

Living At
The Bottom of the Ocean

CURING EMOTIONAL MELTDOWNS

& COMING ALIVE!

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Introduction

This text was in manuscript stage at the time of Dr. Schnarch's unexpected and sudden passing. It should be taken as an unfinished draft. Not only will you be reading Dr. Schnarch's writing with grammatical errors and mistakes, it must be read as a non-finalized piece of work. The ideas, teachings and characters are his own that he worked to convey but they do not represent what may have been his final, published work. Therefore, what you take from this book should reflect that understanding. Nothing presented in this book can or shall be held or used against the estate of Dr. David Schnarch or his family, the Marriage and Family Health Center or the Crucible Institute.

Have you ever felt you were sinking into a pit of worthlessness or drowning in your feelings? Or suddenly become flipped-out angry? Of all maladies plaguing humankind today and throughout history, regressions probably top the list. Regressions are a temporary or long-term reduction in your ability to think straight and control your emotions due to a shift in brain function.

In popular terms, a regression is when you “lose it, emotionally” and you start ranting, yelling, and going on and on. You may know this as “having a tantrum.” Your emotional reactivity dramatically increases. You can suddenly go from stable to full-bore spitting-angry in the blink of an eye. If you’re very regressed, you start throwing things or lashing out at your spouse, kids or friends. But the dark truth about “blind rage” is that you’re secretly aiming.

Regressions also show up as “spaghetti brain,” where the accuracy of your thoughts and perceptions diminish or veer off-topic. Your deductive logic evaporates to where you can’t see what’s going on right in front of you. You can be “dumbfounded,” or “left speechless,” or “at a loss for words.”

There isn’t a person who hasn’t had a regression. The vast majority of us have lots of them. For some of us, it’s the number one problem shaping our lives. It’s also when lots of people lose their lives. Instances of domestic violence, murder, assault and police brutality often involve someone who is regressed.

People of all ages have regressions. It’s so commonplace for young children to regress when they don’t get what they want or drop their ice cream cone, that you probably see this as “just being a kid.” Regressions are more obvious in adults because they involved unexpected behavior.

Both men and women suffer from regressions. Regressions transcend race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, geography, marital status, economics, and social strata. Regressions probably cause the greatest loss of human resources and waste of human potential. They vastly contribute to human suffering.

You probably have first-hand experience with regressions, although you may not have known it at the time. Maybe it’s a vivid memory of your parent suddenly getting rageful and slapping you across the face. Or perhaps you found yourself shrieking at your kid when she spilt her milk.

If you are reading this book, you want to understand regressions better, perhaps in yourself or maybe someone else. You also probably want better ways to handle the resulting loss of emotional control and clear thinking. In the following chapters, you'll find practical information, vivid vignettes, and effective solutions to help you.

This book can help several ways

It's enormously helpful to know you're not crazy. Regressions are not "mental illness" in the traditional sense. You could even argue regressions are "normal" because everyone has them. You don't have to be a lunatic to have regressions, but when you're regressed, you're likely to act like one. Regressions are dysfunctional when they occur and debilitating if they happen frequently.

Regressions are shifts in how your brain operates. They are actual events inside your brain. They aren't just feelings. Knowing this helps, but it's not enough. Knowledge alone won't stop regressions while they're occurring or keep them from happening in the future.

People who struggle with frequent regressions are often demoralized because they can't stop them. They are despondent because most people's spontaneous efforts are rarely successful. On top of that, the things they do when they're regressed often create secondary problems that become significant too.

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean provides solutions for dealing with *acute regressions* while they're happening. I'll lay out the process of getting out of a regression while you're completely regressed—when you're "living at the bottom of the ocean."

Recognizing you're regressed is a huge deal in itself, so I'll show you how to do it. We'll also cover how to reduce your likelihood of future acute regressions.

There's a good chance you're regressed right now

Acute regressions are shocking obvious (at least to other people) moment-to-moment events. But another form of regression is virtually invisible. So much so, you could be regressed right now as you read this book, and not know it. You may be reading this book because you're dealing with someone who has acute regressions--and never suspect that you could be regressed too.

Not all regressions involve *acute* shifts in brain function. Long-term *steady state* regressions can last a lifetime. Your brain can remain in an ongoing state of "low mode" suppressed functioning for decades. Long enough that people mistake your impaired functioning for a true measure of your intellectual and emotional resources, which are often much higher. You can be regressed so long that you and other people only know you in your regressed state.

Steady-state regressions are often mistaken for being dumb, inept, "flighty," or having Asperger's Syndrome, "high-level autism," or learning disabilities. Resolving steady-state regressions is a process in itself, and I'll show you how to this. I'll guide you and point out the common pitfalls so you can handle them effectively.

We're not hopelessly damaged people

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean is based on my previous book, *Brain Talk*. That's where you'll find the scientific basis and supporting references for what you read here, including a hundred pages summarizing over four hundred cutting-edge brain research articles. Rather than having to say it all here, I've already laid the foundation for this book in *Brain Talk*. This allows *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* to be easy reading and focused on practical solutions from cover to cover.

My clients tend to be troubled people from unimaginably bad homes. They often grew up watching family members say and do terrible things that induced *traumatic mind-mapping*. Traumatic mind-mapping occurs when you figure out how someone else's mind works, and this is so upsetting, it traumatizes your *mind* and impacts your *brain*.

