



Train your mind to feel
as strong as you look

Fly Higher

SARAH FURNESS

'A must-read for "extraordinary everyday" women and men!'

Harriet Green OBE, global business chair, founder and philanthropist

Do people describe you as strong?
**Are you outwardly tough as old boots
but inwardly plagued by self-doubt,
self-pity or even self-loathing?**

In *Fly Higher* Sarah Furness, a former RAF helicopter pilot who served in Afghanistan, has translated the lessons she learned under fire into military-grade mindfulness strategies for improved self-leadership. Her Healthy Automatic Behaviours In Threatening Scenarios (HABITS) approach will teach you to stay bombproof under pressure – and feel awesome.

Part memoir, part training manual for the mind, this book will take you on a journey from helicopter crashes and interrogation training to meditation and 'winefulness'.

Read this book and learn how to:

• **Become your strongest ally** • **Command loyalty** • **Perform at your best**

Sarah Furness served twenty-one years in the RAF as a Squadron Leader and helicopter pilot. She led on combat operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and taught at the world-class Defence Academy of the UK. She is a qualified mindfulness coach, cognitive behavioural therapist and human factors facilitator.

Learn more at www.sarahfurness.com



'Gripping, real, honest and fun.'

Dr Andy Cope, bestselling author
and happiness researcher



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Praise

‘Fly Higher is the best book I’ve read for a long time.

The balance of humour, personal reflection and self-help is spot on. Not only is it hard to put down, but the techniques can easily be implemented in your daily life from the word go. Outstanding!’

— **Mark Keen, Head of International Stakeholder Engagement
USVF, Defence Infrastructure Organisation**

‘A Masterclass in writing a book that is well crafted, honest, thought provoking and highly addictive!’

— **Natalie Maddox-Hussain, Commercial Lead, Defence Digital,
and Events Lead, Defence Women’s Network**

‘I love the humility and humour in this book. Sarah helps us move from feeling that we’re not enough to implementing practical top tips around the power of practice, the importance of sleep and, ultimately, flying higher! A must-read for extraordinary everyday women and men.’

— **Harriet Green OBE, global business chair,
founder and philanthropist**

‘Gripping, real, honest and fun, this is personal development for people who don’t like personal development. Utterly Brilliant.’

— **Dr Andy Cope, bestselling author and happiness researcher**

‘*Fly Higher* gives the reader a fascinating opportunity to consider how much more easily we could deal with life’s challenge by making better choices, focusing on what’s important and understanding our mindset. Sarah Furness’s excellent book helps the reader combat the difficulties and enjoy the highlights of the human condition.’

— **Mark Gallagher, Formula 1 executive**

‘This book is smart, witty and straight-talking: like being told the secrets to success by the coolest, wisest friend. Meditating over a glass of wine and living life unapologetically sounds like the best possible way to be.’

— **Natalie Barton, Digital Communities and Marketing Officer, Propertymark**

‘*Fly Higher* is a penetrating, funny and inspiring book whose alchemy is combat, compassion and choice.’

— **Andrew Turner, Air Marshal and Deputy Commander, RAF**

‘Presented in an engaging, no-nonsense style, *Fly Higher* is essential reading for those of us who wish to better manage our inner critic. Packed full of practical and science-based advice, this book will help you retrain your brain to navigate the full maelstrom of life.’

— **Russell Poynter-Brown, Management Consultant
and Performance coach**

‘Since reading this book, I have actually changed one of my terrible habits of flitting between about sixty different jobs thinking I am being dead clever and getting shit done by multitasking. This morning I have set the goal of concentrating on what *needs* to get done in the now, and ‘ping’ – a bulb has just been lit!’

— **Richard Wade, Director, Risk and Safety Compliances Ltd**

‘A practical and entertaining life hack book born from Sarah’s own amazing journey – this is not guesswork! An infectious read.’

