

# CHAPTER 3:

## UNLOCKING THE MYSTERY OF YOUR MIND

### **THE KEY TO OVERCOMING WORRY**

The challenge for all of us is how to stop our worries from running riot in our minds and undermining all the good things in our lives, especially our happiness, well-being and peace of mind.

When we're angst-ridden and consumed with worry, the problem doesn't come from the stressful situation itself, but from our *response* to the situation. This may be hard to accept, but it explains why, when a group of people is faced with the same difficulty, one of them might be overwhelmed with anxiety, another might be slightly concerned, someone else might see it as a challenge, and yet another couldn't care less.

If we can learn how to change our response to the problems we're facing, we can transform worry into something more manageable... and ease it out of our lives.

But how can we change our response?

Well, the answer to this question lies in doing two things:

- First, by recognising that we really do have a *choice* over how we respond...even if it doesn't always seem like it.
- And secondly, by changing the things we have *control* over, namely our thoughts, feelings and the actions we subsequently take.

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This is the key to getting rid of the draining effects of stress and worry, and yet it leads on to another question:

How do we actually change our thoughts, feelings and behaviour?

We might recognise that we have a choice in the matter, we might be willing to make the change, and yet when we do our best not to worry, it seems incredibly difficult to do.

The answer lies in unlocking the mystery of the mind.

What I'd like to do in this chapter and the next is run through some aspects of **how** our mind works and **why** it's important to change the way we think. Then we'll start to explore how you can make the change in your everyday life, so you can smooth away your worries and find some peace of mind.

### **YOU HAVE A CHOICE...EVEN IF IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT**

Even though it may not feel like it right now, you can actually choose the thoughts in your conscious mind, whether they're worry-type thoughts or more upbeat thoughts. The reason it may feel as though you don't have a choice is that the way you think – the way we all think – has become a habit that has built up over a lifetime.

All sorts of deep-seated attitudes and beliefs are stored in our subconscious mind. If these attitudes and beliefs are negative, they can create powerful doubts and worries that affect how we think, feel, the actions we take and ultimately the outcomes we experience. Quite simply, a belief is anything we consider to be true, and includes things like:

- Perceptions we have of ourselves. E.g. what we think we can or can't do, whether we believe we're a worthy person or not.
- Our perceptions of others. E.g. are people generally kind and caring, or are they out to 'get one over on us'?

- How we view life in general and the world around us. E.g. is it a safe or a threatening place? Are there opportunities for everyone or just the ‘lucky ones’?
- How we view different aspects of life, such as our family, friends/social skills, romance, work/career, money and health.

What’s more, these attitudes and beliefs frequently operate below the radar, so we’re often unaware of them and how they’re affecting our lives.

### **HOW NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS AFFECT OUR LIVES**

Because these negative attitudes and beliefs have become deeply ingrained over time, we often don’t even notice them, nor do we appreciate the impact they’re having. Typically, they influence our lives in three ways.

First, they can lead us to over-generalise and make invalid assumptions. For example, if you’re overlooked in the latest round of promotions at work, that doesn’t mean you’re not good at your job nor worthy of promotion. Many other factors could apply. If you had a bad experience with a romantic partner, it would be very limiting if you then viewed all potential romantic partners in the same way. And if you find yourself shouting at your child at the end of a tiring day, that doesn’t automatically make you a bad parent. A good clue as to whether you are over-generalising in an unhelpful way is if you find yourself using words like *everyone*, *always*, *no-one* or *never*.

Secondly, negative beliefs can also cause us to misconstrue what’s really happening in our lives by unintentionally misinterpreting a situation, or what someone says or does, so that it fits with our perception of other people and the world around us. Have you

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ever been involved in a heated discussion with several other people only to discover subsequently that everyone has a different perception of what happened and the motivations that were involved? This is because everyone views the situation through a slightly different lens.

Negative beliefs can even cause us to blank out aspects of what's going on around us so that we don't notice certain things, and we don't even realise we're doing it.

This is all very sobering, but the good news is that we can learn to become aware of any negative attitudes and beliefs that may be holding us back, and we can actually change the way we think and feel about things, thus easing doubts and fears. But in order to do this, it's important to understand the link between our conscious and subconscious mind.

### **THE VITAL LINK BETWEEN OUR CONSCIOUS AND SUB-CONSCIOUS MIND**

Our conscious mind is the part of our mind over which we have direct control. It is where our ability to reason and concentrate lives. It can also make choices and has the capacity to **accept or reject** any information that comes our way, although this often takes place so quickly we don't even realise it's happening. The other interesting attribute of our conscious mind is that it's a channel through which we can communicate directly with our subconscious, and the importance of this will soon become apparent.