In conventional terms, my clients are the most "screwed up." the hardest to treat and the least likely to change. Most failed in prior treatment. I'm genuinely delighted when my clients identify their regressions. I see this as their first true opportunity to change their lives. Many say, "So *that's* why I think and feel like I do!"

In three decades as a therapist, I've seen miracles. I've also seen and heard about the worst in people. But I don't get dismayed by the terrible things I encounter because most of my clients get better. For better and worse, all of us are affected by our interpersonal experiences because our brains continually rewire themselves as a result. I've observed how negative experiences change people's minds and brains. And I've

discovered these can be improved and lives regained. We are not helpless captives to unfortunate experiences that occur throughout our lives.

It's remarkable--but not surprising--how the human brain can repair itself and overcome negative experiences. If you think things are overwhelming or traumatizing now, imagine life a million years ago. If the human brain couldn't repair itself from *horrible* experiences, we would not have evolved into the most adaptable animal on the planet.

New ways to resolve regressions

Conceptually speaking, this book is about *interpersonal neurobiology*: how selfhood, your mind, relationships and brain function are entirely intertwined. However, this kind of abstract left-brain thinking won't help you stop your regressions. "Insight" doesn't sufficiently resolve interpersonal trauma.

In contrast, the graphic depictions and revisualizations in *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* can help you manage your regressions and control your life. It offers powerful new right-brain methods to resolve the negative impacts of growing up with "difficult" people. Acute and steady-state regressions are often the result of subtle interpersonal trauma.

Bad things happen in dark places

The methods described in *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* can help resolve sexual abuse, in particular. Sexual abuse most often occurs via traumatic mind mapping

rather than through reportable physical behavior. But whether you've experienced sexual abuse or not, this book offers you a chance to become a better, smarter, and more emotionally stable person than you ever thought possible.

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean describes a number of negative interpersonal experiences. Visualizing my clients' unhappy stories allows you to learn things that can change your life. Their vignettes frequently involve shock, dismay, disappointment and heartache. They often depict people being darker than socially-accepted stereotypes.

But *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* is far from pessimistic. I think looking at people's dark side is an *optimistic* viewpoint. Glossing over people's glaring shortcomings is the hallmark of *pessimism*. Only the best in us acknowledges the worst in us, because the worst in us lies about its own existence. Count on this book speaking to the best in you.

I've learned dark humor is appropriate and helpful when you're facing dark human interactions. The title and theme of *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* reflect my belief. This book provides lots of opportunities to laugh at yourself. I'll help you with an occasional tweak to not to take yourself too seriously.

You'll also be able to commiserate with the rest of us who ruefully acknowledge our shortcomings. I've had more than my fair share of regressions in my life. And, it isn't pretty when I'm screaming to make my point, while simultaneously proving this is no time to take me seriously!

Resolving regressions is not easy. If I told you I boiled the solution down to three easy steps, would you believe me? No! You might still buy this book because you'd like to believe in fairy tales. *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* is not the "Mary Poppins approach to regressions." If that's what you want, this book is not for you.

But if you are ready to make a serious effort to control your regressions, *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* offers effective, no-nonsense, no-fooling-around, time-tested solutions. But Mary Poppins was right that a little bit of sugar (and humor) makes the medicine go down easier.

The good news

I want to convey an encouraging attitude, rooted in knowing how difficult resolving regressions can be. *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* offers a realistically-difficult course of action for seemingly intractable problems. I don't apologize for this. It gives this book credibility. I can sum up my attitude about this in a single sentence: *You don't need a solution that's easy or convenient, you just need something that works!*

I've treated regressions for over twenty years, but only recently have I started teaching other therapists how I do this. I've waited two decades to disclose these powerful methods of Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy because I needed to convince myself they were effective. I'm a natural skeptic (including of my own work), so I needed a lot of convincing.

Now I know it's possible to fundamentally change how you think, feel and behave. Core change that holds up under difficult, stressful circumstances. Even changes

in how you look. What you'll learn here does not cure everything, but you'll be amazed by how much it can help you throughout your life.

Here's what I've come to cherish most about the process of resolving regressions: I get to see the best in people stand up. For me, this far outweighs the negatives of hearing people's terrible experiences. It keeps me optimistic about human nature—but not naïve.

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean celebrates the triumphs of the human spirit (mind), and our magnificent brain's ability to heal itself. Resolving regressions is a respect-worthy effort to live a better life. Applying *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* can bring peace of mind and peace in bed. That's how it's worked for my clients, and I'm hopeful it can happen for you too.

Your inner mental world impacts the people around you. We impact each other's brains with our minds—how we feel and think—and not just simply through our actions. Cleaning up your inner mental world reduces your regressions, and makes you a safer person to be around. It's the kindest thing you can do for the people you love.

May you find peace of mind, brain and body. That's the gift you can give everyone else. Make this your children's inheritance. Make it your contribution to the better world we all want to inhabit.

Dr. David Schnarch
Evergreen, Colorado
New Year's, 2020

SECTION ONE: LIVING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN

Chapter 1: You're Not Having Feelings, You're Drowning in Them!