— **Kay Kennedy, Director, Kennedy Executive Recruitment**

‘As a former combat helicopter pilot, Sarah has certainly taken the right-hand seat in her approach to a career as a life coach. This book, based on Sarah’s experiences, and backed by academic research, is very much a companion manual for mindful living.’

— **Nigel Whittaker, Air Safety Manager, MOD**

‘We cannot all be superhuman, but we can all be super humans. In this book Sarah has captured the true meaning of being mindful and what it takes to perform under pressure. She smashes some business myths, is brutally honest about her own thought processes and failings, and guides the reader through simple but highly effective tools to help ordinary people be extraordinary. This isn’t a story about helicopters or combat missions, but a story about how everyone can fly high, remain focused and complete their own personal missions.’

— **Dr Lee Williams MBA, [Coach/Speaker], [JOWSA Consulting Ltd]**

‘Mindfulness and military service are two things you would not imagine being together in the same book. However, Sarah successfully combines mindfulness techniques with her experience as an RAF helicopter pilot to produce a practical guide on how to deal with the stresses and strains of modern life – along with some pretty darn cool stories as well.’

— **Andrew Speirs, founder, Lens Digital**

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as strong as you look

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SARAH FURNESS

R^ethink

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*For my mother, Helen,
who taught me to be brave.
And for my son, Arthur,
who taught me everything else.*

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Introduction

‘No Sarah, I disagree. You *are* superhuman.’

That’s what the Men’s Radio Station presenter said to me during a recent interview. I was sharing my ideas about how we cultivate mental toughness and had casually dropped in that I was a helicopter pilot in the RAF for twenty years and had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He then suggested that a helicopter pilot’s version of mental toughness might be somewhat out of his normal listeners’ league.

I disagree.

The fact is, this lovely man was wrong. I wasn’t born different. I’m just the same as you. And that’s on a good day. On bad days, I feel like a total fraud. I’m thinking, ‘You obviously have no idea what I’m really like if you are saying those nice things. I’m nothing like you, because I’m not as good as you.’ I *want* to be the same as you.

So let me be upfront. This book is not about setting me apart from everyone else. It’s not about a hero sharing hero stories. It’s not about swinging the lantern and telling endless flying dits. If you like the sound of flying stories then rest assured there are plenty of anecdotes in here, but they aren’t the point or the driving force behind this book. Part memoir and part

training manual for the mind, this book is about connecting with you through the human experience and the rawness and messiness of life. It's a place for me to candidly channel my experiences into one place. To share everything I've learned so that you can feel utterly bombproof, no matter what the world throws at you. Having been to war (both literally and metaphorically) I have some experience in dealing with curveballs, and that's important because it means I know these methods work. But it's also so much more than that. I'm also going to show you why the brain responds the way that it does in adversity and then, crucially, how to train your brain to respond differently in crisis.

On this journey, you will learn why the brain often does things which helps absolutely nobody (especially you) and how to train your brain to perform and thrive under fire. Following the seven steps in this book to retrain your brain to perform optimally under extreme pressure will help you to perform at your best, feel bombproof in adversity and lead with gentle courage. The book focuses on:

- How to understand the mind, particularly when 'under threat'
- How to train and ultimately rewire the mind to feel in control and resilient in adversity
- How these techniques have been used and proven in combat scenarios and flying missions
- How to leverage these skills to relate to others and lead others skilfully and authentically

Do you ever feel hostage to the battlefield that is in your

head? Do you sometimes experience self-doubt, self-pity or even self-loathing? This book is perfect for you if you have high standards for yourself, and others. If you typically get described as strong or confident, but often don't feel that way. If you worry about letting others down. If you sometimes act in a way that you later regret. If you lie awake beating the crap out of yourself for falling short of your own high standards. If you sometimes upset people that you love. If you wonder why the people that you love upset you. If you ever ask yourself, 'Why did this happen?' If you feel like you must have all the answers...

