

Elizabeth Wilde McCormick

Change for the Better

self-help through practical psychotherapy

third edition



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To Tony and all CATs



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Foreword

We are all born to particular parents at a particular time and in a particular place and our early experiences combine with our inherited temperaments to form us into recognisable individuals – ourselves. The journey through infancy, childhood and adolescence to adulthood is a complicated one and, while most of us acquire a more or less stable and satisfied sense of ourselves and an adequate grasp of the world we live in, we all collect some habits or dispositions or beliefs which serve us badly but which are so much part of our sense of ourselves that we do not question them. Unless and until, that is, we find ourselves suffering from unreasonable anxiety or frequent depression or unexplained physical symptoms or become aware of ways in which our life is not going as we hoped or intended. At this point we may stop and think about how our life has been and we may talk to family and friends and receive helpful support and advice. But for many more troubled people there is a limit to how useful that may be, partly because those we choose to talk to will often be selected (not consciously) because they can be trusted to respond to us in the way we expect and not to challenge our problematic aspects and partly because, if they do challenge them, we may be unable to take on board what they are saying. This is not because we are stupid, it is because, to a far greater extent than we usually realise, we all live suspended in a web of relationships with others, some from the past and some present, and it is this web of connections with others which sustains our sense of being ourselves. Or it may be that, in the face of early experiences that were emotionally unmanageable, we have learned to conceal ourselves and to mistrust others to the extent that there is nobody we can feel safe enough with to show our pains and to expose what we may feel to be our weakness.

It is at such a time that this book can be of particular value. Liz McCormick combines a wealth of experience as a psychotherapist with a gift for writing and an attitude which is fully respecting of the reader. Those seeking simple categorisations of distress or illness linked to prescriptions of how to get better will be disappointed, for there are no oversimplifications of the problems and no dispensing of ready-made solutions. Instead, readers are invited to think clearly about their difficulties and to feel directly the meanings of their past and present experiences. The common tendency to think about psychological symptoms as if they were analogous to physical illnesses and to treat them with medication or simple symptom-oriented therapies is reinforced by some psychiatrists and by the power of the pharmacological industry. It can be difficult for many people to realise that their moods and symptoms are the

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physical manifestations of difficulties in living and can signal the need for change. That symptoms may be partly physical in origin and may sometimes require medical treatment is of course acknowledged here, but the book aims to emphasise the value of understanding the links between one's distress and how one leads one's life. By indicating the possibility of understanding and changing the thoughts, feelings and behaviours which underlie our depression, anxiety or headaches and our unhappiness or difficult relationships, it allows passive suffering to be replaced by an active engagement in identifying and changing damaging and restricting aspects of our own natures.

To help in this task the book starts by offering clear descriptions of common problematic patterns of thinking and acting. These usually repeat unhappy patterns experienced early in our lives or represent our early attempts to solve problems through means that have themselves become harmful or restricting. We are usually only partly aware of our own patterns and here common ones are usefully illustrated by examples and are linked to exercises that support self-discovery and indicate possible alternative ways of coping. This is unfamiliar territory for most people and exploration needs the help of a guide. A particular strength of the book is the way in which one has the experience of being in dialogue with the author; one is not being given instructions and a guide book so much as one is invited to participate in the construction of one's own map and to conduct one's own exploration. This means that readers, to benefit, must accept their share of the work. This is not a book to read while waiting for the bus; it demands concentration and the ideas need to be thought about actively through the day. Change will not come about in a flash of realisation, it will require sustained attention. The structure of the book supports this and it will be most valuable to those who go through it systematically and at their own pace. As well as helping one to think clearly about negative aspects of oneself Liz McCormick draws on her knowledge of Buddhist ideas to propose mindfulness techniques which can enlarge self-awareness.

The book can help many people through many problems and can contribute to enlarging what can be called emotional literacy but it does not claim too much for itself. Enduring what cannot be changed is not a skill that can be taught but learning to recognise what can be changed and knowing how to begin to change will be greatly clarified by reading this book. Further reading from a wide spectrum of viewpoints is listed and guidance on how to find appropriate psychotherapy is provided. But whether or not further help is needed, I warmly recommend it as an excellent place from which to start the journey.

Anthony Ryle

Acknowledgements

This book is based on the model of time-limited therapy created and initiated by Dr Anthony Ryle at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals called Cognitive Analytic Therapy, CAT for short. Since 1984 CAT and CAT therapists have grown in numbers, and this method of focused therapy is now taught and used in different settings within the National Health Service in the UK. I am extremely grateful to Tony Ryle for encouraging me to write a self-help book based on his work, and for his help with the first, second and now the third edition, as well as his supervision and clinical support over many years of my own practice as a psychotherapist. Dr Ryle, now retired to Sussex, and I spent two days together going over the new material for this edition. Most of this third edition is new writing and the changes reflect the most recent developments in CAT theory, particularly the use of reciprocal role relationship understanding, less stated in the second edition. Dr Ryle's contribution has been invaluable. He brings not only his extremely finely focused clinical mind but also his ability to get to the root of something and simplify it, and his great humanity.

Many, many CAT colleagues have contributed to the formation of this self-help book, based upon the collective work in CAT therapy. For this third edition Sage sent out a questionnaire about the use of the book in different settings to thirty colleagues. All of them took the time to reply in detail and nearly all of the comments I received have been addressed in this edition, with enormous gratitude.

Grateful thanks go to Annalee Curran and Shakir Ansari who read the original early drafts, and to my many other CAT colleagues, particularly Deirdre Haslam, Jackie Baker, Dr Julia Clark, Liz Fawkes, Jon Sloper, who runs the ACAT website, the late Angela Wilton and Mark Dunn, all of whom contributed ideas and cases for this book. Thanks also to Susan Needham for editing the chapter on couples and to my partner, Keith Maunder, for his inspiring idea for the cover.

At a wonderful meeting of CAT supervisors and therapists in March my questions and issues about the changes in CAT theory and practice were shared with a group of colleagues to whom I am extremely grateful. This most recent work has, I think, helped me to see that I, as writer, and this book also, have been able to 'Change for the Better'.

I would also like to acknowledge my many teachers of the practice of mindfulness: Ven Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist; Tibetan Buddhist nun and author Pema Chodron; Buddhist psychologist Dale Asrael; Becca Crane at the North Wales Centre for Mindfulness, Bangor; my dear friends and colleagues Nigel Wellings and Philippa Vick, with whom I have sat, and mulled over tricky questions around spiritual practice. There are countless

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others whose texts and practices I have been enriched by and learned from, including my Suffolk coastal sangha. For all spiritual teachings I am profoundly grateful.

A special thank-you goes to all the patients who agreed to have their life stories, charts, letters and diagrams used for publication. All names and some details have been changed to protect their identities. Their examples show us how difficulties can be faced and how lives can be changed.

Change for the Better has had a curious journey since its first publication by Unwin Hyman in 1990. It became an 'orphan book' when its publishers were taken over by HarperCollins two weeks after publication, and for the years following was not readily available in bookshops. Nevertheless it survived, largely thanks to the continued interest in CAT and the growth in training programmes for therapists at ACAT. In 1997 a new edition was prepared for Cassell who were soon to be amalgamated into Continuum Books. And then, in 2002 Continuum sold its health list to SAGE, where the book currently rests. I would like to thank Sage for commissioning this new edition and for their interest in achieving such a thorough production and completely revised content. So for nearly twenty years *Change for the Better* has survived the vagaries of publishing and found its way into many different settings keen to focus on change and self-help: universities, day centres, career counselling services, psychotherapy training and GP practices. As well as being offered to patients on waiting lists or as self-help, it has also been used usefully for students in training, particularly in CAT. It is easy to read and user-friendly. It takes complex ideas born out of research and practice in psychotherapy and simplifies them for general reading.

