

## CHAPTER 1

# Life is difficult, *for everyone*

**D**o you ever wonder, “Why is my life so difficult?” I wonder about this a lot. Compared to the vast majority of the six billion people on the planet, I’ve had it pretty easy. Good parents, no really serious diseases so far, plenty of food and shelter, a loving wife and children, caring friends, even an interesting career. Still, not a day goes by without my mind generating some sort of subtle or not-so-subtle emotional suffering:

“Am I starting to get a cold? I really don’t want to be sick over the weekend.”

“I hope my daughter does well on today’s test—she was so upset after the last one.”

“I wish this traffic would clear up; I can’t be late again.”

“If only I had . . .”

“Getting old really sucks. Who knew?”

Why does my mind fill with thoughts like these all day long? Do I just have bad genes? Perhaps—but if so, I seem to have plenty of company.

Emotional suffering comes in all shapes and sizes. We might worry about the future, be angry or sad, feel guilty or ashamed, get upset about physical pain, or just feel bored or stressed. Sometimes it’s pretty subtle—we “don’t feel great” or are “out of sorts.” Other times we can get so taken over by anxiety, depression, addictions, pain, or stress-related symptoms that it’s hard to even function. A remarkable amount of the time, being human isn’t easy.

## Happiness is possible—but optional

The problem may be that we did not evolve to be happy. Natural selection, the process that guides evolution, favors adaptations that help us reproduce successfully. This means surviving long enough to mate, snag a partner, and then support our children's survival. Evolutionary forces don't particularly "care" whether we enjoy our life—unless this increases our survival or mating potential. And they really don't "care" about what happens to us after our childbearing and protecting years are over.

*But we care.* While most of us think the survival of humanity is a good idea, we would also like to be able to enjoy *our* lives while we're here. It doesn't seem like a lot to ask.

Yet we struggle. As a clinical psychologist, I've had a window into the lives of many other people, and they all find life to be difficult. Of course, my patients might be an unusual lot. After all, aren't people with problems the ones that seek psychotherapy? While there is some truth to this, I suspect that most of them are actually in no more distress than people who are not in therapy—they're just more motivated and able to do something about it. On top of this, every friend, colleague, and family member that I've ever known well—whether or not they've been in therapy—seems to find life emotionally challenging too.

What's wrong with us? Life is so remarkable. The natural world and human culture are astonishingly complex and interesting, and by historical standards almost everyone in developed countries lives privileged lives full of riches. Most of us never experience the tragedies that we see on the news, like losing a family in a natural disaster, being attacked by a hostile army, or barely surviving a horrible accident—and yet we all experience a surprising amount of stress and emotional pain.

Have we actually evolved to be *unhappy*? In a sense, yes. What counts in natural selection is the survival of the *species*. Certain instincts and intellectual abilities that have helped our species prosper over the past few million years have created some pretty negative consequences for us as individuals. Let's look at an example from the past:

Fred and Wilma were early *Homo sapiens* living on the plains of East Africa about 40,000 years ago. They had evolved quite a bit from their *Homo erectus* ancestors, developing enormous brains. In fact they each needed to eat 400 calories a day—a fifth of their normal diet—just to keep these going. The couple used their brains to do all sorts of marvelous things that helped them survive: to think abstractly, plan for their future, find novel solutions to problems, and trade with their neighbors.

They were even able to make cave paintings and stone jewelry in their spare time.

But all was not well on the savannah. Fred's and Wilma's brains also gave them trouble. They worried about rhinoceroses and lions, were envious of their neighbors who had a bigger cave, and got into arguments over who should haul the water on hot days. When it was cold and rainy, they both got irritable, remembering how much better they liked the sun. They noticed changes around them, fretting when there wasn't as much fruit on the trees, roots to eat, or insect larvae (a favorite treat) to snack on. When neighbors got sick or died, they were distressed to realize that this could happen to them too. Sometimes Wilma got upset when Fred looked at other women. Then she wouldn't have sex with him—which upset *him*. Sometimes they both thought about their dog that was eaten by the hyenas. And they felt terrible whenever their son was hurt by the bully from over the hill.

Even when everything was going well, they had thoughts about what had gone wrong in the past or what might befall them in the future. Fred and Wilma were surviving pretty well, and their son had a good chance of making it too, but they still had a lot on their minds.

In some regards, things haven't changed much over the last 40,000 years. Our brains—marvelous as they are—continue to give us trouble. Fortunately, though, some of the same abilities that helped our ancestors survive have also enabled us to develop effective practices to deal with our troublesome brains and enhance our happiness. Luckily these techniques have come a long way since Fred and Wilma's time.