In other words, if you experience fear, anxiety, stress, loneliness, anger or grief, then this book is perfect for you. This is not a book written for robots. This is a book written for humans who experience the full maelstrom of life and secretly hope they might deserve a bit more. This is the book I wish I'd read twenty years ago.

I *did* want to be superhuman, by the way. When I was five years old, I was obsessed with Supergirl, so I constructed an obstacle course in my garden. I was convinced that if I got myself fit enough, I could teach myself to fly. I believed that if I could work up the courage to launch myself off the washing line that I'd be airborne. I never did have the courage to try (mostly because I was terrified of what my mother would say if I broke her washing line). But I *did* learn to fly. And not in the sense you may think.

Imagine we are all swans. You probably know the adage about how swans look graceful on top of the water, but underneath they are paddling like buggery. Well, that's where we will start. Because that swan is you. And just like that swan, there will be

times when the conditions are rough. Life will throw in hand grenades that will turn everything upside down. It will seem crushingly unfair, and you might feel like you are drowning or that the world is just downright dragging you under. This is the crucial 'sink or swim' moment when you can choose to keep swimming. That's what you're going to learn in this book. You're going to learn how to swim in the choppiest of conditions, and because you are a swan, you'll make it look easy. In fact, it is easy when you know how.

One day, you'll realise you don't need to keep swimming, because swans can also fly. Not too far from now, you'll spread your wings and take your rightful place in the sky. I'm the proof. Because I'm just like you.

Come with me on this journey. Learn how to navigate through everything weird and wonderful that life throws at you with all your human frailties and limitations. Discover how to come through it all. Smiling. Laughing. Flying.

Choose to fly. And fly higher.

1

You Have A Choice

Do you remember the days when you could impulsively book a flight to Dubrovnik while drinking sundowners in Leicester Square? You could turn up to the airport with sunglasses, your passport and a hangover and then fall into the nearest youth hostel on arrival a few hours later. Or maybe you'd decide not to book anywhere to stay and operate the 'pull or die' philosophy.

There were no amber lists, red lists, passenger locator forms, Covid-19 vaccination passes, pre-booked lateral flow tests. I don't remember ever checking the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice before travel. I don't remember waiting anxiously to be 'traced' on return from my holiday to see if I could leave the house. I just went straight to the pub to show off my new tan. Travel was footloose and fancy free (at least that's how I remember it).

Then the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic struck and all of that changed. Suddenly there were *rules*. Lots of them. And paperwork, which you had to fill out in triplicate and include the precise details of your holiday (even down to which toilet

you would be using, in which restaurant and on which day). It seemed that navigating your way through an airport or attempting to board an aeroplane was just an excuse for some official to tell you which rule you were currently breaking.

I was on a Turkish Airlines flight back from Dalaman when I wrote this. They had just served us a limp sandwich and informed us that people sitting in the same row were not to all remove their masks at the same time. We were to take it in turns to eat our lunch. Despite the fact that I was sharing a row with two people I live and eat with every single day, of course we complied. It was preferable to suffering the embarrassment of a public telling-off by the air steward.

I'm not saying this to have a go at the powers-that-be. I understand that these rules had been put in place to keep us safe. And what a wonderful world we live in where we have lots of people devoted to exactly that – keeping us safe. I'm certainly not suggesting I could have done any better. (Well, maybe a bit better.) But it does highlight an interesting challenge that is central to this book, and the subject of this chapter. Choice. Or more accurately, the apparent lack of it.

I think it's fitting, as the sun sets on the Covid-19 era, to reflect on what it's taught us about choice. What has really struck me is this: we all pretty much followed the rules. (Yes, I know there were some rebellions against the rules, but by and large I think we are a pretty obsequious bunch.) By following the rules, our choices became limited. Indeed, many felt that our choices had been taken from us, but most of us cooperated. That tells us a lot about how the human mind works.