In contrast, our subconscious is the powerhouse that operates beyond our conscious awareness. It's where the memories of all that's happened in our lives – both good and bad – are stored, along with our attitudes and beliefs that have built up over time. One of its main jobs is to keep a lookout for potential threats so it can keep us

safe. This is why, when we're faced with a problem, it may throw up all sorts of doubts and fears through our conscious mind that say: *look out! It's too risky. You can't do that.* And so on.

But what matters, and this is important from the point of view of smoothing away our worries, is that our subconscious simply **accepts** any information it's given by our conscious mind. What this means is that if we can replace the worry-type thoughts in our conscious mind with more upbeat thoughts, we can reprogram our subconscious to adopt constructive attitudes and beliefs that serve us more effectively.

### **THE POWER OF OUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND**

The subconscious also has an amazing capacity to draw into our lives solutions to the problems we're facing.

When I was growing up, I remember someone saying to me: *be careful what you wish for.* It was the first time I'd heard that old adage and it puzzled me at the time. *Why did I need to be careful?* All my wishes were for things that would bring great happiness.

At that young age, I thought of the word 'wish' in a make-believe way, simply wanting all my dreams to come true. And in one sense, that still applies.

But decades later, after reading hundreds of books and articles about stress management, listening to as many seminars about the topic, and most importantly, experiencing life's ups and downs, I saw that old adage in a different light.

What I hadn't appreciated all those years ago is that anything we constantly focus our minds on – whether it's positive or negative – can be thought of as a wish.

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Our subconscious is a truly phenomenal part of our being. It has the ability to **attract** into our lives all sorts of ideas, solutions, people and situations that are in harmony with our dominant thoughts and feelings. Whatever we dwell on in our conscious mind tends to grow. The more we think about something, the more it affects how we feel and behave, and the more likely it will manifest itself in one way or another in our lives. It really is quite extraordinary, and is why we have to be very careful about what we allow into our minds and what we think about.

Have you ever had the experience where you've been faced with a problem and not known what to do, and you asked yourself over and over again: *how can I solve this, how can I solve this?* Then sometime later, apparently out of nowhere...ping...the perfect solution just popped into your head? Well, that's your subconscious at work.

In order to overcome our troubles and worries, we need to switch our conscious thoughts to something more constructive, and as we do this, we begin to get ideas about how we can overcome difficulties we previously thought were impossible.

### **CAUSE AND EFFECT**

The law of cause and effect states that for every outcome, there's a cause, i.e. everything happens for a reason. We are where we are now as a result of things that have happened in the past. But what's not always appreciated is that our thoughts and feelings, as well as our behaviour, upbringing and the experiences we've had, influence the outcomes in our lives. And arguably, our thoughts are the most important influence of all.

What happens is that our thoughts affect both our feelings (i.e. our emotional state) and our behaviour, and ultimately the outcomes in our lives. In fact, our thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all part of

a cybernetic loop; that is to say, they are all connected, which means a change in any one of them creates a change in the other two.

Have you ever had the experience where you were so worried about something that it really dragged you down and you were just not able to do anything? You felt totally demoralised and unable to take any action to sort out the problem you were facing. Maybe a friend or close family member then suggested you go out for a few hours for a bit of light relief, and perhaps reluctantly, you agreed to go. Then after a while, you started to feel a bit brighter and things didn't seem quite so bad. Or maybe that friend talked through the problem with you and you suddenly realised there was a way forward you hadn't seen before. You immediately felt much better and were motivated to take action to sort things out.

Prior to the intervention of your friend, your thoughts, feelings and actions (or lack of actions) were just going around and around in a self-perpetuating loop getting nowhere. You were so worried about the problem you were facing, you felt really down. And the more down you felt, the less able you were to take any action to solve the problem. And when you didn't take any action, it caused you to worry even more. And so, it went on. But when you were obliged to do something different, or to start thinking about the problem in a different way, that cycle was broken. When the cycle was broken, you started to see your worries in a different light.

This is just a very simple example of two things:

- First, it demonstrates cause and effect, i.e. how your thoughts affect your feelings, your feelings affect your behaviour, and your behaviour affects the outcomes in your life.
- Secondly, it illustrates how you can break the worry cycle by thinking, feeling or acting differently.

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The downside with this particular example, however, is that you can't always rely on the intervention of a friend or family member, and also, the positive effect of this sort of intervention is often short-lived. What's needed is a better understanding of how this cycle works, so you yourself can intervene effortlessly, each and every time, to stop the worrying thoughts, prevent the gloomy feelings and instigate more constructive actions to deal with the problems you're facing...and to do all this so that it has a lasting, uplifting effect.