## Mindfulness: an antidote

*Mindfulness* is one of these practices. It developed through thousands of years of cultural evolution as an antidote to the natural habits of our hearts and minds that make life much more difficult than it needs to be. Mindfulness is a particular attitude toward experience, or way of relating to life, that holds the promise of both alleviating our suffering and making our lives rich and meaningful. It does this by attuning us to our moment-to-moment experience and giving us direct insight into how our minds create unnecessary anguish.

When our minds topple forward into worries about being attacked or running out of food, mindfulness practice helps bring us back to the relative safety of the present moment. When our minds make envious

or competitive comparisons with our neighbor's husband, wife, or home, mindfulness practice helps us see that these are just symbols and no lasting victory is possible. When our minds protest against the heat or cold, mindfulness helps us notice that it is actually the protesting—not the temperature itself—that causes our suffering. Even when illness or death visits us or our loved ones, mindfulness helps us understand and accept the natural order. By helping us observe exactly how we create our own distress, mindfulness practices teach us how to let go of painful mental habits and replace them with more useful ones.

Various cultures have developed their own ways to cultivate mindfulness, each shaped by particular philosophic or religious views. Despite differences in approach, all of these practices evolved to deal with psychological difficulties similar to those we face today. In the East, mindfulness developed in Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and other traditions as a component of yoga and meditation practices, designed to free the mind of unwholesome habits. In the West, mindfulness is an element in many Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Native American practices designed for spiritual growth. Secular artists, athletes, writers, and others have also developed techniques involving mindfulness to “clear the mind” and facilitate their work. While some of these practices take exotic forms, others are very simple and practical.

Over the past decade or so, researchers and mental health professionals have been discovering that both ancient and modern mindfulness practices hold great promise for ameliorating virtually every kind of psychological suffering—from everyday worry, dissatisfaction, and neurotic habits to more serious problems with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and related conditions. They're even proving useful for enhancing romantic, parenting, and other interpersonal relationships and for fostering overall happiness. Research and clinical practice are beginning to demonstrate what ancient cultures have long proclaimed—that mindfulness provides insight into what causes our distress and offers effective ways to alleviate it. Lucky for us, it is a skill that can be learned by almost everyone.

Fortunately, too, there are ways to cultivate mindfulness without huge new time commitments. You can actually learn to develop mindfulness while engaged in normal, everyday activities such as walking, driving, showering, and doing dishes. But if you can also set aside regular times for formal mindfulness practice, you may end up actually feeling less pressured and better able to deal with obligations as your mind becomes clearer and your body becomes less stressed.

This book will show you how to cultivate mindfulness in the midst of your daily routines, as well as how to develop it through a step-by-step program of formal practices. Either way, learning mindfulness will help you enrich good times and work more effectively with bad ones.

To understand how mindfulness can be so worthwhile, you need to understand a bit more about why life as we normally live it can be so hard. Let's start with the obvious.

## Our prognosis is terrible

In the workshops on mindfulness and psychotherapy that I conduct for mental health professionals, I sometimes ask the audience, "Who here is going to die?" No more than half the hands ever go up. Everything changes, and everything that is born dies. We know this, yet we don't like to think about it. A great Zen master renowned for his wisdom was once asked, "What's the most remarkable thing you've learned in all of your years of meditation and study?" He answered, "The most remarkable thing is that we're all going to die but we live each day as though it weren't so."

He was on to something important. In fact, we can understand much of our emotional suffering by looking at how we react when things change:

"I don't want to give up my pacifier."

"I don't want to use the potty—I like my diapers."

"I don't want to go to school."

Our resistance to change starts very early in life and continues with every subsequent transition—moving, losing friends and loved ones, changing life roles. Who really wants to grow up and drive a minivan? I cried when my twin daughters went off to college. After all that effort, and so many intimate moments together, why did they have to leave home? (My wife wisely pointed out that the alternative—not being emotionally or intellectually able to go off to college—might be even more upsetting.) Looking forward, something tells me I won't be too thrilled when it's time to enter an assisted living facility, or say good-bye to this world entirely.

Resisting these inevitable changes causes us considerable unhappiness. Judith Viorst wrote a groundbreaking book that many psycho-

therapists read in the 1980s called *Necessary Losses*, which points out that *most* of what makes us unhappy involves difficulty dealing with the inevitability of change. This certainly fits my experience—both personally and professionally. Could it be true for you too?

### A RESISTANCE TO CHANGE INVENTORY

Take a moment to make two short lists on the lines below. First, list a few of the more emotionally difficult changes that have happened over the course of your life—the ones that you really didn't welcome. Second, list the most recent few changes, no matter how small, that you found yourself resisting. Now next to each item, jot down what emotions the change brought up at the time.