At some point, we've decided it's easier just to go along with it rather than become a disrupter, and then, bit by bit, we give away all sorts of other choices. We blindly follow our sat navs (metaphorically not literally). We pick up the sweeties at the counter, not considering that whoever designed the store layout essentially made that choice of confectionary for us. We get diverted by some meaningless TikTok meme that popped up in our feed, which, if you've watched the Netflix documentary 'The Social Dilemma', you'll know was deliberately planted in your feed at that precise moment with the sole purpose of selling you more useless rubbish. Which means Mark Zuckerberg is choosing what we buy online for us. We wear the latest fashions, so our clothing choices are dictated by the editors of the latest fashion magazines.

The science behind choice

This is not your fault. The brain accounts for a whopping 20% of energy consumption, despite being only 2% of our overall body weight, so its default will always be to conserve as much energy as possible.¹ Our neurons (pathways in the brain) are inherently lazy. For any given situation, our brain uses all its senses to gather information about that event, then decides what to do and sends signals around our bodies to help us implement our chosen course of action. The first thing it does is ask, 'What did I do last time?' As long as we are still alive, our previous response is deemed good enough and no further

1 ME Raichle and DA Gusnard, 'Appraising the brain's energy budget', *PNAS* (July 2002), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC124895, accessed 26 May 2022

analysis is required. What is the upshot? We no longer need to choose our next move. We can just react instinctively.

While there are clear evolutionary advantages to this brain functionality, such as energy consumption and time, we would do well to understand what this means for us. We are hardwired to react, *not* to think. This means that not only are we giving away our choices, but we probably don't even realise we have them in the first place.

So what's the problem? The truth is, usually none of this causes a problem for us. Culture, past experiences, other people's behaviour, upbringing, relationships, environment, threats – they all shape our choices without us realising most of the time. And most of the time we get by perfectly well. Until we don't. Until we start delegating important choices that result in us living in conflict with our values. Until we can't discern between external influences and our own internal compasses. Until we take on someone else's narrative as if it were our own, and then wind up feeling confused, misunderstood and a failure.

While my mother was still alive, I would consistently baffle myself at the moody teenager level I would descend into the moment we started interacting. It didn't seem to matter how many pep talks I gave myself. Something about the way she breathed just got me angry. I couldn't seem to help myself. She'd ask me some eye-rollingly stupid or annoying question that was utterly beneath me and then sit there, mouth open, waiting for a response. The vitriol that used to come out of my mouth makes my stomach turn when I think about it. And because I'm not actually evil, of course I'd feel like a monster afterwards. Does that ring a bell?

Have you ever uttered the words, 'Adam/Sheila/John [insert name as appropriate] brings out the worst in me?' I'm sure there is someone you can bring to mind. There are two valuable clues in that statement:

1. The word 'worst' implies we don't like the way we behave around this person. In other words, our behaviour in that scenario is counter to our values. My guess is, just like me, you probably feel ashamed of your behaviour and wish you'd reacted differently. This doesn't make either of us weak or evil. It just means we have some healthy values (for example, one of my go-to values is, 'Don't be a dick'), and we've contravened those healthy values. It happens. Welcome to being human.
2. Let's pause to reflect on 'brings out the worst'. This indicates that in some way we feel like we've behaved against our will. We've attributed the cause of our behaviour to someone else. In the example of my mum, it was the 'stupid' question that triggered me, or maybe it was just her breathing with her mouth open. Attributing our bad behaviour to someone else is quite normal, especially when we feel a bit embarrassed because we've behaved like a dick. (I mean how much of a dick do you have to be to get annoyed at someone for breathing?) Pointing the finger at someone else has the short-term appeal of being able to deflect the blame away from us, but in reality, we're effectively saying that someone else makes us behave a certain way. And that's simply not true. Nor is it helpful. If we continue on this trajectory, at best, we will end up in conflict with our own values and fail to realise our full potential. At worst, we will start to find ourselves loathsome. Trust me on this one.