I am grateful for the interest in the book and to the number of readers who have written to me about how they have been able to make use of it. I am particularly grateful for the support of ACAT.

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Introduction

The present is the only time that any of us have to be alive – to know anything – to perceive – to learn – to change – to heal ...

John Kabat Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living* (1990)

How many times in a day do we think about change? I wish. I wish I hadn't. I wish they didn't. I wish I could. How often when things go wrong do we wish it were different, that perhaps *we* were different? And how often do these wishes remain as remote dreams that can only come true with the help of a magic wand?

Perhaps we try hard at something. We strive hard to make it work, employing everything we know. We work at our jobs, at being nice to people, at making relationships, developing hobbies; we try something new. But still we feel inside that something is wrong; we feel unhappy, lost, hopeless, doomed. Things go wrong outside: we don't fit in, our jobs perish, partners leave, or we can't rid ourselves of habits or thoughts that make us feel bad. So we try to make changes – a new look, job, partner, house – and for a while we are glad, and things are different. But then the same bad old things start happening again and we feel worse – worse because our hope of change fades. We feel stuck or jinxed and anger and helplessness begin to well up. Perhaps we are beginning to believe we actually are that miserable, stuck person we see in the mirror every morning at whom we want to lash out.

This book is about change. It sets out methods of identifying what we *can* change about ourselves and our behaviour. When we lessen the hold of assumptions and attitudes based on our early need to survive we allow more space for developing the natural 'healthy island' within. The 'healthy island' is comprised of our own basic goodness, and all the positive experiences we have had where a healthy sense of ourselves has been reflected. The healthy island is always near, even though often we do not see it or feel it because it is eclipsed by our problems.

This book suggests practical, manageable ways to make changes:

- We *can* learn to become better observers about what happens to us.
- We *can* identify the patterns, based on our earlier need to survive, that dominate how we conduct ourselves.
- We *can* revise these old survival beliefs which we take for granted, but which become redundant when they get in our way.

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- We *can* then allow space for the healthy island that is always in us even when we cannot see or feel it.
- We *can* help to nourish the healthy island within by identifying and practising different ways of expressing ourselves.
- We *can* change, by recognising the difference between the old survival self, dominated by faulty thinking, and the energy of the healthy island.

When we change the problematic patterns, we change our lives.

We don't, however, change the fundamental core of our being, the individual seed of our real selves with which we were born, and I will explain that more fully in Chapter 1. But we can change the hold that survival-self-thinking has on our life: the way it limits our choices and leads to things going wrong. We are usually unaware that such processes inform our everyday choices because we learned them very early on, and they are all we know. The wild deer in the forest who wounds her leg might lie low so as not to be seen and preyed upon. Alternatively, she may remain with the other deer, but limp behind at a distance; she may even find someone who will shelter her for life. People are no different in their survival responses. If we survive a harsh early life by developing a brittle coping self, we come through the hard times when otherwise we might have gone under. However, we emerge into adulthood with survival presumptions that make it hard to get close to others or to be touched by life's beauties. And the difference between the deer and a human being is that we are able to contemplate alternatives. And it is when life challenges us through our difficult feelings or habits, or when things have gone very wrong for us, that we confront aspects of ourselves we had previously taken for granted.

This book aims to help people who wish to do something active about their lives, who find themselves saying: 'Does it have to be like this?' It will provide methods for individual self-examination, for checking out patterns, for self-monitoring, for making personal maps to illustrate the kind of thinking webs we weave that ensnare us. And it will offer ways for changing the patterns that are no longer working.

Here is an outline of the steps we shall follow:

1. We identify problems and the thinking, feeling and reciprocal roles that accompany them.
2. We begin to name the sequences or patterns we take for granted, but which actually limit our choices.
3. We write our individual life story, how it has been for us since the beginning, and link what has happened to us with the traps, dilemmas, snags and unstable states that have become our everyday reality.
4. We begin to notice the sequences when they occur in daily life, and write them down.
5. We make maps so we can look at where we are in the sequence throughout everyday life.
6. We make realistic goals for challenging and changing the sequences.
7. We begin to experience more of a healthy island inside, more 'real' bits of ourselves, because for the first time, we have more space and energy.

8. We process and bear the shifts that come with change.
9. We find helpful ways to hold on to change.

The changes we may make from this book are achieved by using conscious will and effort to revise old patterns that are no longer working. Once we do our part, using strengths developed by actively thinking about how we operate, we often stimulate other changes which are less conscious in origin. Many people who actively engage in the process of helping themselves find surprises and treasures. They find they have more inside them than they thought. The numerous threads running through our individual lives which may have felt chaotic start to make sense. We begin to feel there is more in life than the tunnelled-vision way of keeping going that many of us are reduced to when things are not going well.

We all carry a part of us which is wounded in some way. How we carry this wound makes the difference between a passive attitude of 'I am a depressive, no one can help me' and the active 'There is a part of me which is depressed and I will address it and take care of it'. Once we engage with ourselves in this way we are much more open to enjoy and use our inner world of imagination, dream and insight, and to accept ourselves.

Each of us can take up the challenge of looking at ourselves afresh: to see what things we can change and to accept those we cannot, and to know the difference. Setting aside time to ponder on what we can change, and actively working to achieve those changes, means that we free ourselves from the restrictions of the past, and that our changes are changes for the better.

About Cognitive Analytic Therapy

CAT evolved as an integration of cognitive, psychoanalytic and, more recently, Vygotskian ideas, with an emphasis on therapist-patient collaboration in creating and applying descriptive reformulations of presenting problems. The model arose from a continuing commitment to research into effective therapies and from a concern with delivering appropriate, time-limited treatment in the public sector. Originally developed as a model of individual therapy, CAT now offers a general theory of psychotherapy with applicability to a wide range of conditions in many different settings.

The practice of CAT is based upon a collaborative therapeutic position, which aims to create with patients narrative and diagrammatic reformulations of their difficulties. Theory focuses on descriptions of sequences of linked external, mental and behavioural events. Initially the emphasis was on how these procedural sequences prevented revision of dysfunctional ways of living. This has been extended recently to a consideration of the origins of reciprocal role procedures in early life and their repetition in current relationships and in self management. (Anthony Ryle and Ian Kerr, *Introducing Cognitive Analytic Therapy*, 2002)

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Cognitive Analytic Therapy was pioneered by Dr Anthony Ryle at Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals in London as a time-limited integrated therapy. It has been used with increasing demand in numerous different settings within the British National Health Service since 1983, and CAT is now available in Finland, Australia, Spain, Greece and France.

About mindfulness

A basic definition of mindfulness is 'moment by moment awareness'. This awareness helps us to stay present, with whatever is arising, so that we may experience it fully. Developing the capacity for mindfulness helps us in the journey of exploring our inner worlds. It helps us to see things clearly and also to develop great calm. When we combine a non-judgemental acceptance to our mindfulness we are able to look deeply at the more difficult things, and to find compassion for these difficulties.

On retreat at Arnhem in Holland in June 2006, Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh said:

The practice of mindfulness is to remain in the present moment without trying to change or avoid it. It has the quality of attention that notices without choosing, a sun that shines on everything equally. The energy of mindfulness carries the energy of concentration and establishes us in the here and now. It allows us to touch the island within. Only when mindfulness is established can we know what is happening in the present moment.

part one

all about change

The new information that science has offered in recent decades makes it clear that something can be done to alleviate many social and mental health problems.