### **MIND AND BODY**

Recent scientific discoveries have shown that the brain and the body interact very closely with each other via powerful electrochemical signals. If you have worrying or fearful thoughts, your brain triggers the production of chemicals that make you feel worried or fearful. But it doesn't stop there. Your brain continues to monitor how your body is feeling. If it registers via chemical feedback that you are feeling worried, it will generate more worrying thoughts which in turn produce more chemicals that harmonise with your worried physical and emotional state. This results in your mind and body becoming synchronised so that you start to feel the way you think, and think the way you feel in a self-perpetuating loop.

Over time, your mind and body get into the habit of thinking and feeling in the same way. So, if a new worry is triggered, they recognise the signs from before. They immediately tune in and synchronise by repeating and reinforcing the same cycle of worried thoughts and feelings. This, then, has a knock-on effect in terms of the actions you choose to take (or not take) to deal with the problems you're facing, and as a result, the outcomes you experience.

There is, however, light at the end of the tunnel. In the same way that your brain triggers the production of chemicals that make you feel worried when you have worrying thoughts, it can also trigger chemicals that make you feel happy or peaceful if you have happy or relaxing thoughts. What this means is that you can break the worry habit by changing the content of your thoughts and feelings.

### **CHANGE IN FOCUS**

The key is to switch your thoughts from what you don't want (the worry) to what you do want (the ideal outcome). We will cover exactly how to do this in the next two chapters.

As you start to focus your thoughts on the ideal outcome, your brain triggers the production of chemicals that make you feel more hopeful and upbeat. This in turn encourages more upbeat thoughts, which reinforce the upbeat feelings, and so the cycle continues.

At the same time, your subconscious recognises that you're now focusing on something different, and so gets to work finding a solution to the problem you're facing. New ideas pop into your conscious mind that would previously have been filtered out by your deep-seated attitudes and beliefs. You become aware of all sorts of opportunities and choices you didn't notice before. And most importantly, you start to realise you have skills and qualities you thought you didn't have. Together, these things create a new understanding of yourself and the world around you, enabling you to overcome the difficulties in your life rather than being overwhelmed by your doubts and fears.

These things also affect your behaviour, because you're then motivated to take different sorts of action to resolve the problems you're facing. And when this happens, you start to see real, positive change manifest itself in your external life, leading to more favourable outcomes.

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This isn't make-believe; it's a manifestation of how the mind and body work together. What is in fact happening is that when you change your thoughts and feelings, and synchronise the two, you are 'vibrating' at a different level and so are open to new possibilities in your life.

The more you focus on **what you want** rather than on your worries, and the more you start thinking and feeling in terms of what you **can do** rather than what you can't do, you set up a force field of energy that draws new ideas and solutions into your conscious mind. This motivates you to **take action** to resolve the problems you're facing, which in turn moves you in the direction you want to go.

There are some wonderful benefits to taking this approach. First, you discover that your worst fears seldom materialise; as they say, the anticipation is often worse than the event itself. Second, if something awful does happen, more often than not, you find you can deal with it. Third, your self-confidence starts to grow as you realise you can handle difficulties that would previously have immobilised you. Fourth, your creativity, problem-solving abilities and decision-making skills all improve.

And finally, you become calm and more relaxed because you know, deep down inside, you can deal effectively with whatever problems come your way.

By thinking, feeling and behaving differently, your troubles and worries no longer weigh you down or hold you back.

### **BUT I'VE TRIED TO STOP WORRYING BEFORE AND IT DIDN'T WORK**

Now you may be thinking: *that's all very well, but I've tried to stop worrying in the past, and it just doesn't work.* Well, it likely didn't work for one of two reasons.

If you've always worried, your mind and body will have got into a certain way of thinking and feeling that kicks in automatically when you're concerned about something. Because this happens on a subconscious level, you don't even realise what's going on; it seems as though it's just the way it is. So, when you try 'not to worry' without fully appreciating what's happening under the surface, it feels like it's impossible to change.

Added to this is the fact that you – like all of us – have deep-seated attitudes and beliefs about yourself and the world around you that influence the way you think and feel about things. If many of these beliefs are negative, they reinforce the tendency to worry. Because they're operating on a subconscious level, you don't realise the powerful, adverse effect they're having.

But when you start to understand how the mind and body work together, as well as recognising any deep-seated beliefs you have that may be holding you back, you can start to change the way you deal with the problems in your life and get some relief from your troubles and worries.

I'm mindful that we've covered a lot of new ground in this chapter, so if it doesn't make perfect sense, just accept that for now. It will become clearer as time goes on.

### **KEY POINTS**

1. Even though it may not feel like it right now, you can choose the thoughts in your conscious mind, whether they're worry-type thoughts or more upbeat thoughts.
2. All sorts of deep-seated attitudes and beliefs are stored in your subconscious mind. If they're negative, they can create powerful doubts and worries that affect how you think, feel and behave, and ultimately, the outcomes you experience in your life.