If you are only going to read one chapter of this book, read this one. In this chapter I'm going to share a secret that changed my life. It is amazingly simple, yet easy to overlook – so easy in fact, that I overlooked this small but important fact for the first forty years of my life. When I finally had my eyes opened, nothing was ever the same again. The discovery I made was this: you *always* have a choice.

That's right. No matter how many uninvited curveballs get thrown at you, no matter how many pointless government regulations you have to follow, no matter how many cringe-worthy family birthday parties you feel you have to endure, no matter how impossible it may seem to do things the way you want to do them – you always have a choice. I'm not saying you have all the choices. I'm not saying you own the whole universe and can decide everyone's fate on a whim; nor am I saying that shitty things won't happen that you didn't ask for. And I'm certainly not saying that you somehow deserve or brought about those shitty things. Life is tough. Stuff goes wrong. All the time. But no matter how criminally unfair life may appear, I promise you, you *always* have a choice.

The secret is your response. You get to choose how you respond to life's hand grenades. You get to choose how to interpret the things that happen to you. (Don't worry if you don't realise that yet, we'll get to it shortly.) You get to choose if something will be the making or the breaking of you. You get to choose what to do next, even if it's simply, 'What superhero pants am I going to wear today?' (I'm a big fan of Batman pants.) You always have a choice. You can choose how to interpret any given scenario.

Let's break down the annoying mum scenario again. I told you that she asked a stupid and annoying question. She probably asked me something like, 'So Sarah, when are you going to get pregnant?' in response to my gripping war story about how I flew into a landing zone under fire and saved thirty-seven orphans. Now, I'm sure a lot of us can relate to how annoying that sort of question might be. Let's list the reasons why this question would initiate the red mist in me:

- I don't really know the answer to that question because I'm not God.
- I'm wondering if she was even listening to my war story, because I was really hoping to impress her.
- I'm thinking all she cares about is an heir and not my service to Queen and country.
- I feel inadequate because I was not rewarded for my service by an immediate pregnancy.
- I still find her breathing quite annoying.

For all those reasons, I am irked by this question and my reaction is to come back with some cutting remark which leaves her in no doubt as to her inadequacy as a mother. (I'm pretty good at cutting remarks.) But let me ask you something:

- Who made the judgement that the question was stupid? I did.
- Who decided that my mum should be more interested in my flying stories than seeing the birth of her grandchild before she dies? I did.

- Who appointed my mother as the person who needs to be impressed by me and make me feel worthy? I did.
- Who decided that I am inadequate for not being pregnant? I did.
- Who chose to find her breathing annoying? I did.

I'm not saying it's not natural to respond this way. The important point is that I am the one who is choosing to interpret that question in that way, and it's usually because of my own insecurities.

Exercise: ABC

Draw the table below on a piece of paper or in a notebook. Now recall a scenario when you behaved in a way you are not proud of. Take some time to understand *why* you responded the way you did. This is not designed to make you feel more shame – I've just shared the fact that I was a bitch to my mum who is now dead and who I can never apologise to, so trust me, there is no judgement here.

Now complete each of the boxes. And don't beat the shit out yourself. You're being brave by doing this.

At First	Behaviour	Consequence
What thoughts and feelings come up?	What did you do?	What did you think and feel afterwards?

I'll be brave too and share my own example of this exercise:

At First	Behaviour	Consequence
<p>Mum: ‘Sarah, when are you going to get pregnant?’</p> <p>My thoughts: ‘Why doesn’t she care about my service? Why is she being so insensitive about my failure to get pregnant? She should be proud of me.’</p> <p>My feelings: irritated, (subsurface) ashamed.</p>	<p>Snapped at my mum.</p>	<p>My mum got huffy and I felt indignant at first, then awful.</p>

Our brains will search for the meaning of everything we experience. That is the principal purpose of our thoughts: to interpret what happens so that we can react appropriately and stay alive. It was thoughts and feelings that triggered the behaviours above and, by becoming aware of how we are choosing to interpret something, we can start to realise just how much agency we have over what we think and feel.