Sue Gerhardt *Why Love Matters* (2004: 217)



1

Change is possible

Why change?

Everyone seeks change for different reasons – to feel less anxious perhaps, to overcome debilitating problems like depression or phobia, to feel more in control of life, to stop making destructive relationships. Or perhaps we seek change because we feel sad or bad, unhappy or empty; because things keep on going wrong, but we aren't quite sure why. We may not necessarily be aware that change is what we want until we begin to look more closely at ourselves and at our familiar patterns of behaviour. Just being prepared to look at ourselves from a different perspective is already embracing change.

We all have our own unique character, gifts and tendencies, as well as our genetic patterning. In early life this potential self is a bit like a seed planted into the garden of the family. Using this image it's easy to see that its growth and development is bound up with the nature of the soil and its environment. We cannot isolate ourselves from our context within culture, language, family, our own biology and history. Inevitably some seeds will be planted in an acid soil when their growth is more suited to alkaline; others may be pruned too early as their shoots are only just beginning to grow; some will land on stony ground. Some seeds, which perhaps have the potential to develop into peaches or pears, experience alienation when those caring for them are trying to raise oranges or apples and their own pear or peach nature goes unrecognised and unfulfilled.

All of us must find ways of dealing with these early experiences in order to survive. It is usually later on, when we have suffered a blow, that we have an opportunity to take stock, and to see our part in things. This gives us an opportunity to revise the patterns of behaviour based upon adaptations to others that have restricted our natural self. There are five reasons we might seek change:

1. Getting fed up with feeling like a victim.
2. Wanting to see and understand our part in chaos or crisis.
3. Becoming aware of our own destructiveness.
4. Realising that there is more in us than our 'coping' selves.

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5. Longing to feel well and 'whole'. 'Whole' in this context means accepting and living our own true nature just as it is, pleasures and suffering, likes and dislikes and embracing the hand we have been dealt, however meagre and limiting it may have once felt.

Survival self and seed self

Using the metaphor of nature, we know that Mother Nature brings different seasons, and that her laws decree devastation and death, as well as care and nurture and birth of the new. We have rains and deserts, earthquakes and hurricanes as well as spring and summer. Just as nature constantly shows us its creative adaptations, so most 'human' seeds have to develop a 'survival self' in order to manage the less than ideal conditions of their early life. Few seeds are given the ideal soil. Developing a survival self, together with a package of coping tactics for adapting to a difficult, hostile or just strange environment, is always necessary, and a mark of the human capacity for adaptation. Human beings are extremely creative!

Understanding and contrasting the difference in energy and flexibility between the survival self, with its often restricting ways of living and relating, and the potential of a healthy self that is able to reflect, observe and transcend identification with suffering, is at the heart of the experience of psychotherapy.

The healthy island

Throughout this book we will be looking at some of the ways in which we have become accustomed to think and feel about ourselves and other people. When we train ourselves to use our conscious mind to reflect on the patterns and choices made from our survival self, we can challenge the patterns that are no longer useful or which can actually make things worse. In so doing, we are clearing the ground for our healthy island, with our natural observing self and its creativity.

Reciprocal roles in relationships with ourselves and others

No one grows in isolation. The seed is in reciprocal relationship with the soil in which it is planted. We are intimately bound up from the time of our conception with an 'other' and our brain wiring and nervous systems develop in reciprocal relationship with 'others'. Our model of 'other' may be built from

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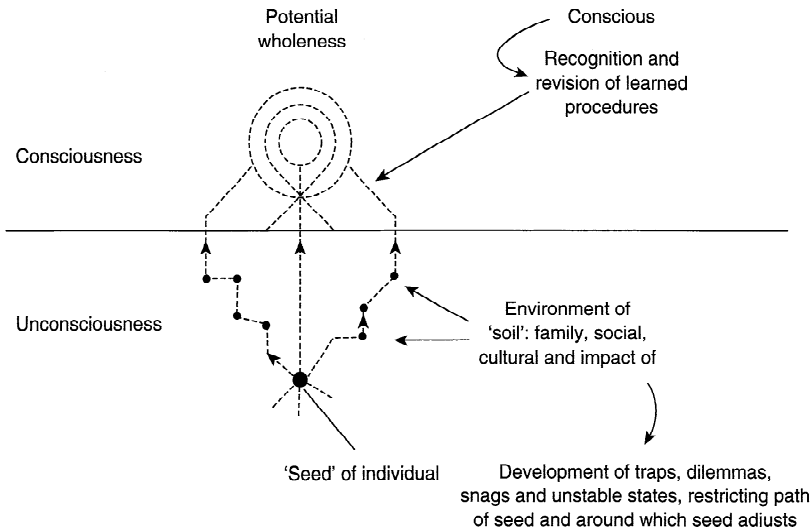


Figure 1.1 Seed and soil diagram of reciprocal role of seed in relation to soil

a mother or series of mothers or fathers, by siblings or caregivers, and later in life by friends, partners, employers or even the government. We also carry this learned 'other' inside us. The way in which we experience the responses from these 'others' in early life starts a process of reciprocal learning and lays down patterns for relating, both to other people, to the outside world and to ourselves.

Let's look at how it all starts. If, as an infant we get fed when hungry, warmed when cold, held when anxious, we learn that our non-verbal signals are effective, that we are understood and the appropriate response is given. *Imitation plus exchange is the basis of communication.* We learn that it is safe to be close to another, and this is how we begin to experience our value, to feel that we are worthwhile and lovable, and to love others. This secure attachment, and our anticipation of it, gives us the space and freedom to express ourselves in a natural way as we grow into a speaking child and expressive adolescent. We learn that it is OK to be ourselves, to be different, to be separate, to go our own way, all within appropriate limits.

Most of us experience 'other' as a mixture of good, bad and indifferent, sometimes there and sometimes not. A lot of us experience 'other' as having conditions based upon their own patterns and expectations, with which we have to comply in order to remain in relationship upon which we are dependent. Because of our adaptability we learn to respond to what our caregiver wants of us. If this is to be good in order to receive care and acceptance then

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we may develop compliance, always wanting to please others, and thus get stuck into a placation trap. We may develop a rebellious style, refusing any kind of relationship because of its demands. We may develop a form of anxiety over 'other', fearing their disapproval, or that they might abandon us, and become clingy and needy in relationships, which may last into later life.

During infancy and from childhood our brains are tuned to be fantastically responsive and adaptive. Professor of neurology and musicologist C. Trevarthan (1993) speaks about the music of preverbal contact between the infant and other, of how the baby will respond to the communicative sounds of the parent and then wait in anticipation of the continuing response, the baby altering its sounds as the parent alters theirs. The baby's tiny nervous system and brain is finely tuned in responsiveness, like a whole orchestra at concert pitch, waiting for the mutual chords to be struck, the dance of the conjoined music to begin.

If we experience 'other' as unsafe – perhaps as 'not there', as constantly changing, as unpredictable or neglectful, our natural anxiety rises. Our tiny autonomic nervous systems become flooded with adrenalin and cortisol that has no means of release. Our fight or flight mechanism is not yet mature. We may 'freeze' and become flat, avoiding contact for fear of more anxiety; or, we may become hypervigilant, always on the lookout for something unpredictable or difficult. These patterns protect a young nervous system from more unmanageable fear and are to be welcomed and valued. However, the anticipation of responses from 'other' as being in a certain way governs our inner dialogue – the way we think about ourselves inside and what we allow outside, and continues into outside relationships. These patterns will continue in a variety of ways – some more problematic than others – until they are recognised and revised, and alleviated or replaced with other, more helpful ways of relating.