Elizabeth couldn't believe how bad she felt. She was drowning in her worthlessness, feeling like trash. She was hideous and disgusting, the lowest of low-life scum. Unfit to take up space on the face of the earth. She just wanted to disappear instantaneously to escape her torturous mind.

“How could you be so stupid to think Dennis really cared about you?! You know everyone is going to think you failed! You couldn't keep your marriage together! You weren't enough woman to keep your man from straying! Now your son grows up without a father! How are you going to explain this to your mother?! She's going to die of embarrassment!!”

The previous day, Elizabeth was fine. That morning, however, she thought about what people might think about her for getting a divorce. Elizabeth's emotional stability and well-being suddenly evaporated! She could feel it in her body. She got a familiar unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach, and her heart began to race. Elizabeth felt like she was sinking into the abyss, into an emotional hole she couldn't escape. Lots of people experience what Elizabeth was going through. You might be one of them or partnered with someone who does.

I met Elizabeth when she and her husband, Dennis, came to see me for their marital problems. Like many couples, Elizabeth and Dennis argued over differences in

sexual desire, parenting styles and spending habits. On top of this, Dennis complained about Elizabeth's excessive emotionality. Elizabeth countered that Dennis often drove her out of her mind—and then told her she was insane! Dennis admitted to thinking she was high strung and overly emotional. But in truth, Dennis thought Elizabeth was a crazy person, and he didn't hesitate to tell her so when they argued.

Elizabeth didn't like to admit that she secretly thought Dennis was right. As far as she was concerned, she was a fruit cake. A nut case. A lunatic. That was the only way she could make sense of her overwhelming emotions and sudden changes in mood.

According to her prior therapists, Elizabeth was a “borderline personality disorder,” referring to DSM-V and ICD-10 diagnostic criteria. Generally, this means you are emotionally unstable, highly dependent and prone to emotional meltdowns. In case you don't know, it's not a promising diagnosis.

I've helped lots of people who had severe emotional crashes all their lives finally get them under control. I love doing this because of the benefits that ripple throughout their lives. Regardless of how long you've had these problems or how severe they've been, my experience as a therapist says you've got a good chance this can happen for you too. I don't underestimate how much work this takes, and I won't tell you that it's easy. But I'm optimistic because I know it's doable and I've seen many people get better.

Do you have emotional meltdowns?

Emotional meltdowns come in many forms. I just described how they look and feel when you're caving in. Feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing eat you alive. You

want to withdraw from everyone. You feel depressed, hopeless and just want to give up. It's like you're just falling apart.

But there are other forms of “coming unglued.” I’m referring to shocking emotional outbursts of anger or frustration entirely disproportional with the gravity of the situation. These seemingly unwarranted negative responses occur as verbal tirades of angry speech, shouting, recriminations and sometimes crying and wailing. Hysterical ranting and loud obnoxious screaming are often accompanied by wild gesticulations, dramatic flailing limbs, feet stamping, and whining. In some cases, this involves biting, hitting, clawing, and other physically violent behavior.

These emotional meltdowns are often precipitated by someone else’s (or one’s own) foolish, short-sighted or neglectful actions. Usually you identify someone else as the culprit who triggered your meltdown. Your wounded pride makes you stubbornly and defiantly resist “the culprit’s” attempts to placate you. You may not calm down even if your original goals or objections are met.

Sound familiar? Everyone has these experiences once in a while, regardless of age or gender. Many people have them under extreme stress, particularly when they’re emotionally distressed.

Some people call what I’m describing a conniption or hissy fit, particularly when they’re trying to trivialize female anger. But besides their pejorative connotation, these terms are too narrow to encompass what I’m describing because they emphasize feelings of narcissistic entitlement.¹ They don’t consider the sinking-into-worthlessness

“quicksand reaction” people like Elizabeth have. On the surface, these two reactions couldn’t be more different. But what they have in common is the experience of “drowning in your feelings.”

It’s time to take a broader and more sophisticated view of common problems dealing with emotions. This comes, in part, from realizing how “drowning in your feelings” is a widespread experience. It also stems from new cutting-edge brain science that gives additional options to people who’ve approached these problems more conventionally.

Are you a nut case?

Elizabeth had been seeing therapists ever since she was a troubled adolescent and her parents shipped her off to a shrink. Initially, her therapist diagnosed her as a teenage girl having melodramatic meltdowns triggered by her insecurities. Her boyfriend, the first one she had sex with, had just broken up with her. Her crying episodes lasted for hours, filled with excruciating self-condemnation, hating her body, and feeling desperate to get back with him. Likewise, Elizabeth’s feeling down and depressed was dismissed as expected among teenagers.

In therapy, Elizabeth talked about feeling ugly and not liking her parents or their marriage. Her therapist listened empathically. Elizabeth felt better from talking to someone. Elizabeth’s parents chalked up her meltdowns to her being a moody adolescent. As far as everyone were concerned, treatment was successful.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. When Elizabeth went off to college, her functioning declined. When her next boyfriend broke up with her, she couldn't get over it. She would pull herself together and start to do OK. But if something reminded Elizabeth of him, she was suddenly overwhelmed with terrible feelings of worthlessness, being unlovable, and desperately needing him.