Now it’s tempting to think, ‘But I can’t help what I think and feel. Why would I choose to be upset by something someone said?’ And this is a great point. There are lots of times it doesn’t feel at all like a choice, so let’s dig a little deeper.

Thought one: ‘I’m inadequate because I can’t get pregnant.’ This is a great example of me taking on someone else’s narrative without even realising it. In this scenario, I was probably comparing myself to my friends who were married at

27, already owned their first house and had, by now, produced 2.4 children and bought a dog. I am feeling inadequate compared to them, but this means I'm living in accordance with their narrative. In turn, perhaps they are living in accordance with their neighbour's narrative, who had their first child when they were twenty-six. And of course, there is the age-old biological clock which strikes fear in the heart of all 30-somethings – but it only strikes fear because we've been told about it. It's important to note that I'm not saying it's irrational or wrong to think these things, simply that we should realise our thoughts are being shaped by other people. Which is fine most of the time, but not when it is causing us to feel shitty or behave like a dick.

Thought two: 'My mum should be proud of me.' This is probably because she spent her whole life telling me I was brilliant, so I learned to expect it. I learned to bask in it. I learned to use it as my yardstick for self-worth. I learned to trust her judgement about *my* worth over my own. We now know that there is a problem with giving our children too much praise for precisely this reason. It can actually cause performance anxiety.² Who knew? This is why most of us are afraid of failing, which, paradoxically, makes us afraid of success. It's not because our parents and teachers were trying to mess with our heads. They were just doing what they thought was right, but either way, we've taken on the value to measure ourselves by other's standards and that is exhausting and a battle we're sure to lose.

2 R Coe et al, *What Makes Great Teaching?* (Sutton Trust, 2014), www.suttontrust.com/our-research/great-teaching, accessed 9 June 2022

Now, I want you to think about these external influences and add them into the melting pot of learned behaviours (because that's what they are), and then I want you to remember what I said about lazy neurons. They take the path of least resistance. For any given situation, the first thing the brain asks is, 'What did I do last time? Did I live through it? Great. I'll do that again.' And again. And again. So the trigger-thought-behaviour pathway starts to become ingrained, and ta-dah. You have a learned behaviour which then becomes automatic.

What does all this mean? It means those thoughts that have been shaped by other people, our society, our upbringing, etc, have led to behaviours that are taken on as our signature behaviours. Those thoughts which have essentially been chosen by other people are influencing the kind of person you are showing up as. You are allowing other people's choices to define who you are. You are giving your choices away.

Becoming choice aware

Still with me? Good. The purpose of this revelation is not to make you feel stupid. Remember, your brain is just doing what brains do. The purpose is to show you just how often you have a choice in the first place, even if you unintentionally gave that choice away. That's actually great news, because it's by becoming choice aware that we can start exercising that choice in a way that actually serves our values.

This doesn't require much reflection beyond this chapter. We don't need to spend years in therapy understanding *all* the ways we have been influenced to show up this way. We don't have to spend hundreds of pounds lying on a chaise longue

getting angry at our parents for not having all the answers. It's enough to know that we are influenced by all sorts of things, that our thoughts and behaviours carry the blueprint of everything that has gone before us, and that this is normal.

In a nutshell, if you've been showing up as a bit of an asshole to date, you can forgive yourself. Thus far it's not really been your fault, because you didn't know you had a choice. That's about to change. It is true that thoughts will pop up unbidden, so to that extent we don't get to choose what we think, but we do get to choose how we engage with those thoughts:

- **Option A:** We choose to take them as incontrovertible facts which must be acted upon the way we always act on them.
- **Option B:** We choose to treat them with some good-humoured scepticism and then decide what we are going to do next.