Problems in relationships occur when, in anticipation of 'other' being conditional or abandoning or rejecting, the individual sees even the slightest difference in attunement as extreme and reacts accordingly, as if it were a foregone conclusion. Because we are so helpless in infancy we make all kinds of arrangements not to be abandoned. This might mean being very good outside whilst feeling very bad inside; it might mean compulsively longing for relationships but, once engaged and fearing the old patterns will return, become desperate to get out and cut off or attack.

Understanding the fundamental building blocks of inner and outer reciprocal role relationships and how they dominate emotion and behaviour is the cornerstone of this book, and throughout the different chapters we will be returning to this in many different presentations.

No-go areas

If we have had to adapt to a difficult environment in order to manage our early life, we will have 'no-go' areas. Feelings of being worthless may link with feeling abandoned because of a painful life event such as bereavement or illness

which was never explained. We may feel bad most of the time, or find our mood switches from one state to another in a desperate bid for safety. One person described the different and shifting emotional states she adopted with people wanting to get close to her as 'catch me if you can'. If our life feels like a jumble of mistakes or a mess we may discover that cutting off, kicking out, going numb are aspects of our adaptive responses to neglect and abuse, to getting bullied, punished and banished.

The 'no-go' areas are full of unexpressed difficult feelings and fear. We tend not to look too closely until life pushes us into them again. A broken relationship can often trigger earlier feelings of loss that had been left unresolved. And we often carry on judging or punishing ourselves in the way we have experienced earlier because this is what we know.

Until we can begin to describe them, these 'no-go' areas limit the healthy island, our range of response choices and block our natural growth. A clear description of how things have been, together with an understanding of the ways we have learned to cope, help to begin the process of change. Revising our old learned adapted ways of proceeding offers freedom from old patterns that hinder and limit us, so widening our choices and releasing energy.

Core, chronically endured emotional pain

When we start to take our problems seriously and want to change our life, the most important first step is one actually away from the symptom we suffer – whether this is related to depression, relationship failure, dissociation, eating problems or addiction. **We need to get off the symptom hook** and understand what patterns contribute to our symptoms. A good beginning is to reach underneath our symptoms and find words or images that best describe the chronic emotional pain we carry; the pain we try to get away from but end up with when things go wrong.

In this next section we are going to start looking at possible words for our core pain. Core pain and core pain statements tend to become so entrenched in our ways of thinking about ourselves that we take them for granted. We then see life through a lens coloured by these attitudes. In order to inspect the lens we need to identify its nature and then to ask ourselves whether it is still appropriate. Then we can start finding ways to challenge the limitations such a lens may be having upon our life. Read through the following examples of core pain commonly experienced and see if you can find your own words to describe your own assumptions. See if you can identify the pain-suffering and the pain-maintaining reciprocal roles: for example, judging and criticising oneself maintains the feeling of being criticised and worthless.

'Whatever I do, it's never good enough'

Our experience is that however hard we strive – to be good, work hard, give to others – we never get the approval or the love we long for. Our response may be to overwork or become addicted to work or to give up and fall into

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depression. We may develop a form of perfectionism and achieve a great deal. But whatever the fruits of our striving in the outside world, we are unable to feel good inside, and we are snagged by this core feeling of limitation and judgement. We may end up exhausted and martyred, suffer burn-out, or even suicidal urges.

A learned reciprocal role of *anxiously striving* in relation to *conditional and demanding* maintains the core pain feeling of rejection and worthlessness.

'Everything has to be difficult, whatever I do'

This is a 'yes ... but' snag. It's also a depressed way of thinking and being where no matter what improvements are made we cannot allow them in. The core pain feelings are connected to emptiness. The inner dialogue is between a restricting pessimist in relation to a restricted and defeated small self.

If you recognise this pattern, consider whether you are caught in any of the following patterns of thinking:

I identify myself with my hard work, at least I keep on going. If I don't have a struggle I might be more depressed.

If things weren't difficult and I was happy with my life I would be asking for trouble, pushing my luck.

Mother/Father said, 'Don't count your chickens before they're hatched' – so I never take anything for granted, I prepare for the worst all the time. Whenever I've looked on the bright side I've always been disappointed, so I gave it up.

I need to be admired for my ability to struggle or I'm a wimp.

If you have identified a fear of being pinned down, depressed or being seen as weak, you may view your struggle as being similar to the myth of Sisyphus, doomed endlessly to push a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down again. In Part Four we will be gathering information about our early lives and about how we came to the attitudes we have. You may find relief in understanding the nature of your own boulder (which may not be yours in fact!). *Pause here though, and ponder or fantasise on what it would be like if the boulder, or difficulty, were not there. What would it be like if you could change the lens that makes things difficult?* As you begin to recognise the times when this lens colours the way you do things, experiment with leaving this assumption to one side, and moving into things with an open mind.

'No one ever helps me. I have to do everything myself.

If I didn't, nothing would happen'

This struggle grows out of an early environment where it was hard or impossible to ask for help and we were expected to do most things for ourselves. The harassed single mother or too busy parent may reward their child for self-sufficiency. In families where parents were ill or absent for long periods,

or when children have been moved from one foster home to another, the art of self-sufficiency may be the only means of survival. As a child it is very hard to bear the helplessness or inadequacy of a parent as well as our own. We may develop the fierce independence of a brittle coper, masking unmet emotional need of our own helplessness, fear and loneliness. *This core pain may be maintained by the internal dialogue between our neglecting internal bully in relationship with our needy wimp.*

In some of us this assumption is so well developed we have no concept of being allowed our own needs and feelings. We survive by our independence, 'gutting it' through many of life's crises without apparent difficulty. Problems arise when loneliness or exhaustion become severe. We may develop a cynicism and bitterness in our belief that we are the only people who do anything, and become exacting, demanding company. The fear of letting go enough to allow someone to help us or be close makes us cold companions. Try the following Exercise:

exercise: 'no one ever helps me ...'

Monitor the number of times you find yourself doing things automatically with a resigned sinking heart, feeling put upon and all alone, secretly grumpy and resentful. You might find yourself thinking: 'Why is it always just up to me?' Do this for a week. At the end of the week look and see how much this happens in your everyday life. Start questioning it. Need it be so, every time?

Experiment with putting off tasks for as long as you can bear and note the feelings that come up.

Note how much the presumption that things will not get done unless you do them actually heightens your anxiety.

Talk about what you feel to someone. Explain how difficult it is for you to leave things to others, but how you would like to do this more.

How serious would the consequences be if things were not always done to your standard? Can you live with what feels like others' inadequacy?

Can you identify the inner dialogue that might go something like 'exacting/demanding to inadequate and worthless'?

I began to recognise this pattern in myself some years ago. It came up when I had to work as part of a team for the first time. I was always going off and doing things either on my own or without consulting the others. The rest of the team saw me variously as arrogant and insensitive. I started monitoring this pattern, and looking underneath I found that I had not learned to ask

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others for anything, for help, for opinion, for discussion. I presumed I had to do it myself. So I experimented with asking and consulting, taking the risk of rejection for being seen as 'needy'. It turned out it was a relief to work as a team and not have to do everything. I have also found that I can trust others to do what they feel like doing for me on their own terms and not be so exacting or conditional toward myself and others. I get really nice surprises!