After college Elizabeth's relationships didn't improve. Her major shortcoming was her inability to control her feelings. Elizabeth was highly reactive and emotionally labile. Once she got upset, she stayed upset. She had great difficulty calming herself down. Elizabeth went through wave upon wave of exhausting emotional crashes. Lots of thoughts of suicide and sobbing calls to her current therapist. In her blackest darkest moments, Elizabeth cut her wrist, seeking to distract herself from her tormenting inner mental world.

Elizabeth's anxieties and insecurities drove her into and out of relationships. She ran to other people for reassurance when she was upset. Her emotional neediness made it taxing to be with her. She was too ready to perceive other people as rejecting her.

Elizabeth's relationships with men tended to be superficial and short-lived. The sexual side was a big problem. She never really enjoyed it and mostly did it for the attention. When she was dating, Elizabeth made efforts to present herself as sexually interested and exciting. In her few relationships that lasted more than six months, Elizabeth eventually lost sexual interest. Although she was heterosexual, her friendships with women weren't much better.

Just when Elizabeth was ready to give up on ever marrying and having children, she met Dennis. During their courtship, Dennis seemed like an answer to her prayers. He was attentive, good looking, charming, and they talked for hours. In Elizabeth's view, Dennis swept her off her feet—which didn't consider her difficulty maintaining her own emotional stability. Dennis' interest in sex and intimacy cooled off as their wedding approached, but Elizabeth wrote this off to wedding jitters.

Within the first year of marriage, sex dropped to several times a year. As their marriage progressed, Dennis and Elizabeth rarely talked, and when they did, it often ended in arguments. Elizabeth's emotional meltdowns increased. Her disappointments and frustrations regularly surfaced in criticizing Dennis, who responded with extended angry withdrawals. They thought perhaps having a child together might improve their connection, but as is usually the case it didn't. Instead, Elizabeth and Dennis settled into an unsatisfying marriage of convenience mainly focused on raising their son, Paul.

After twenty years of marriage, Elizabeth and Dennis were on the verge of divorce. She made the appointment with me for both of them for marital counseling. In our initial session, things started going downhill at the first sign of conflict. Dennis began to act like he was arguing with a hand grenade that might explode. And predictably, Elizabeth erupted when she saw Dennis relate to her like that.

Elizabeth despaired of ever getting herself together. Previous boyfriends left because they couldn't put up with her emotional crashes. She often felt entitled to these crashes because of how she felt they treated her. Now, with her marriage on the rocks,

Elizabeth's emotional meltdowns were getting worse. They were lasting longer. She was sinking lower and finding it more difficult to recover. Elizabeth was getting worn out by her own emotional volatility.

Are you high functioning but impaired?

“Drowning in feelings” can take many other forms. For instance, when a different client, Stephan, was drowning, he couldn't believe how stupid other people were! He'd get fed up with the gross incompetence of his co-workers and staff! As far as he was concerned, they had no perspective on troubling situations as they arose! No understanding of what was going wrong! Everything fell on *his* shoulders to see potential problems before they got bad. In his own eyes, Stephan's biggest fault was being willing to say what true, regardless of the consequences. It wasn't his fault that people want to shoot the messenger when they don't like the message.

Stephan didn't see how he expected everyone to see things *his* way. Said differently, Stephan controlled the people around him through the “problems” he saw that no one else did (or didn't evaluate the way he did). It wasn't just that Stephan had a king-sized sense of entitlement and superiority. Stephan had a serious problem with acute regressions.

When Stephan regressed, he became obsessed with the “problems” he saw. He became adamant when his warnings (i.e., what he wanted) weren't taken seriously. As far as he was concerned, his ensuing emotional meltdown was perfectly understandable. Who wouldn't go out of his mind watching incompetent people, who you have to depend

on, do such STUPID THINGS!! Of course, he was upset!! Not being upset would mean he didn't see what was going on, just like everyone else!

When Stephan was regressed, he approached his upset-of-the-moment like an act of integrity. A badge of courage. He never backed down—meaning he never took a second look at what he was doing. It never dawned on him that he could be wrong about what he was upset about. Or that what he was upset about wasn't the most important thing.

Stephan just figured he was smarter than most people. He went to medical school. He had his calm medical demeanor down pat. He was a surgeon. He knew how to keep a lid on his emotions. He thought he was better at detecting and solving problems than most people. It's what he did for a living.

The problem was this picture wasn't accurate. Stephan lost his temper all the time. His support staff was afraid of him, and other doctors tolerated him. Stephan acknowledged sometimes he got carried away and went too far in what he said. He dressed down several medical students and reduced them to tears. When the Medical Chief of Staff approached him about this, he agreed his bedside manner and attitude could stand improvement. But Stephan never acknowledged he often lost control of himself and his "medical professional" coolness evaporated.

When Stephan lost his temper, you didn't want to be on the receiving end. It was quite a pounding. When Stephan *really* lost his temper, he acted like he was in the middle

of a fight he needed to win at all costs. He wielded his anger like a sword and methodically cut his victim to bits. He was cold, organized, brutal, and cruel.

On the surface, Elizabeth (who I introduced earlier) and Stephan couldn't be more different. He was a doctor, and she was a patient. She barely made it through college, whereas he breezed through medical school and residency. Stephan was a licensed physician and board-certified surgeon, who drove a Porsche 911 Carrera GTS. Elizabeth never attempted a career and married young because she couldn't handle the stress of a 9 to 5 job. She drove a twelve-year-old "soccer mom" car headed for the junkyard. She had an unpromising diagnosis, and he was a well-known professional. He thought he had all the answers, and she thought she had none. Stephan thought he was better than most people. Elizabeth thought she was beneath contempt.