*Most Difficult Changes*

*My Emotional Reaction  
to Each Change*

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

*Most Recent  
Unwelcome Changes*

*My Emotional Reaction  
to Each Change*

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

You may have noticed that your life has been full of unwelcome changes, both big and small. Perhaps you've run out of lines. Do the changes that came to mind have anything in common? Did similar emotions arise in response to each of them? Since we all find some changes easier than others, the answer to these questions may hold clues as to which you find most challenging, and which feelings arise most often.

These clues will help you later choose the mindfulness practices that are most suited to your needs.

## Hooked on pleasure

Have you ever wondered why doughnuts are so irresistible? Nutritionists speculate that we are attracted to doughnuts—despite their deadly biological effects—because sweet and fatty tastes were associated with getting nutrients when food was both natural and scarce. It's no surprise that we're hardwired to enjoy those things that historically have helped us survive and reproduce. For the same reason that our cars just seem to steer themselves to the doughnut shop, we're fond of love, sex, and comfortable temperatures. And we typically do what we can to avoid pain and discomfort. These sensations, after all, are generally associated with harm to the body: putting a hand too close to a fire, being bitten by a saber-toothed tiger, and freezing in the snow are all both unpleasant and dangerous.

The problem is that our wonderfully adaptive tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain, while great for our collective survival, locks us into shopping for pleasure and running from pain all day long. The species thrives, but as individuals we live each day perpetually stressed. So on top of the inevitability of change and loss, we have here another built-in source of emotional pain.

Both ancient philosophers and modern psychologists have pondered our tendency to seek pleasure. Freud described it as the “pleasure principle” and pointed out that it explains a lot of our behavior. Later, behavioral psychologists observed that we continue to repeat those actions that are followed by rewards (which are generally experienced as pleasurable). These forces play a role in everything we do. Our whole economy revolves around producing and selling goods and services designed to bring us pleasure.

Unfortunately, the pleasure principle also makes it difficult for us to just *be*. In virtually every moment we're attempting to adjust our experience, trying to hold on to pleasant moments and avoid unpleasant ones. This makes it very difficult to relax fully and feel at ease or satisfied. We become like Goldilocks—reacting to almost everything as too hot, too cold, too large, too small, too hard, or too soft. Take a minute right now to review the past 24 hours. During how many moments were you truly content, appreciating the moment-to-moment unfolding of your

life? For most of us these moments are the exceptions—they stand out in our memory. The rest of the time we're restlessly pursuing some goal or another, trying with limited success to maximize pleasure and minimize pain or discomfort. This difficulty really being content is then amplified considerably by another accident of our evolutionary heritage.

## Too smart for our own good

As humans, we have other faculties besides the instinct to pursue pleasure and avoid pain that have helped us survive. It's a good thing, too. Magnificent as they are, our bodies are pathetic for life in the wild—no sharp claws, big teeth, or swift feet. Just imagine trying to frighten off a lion or tiger by baring your teeth and claws or to escape from one by running away. Our hide also offers virtually no protection, and our fur is truly comical—a few tufts on top, under arms, and around sexual organs. Our eyesight and hearing aren't great compared to other creatures either, and our sense of smell is absolutely pitiful (just ask a dog).

What we do have, of course, is an extraordinary capacity to reason and plan. This ability enabled us to survive in the wild by *thinking*. Fred, Wilma, and our other ancestors figured out how to hunt animals and avoid being eaten themselves. They learned how to gather and cultivate plants. They developed the culture and technology that have enriched our lives and brought us to the point of dominating (and, if we're not careful, destroying) the planet.

But here we find another adaptive mechanism—so well suited to our survival—that often makes us unhappy. Thinking and planning, wonderful and useful as they are, are at the heart of our daily emotional distress because, unlike other tools, we can't seem to put these down when we don't need them. They keep us worrying about the future, regretting the past, comparing ourselves to one another in thousands of ways, and forever scheming about how to make things better. This makes it very difficult to be truly satisfied for more than a brief time. Our constant thinking can make it impossible to wholeheartedly enjoy a meal or listen to a concert, to fully listen to our child, or to fall back asleep in the middle of the night. It can send our emotions on a nonstop roller coaster as our mood soars and sinks based on thoughts. One day we're smart, attractive, popular, or successful—the next we're dumb, ugly, unwanted, or a failure. Even a casual observation of our minds reveals that we are compulsive thinkers.



## THOUGHT STOPPING

I'd like you to try a little experiment right now. *Close your eyes for about a minute and stop your thoughts. See if you can keep words from forming inside your head.* (Please don't cheat—try this before you continue reading.)

What happened? Most people find that they can't stop thinking for more than a few seconds.