'I always pick the bad ones'

We may notice patterns of feeling excited and carried away by meeting exciting others and having exciting experiences of which we have high hopes and often getting lost in the excitement. We project our ideal into the other person and become enthralled, secretly hoping they will offer all the comfort, love, nurture and satisfaction we have never had. In doing so we become passive, vulnerable to being victim. Sooner or later the rosy spectacles come off and the person, ideology or group become just ordinary or worse, and we feel terribly let down, even abused by the loss of the projection of all our hopes. We end up feeling angry, humiliated, beaten, frustrated and let down. We can get cynical and bitter, fearing that all experiences are the same.

The reciprocal role we are caught in is of a *neglected self* in relation to the *fantasy of perfect care*. We may also notice that throughout the day we have a number of different extreme feelings and no idea how we got from one intense feeling to another.

Notice these patterns in yourself. In Part Five, 'Making the Change', we will be looking more specifically at how to nourish the neglected past of ourselves.

'Only if I am allowed to have what I want on my own terms can I feel I exist'

The core pain feeling associated with this is terror of annihilation. As if our only hope for staying alive, or sane, is to make sure we have control over every interaction. As a consequence, people experience us as rigid and overcontrolling, and if we do not have things on our own terms we experience depression and its associated sense of annihilation.

The work with change is to find a way of stabilising the emptiness inside so that we can relinquish control in very small steps. At the end of this book there are exercises for befriending fear so that we can take more risks in varying our interactions. In Chapter 12 we see Alistair's diagram of the void and how he took these steps for himself.

'When I have something nice it is bound to be taken away from me'

The core pain here is unbearable loss. We may have experienced the actual loss of someone or something precious early in life. Perhaps we carry an irrational guilt about something for which we were not responsible which makes

us unconsciously sabotage anything good. It's as if, because of our loss, we have vowed never to let anything become important to us again. We might feel as if we are living 'on hold', lonely, unable to get close or be happy, and our core pain may present itself as phobia, isolation or chronic anxiety. There are exercises designed to work through this in Part Seven.

You will see from these examples how important it is to get beneath our symptoms or problems to the underlying patterns. We may not be used to looking back and seeing how we made sense of our world. The symptoms or problems that entrap us are maintained by the internalisation both of our experiences as a child and of those who influenced us. We absorb these learned patterns of interaction which then influence both how we relate and anticipate relating with others and also the conversations we have within ourselves. Many of the powerful beliefs about ourselves maintained by the reciprocal roles are mistaken. They prevent us from living fully.

Throughout the book we will see other examples of how core pain is maintained by particular reciprocal roles. As you read, it will be helpful if you try to identify first your own core pain and then possible corresponding reciprocal roles as well as the traps, dilemmas, snags and unstable states that operate in your own life. These are described next and then more fully explained in Part Three. In Chapter 10, 'Writing our life story', we will be looking at ways to describe our chronically endured emotional pain in the context of how our life has been. In Chapters 10 and 11 we will be looking at exits to the learned patterns and at just how we change our learned but mistaken thoughts.

Traps, dilemmas, snags and unstable states of mind

Survival patterns tend to decree that *only* certain ways of behaving are valid, thus presenting us with a very limited range of options and choices about how to express ourselves. In this book, we describe these limited options as traps, dilemmas or snags and as difficult or unstable states of mind.

A **trap** occurs when we carry on with our adaptive behaviour beyond its sell-by date. Rather than protect us when we are vulnerable, it actually leaves us feeling worse. For example, if the habit of pleasing and smiling even when we are hurt seems to save us from others' anger or rejection, it tends to lead us to feel used and worthless. We feel angry and resentful underneath but have not developed the skills to stand up for ourselves and we feel defeated, stuck in the trap of placation.

When we have bargained with ourselves in a black and white way, either 'I'm this', or 'I'm that' – or we think, 'If I do this ... then I am this ...', we end up living at one end of a **dilemma**. For example: 'If I'm not living on a knife edge of having to strive constantly to be perfect, I will make a terrible mess.' Dilemmas can also form an 'if ... then ...' quality: 'If I get close to other people *then* I will have to give in to them.' Either I try to look down on other people, or I feel they look down on me.

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And a **snag** occurs *internally* when we unconsciously create a pattern of self-sabotage. We are just about to take up a new job or relationship, for example, when something goes wrong and prevents us from being happy or successful. Or, *externally* when we fear the response of others to our success, as if this would hurt or deprive others.

Sometimes the way we experience ourselves keeps shifting and it is difficult for us to keep in focus or to be consistent. It's as if in our early life we have had to keep on the move from contact with 'other' in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed. These **unstable states of mind** may include intense or uncontrollable emotions, being unreasonably angry with others, blanking off or feeling unreal. They may include experiences of dissociation or depersonalisation. **Depersonalisation** means feeling detached from one's body; it's familiar in phobic anxiety and panic attack. **Dissociation** means that we cut off and dissociate from whatever is going on in the moment; it develops as a way of dealing with unbearable pain or terror.

We may have compartmentalised aspects of experience that have, in the past, become unbearable. When something in current time triggers an unbearable feeling we cut off, usually without being aware this is what we are doing.

Where do we start?

Having read so far you will see that this book invites you to look underneath your symptoms, diagnosis or questions about treatment. There is no specific list of symptoms but many symptoms and problems are referred to.

When I see someone for the first time as a therapist I usually hear a phrase that tells me something about the story of survival and begin to sense the feeling of the reciprocal roles that have been learned. This often arises from what occurs in the space between us. For example I might start to feel invited to rescue a 'helpless victim' survival self; I might start to feel as if my open questions are being experienced as critical or powerful and the other person feels put down or judged. Or, I might feel small and inadequate in the face of experiencing the other's powerful need to control or blind me with their own science. This is all good! It's all information, letting me know the nature and feeling of the survival pattern.

Take a few moments now, to experiment with this:

Imagine sitting with someone you know well. See them in the chair in front of you. Without struggling, see if you can find words that describe the invitation from the other – that you are 'nice', or 'clever' or 'in charge' or that you are just happy as yourself. Find words that might describe the dance of relationship between you.

Fear, stress and self-regulation

Skirting around no-go areas and living 'as if' we had only a limited range of options keeps us linked, through fear, to the past. For many of us the body

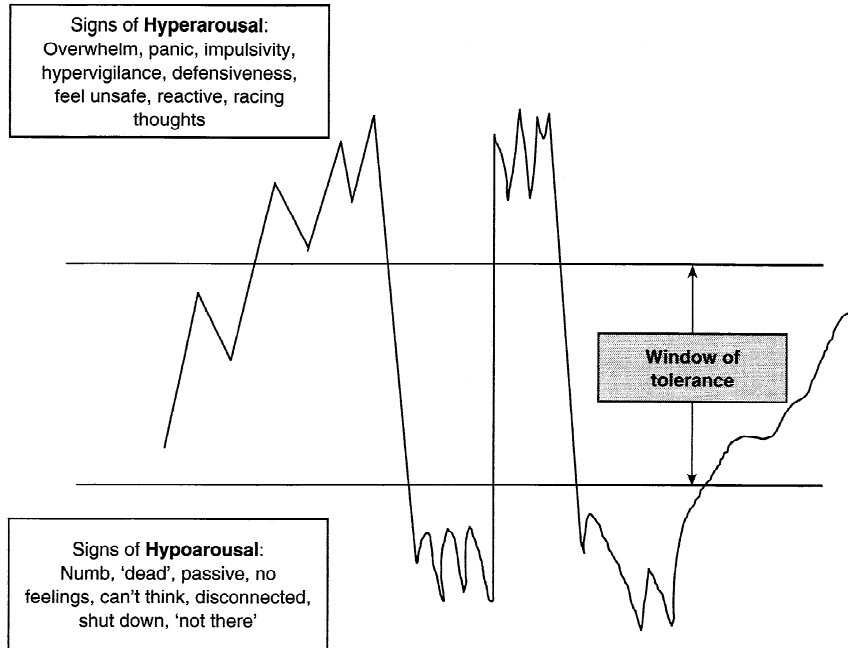


Figure 1.2 The autonomic arousal model. (Reproduced from Ogden and Minton (2000) *Traumatology* 6 (3), 1–20, by kind permission of Dr J Fisher, Centre for Integrative Healing, Boston, USA, and Dr Pat Ogden, Sensorimotor Institute, Boulder, Colorado)

chemistry of fear is dominant and we may find that our sensory experience overwhelms us and stops us being able to reflect or take stock of what is happening. This is called stress. The diagram in Figure 1.2 helps us identify when our responses are dominated by the body reflexes of flight, fight or freeze.