But if you look below the surface, you'll discover similarities that can revolutionize your view of the world and everyone in it. It's amazing how people who have serious emotional impairments can hold responsible jobs. They often occupy leadership positions in business, government and civic life. In fact, they may be extraordinarily creative and productive. They can be outstanding entrepreneurs who become incredibly wealthy. Extreme impairments are no barrier to making lots of money—in some cases, they seem to facilitate it.

Some of my clients are tough businessmen known for making things happen. In so doing, they make profitable things happen for those around them. Even though other people don't like my clients' style, they put up with them because they like the secondary

benefits. Their wives, for instance, have opportunities to travel and volunteer for community causes. They have hired staff to run their homes, resources to entertain family and friends, and expensive hobbies or boutique businesses. Stephan's wife, Anne Marie, had all these advantages. And like lots of trophy wives, Anne Marie didn't want to have sex with Stephan for multiple reasons.

When Stephan was drowning in his feelings, he made waves for other people. A *tsunami* would be a more apt description. Stephan couldn't stop until other people were unhappy too. He took their unhappiness as a sign (1) they understood him, (2) they were taking his concerns seriously, and (3) they were treating him respectfully.

If you didn't get upset the way Stephan thought his concerns merited, then you were in for a tongue-lashing of beratements, disparagements and insults. He used whatever he knew about you and threw it back at you in the most hurtful ways possible. You knew Stephan *wanted* you to hurt. He was *aiming* for you, and he wanted you to know it. This was how Stephan organized himself when he was falling apart.

Regressions involve shifts in brain function

What do these vignettes about Elizabeth and Stephan have in common? They all involve someone having shifts in brain function. I call these changes *brain regressions*.

I'm not referring to "age regression" where you return to a prior point in your life. This differs from pediatrician Berry Brazelton's notion of "touchpoints," which posits an

unraveling (apparent set back) as children's brains transition to a higher level of functioning. I'm not referring to something positive.²

Regressions are periods of reduced cognitive and emotional functioning that produce no positive benefits to you or those around you.³ This reduced functioning can last for a moment or a lifetime. Virtually everyone has a short-term brain regression at some point. If you have them frequently and severely, they greatly diminish your life.⁴

What are regressions?

In their most recognizable form, regressions look like sudden brief dramatic reductions in cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal functioning. These episodes involve overwhelming emotions, increased perturbability, and decreased accuracy of perceptions and decision-making ability. Restrictions in your functioning can last for minutes, hours, or days at a time.

Because regressions involve shifts in brain function, symptoms occur as fast as the brain operates. They can come on suddenly with frightening speed. If you've ever been stunned by someone going from calm to raging with anger in the blink of an eye, you know what I mean.

Regressions surface as steep drops in cognitive functioning. When you're in a regression, your abilities can go up and down like a jet-powered roller coaster. I don't just mean minute to minute. I've seen people's cognitive functioning go up and down within a single sentence! One second you are thinking straight, and the next you're a lunatic talking as if you're making sense. The fact that you believe you are still making

sense is indicative of the problem. Just because you were making sense one sentence ago is no proof you aren't regressed now.

Regressions also show up as a sudden inability to regulate your emotions and feelings. People commonly think of their feelings as occurring in their gut (i.e., gut feelings) because that's how it feels. (E.g., *"I've had a belly full of you!"*) But one thing is clear: Although you may feel them in your gut, feelings occur in the brain.

Regressions show up as serious drops in your ability to think straight and control your emotions.

Your brain assigns meaning to your raw sensations and perceptions. Your emotions and feelings occur in your brain, and they are felt elsewhere. You experience the resulting impact in your mind and parts of your body to which your brain has direct connections. The longest nerve in your body, the *vagus nerve*, runs from your brain to your heart and gut. This is important because later we'll discuss how your feelings are tied to your brain states, rather than what's in your guts.

The primary symptom of a brain regression is difficulty keeping your emotions under control. One common form is someone erupting in anger. "Temper tantrum" is a common way of describing someone in an acute regression. Regressions are also commonly mislabeled "losing it" and "going on a rampage."

But not all regressions look like temper tantrums. Sometimes they look like dissolving into tears at the drop of a hat. This was more Elizabeth's style. This can

surface as sudden crushing feelings of inadequacy, shame, and worthlessness. Other times it can surface as anxiety attacks. If you have many acute regressions, other people may treat you like you're an emotional minefield that's ready to *explode* if they make one false step.

Take a moment to consider what (a) erupting in anger, (b) dissolving into tears, (c) acute anxiety attacks, and (d) overpowering feelings of worthlessness have in common. At first glance, they look like entirely different emotions. But in each case, you're being eaten alive by your own feelings. All four cases involve an inability to regulate your emotions.

What does it feel like to be regressed?

In an acute regression, you may experience:

1. Sudden unexpected shifts in mood—for example, suddenly feeling very sad for no apparent reason.
2. Thinking problems such as difficulty concentrating, tangential thoughts, and thought blockage.
3. Confusion, feeling dazed, spaced out, just floating. You may have a glazed look, staring into space.
4. Feeling disconnected from yourself. Observing your actions, feelings, and thoughts as if from a distance, or like you are watching a movie (“depersonalization”).
5. Feeling as though the world is distorted or unreal (“derealization”).