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3. Because any negative attitudes and beliefs have become deeply ingrained over time, you often don't even notice them, nor appreciate the impact they are having. The good news is you can learn to become aware of them and how they may be holding you back.
4. The conscious mind is the part of your mind over which you have direct control. It can reason, make choices, accept or reject any information that comes your way, and is also the channel through which you can communicate directly with your subconscious.
5. In contrast, the subconscious is the powerhouse that operates beyond your conscious awareness. It's where the memories of all that's happened in your life are stored, along with attitudes and beliefs that have built up over time. One of its main jobs is to keep a lookout for potential threats so it can keep you safe, which is why, when you're faced with a problem, it may throw up all sorts of doubts and fears through your conscious mind that say: *look out! It's too risky. You can't do that.* However, it also has an amazing capacity to draw into your life solutions to the problems you're facing.
6. The subconscious simply accepts any information it's given by the conscious mind, which means if you can replace the worry-type thoughts in your conscious mind with more constructive thoughts, you can reprogram the subconscious to adopt constructive attitudes and beliefs that serve you more effectively.
7. Recent scientific discoveries have shown that the brain and the body interact very closely with each other via powerful electro-chemical signals. If you have worrying or fearful thoughts, your brain triggers the production of chemicals that make you feel worried or fearful. Conversely, it can also trigger chemicals that make you feel happy or peaceful if you have happy or relaxing

thoughts. What this means is that you can break the worry habit by changing your thoughts and feelings.

8. Your thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all part of a cybernetic loop, which means they are all connected. A change in any one of them creates a change in the other two. As you start to adopt more constructive thoughts in your conscious mind, this has a positive knock-on effect emotionally, physically and behaviourally, leading to more satisfactory outcomes.
9. The key is to switch your thoughts from what you don't want (the worry) to what you do want (the ideal outcome). This has the effect of causing you to feel more upbeat, and new ideas about how to solve your problems (that would previously have been filtered out by your deep-seated attitudes and beliefs) pop into your head. You're then motivated to take action to resolve these difficulties, leading to more favourable outcomes.

### **QUESTIONS**

In order to help you become more aware of any deep-seated attitudes and beliefs that may be generating doubts and worries in your mind, and holding you back, I recommend answering the questions below. They are designed to help bring any underlying negative beliefs out into the open, so you become more aware of them, how they trigger doubt and worry, and how they're affecting your life.

A belief is simply something you consider to be true, and includes things like the perceptions you have of yourself and other people, how you view the world around you, and how you view different aspects of life such as family, friends/social skills, romance, work/career, money and health.

If you're like the rest of us, you will probably have a blend of both positive and negative beliefs about these things, so don't be tempted

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to write down just the good points! And please don't record attitudes or beliefs that you feel you ought to have. Be honest with yourself, because that's the only way you will become consciously aware of what you really believe in important areas of your life.

I suggest spending 20-30 minutes jotting down the answers that come into your mind, then leave it for a few days before coming back to add any further thoughts. Often different ideas come into your mind if you give your subconscious time to think things over. It's important to write (or type) out your answers as fully as you can rather than just mulling them over in your head, because writing helps clarify your thoughts and gives you greater insight.

Keep in mind, there are no right or wrong answers. The key is just to get a better understanding of any negative beliefs that may be causing you to doubt or worry. Your answers will then provide a benchmark you can use to monitor your progress going forward.

- 1a What do you believe about yourself? (E.g. What are your qualities and perceived shortcomings? What do you believe you can and can't do? Do you believe you are a worthy person? If not, why not?)
- 1b Have any of your beliefs about yourself caused you to worry or have doubts about what you can do? If so, in what way?
- 2a What do you believe about other people? (E.g. What are the qualities and shortcomings of other people? Do your beliefs vary if you're thinking about total strangers, authority figures, work colleagues, family members, romantic partners or friends? If so, how?)

- 2b Have any of your beliefs about other people caused you to worry or have doubts about yourself? If so, in what way? (E.g. Do you believe that someone who has spent longer in full-time education than you is more capable? Do you consider that people who have a higher salary are more successful?)
- 3a How do you view the world around you and life in general? (E.g. Do you see the world as a safe or a dangerous place? Why do you say that? Is life filled with opportunities or problems? Is it a challenge or a breeze? In what way?)
- 3b Have any of your beliefs about the world and life in general caused you to worry? If so, in what way?
- 4a Are there any areas of your life that you are worried about? If so, which ones? (E.g. Family, friends/social skills, romance, work/career, money and health.)  
For each area of your life that you are worried about, ask yourself the following questions:
- 4b What do you believe about <area of life>?
- 4c How have your beliefs about <area of life> caused you to worry?