Now jot down a few of the thoughts that came to mind.

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If you examine the content of your thoughts, you may notice that many of them are about the past or the future and involve wishes to increase pleasure and decrease pain.

For example, I'm writing this right now on an airplane, which left very early in the morning. Before getting on the plane, I was deciding whether to get a granola and yogurt parfait. Hmm, 400 calories—that's a lot. But what if I get hungry on the plane? Remember, they usually don't serve food anymore.

Once on the plane, I wondered, "Should I nap or should I write? I'm pretty tired; will I be exhausted later if I don't sleep? But maybe I'll feel better if I make some progress on the book." (So far this idea is winning.) These are all perfectly reasonable thoughts. The problem is, when I close my eyes to rest for a few minutes, they don't stop. My mind keeps planning how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, unless I'm lucky enough to fall asleep.

We live most of our lives this way—lost in thought, more often thinking about life than experiencing it. But missing out on the moment-to-moment richness of life isn't our biggest problem. Unfortunately, our thoughts frequently make us unhappy. We're all susceptible to a kind of

*thinking disease*. In our attempt to ensure that we'll feel good, we think of all the possible developments that might make us feel bad. While sometimes this is helpful, just as often it generates needless suffering, since every negative anticipatory thought is associated with a bit of tension or painful feeling.

The number of at least mildly negative thoughts that arise in a day is extraordinary—even on good days.

**NEGATIVE THOUGHTS INVENTORY**

Take a moment right now to review the thoughts that have passed through your mind so far today. Try jotting down all of the unpleasant, worried, or concerning ones that have arisen so far (it may take you a moment to recall them—we sometimes try to forget these).

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What did you find? Has your mind been actively working to ward off disaster, by anticipating all the bad things that could befall you or your loved ones?

Just so you don't feel alone in this, here are my results for this little exercise. At the moment I'm on a different airplane, revising this chapter after visiting my daughter at college for parents' weekend. Starting from the most recent, remembering backward, here are the greatest hits from my negative thoughts of just the past hour:

- What if the guy in front of me tilts his seat back—will it damage my laptop?
- My head hurts a little—hope I don't develop a headache.
- Did the pilot extend the wing flaps? I just read that pilots have forgotten to do this 55 times over the past eight years—most recently causing a fatal crash in Spain.

- I wonder if I'll get to visit my daughter at college again—she's a sophomore now and may feel too old after this to have me come for another parents' weekend.
- Damn—a patient just canceled *again* only 24 hours before his appointment. I bet I won't be able to reschedule someone else in time, and the economy is not looking good.
- I hope my daughter is making good choices about her major—is she really interested in the subject or just picking these classes because she thinks she should?

And this is a good day!

## Filtering out our lives

By constantly thinking, trying to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, we filter out much of life's potential richness. We gravitate toward things we like, try to avoid things we don't like, and ignore the things we don't feel strongly about either way. This incessant pursuit of goals makes it difficult to appreciate the fullness of the world—and easy to miss important information.

If I'm walking down the street, I might come out of my thoughts enough to notice people I find attractive (such as cute little children or beautiful women). I might also notice people that I find threatening—either because they remind me of my vulnerability (such as very old or disabled people) or because I fear they might hurt me (such as teenage gang members). I'll basically ignore everyone else. In a sense, we're always shopping—either literally, for goods or services that we imagine will make us happy, or figuratively, for attractive sights, sounds, tastes, and other sensations. This narrows our focus and makes us miss out on a lot.

You can observe the tendency of the mind to evaluate everything we encounter as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and gravitate toward the pleasant while recoiling from the unpleasant, with the simple exercise on the following page. Please take a look at it now.

If you are attentive, it won't take long to complete a column. Our minds are constantly evaluating our environment, noting what might bring us pleasure or pain, ignoring everything else.

This takes a toll. We can see the problem clearly when traveling. Have you ever visited a new region or country with a list of "must see" sights—things you really want to do—but not have enough time to fit

### ATTRACTION/AVERSION TALLY

This is easiest to do when going for a walk or when literally shopping for food or other items. Take a small pad or notebook with you. Make two columns, labeled “Attraction” and “Aversion.” Every time you see something you like or find attractive, put a tally mark in the “Attraction” column. Every time you see something you don’t like or find unattractive, put a mark in the “Aversion” column. Notice the feeling of each impulse to hold on to the pleasant or push away the unpleasant. See how long it takes for a column to fill up.

them all in? As we rush from place to place, our minds are focused on maximizing our pleasure and avoiding the disappointment of missing something. But in the process, we fail to take in the little things—the boy in the park, the grocer selling fruit, the man holding lottery tickets. Experienced travelers learn that this goal-oriented, pleasure-seeking approach is actually less interesting and fulfilling than taking time to just *be* in a new environment, attending to the random sights, smells, and sounds. The same turns out to be true for daily life, but most of us have difficulty relaxing our pleasure seeking and goal orientation long enough to appreciate this.