6. Feeling as if “darkness” has enveloped you.
7. Flashbacks or intrusive mental images of past traumatic experiences.

What did your parents look like when they regressed?

This is what acute regressions can *feel* like. But if you want to know what they *look* like, think back to the dinner table when you were growing up. That’s the easiest way to I’ve found to show what someone looks like when they are regressed. No doubt you’ve seen someone in your family “lose it” during a family dinner when you or your sibling knocked over a glass of milk. Common examples include:

- Angry outbursts from a parent. Sudden explosive raging anger.
- You or your sibling dissolving into tears. “Fragile” falling apart with anxiety.
- A military father dispensing “discipline.” Physical violence.
- One parent triggering the other parent’s emotional meltdown.

What did your parents look like when they regressed?

Elizabeth had a childhood memory that always bothered her. It was a vignette of her mother and father arguing at the table. Suddenly, her mother threw a glass of water in his face. Her father grabbed the glass and threw it against the wall, scattering pieces of glass everywhere! Elizabeth remembered bleeding on the carpet from stepping on a small shard her parents missed. She had to stop the bleeding herself because her parents continued to argue.

What do you look like when you are regressed?

Most people don't have to think back too far to remember times when someone they loved acted crazy, had a temper tantrum or didn't think straight. Emotionally committed relationships guarantee a front-row seat. There isn't a married person⁵ who hasn't seen his or her partner suddenly display illogical thinking and irrational behavior. Seeing this in yourself is a much tougher proposition.

Someone who is acutely regressed looks ugly and sends off unpleasant vibes. Their facial expression changes instantaneously in conjunction with changes in their brain state. Severely regressed people *look* different. But there's more to this than being physically and emotionally unattractive.

What do YOU look like when you are regressed?

The human brain detects other people's regressions, even if you don't know what you are picking up. A primitive alarm in your mind-mapping system goes off when someone else is regressed, the same way newborns protest when shown misshapen faces. Children detect their parent's regressions at early stages (so they can escape). Relationship partners learn to identify each other's regressions. You recognize your partner is "off" when he or she "gets that way."

How impaired can a high achiever be?

How impaired can you be if you can do your job, pay your bills, feed your kids, and balance your checkbook? Although less vivid (less recognizable), regressions can also include long-term suppressed cognitive and emotional functioning. So much so, that other people mistake your impaired functioning as your level of intelligence, ability or personality. You look dumber than you are. Many people live regressed for some portion of their lives. Some unknowingly spend their entire childhood and adult life in a long-term regression from which they never escape.

You can be a titan of industry and still have serious regressions

You can't be that impaired if you run a Fortune Five Hundred company, can you? Can you be the chairman of a too-big-to-fail bank if you have acute regressions? Or chancellor of a university? Or a world-class athlete? The answer in a word is: YES! Sure! You bet! If you can set up reasons why other people will take your bullying, you can build an operation that adapts to your acute regressions.

In Chapter Three, I'll tell you more about Stephan, his successful career, and his relationship with his wife, Anne Marie. We will follow them throughout this book, along with Elizabeth and Dennis. Stephan and Anne Marie were more successful by conventional standards and lived a more extravagant lifestyle. Stephan enjoyed a stellar reputation as a plastic surgeon. Who would think he had a serious problem keeping his brain in check?!

Some of my other clients are titans of industry, world-famous stars, government officials, and leaders in their fields. In the past, I might have joked that you could even be President of The United States and be living in a profound long-term regression! And your acute regressions might so terrify your advisors that they avoid briefing you on things you don't want to hear! Only today, sadly, it's no joke.⁶

Donald Trump is living proof (A) severely regressed people can even make it to the White House, but (B) under pressure, their cognitive and emotional functioning declines in frightening ways. When this occurs in a nation or a family, (C) the "Person in Charge" induces traumatic mind-mapping in the people for whom they are responsible.

Your brain creates your mind, and your mind maintains your brain

Your attitudes towards your feelings and emotions shape your ability to handle regressions. For many of us, our feelings are part of our identity. Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes said, "I think! therefore I am!"⁷ But for lots of us, it's "I *feel!* therefore I am!" This surfaces in modern culture as "being entitled to your feelings." The less stable you are as a person, the more you cling to your feelings as part of your identity and your "personal truth."

Regressions make you wonder about the purpose of feelings. Conventional wisdom looks at feelings as an expressive "pressure release." In other words, if you can't regulate your emotions, they express themselves as inappropriate laughing, uncontrollable crying, sinking into depression or blowing your top. This folk wisdom

lines up with some experts who propose feelings allow your mind, brain and body to maintain healthy homeostasis (stable equilibrium between interdependent elements).

However, homeostasis isn't necessarily a good thing. For instance, many children and adults maintain the homeostasis in their relationship with a highly dysfunctional parent, which can only exist as long as they themselves remain impaired. Likewise, traumatized people often have a cruel mental voice that attempts to maintain an unhealthy equilibrium in their inner mental world.