Spend a few moments considering where you might be on this diagram right now. Make a copy for yourself and carry it around with you. Whenever you feel you are out of the 'window of tolerance' stop and try one of the self-regulation exercises described in Appendix 3. Whenever you can, just try to notice the triggers to getting stressed and write them down.

Finding ways to recognise when our stress response inhibits self-reflection, and learning how to stay within the window of tolerance is a first step to taking control of our body stress responses and to change. In regulating stress we are freer to think clearly about ourselves and others.

Our internal core pain will be unique to us. It is based upon what, for us, was both the nature of, and our response to, the people, atmosphere and events of

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our early life. In searching the past to look at how we have constructed our internal maps, we are not allocating blame. It is not *just* what happens to us, but what we *make* of what happens to us that is important.

Many people carry a strong sense of 'past', of the ancestors and family, contained within the stories and myths of their families, tribes or cultures. This may affect their lives deeply, and may require acknowledgement rather than psychological analysis. The task of the focused psychotherapeutic approach outlined in this book is to offer the tools for revision, adjustment, healing or forgiveness only *where they are needed*.

Different approaches to understanding

There are many different approaches to understanding our selves. This book is based upon the practice of Cognitive Analytic Therapy, as outlined earlier. This is combined with contemplative and mindfulness-based psychology, which offers an understanding that human beings are capable of making a meaningful relationship with suffering. Having understood the patterns that dominate our emotional lives, mindfulness teaches us how to remain present with our difficulties. This book gives us ways to recognise, name and focus upon learned patterns and offers ways, through mindfulness, to assist the development of new, more understanding and kind ways of being with oneself and with others.

This book seeks to spotlight *how* we live with what we feel and *how* we have adjusted, and what changes, if any, are needed. I would also like to add that I have met many people who seem to carry an overwhelming sense of pain and suffering for reasons that are unclear. Not everything has a linear cause. We can only bear witness to the suffering we experience in ourselves or in others, and honour its reality as it lives within the individual, and not seek to concretise or rationalise its source.

The need to tell our own story

Stories have been an invaluable form of communication since time began. Long before psychology the storyteller was often experienced as the one who 'knew things'. He or she could be a wise person, myth-maker, keeper of secrets. The telling of fairy tales was an important form of entertainment in Europe until the turn of the last century, both for adults and children. Stories honour experience, giving it shape as well as containment. The continuum of past, present and future widens the way we collect our ordinary life together. Stories, even about the most horrible and painful of situations, help to bring a dignity to our individual lives when it is *our* story: this is what happened to me; I felt this, I did this, I went there and it was as if ...

In the therapeutic story we find descriptions for the adaptation we want to change and add intention for change and hope for the future. We begin to take charge of our own life and breathe conscious energy into it for ourselves.

As we look at the patterns and myths in our own life story we may find associations with themes from well-established stories: 'Sleeping Beauty'; 'Bluebeard'; 'Hansel and Gretel'. The recognition, as well as wisdom, in these ancient stories can help us to feel not so alone. Others have come this way and their patterns of suffering been woven into story and fairy tale.

And we are not the story! It is merely the context in which we find ourselves, the fabric of everyday event into which our own individual pearl is sown. We cannot escape our context or story but we can make it work for us.

In Cognitive Analytic Therapy, the retelling of the life story, paying particular attention to the learned patterns of coping and survival, is called 'reformulation'. The written reformulation reframes our personal life story and places us as a hero or heroine on a journey of life rather than as a victim of life. This process offers a witnessing process which helps us to feel understood and respected. What follows is an opportunity to understand and respect oneself, to be in charge of one's patterns and one's life.

The stories in this book are from real life. Real-life dramas that are woven with threads from real-life players, scenery, atmosphere and plots, survival patterns and the courage to change. All the stories are moving and graphically illustrate each person's struggle to live a life. I thank again all those people who have given permission for their stories to be shared within these pages, and for allowing their themes to inspire us to look at our own lives afresh.

What is it that changes?

Human beings are not fixed, although patterns of thinking can feel very rigid and dominating. Subtle shifts in our perceptions, feelings and our thinking go on all the time simply because of ordinary living in a web of relationships, and we may change our style or belief because of outside influence. One human life will encompass many phases and changes. The 'global village' liked by the World Wide Web means that there are many more influences than ever before.

We have been looking at the idea that a human being has a combination of an original core self and a 'survival self'. Evidence indicates that the pull of the natural seed gets stronger as we grow older. The desire to be oneself freely, to find our own true way, is strong. This core self does not change but, as understood in Jungian psychology, is always inviting us to individuate, to become who we really are, inhabiting our own healthy island.

What *can* change, however, is the domination of reciprocal roles when they have become fixed and unhelpful. Already, by being prepared to read this book you are growing a new reciprocal role, one of listening, and of being listened to. This might grow into an understanding self that helps being understood and in time you might find that you become more accepting and kindly to yourself and to others in relation to feeling accepted and loved.

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Old patterns can move beyond their 'sell-by' date. They can become redundant, to be sloughed off like a snake's skin or chrysalis. We can challenge rigidities and free a space so that our natural self may start to breathe. But we cannot grow if we are living out of mistaken ideas. We cannot take in good things, however much they are offered, if inside we believe we are not entitled to receive them. We cannot relax or let go if we fear being persecuted or abused. And we cannot be assertive if we believe we will lose affection. So in order to change and grow we must challenge the presumptions that limit our freedom to be who we are.

Are there things better left unchanged?

There is an old superstition that it 'doesn't do to meddle with things you don't understand', and the myth of Pandora's box will be used to bear this out, as if all the things we have locked away will wreak havoc once exposed to the light of day. Then there are the old adages 'Let sleeping dogs lie' and 'Better the devil you know than the devil you don't'. These are powerful messages that would stop us searching and ultimately using our power of choice. They encourage avoidance and ensure that we are limited by fear.

My feeling is that if you want to know your devils then make sure that you really do know them. If we fail to know them properly they have a habit of being projected, that is, seen as if they were in other people, who then live them out for us, becoming the very devils we fear; they pop up in relationships, in dreams and they bind us into traps and dilemmas by remaining in the unconscious. The 'shadow' in Jungian psychology contains all that is not in the light, often all that we fear and dislike in ourselves. Accepting this shadow as a valid part of being whole (there is no sun without shadow; no day without night) means we are willing to see it for what it is, rather than projecting it out into the world and making other people or events carry it for us. We have it rather than it having us.

Looking at ourselves isn't easy or pain-free. But what we get out of it is an honest appraisal of ourselves and our choices, and more control and freedom from the burden of unconsciousness.

Is there a burden in knowing ... and in knowing too much?