And it’s not just the richness of the world we miss. We might trip over a curb and sprain an ankle while eyeing someone attractive or absentmindedly miss a highway exit while fantasizing about the weekend. Ever find yourself feeling nervous, sad, or irritated and not know why? It might be because of leftover emotions from something that happened earlier—when you were too busy pursuing a goal to notice your feelings. Maybe you have lingering remorse because you were worried about your to-do list and didn’t really listen to your son when he was telling you something important. Or perhaps you’ve got some resentment left from when—focused on some important objective—you glossed over the fact your boss was rude to you.

While mindlessly pursuing the myriad goals woven into the fabric of our everyday lives, we can miss simple, important things happening here and now—like the curb, the exit ramp, and other people. And, as we’ll soon see, by distracting us from important emotions, mindlessness even sets us up for problems such as anxiety, depression, and addictive behaviors.

## All things must pass

Since everything changes, and we incessantly think about how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, it's no wonder we find life difficult. No matter what we do, pleasure will pass and pain will recur (of course, pain also passes and pleasure recurs—we'll discuss this later). Being intelligent creatures, we soon learn that everything is transient. This knowledge creates a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. Even in the midst of pleasant moments, we're aware that they will end. Soon the ice cream cone will be finished, summer camp will be over, our girlfriend or boyfriend will leave. We may not get an A on the next test, our job may be eliminated. Children eventually realize that their parents will die. Most of us fear running out of money, getting sick, or dying ourselves. Once we notice that all things really must pass, the pleasure principle combined with incessant thinking becomes a real problem. One of my patients found this out on a much-needed vacation.

Alex worked hard running a successful import/export company. While it was stressful, he liked his job and rarely took time off, fearing that things might fall apart when he wasn't around. But after months of cajoling from his wife, he finally took the plunge and made plans for a weeklong vacation in the Caribbean. He did lots of research, wanting to choose the right island so that his wife would be happy.

When the day of departure arrived, Alex was stressed. He was nervous about leaving unfinished business, and concerned about having chosen the right vacation spot. He started to feel better when they got to the hotel, though. The beach and ocean were beautiful, and his wife really liked the place.

The first days were exciting. They discovered all sorts of new delights and were looking forward to more. "It'll be fun to eat at that restaurant." "We should go on the snorkeling trip." Soon, though, Alex realized that a week isn't very long. By the third day, he was thinking, "Damn—almost halfway through—we'll never have time to really take full advantage of this place." The last few days were still nice, but tinged with uneasiness. When it rained, Alex got upset because they had so little time left. Thoughts of work intruded more and more.

The trip made Alex realize that he needed a change in attitude. Even though the Caribbean was great, he couldn't fully enjoy it knowing he would soon have to leave.

Most of us experience Alex's problem in small ways all the time. Who

hasn't looked forward to the weekend, only to get irritated when Sunday rolls around? And thinking about the big endings is so painful that we usually try to block them out of our awareness entirely.

### **An Ancient Problem**

Mindfulness practices were developed to address this predicament. In fact, the central legend of the Buddhist tradition, in which many mindfulness practices were refined, is about the problem of the pleasure principle meeting the reality of impermanence.

The story goes more or less like this: It's said that the historical Buddha was born a prince in a small kingdom in what is now Nepal. Following the custom of the day, his father had Brahmins come to evaluate the new baby. Instead of the Apgar scores of modern pediatricians, the priests looked for 32 signs of greatness—and found them. This meant that the prince was destined to become either a great worldly leader or a great spiritual teacher. Wanting, like many fathers, that his son should follow in his footsteps, the king sought to prevent his son from becoming interested in spiritual matters. To this end, he kept his son cloistered on the palace grounds, surrounded by pleasant things. The idea was that if his son didn't experience pain, he wouldn't be motivated to become a spiritual teacher.

On the rare occasions when the prince would leave the palace, the king made sure that upsetting things were kept out of sight—like they do nowadays when the Olympics come to town. As the prince grew older, however, he became restive and curious, and one day convinced his chariot driver to take him on an unsanctioned visit outside the palace gates. It's said that on this first trip, the young man saw an old person. He asked his driver, "What's that?"

"Old age," replied his driver.

"And who does that happen to?" asked the prince.

"The lucky ones," said his driver.

Disturbed by this discovery, he returned to the palace. On a second unauthorized tour, they saw a sick man. "What's that?" asked the prince.