Write down which option you would choose

This is the first and most important choice you will ever need to make. Did you write Option B? Good – I knew you'd be awesome.

Now, here's what's next. The first thing you need to learn is how to become aware of when those unbidden thoughts pop up (ie when you are not consciously choosing what to think), because that is the moment when you are most likely to give that choice away. Distraction is a useful combat indicator of

how often you give away your choices. When you are distracted by something, you are not consciously choosing where to focus your attention; you are being diverted to a particular train of thought by something or someone else. It could be something popping up on your phone. A sudden noise. An ache in your shoulder. A flashback to a pointless phone call with a utility company – I've recently moved house so I can list lots of examples here. Just like that, your attention is somewhere you didn't choose for it to be. Let's try it.

**Exercise: Noticing how often you
don't choose what to think**

- Give yourself the task of focusing on your breathing for the next minute.
- Count your breaths from one to ten.
- Every time you notice that your attention has wandered away from your breath, simply resume your counting at one and start again.
- Do this exercise for one minute.
- What was the highest number you got to before you got distracted?

On average, you will usually get to about two or three breaths before you notice that you've started:

- Daydreaming
- Planning
- Ruminating

- Feeling bored
- Insert your own distraction here

Research by two Harvard psychologists showed that we spend around 47% of our waking day distracted.³ How crazy is that? The good news is, every time you notice you have become distracted, you are becoming choice aware. You are *exercising choice*. You can start to hone this awareness of how often you are distracted as an indicator of how often you might give your choices away. The reality is you are going to get distracted no matter how much you try not to be – that’s just how brains are. Thoughts and feelings are still going to pop up out of nowhere, so you don’t need to fight this, but you do get to choose how you engage with these. Take the example of your phone pinging. You can’t stop the fact the phone just pinged and you were distracted, but you can make a choice: you can pick the phone up and become absorbed in whatever the evil social media giants are trying to sell you, or you can notice the distraction and then turn your focus back to what you were doing before.

The same is true for thoughts that pop up. You get to choose to take them as incontrovertible facts that you must immediately act on the way you have always acted on them, or you get to choose to treat them with some good-humoured scepticism and then go back to what you were doing. The point is, you don’t always choose for these thoughts to pop up, but you can choose whether to be at the mercy of them. Now you might

3 N Klemp, 'Harvard psychologists reveal the real reason why we're all so distracted', *Inc.* (2019), www.inc.com/nate-klemp/harvard-psychologists-reveal-real-reason-were-all-so-distracted.html, accessed 26 May 2022

say, ‘But how is that possible? When these thoughts pop up in my head, I feel like there is no escape. If it was that easy to leave them be, I’d just do it, so why can’t I?’ Simple, really. Up until now, you probably didn’t realise you had a choice, so you weren’t practised at choosing how to engage with your thoughts, feelings and distractions. But you absolutely can choose, and what’s more, it’s easier than you might think.

The simple fact is that the cognitive thinking brain can’t be in two places at once. You cannot give your attention to more than one thing. Think about when you are at a dinner party and are in conversation with someone across the table, but you’re also trying to eavesdrop on what your partner is saying to someone else. Or you’re on a Zoom call while secretly emailing your colleague. Take a moment to think about if that’s even possible. And if so, how? It’s possible because you are switching from one object of focus to the other. That’s why, when you’re listening to two people, you have to tune in to each one separately and therefore miss a crucial point in your partner’s conversation. When you’re emailing during a Zoom call, you inevitably miss part of the Zoom conversation (and Sod’s law says it will be when you are asked a question). It’s also why you don’t always hear what someone else is saying, because you get lost in your own thoughts, perhaps triggered by something they just said. In this instance, your attention is on your thoughts and not what the other person is saying.