There are times when we are ready to know certain things about ourselves, and take action. The fact that you are reading this book might indicate that you have started a journey of self-exploration, and are already questioning things you've previously taken for granted. Through honest self-questioning and exploration we find an accurate description of our chronically endured pain. It is through this researching process that we are often rewarded by the

gift of insight. Insight – that feeling of ‘ah, that is what that meant; that is how it was’ – is a leavening process through which we begin to trust that there is inside us something that understands what is going on. Just knowing rationally is not enough; we need to open up our other senses – sensing, intuiting, imagining; then checking it out against what we have learned. When we are open to these other senses we may learn to trust when is the right time to ‘know’.

In her moving book *My Father's House*, Sylvia Fraser (1989) describes how for the first forty years of her life she split herself in two – the self that had a secret and the self that lived in the world. The secret self that had been split off leaked out via dreams, impulsive behaviour, irrational revulsions, in rages, incredible sadness and feelings of emptiness. She writes:

Though my restored memories came wrapped in terror, it is a child's terror that I realise I must feel in order to expel. Thus the adult me comforts the child, holds her hand, pities her suffering, forgives her for her complicity, assuages her guilt. She has carried the burden until I was prepared to remember our joint history without bitterness. I feel only relief, release, compassion, even elation. The mysteries of a lifetime, shadowy deeds dimly suspected, have been clarified. (p. 252)

Is there a right time to change?

The one certainty in life is change! But often we fear it because we fear the unknown. A crisis plunges us directly into new territory inside ourselves, and we are forced to change in order to get through. Sometimes problems become so serious that we have to seek professional help, and that in itself may be the beginning of change. One woman I knew flew back from an expensive holiday, for which she had spent years saving, a week early because she felt unwell and was convinced she had something seriously wrong with her. When it turned out only to be piles she realised the extent of her anxiety and took herself into therapy. She was then in her fifties and she was ready to look. At age fifty-one actress Jane Fonda's husband left her. In an interview given to David Levin in *You* magazine (1989) she describes how she reacted:

If you are lucky [life] is a continual process of struggle and hard work, growth, learning, setbacks and steps forward. The unfortunate ones are those who stop searching and give up; who don't stay open and are unwilling to grow. That is when the journey ends before it should. My journey is only beginning in fact.

Life has natural phases that involve great change. The greatest change we ever make is from girl to woman, boy to man; we change from little child to questioning adolescent, struggling with emotions and changes in consciousness of

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all kinds. We change when we become parents, move house or job, learn to drive a car, fall in love. As we grow older we are forced to contemplate a different face and shape in the mirror and the fluctuations of our bodies. Mid-life, growing old, death – all these things involve us in change.

Developing an 'observer self'

Our patterns of relating learned with others are embedded within our inner dialogue and dominate the way we experience ourselves with ourselves. Thus noticing that the extent to which our inner dialogue of *criticising/judging/bullying* in relation to *striving/crushed/victim* governs what we feel, helps us to develop a new, *observing in relation to observed* self. We also need to observe how much our inner dialogic relationship continues in our outer relationships. Developing an observer self helps us to both observe and begin to change the old patterns.

We can prepare for and assist the process of change by moving our concentration into developing new 'awareness muscles':

- Awareness of our breathing and body sensations
- Awareness of our feelings and emotions
- Awareness of thoughts and what follows from thoughts

We can train ourselves to:

- Observe
- Notice
- Reflect
- Revise
- Try something new

Thus, just as a marathon runner develops physical muscles, we start developing strong and flexible mind muscles. We do our daily warm-up exercises, we stretch and limber up.

Psychotherapy nourishes self-observation and self-reflection. Some of the changes brought about by psychotherapy are easy and natural, and are mainly concerned with shifts in thinking, perception and attitude. What is harder to change is the reflexive responses that remain hidden in our bodies. We may know 'about' them in our minds, but we have to learn what they are signalling. This needs our observation and exploration, and many different forms of exercises throughout this book will help with this process.

How to change

In order to change we have first of all to understand the nature of our survival self, its learned patterns of behaviour and our mistaken belief system. We must

know something of the roots of our patterns, how they developed and also a good deal about how problematic ways of thinking and proceeding still operate within our life and relationships. Part Three, 'Getting Off the Symptom Hook: Naming the Problem', will assist in this discovery process. Part Four, 'Gathering Information', is aimed at helping us to gather sketches about our early life: what happened and how our attitudes were shaped from our assimilation during this time. Much emphasis is laid upon self-reflection and self-analysis, with the assistance of detailed questionnaires and exercises. By writing down our life story, how things have been for us and how things have come to be as they are in our life, we also begin to look at what it is we need or wish to change. Part Five, 'Making the Change', assists with this process and gives examples from other people who have made important changes for themselves in this way.

For readers wanting to understand their relationships more fully, Part Six, 'Changing Within a Relationship', offers some case examples of how couples used the understanding of reciprocal roles and diagrams to help with their communication. Finally, Part Seven, 'Holding on to Change', offers practical suggestions for holding on to the changes in consciousness this book suggests.

One does not have to be an engineer to drive a car and one certainly does not have to be a professional psychologist to live a life, but if things go wrong in either case it can be helpful to know something of how to go about tracing and remedying the trouble. The chapters are arranged in such a way that the simpler problems are described first; these earlier sections could be seen as a roadside manual, giving only partial explanations of the processes involved but aiming to provide enough to get the car back on the road. Later chapters give a fuller account of how we organise our lives and of the ways in which our sense of ourselves and of our relationships with others can be distorted. The basic assumption is that, in order to overcome our difficulties, we need to alter both how we see ourselves and our world, and how we act.

The limits of self-help

It is important to say at this stage that not all difficulties and symptoms are the reflection of problems in living. Some are the effects of bodily processes and may need medical treatment. Many common symptoms, such as undue fatigue, headaches, indigestion or appetite changes, are most frequently the result of emotional stress, but can, in some instances, be caused by physical illness. If there is any doubt about the nature of such symptoms then medical advice should be sought. It is also the case that being badly depressed may cause, or may be caused by, physical changes in the nervous system which are best treated by medication. Someone whose depression is severe, who suffers from marked physical or mental lethargy, or whose sleep is broken regularly in the small hours with gloomy wakefulness thereafter, should seek medical or psychiatric advice. More generally, if mental distress is severe or prolonged, with experiences of the mind not working normally, it would be appropriate and kind to the self to seek professional help.

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Other problems are due to causes that are not primarily emotional, psychological or medical; they are social. The American writer Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), observed that 'the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation'. While much of this desperation may be rooted in the personal domain of marriage, family and career and might be eased by the methods discussed in this book, to be poor, unemployed, prematurely retired, discriminated against, badly housed, to have to work at intrinsically boring tasks under the arbitrary control of others are also potent causes of desperation. The impact of these factors is, of course, upon the feelings of individuals, but the appropriate action is political and beyond the scope of this book.

Preparation for reading this book

Having looked at some of the reasons we may wish to seek change, we now need to consider how we might engage in this process through a book! No book can hope to take the place of a flesh and blood therapist. But I will be the therapist speaking to you through the pages of this book as if you were sitting in my consulting room. It might help you to imagine me in a chair opposite you, slightly to the side, as a new witness to all you have experienced and experience now. I could be the compassionate observer who becomes part of your inner dialogue, thus hearing but not joining the voices from the past. I will be encouraging and supporting you. I can become someone who is always there as a silent companion and witness to your discoveries and journey of change. You can yell at me, get cross with me, laugh with me, cry, moan or be silent and contemplative.

The first task is to complete the Psychotherapy File and the Personal Sources Questionnaire which you will find in the Appendices. This helps to distil the issues you are currently struggling with and will help with understanding the patterns of behaviour to which you have become accustomed.