The driver replied, "Illness."

"And who does that happen to?" asked the prince.

"Most everyone eventually."

On a third visit they saw a corpse. "What's that?"

"Death."

"And who does that happen to?"

“Everyone, I’m afraid.”

Now the prince was really shaken, and even more energized to learn about the world. So he convinced his driver to take him on one more trip outside the palace. They came across a wandering spiritual seeker (these were common in the kingdom at the time). “What’s that?” asked the prince.

“Someone trying to figure out how to deal with what we’ve seen on our earlier visits,” his driver might have said.

That did it. Illusions shattered, the prince was no longer satisfied with his life. He (like us) had to figure out how to live with reality.

So our central problem is that old age (if we’re lucky), illness, and death are inevitable. Add to this the millions of small disappointments when we don’t get what we want and it’s clear that pain is unavoidable. Since we spend most of our moments thinking about how to maximize pleasure and avoid discomfort, no wonder we wind up dissatisfied.

## The failure of success

It gets worse. We also seem to be hardwired to try to enhance our self-esteem. Robert Sapolsky is a neuroscientist at Stanford University who studies the physiology of stress. I heard him interviewed on NPR several years ago by Terry Gross. As I recall, he was explaining that he had spent the last couple of decades hiding with his colleagues behind blinds of vegetation in the African savannah, watching baboon troops. The scientists would wait for a particularly dramatic soap-opera interaction among the baboons and then shoot anesthetic darts into all of them to put them to sleep. Then they drew blood and studied the baboons’ physiological response to stress.

Terry Gross asked him, “What did you learn?”

“It’s actually very complex, and hard to make generalizations,” he replied.

“Were there any findings that really impressed you?”

“Well, we did discover one thing repeatedly: *It is particularly bad for your health to be a low-ranking male in a baboon troop.*”

Yes, we’re not baboons. But as the “smart monkeys,” our concerns are remarkably like those of other primates. It is no accident that kids in middle school and junior high (who are perhaps closest to our simian ancestry) refer to their insults as “ranking” on one another or “ranking out” other kids. As adults, we’re a bit more subtle.

Do you ever compare yourself to others? Have feelings of either envy or superiority? Ever notice who is better liked, earns more money, has the nicer car or home, is more attractive, has the more desirable partner or family, is healthier, smarter, or gets more respect? The list goes on and on and occupies a remarkable number of our waking moments. To see how pervasive this tendency is, try the following exercise.

**RANKING CRITERIA**

Jot down the criteria you use to establish your rank. This can be a little embarrassing, but it is also instructive. List in rough order of importance the qualities that grab you the most when comparing yourself to others (such as wealth, strength, intelligence, attractiveness, generosity, etc.).

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

Looking at your list, you may find that these are also the issues that cause you the most unhappiness.

As humans, we can never really achieve a stable rank in our social order. This is because our minds have the remarkable ability to rethink our situation and to change whom we include in our troop. When a smart girl is in high school, she's proud to do better than most of her peers. But when she gets to a selective college, suddenly she's disappointed to find herself in the middle of the new pack.

We also constantly adjust the level of pleasure or comfort that we consider to be "enough." As young adults, being able to afford our own



small apartment feels like an accomplishment; a few years later, we “definitely need” a bigger house. The scale by which we measure our success or satisfaction is continuously being recalibrated.

### ATTAINED GOALS

Take a moment to think of an event in your life that you once imagined would provide a lasting feeling of well-being. Sometimes our goals are small: all I want is for this toothache to go away; all I need is for my child to sleep through the night. Other times, they're big watersheds, such as earning a degree, meeting the right person, getting a good job, reaching a new level of wealth, or having a child. Jot down a few goals that you focused on for some time and then managed to achieve.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Did reaching your goals provide lasting satisfaction? Or, in each case, did you become accustomed to your new accomplishment or level of comfort and start looking for something more? Does your mind continue to imagine happiness lying somewhere in the future—“I can't wait until I finish school, get married, buy a house, or retire”?

A patient I saw many years ago taught me a great lesson about how this works. He had just sold his oil trading business for \$30 million cash. He kept using that phrase, “30 million dollars cash,” and I kept imagining the wheelbarrow full of bills. But he was depressed. He had devoted his life to international energy sales, and now that he was no longer making deals, he felt at loose ends, without meaning or purpose. Being philosophically inclined, I was excited to work with him. I imagined that he was at a vital turning point in his life and I could help him awaken to important human values and find new meaning to his existence.