Since many people continue stable-but-dysfunctional emotional and relational patterns that are distinctly unhealthy, we need a more complex view of emotional functioning. We need to see it as resulting from the interaction of brain, mind, body *and relationships*. There's more going on than your brain, mind, and body maintaining their equilibrium. Very often, we're trying to keep someone else's inner mental world balanced too! Poor personal emotional functioning is often the result.⁸

Bowen's insight about emotions

Psychiatrist Murray Bowen, who invented differentiation theory in the 1960s, had a unique view of emotions. I find his viewpoint incredibly helpful in understanding regressions. Bowen focused on the physiological aspects of emotions at a time when other therapists emphasized their subjective experience and expression (catharsis, letting them out).

Bowen recognized emotions are largely a human affliction. Some feelings enrich our experiences and produce our greatest joys. But emotions often interfere with our

happiness, relationships, productivity and pleasure. Emotions impact how your brain, mind, and body function. Feelings can wear you out in many ways.

First and foremost, Bowen understood that emotions are physiological processes with concomitant felt experiences. There is nothing holy or sacred about your feelings, and it doesn't help when you think they are. You have to relinquish typical ways of relating to your emotions and feelings, because they interfere with getting your regressions under control.

Emotions are not just deeply felt subjective experiences. They are physiological processes that greatly influence your mind and your ability to function.

Bowen's view of anxiety is particularly relevant to regressions. Bowen saw anxiety as a mind-killer and destroyer of modulated functioning. After studying research on rat behavior in crowded conditions, civil riots, and the rise of dictators, Bowen concluded that:

- (A) anxiety is contagious. People's inability to regulate their own anxieties leads them to
- (B) become swept up in their emotions, and
- (C) engage in dysfunctional interactions with other people that
- (D) involve loss of individual self-control but
- (E) help them regulate their anxieties.

Bowen recognized how people relinquish personal responsibility and become part of a mob that acts out in antisocial ways because it reduces their individual anxieties.

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean looks at interpersonal regulation of anxiety two additional ways: One is regulating *other people's anxieties* (as well as your own) through your own emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The other is controlling other people to regulate *your own anxieties*. It is why I say, *people who can't control themselves control the people around them!*

When you are regressed, your ability to regulate your inner emotional world and your outward behavior evaporates quicker than spit in the desert. That's why it's difficult—but not impossible—to control your regressions. You have to manage your anxieties and emotions all by yourself—which is the equivalent of learning to spit when your mouth is dry.

Understanding regressions changes your world view

How you understand regressions dramatically influences your ability to handle them. That's why I'm focusing on your attitude towards your feelings and emotions. Let me give you another example:

If you have frequent regressions you probably have your own way of labeling them, and how you label them makes a difference. Perhaps you call them “being moody.” Or “being a highly sensitive person,” Or “crying too easily (being a ‘crybaby).” Or

“having a hair-trigger temper.” Or “bouts of depression.” Or, “you’re not a morning person.”

You probably label your regressions in ways that justify them or see them in the most favorable light. Likewise, you may experience your feelings during this time as terribly important or affirming your personal “truth.” Talk psychotherapy that helps you identify your feelings, label them, and then express them reaffirms the notion that your feelings are what’s important. Rarely do we label our regressions and approach our emotions in ways that help manage and reduce them.

Regression “scale”: Are you scaly, furry, or bare-skinned?

One way to comprehend regressions involves the triune brain model developed by neuroscientist Paul MacLean in the 1960s. He proposed your brain consists of three evolutionarily-distinct main parts: The back of your brain (brain stem) is called the *reptilian brain*, because we have this part in common with reptiles and amphibians. This is the location of your primal instincts and quick-responding “fight or flight” self-preserving actions, which initiates the release of neurochemicals throughout your body.

Your later-evolving mid-brain is known as the *mammalian brain* because we share this in common with all mammals. It is the site of your limbic system, which creates our experience of emotions and also releases chemicals in response to shocking or upsetting news.

The most recently evolved part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex in your forehead, is considered the uniquely *human brain*. It is the site of “executive processes,” like making decisions, rational thinking, solving problems and reasoning.

Murray Bowen used MacLean’s triune brain model when he developed differentiation theory. When I started treating regressions, I used the triune brain model too. Regressions involve the locus of control shifting from your *human brain* (prefrontal neocortex) to more primitive areas in the *mammalian* and *reptilian* brain. Your thoughts, feelings and actions become more reflexive and automatic, and less adaptable to the complex demands of everyday life. A million years ago, your survival chances increased if you went on a rampage when something triggered your fight-or-flight response. But, today, this regression diminishes the chances of your marriage or sex life surviving if it happens whenever your partner confronts you.

How regressed are you? Are you a scaly reptile, a fury warm-blooded mammal, or a bare-skinned human?

The triune brain model is a useful self-assessment tool when you are regressed. How badly regressed are you? A ten-point scale won’t help you when you’re stomping around issuing ultimatums. At times like that, you need something simple and concise. For many years, my clients found a single question helped them track their level of regression: Which part of your brain is currently determining your level of functioning?

Are you human, impaired-but-still-warm-blooded (mammal), or are you a full-blown cold-blooded, snapping and thrashing reptile?

How you understand regressions makes a difference

For a long time, this was the model I used to explain regressions. I described them as a shift in function from the prefrontal cortex (executive functions) to more primitive parts of the brain, either to the mammalian brain (emotional centers) or the reptilian brain (fight or flight response).