This might appear like a limitation – your distinct lack of ability to see and hear everything all at once – but actually it’s a saving grace. If you are focusing on a task, even if that task is simply counting your breaths, you cannot be focusing on whatever self-sabotaging thought just popped up. And

here's the good bit: because all your thoughts and feelings are transient, no matter how angry/sad/scared you feel right now, you don't feel that way forever. When you stop giving your focus to those thoughts and feelings, something magical happens... They fade away. By deciding to focus your attention somewhere that you choose, those unwanted thoughts will diminish.

Making choices that serve you

I'm not saying that these thoughts won't return, and it's not to say they won't repeatedly pull for your attention, but every time you notice you are distracted by a thought, you can simply repeat the process: choose where you want your attention to be, and repeat the process as often as you need to. If this sounds weirdly familiar, it's because this is the classic distraction technique that parents use on their children. Distract your child with a fun task and they will forget about their broken tractor. It is equally effective all the way through adulthood. The only reason we don't use it is because we've either forgotten that we can, or because we have prescribed to this pop-culture of deeply introspective theorising and analysis where we feel the need to understand the origin of our thoughts, wrestle with them and ultimately conquer them. In my opinion, the latter is an unnecessary use of valuable energy and has the potential to retraumatise, keeping us stuck in the past. The solution, if you ask me, is far simpler. Notice the thought and then give yourself permission to focus on something else. Every time you do that, you are making a choice that serves you.

Now of course it is easier said than done. Not least because neurons are lazy (remember) and like to do what they did before, so don't lose heart if this feels like a mammoth task to start with. But I promise you, it can and will be done. You just need to commit to training your mind to focus your attention where you choose and then go ahead and start doing it. Little by little. Every time you choose where to focus your attention, you are taking charge of your brain and rewiring those neural pathways. Every morning from now until say, forever, before you reach for your phone (or whatever else you instinctively reach for, no judgement here), try this exercise.

Exercise: Seven mindful breaths

- Close your eyes, inhale and focus your attention on where you feel the breath in your body. Notice your chest expanding. Notice the cool air entering your nose.
- Now exhale. Notice how your chest contracts and the warm air that's in your nose or mouth.
- Every time you notice you are distracted (whether it's thinking, planning, remembering, external noises, aches and pains...), notice it without giving yourself a hard time, and then bring your focus back to your breath.
- Repeat seven times.

That's it. You have just started training your mind and becoming the boss of it. Go you! You can do this with your kids too. Put a teddy or a favourite book on their tummy and just ask them to focus on the movement of the object.

There is a parable in a famous Buddhist text called ‘The Dart’.⁴ Basically, a man is struck by a dart. He feels great physical pain (as one would expect). He now has a choice: he can roll around on the floor focusing on his pain and misfortune and get struck by a second dart – the psychological dart – or he can acknowledge his pain without becoming distracted by it, thus avoiding the second dart. The moral of the story? We don’t always get to choose what happens to us, nor do we choose to be distracted by unwelcome thoughts or feelings, but we do get to choose our next move.

Initiating the simple practice of choosing where to have our focus helps us to consciously exercise choice in our lives. We can, for example, choose to focus our attention and energy on things we have little direct influence over (weather, other people, news), or we can instead choose to focus our energy and attention on things we can directly influence. Examples of this include, but are not limited to, our behaviour, how we respond to adversity, and how we engage with our thoughts and feelings. We will be learning more about this throughout this book.

Key takeaways from Chapter One

- We *always* have a choice.
- We can choose how to interpret our experiences.
- We can choose how much attention to give to unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

4 N Thera, ‘Sallatha Sutta: The Dart’, translated from the Pali by N Thera. *Access to Insight, BCBS Edition* (13 June 2010), www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.006.nypo.html, accessed 26 May 2022

- We can only focus our attention on one thing at a time.
- We can choose to use our attention as a ‘force for good’ by focusing on what nourishes us.
- Every time we focus our attention where *we* choose to (eg the breath), we are training our minds to be more ‘choice aware’.