As often happens when a psychotherapist gets attached to his or her own agenda, the first few sessions didn't go well. I just wasn't connecting with him. At about the fourth meeting, however, he came in looking

much happier. I asked what had happened, and he said, “The other day I came up with a business plan by which I think I could parlay my thirty million dollars into a fifty-million-dollar business. I think that if I could establish a fifty-million-dollar business, I’d feel as though I had finally succeeded.”

He was completely serious, and that was the last I saw of him.

As a young psychologist, I had plenty of concerns about my own professional, social, and romantic success. My patient had given me a real gift. I realized that day that no matter what I accomplished, the tendency to compare myself to others would probably continue—I’d just pick new peers with whom to compete. We don’t tend to compare ourselves passionately to others of very different rank—the attorney doesn’t compete professionally with the janitor; the young fashion model doesn’t compete with the old woman—but rather we compare ourselves to people who have a bit more or a bit less. Our comparison group keeps shifting, but our restless concern about our rank in the troop continues.

This concern with “success” causes repeated difficulty because we win some and lose some. (I was once talking about this at a workshop and asked, “Who here always wins?” One hand went up. I thought, “Better avoid him at lunch.”) Not only do we win and lose the small daily competitions in which we compare ourselves to others, but we become sick, old (again, if we’re lucky), and die.

### DEFEATS BIG AND SMALL

I’d like you to make two lists again. In the first column, make note of the more significant moments in your life when you felt unhappy or inadequate about losing a competition or feeling “less” than someone else. In the second column, jot down when this has happened, even in very small ways, over the past few hours or days.

*Biggest Defeats*

*Most Recent Defeats*

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

If we're honest with ourselves, most of us can find quite a few items for both lists. Do you see any patterns or themes? It can be interesting and freeing to see if the incidents share common features and if they are related to the items you listed in the *Ranking Criteria* exercise. While we all seem concerned with our rank in the primate troop, we tend to measure that rank by different yardsticks. Our experiences of winning and losing depend on how we create our identity. We'll explore this further in Chapter 6, where we examine how mindfulness practice can help us gain perspective on these mental habits (which get particularly out of hand when we feel defeated or depressed).

## Love hurts

So here we are: smart monkeys who are instinctually programmed to seek pleasure and avoid pain, trying to enhance our rank in the troop, living in a world in which illness, aging, and death, along with myriad smaller disappointments, are unavoidable. On top of this we have the capacity to imagine things going wrong all the time. It's a wonder we don't find life *more* difficult than we do.

As though this weren't enough, there is yet another hardwired evolutionarily adaptive mechanism that has helped us survive but adds to our troubles: our predisposition to love. While adult humans are physically pitiful animals in the wild (with no big teeth or claws), our children are even less well endowed. A human infant wouldn't last more than a few minutes in the jungle or on the savannah without a parent. Luckily, we have evolved powerful emotional responses that prompt parents to take care of their kids and prompt kids to seek care from their parents. Related feelings connect sexual or romantic partners to one another. These emotions bind us together in couples, extended families, tribes, and larger cultural groups. They enable us to nurture and protect one another, dramatically increasing our chances of survival.

But these emotions also set us up for a host of painful experiences. On top of thinking constantly about seeking pleasure and avoiding pain for ourselves, we have the opportunity to worry about the well-being of our loved ones. I have a patient who recently became a father—an event he'd been dreading for some time. At the heart of his concern is feeling too "emotionally sensitive." He is deeply affected by every pleasurable or painful event and lives in fear of disappointment. The thought of now also being vulnerable to his son's ups and downs is almost too much to bear.

His fear is justified. For those of us with children, safety is even more elusive now than it was before they were born. We now not only worry about disappointing or tragic events in our own lives but also are deeply affected by our kids' experiences of pleasure and pain. And it doesn't stop there. To varying degrees we're affected by the ups and downs of other family members, friends, and people in our wider community. In general, the more we're able to love, the more everyone's pleasure and pain become our own. While this capacity for attachment and empathy is a wonderful part of being human, it makes the project of trying to hold on to pleasure and avoid pain even more impossible.

### THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE INVENTORY

Once again I'd like you to make two short lists. In the first, jot down a few significant incidents from the past in which your concern for a loved one or other person made you feel worried, angry, or sad. In the second list, note a few times that this has happened, even subtly, during the past few days.

*Big Pain for a Loved One*

*Recent Pain for a Loved One*

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Here too, most of us find that these thoughts occupy our minds quite regularly. Even when everyone we know is doing pretty well, we know it's just a matter of time before something unfortunate happens to someone dear.