Co-counselling

If you decide to share the process of reading this book with a friend, take turns at being counsellor and client and go through the findings from the psychotherapy file with each other. Each of you can help the other with the process of identifying attitudes, thinking and problem areas, and in answering the questionnaires. In co-counselling the aim is for the counsellor to be an objective observer and questioner. The use of the Psychotherapy File or the Personal Sources Questionnaire is a first step to naming the patterns that are current. Part Four is laid out in such a way that the counsellor may read out to the other from 'Gathering Information' and allow the client time for reflection. Help from another in writing the life story is also important and can act as an encouragement and keep us at the task. If you decide

upon co-counselling, set aside a certain time each week to meet in the privacy of one of your homes, and treat the time as you would a counselling session with a professional. Keep to your own individual reflective time in between, for pondering, for painting or sketching the images and impressions that are formed during the process.

Going it alone with the invisible therapist

If you decide to read the book alone to enter into the self-help programme, set aside some uninterrupted time to read the questionnaires and to do the exercises. Part of the programme involves keeping notes, jotting down ideas and associations, keeping a journal of thoughts or ideas. For this you will perhaps need to allocate time for yourself in a way that you may not be used to: marking out time in your diary, or setting aside particular days which you devote to self-reflection and keeping an eye on your aims for change. In each section there are instructions on how to proceed next, and examples from people who have already travelled along this path.

Imagine that I will be sitting there with you. You might like to give me a chair. Whenever you get stuck or feel overwhelmed, look at the chair you have given to me and restore all the qualities you have given me as your unconditional listener who is mindfully listening, and with whom it is safe to be cross or unhappy. When you return to the pondering or writing, write about the presence in the chair who is your very own invisible therapist and give them flesh and blood! Start a dialogue with the invisible therapist.

Notebook, pencil, colours and loose paper

Think of reading this book as going on a journey, and prepare yourself appropriately. A small notebook that will fit into your pocket is useful for jotting down thoughts and reactions as you go through each day. A larger notebook is helpful to keep a fuller journal and is useful for writing down – or making scribbles, drawings, cartoons, doodles – your dreams, ideas, fantasies, open letters to people who come up for you in the course of this programme, your life story, your target problems and aims, and anything else that intrigues you. Choose a notebook that you really like, that you can claim as totally yours. Some people like to have loose-leaf files so that they can add more and more pages. Actor Richard Burton kept his life's diaries in Woolworth's lined notebooks, of which there were hundreds when he died. Keep your notes and thoughts as you would want to, not as others would, or for others.

Creating a safe space through mindfulness

Find a place to sit where you feel warm and comfortable. Close your eyes. See if you can invite into your body memory a time when you felt safe and loved,

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however fleeting this experience. Stay with the feeling as you identify it in your body. Notice the atmosphere, the colours or shapes, the people or nature of your experience. Just consolidate the feeling in your body and know that you can return to it at any time.

It is useful to keep the image of the safe place close to you. A photograph or magazine picture posted up by your fridge or bathroom mirror can help. Or you could make your own drawing or painting. If at any time you realise you are becoming disorganised in your thinking, overly distracted or ruminative, if you feel disregulated in the way described on page 17, then return yourself to the feeling of the safe place. When you have restored yourself to regular breathing and to the 'window of tolerance' (Figure 1.2), note down what seemed to be the triggers to your disregulation. Knowing your 'triggers' helps you to anticipate or prepare throughout your day.

Once we have made maps that outline the way our survival self has had to operate we might want to use techniques for managing the feelings we are going to allow to emerge for the first time. **Mindfulness** is a practice of resting our attention on the present moment which has emerged from Eastern spiritual philosophies. It is an excellent way of learning concentration and also developing awareness of the minutiae of our responses. Practising mindfulness can help us to be peaceful and to gain insight. It can help us in our relationships to be calmer and more accepting. In Appendix 3 there are instructions on mindfulness and suggestions for practical exercises: the Grounding Exercise; Mindfulness of Breathing; Befriending Fear Exercise; and Unconditional Friendliness or Loving Kindness Meditation.

The early five minutes

It is a very good idea when beginning a programme of self-examination to start each day with a few minutes' silence. It may have to be five minutes when you are alone in the bathroom. For the first few weeks don't try and 'do' anything with this time, just quietly reflect upon yourself, how you feel, how your body feels, and gradually become aware of the first thoughts and stream-of-consciousness impressions you have about yourself. Jot down afterwards anything that strikes you as interesting and unusual, especially feelings. Most of us give very little time, if any, to pondering on how we feel emotionally or physically, and when we have problems we tend either to shut down and go on automatic, or feel flooded with uncontrollable feelings. This early five minutes will be a kind of anchor, a chance to be in silent communion with yourself at the very beginning of the day. And later on, when we have processed the difficulties into your story and your goals for change, you may like to use this time for contemplation or meditation.

Self-monitoring

One of the most useful methods of keeping aware of what is happening inside ourselves is through self-monitoring, and details of how to accomplish this

are described in Part Five. However, as you embark upon the reading of this book you might like to make a start by monitoring the number of times you think negatively or unkindly about yourself. Monitoring when we feel depressed, by writing in a small pocket notebook the time of day, what is happening, what we are thinking about, can help us to see if there is any pattern to our episodes of depression. The same goes for any physical symptoms and panic or phobic attacks. As you read through the book you will see how monitoring the occasions when certain traps and dilemmas operate in your life can give you the insight and the clarity of control to get out of the trap or dilemma, and to choose to think and behave differently.

Learning compassion and Maitri

I have said a lot so far about changing the problematic patterns that have had a hold on our lives. Just as important is to value the things we *have* done that we can feel good about and in doing so we nourish our healthy island. Sometimes just the fact of our survival is extraordinary. To have survived a childhood of abuse and yet to be making our way in the world, working at what we can, trying again and again to make a relationship, is brave. Observe your own braveness, and wonder at this capacity you have for endurance!

Survival procedures and irrational guilt often prevent us from choosing joy or happiness. Several people I have met have said that they could envy a dying person, because they no longer had to struggle at life, they could just let go and be themselves. It is a sad thought that we have to wait to live until we are about to die.

Maybe we all need permission to be happy in the present moment. A good example of how this can work comes from meditation practitioners who use the concept of **Maitri** – a Sanscrit word meaning unconditional friendliness or loving kindness to oneself. During conflict, distraction or difficulty, remembering to practise Maitri helps a hardened attitude to be more flexible. It is an extremely helpful concept and one that is rather alien to Westerners who regularly suffer from low self-esteem, self-criticism and self-dislike. These are completely unknown in Eastern countries, where a contemplative way of life is predominant. The Tibetan people, with all the problems of being refugees from their own land, do not suffer low self-esteem.

The formal practice of Maitri, called Karuna or loving kindness compassion (instructions in Appendix 3), begins with practising loving kindness first toward oneself, then to those closest to us, then someone neutral, then someone we have difficulty with and then all people, plants and animals. The concept is that we need to learn to love and accept ourselves in our humanity before we are able to love others.

In my practice as a psychotherapist I often describe Maitri to people and invite them to try it. In Chapter 10 Susannah shares her journey of therapy where she used this concept to help her challenge a reciprocal role that dominated her relationships where she felt merged and lost.

Sometimes just saying 'yes' to life and choosing a joyful attitude makes a difference: to walk in the street and see what is happening rather than what

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is not; to greet a person and recognise what is in their hearts rather than defending against what might hurt us. And the poets have been there before us. Their words can help:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

'Auguries of Innocence' by William Blake