. When difficult thoughts and feelings reduce or disappear — as often happens — that's a bonus, not the main aim.

the methods of the harsh, critical coach: a misguided attempt to help us 'improve', 'shape up', 'be better', 'fit in' or 'achieve more' — by highlighting and exaggerating our flaws and failings. And this constant barrage of self-judgment makes us feel inadequate, unworthy or unlovable.

So what are we to do about it? We've already looked at common strategies people use to STRUGGLE against negative thoughts: challenging them; pushing them away; distraction; avoiding the people, places and activities that tend to trigger them; using drugs, alcohol, food or other substances to get some relief; 'people-pleasing', trying to be perfect; and so on. And we've discussed how although these methods often give short-term relief, they don't permanently eliminate these thoughts (no delete button in the brain); plus, when used excessively or inappropriately, they have significant costs. However, we haven't yet touched on one of the most popular self-help concepts in the Western world ...



Teachers, parents, coaches, therapists, friends and family: they all tell us how important it is to have 'high self-esteem'; and most of us have said the same thing to others. (And I certainly used to, before I discovered ACT.) Why is this idea so popular? Well, obviously, when we get hooked by the 'not good enough' story, that's not helpful. So the 'common sense' solution is to replace the negative story with a positive one: focus on your strengths, your

successes and your good points. Build up a positive self-image and hold onto it tightly, to keep that old 'not good enough' story away.

But does this approach really work? Haven't you already tried it? If so, you'll know there are four big problems with this approach:

1. **You can't convince your mind.** You try hard to convince your mind you're a 'good person'. You put forward the argument: 'I'm doing well at my job; I'm exercising regularly; I'm eating healthily; I help people out; so basically, that means I'm a good person.' And if you can really manage to believe that you're a 'good person', then in that moment you have 'high self-esteem'. But that moment rarely lasts for long. Your mind soon says, 'Yes, but really, you're just kidding yourself. Deep down, you know the truth: *you're not good enough.*'
2. **It's exhausting.** If you go down this path, you will constantly have to prove to your mind that you *really are* a good person. You have to gather up as many positive thoughts as you can, to continually disprove those 'not good enough' stories. And there's a whole army of self-judgments just waiting for the opportunity to advance! The moment you slip up — the moment you stop doing any of those things that justify 'I'm a good person' — the self-judgment army attacks. You stop exercising for a few days and you get, 'See? You knew it couldn't last!' You lose your temper with a friend and you get, 'What sort of lousy friend are you?' You make a mistake at work and you get, 'Jeez, what a loser!'
3. **The 'big guns' just prolong the battle.** At this point in the battle with their thoughts, many people bring out the 'big guns': they start using 'positive affirmations'. This incredibly popular self-help technique involves repeating positive things to yourself like, 'I deserve the best', 'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better', 'I love who I am', 'I am full of strength and courage,' 'I am in charge of how I feel and today I choose happiness'. One huge problem with this method is that most people don't really believe what they are saying. It's a bit like saying, 'I am Superman' or 'I am Wonder Woman.' No matter how often you said that to yourself, you wouldn't really believe it, would you?

These three short phrases — *be present, open up, do what matters* — pretty much summarise the whole ACT model. The greater our ability to *be present* and *open up*, the easier it is to unhook from difficult thoughts and feelings, and interrupt our away moves. And the more we *do what matters*, the better life gets. The diagram below maps this out.



The technical term for our ability to 'be present, open up and do what matters' is 'psychological flexibility'. And the research is crystal clear: the greater our psychological flexibility, the greater our health, wellbeing and happiness.

Of course, as we take action to create the life we want, we will face many fears, obstacles and challenges — so uncomfortable thoughts and feelings are inevitable. But more and more, through being present and opening up (dropping anchor, noticing and naming, making room, self-compassion, focusing and refocusing, savouring and appreciating, etc.) we can overcome such barriers, and do what it takes to build a better life.

## PART 3

# HOW TO MAKE LIFE MEANINGFUL

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## BREAKING BAD HABITS



We've all got them. And plenty of them. 'Bad habits' (things we do repeatedly that take us away from the life we want) come naturally to us all, and are rarely easy to change. To quote the famous author, Mark Twain, 'Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time.' (Twain also said, 'Giving up smoking is easy ... I've done it hundreds of times.')

So it's somewhat misleading to talk about 'breaking' a habit — as if we can just snap it in half, throw it in the bin and it's done with. Remember, the brain works by addition, not subtraction; we can't simply delete those old neural pathways that underpin our 'bad habits'. Those pathways will remain and give rise to impulses and urges to keep doing whatever that away move happens to be. But we can lay down new neural pathways on top of the old ones. We can develop new, more effective patterns of behaviour and consciously choose to do these new towards moves instead of the old away moves.

And if we practise, practise, practise these new behaviours repeatedly, then eventually, over time, with lots and lots of repetition, we will reach a

point where we start to do them automatically, naturally, readily — at which point we could say that we have developed a 'new habit'. However, it takes a loooooong time for a new behaviour to become habitual. Don't believe all those bloggers, self-help books and motivational speakers who claim it takes 21 (or 28 or 35) days to form a new habit. Those numbers sound good, but there's no scientific validity to them. Someone literally just 'made them up' because they *do* sound good — and now everyone repeats them as if they're facts. But you only need to look closely at your own experience to realise it usually takes many months, if not years, of repeated practice, until a new pattern of behaviour becomes habitual. So until we eventually reach that point where our new behaviour is automatic, we will need to make a conscious effort to repeatedly 'catch ourselves in the act': to notice that we are about to start (or already have started) doing this away move, and to interrupt it and choose a towards move instead.

The good news is, when we apply the skills we've covered in this book, we can interrupt pretty much any 'bad habit' and choose a more effective one instead (as illustrated below).



A good way to kick off this process is to run through these five steps:

1. What are the triggers?
2. What are the payoffs and costs?