## Pain over pleasure

As though all this weren't enough, we seem to have evolved to notice and remember negative experiences more vividly than positive ones. Nancy

Etcoff, an evolutionary psychologist at Harvard Medical School, points out this makes good sense for survival. We can think of our emotional system as a smoke detector—we won't die from a false alarm, but if the alarm doesn't go off during a real fire, we're toast (literally). Research shows, for example, that our taste buds respond more strongly to bitter tastes than to sweet ones. This may have evolved to protect us from poison—which is much more important than being able to fully enjoy a piece of fruit. Since we evolved in a world full of immediate dangers—snakes, tigers, cliffs, and poisonous plants—it's no wonder that we would be better at remembering and learning from negative experiences than positive ones. Missing one opportunity for a tasty morsel or sexual encounter probably won't end our line of DNA, but missing one tiger or cliff will.

This doesn't bode well for our moods. Since we tend to remember painful experiences, we also tend to anticipate them in the future. Each unpleasant memory, worried thought, and pessimistic conclusion is associated with a bit of emotional hurt—even when nothing is actually going wrong. So as long as we're living in our heads, lost in narratives about the past and the future, we're going to experience a lot of pain.

## And it's all my fault

Ironically, many of us put icing on the cake of our suffering with a uniquely human addition—concluding that our dissatisfaction is our own fault. Living in a more or less free-market economy exacerbates this. (I'm not advocating the other systems—they all have their problems.) The way I can motivate you to buy my goods or services is by suggesting that they will bring you more pleasure and less pain. Entrepreneurs and marketers are smart—they know that this is what makes us tick. When we see the happy couple in their new convertible, or the sexy surfer with his beautiful babe holding a beer, we draw the conclusion that we would feel great if only we had that car or brew.

Besides creating a remarkable amount of wasteful, environmentally destructive consumer spending, such marketing contributes to our personal suffering. Growing up with our minds marinated in these messages, most of us come to believe that if we're not happy, either we must have made bad decisions or there is something fundamentally wrong with us. "If only I had chosen the right career, spouse, diet, plastic surgery, shampoo, or jeans—then I'd be happy. Why do I keep getting it wrong?"

### MY MISTAKES INVENTORY

One way to see how this works is to take an inventory of your supposed “mistakes.” Take a moment to jot down some choices you regret—instances where you’ve imagined at one time or another that you’d be happier if only you had chosen differently.

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Complete the inventory above and then look at your list. Would the other choice really have worked to bring lasting satisfaction?

Of course, sometimes we don’t think we made bad decisions. The alternative belief, that I made good choices but am still unhappy, is even worse: it means there must be something so wrong with me that even the right choices don’t work.

Either way, we’re left blaming ourselves rather than noticing that most human suffering derives from our evolutionary history, biological makeup, and existential predicament. By not noticing that suffering stems from universal habits of mind rather than our personal failings, we compound our difficulty.

The belief that our suffering is our fault also keeps us from telling other people about it. We fear that admitting to others that our life is difficult will lower their view of us, and no one wants to be thought of as a “loser.” So we tend to minimize our suffering when speaking to others, making ourselves feel inadequate or defective because *our* life is challenging, while everyone else seems to be doing fine. This sometimes shows up as a sinking sensation when we ask someone, “How are you?” and he or she answers annoyingly, “*Awesome!*”

Since we’re hardwired to continually compare ourselves to others, these feelings of inadequacy can really color our lives. They’re behind a lot of our competitive urges and even underlie the experience of what the Germans call *schadenfreude*—our secret delight in others’ misfortunes.

## Mindfulness practice to the rescue

Fred and Wilma's painful concerns about wild beasts and food shortages, tensions over coveting their neighbor's cave and spouse, irritation with the heat and cold, worries about illness and death, and distress about their son's welfare were all the natural consequence of their enormous brains working to perpetuate their DNA. Like the rest of us, they suffered because everything changes, yet they evolved to seek pleasure and avoid pain, analyze the past to prepare for the future, keep up their social rank, and care for their children and one another.

Luckily, we humans evolved not only mental habits that lead us into emotional difficulty but also faculties through which we can free ourselves from them. The same skills we have used for millennia to understand and thrive in our environment can help us understand how our minds create unnecessary suffering and how to free ourselves from it.

The rest of this book is about cultivating mindfulness. This deceptively simple way of relating to experience that has been practiced for thousands of years can alleviate precisely the kind of psychological suffering we've been discussing. Mindfulness can help us embrace, rather than resist, the inevitable ups and downs of life and equip us to handle our human predicament. It can help us come to grips with being mortal beings with a propensity to seek pleasure and avoid pain, while living in a world full of both. It can also help us see the folly of our concern with how we compare to others and our inability to stop thinking about the past or future for more than a few seconds. And it can deepen our capacity to love others, even as this makes us vulnerable not only to our personal successes and failures, but to their joys and sorrows as well.