However, modern advances in brain-imaging demonstrate there is no such neat division in the brain. Primal, emotional and rational mental activities are the product of more than one brain region, and their collective operation creates the human experience. While the triune brain model provides a way of looking at the relationship between structure and function in the human brain, many neuroscientists have rejected it.

As my work progressed, I realized this model didn't help people control their regressions. It offered an intellectual conceptual explanation. For the most part, clients thought of "mammalian brain" and "reptilian brain" as concepts. Without realizing it, the triune brain model led them to approach treatment using the language-dominant left side of their brains. If they pictured anything, they visualized a picture of a human brain with different sections lighting up. This didn't seem particularly helpful, and I thought I knew why:

Working with my clients and studying brain research increasingly convinced me that regressions were a right-brain-dominant problem. I realized I needed to develop a

right-brain-dominant therapy using methods specifically designed to engage the functions located in the right brain hemisphere. I knew this meant treatment had to involve pictures and images rather than intangible concepts. The right-brain operates in images, whereas verbal language is a left-brain function. Treatment also needed to be visceral and vivid to further engage the right-brain.

Once I had a left-brain understanding of the *modus operandi* for an excellent right-brain therapy, I set off looking for content. Here's what my left brain knew:

1. Whatever image I was going to come up with had to be *simple*—something a severely regressed person could hold on to.
2. The picture also had to be *complex*. It had to be sophisticated because there could only be one image. Seriously regressed people can't handle a slide show when their brains and minds are falling apart.
3. The image I was looking for was actually a *system*. A picture of the interpersonal dynamics of regressions and how they worked.
4. This image had to be *useful*: It had to tell you what to do when you were at your worst.

So, I knew the solution I sought was *simple, complex, systemic and useful*. No small thing to come up with and this left-brain approach got me nowhere. It's not like you can google "simple, complex, systemic and useful" to come up with a good paradigm for psychotherapy.

Fortunately, my clients were a continual source of right-brain inspiration. Dealing with severely regressed people brings lots of images to mind, whether you're a therapist or an eight-year-old kid. I also interact with my clients through collaborative confrontation, and I have a pretty good sense of humor. Considering all this, it's not surprising that vivid visceral images continually come to my mind in the course of psychotherapy sessions.

Right-brain solutions for right-brain problems

I was in the middle of a challenging session with Elizabeth and Dennis when I realized I was repeating what I had said to other couples. Elizabeth was having a towering fit of rage, and Dennis was screaming back at her. Their arguments at home were escalating, and I was running out of good moves to make.

I looked at them and said, *"You are both so regressed, you have no idea how regressed you are! You are entirely underwater. You are both so far down, you are in the Mariana Trench! You're seven miles down! Down in the deepest, darkest part of the ocean that never sees the light of day! You are so regressed you're swimming with the Ugly Fish that make their own light! So regressed, neither of you seems to realize YOU are one of them!"*

Elizabeth and Dennis didn't know what to make of what I was saying at first. At the very least, now I had their attention. So, I continued, *there are no schools of fish in the Mariana Trench. It's too deep! No fish families! No friends! You are on your own! It's everyone for themselves! If another fish offers you sex in the Mariana Trench, you*

better eat it before it eats you!” Elizabeth and Dennis’ nervous laughter said they got what I was picturing.

Like I said, working with regressed people bring lots of images to my mind, I talk straight to my clients, and I have a sense of humor. My limited experience as a scuba diver was also showing up.

In the middle of treating regressions, I realized I had the right-brain solution I was seeking. I got there in a right-brain way. I had finally found the simple, complex, systemic and useful image I was looking for: *The Mariana Trench Model of Regressions*.

That’s how the theme of *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* came into being. It’s not just the title; it’s woven throughout this book. If you want to control your regressions, envisioning the Mariana Trench can help you in ways you can’t yet imagine.

You’re going to learn the Mariana Trench Model of Regressions.

I’ve been stressing that your understanding of regressions determines how effectively you can deal with them. My clinical experience says the Mariana Trench Model helps people control regressions while they are occurring and reduce them over time. But before I can explain how the model works, you need to learn a lot about brain regressions and what causes them. That’s where we’re headed in the next several chapters.

Resolving regressions involves cutting-edge brain science

You can recover from an acute regression in the blink of an eye. But it takes a lot more than blinking your eyes to accomplish this. On the other hand, sometimes my clients' functioning came up so rapidly, I couldn't adapt fast enough. Suddenly, I'd be talking to smart quick-thinking insightful people, in contrast to the dull, dim-witted, myopic clients they had been previously. Some pulled themselves together so quickly they perceived the shift in their own brain function. They said they *felt* and *thought* better, like coming out of a fog.

In subsequent chapters, I'll share with you my best ideas and methods for resolving regressions. But there will always be people who will try to exploit them to perpetrate or play the victim. They might excuse themselves by saying: "*I only said what I did because I was regressed!*" Or, "*I didn't go to the grocery store because I was too regressed.*" Or, "*It's not my fault I had an affair! I was too regressed to enjoy it!*"

So, let's get something straight from the outset: You're responsible for everything you do and don't do, *even when you're profoundly regressed*. You're *not* responsible for controlling the *impossible*. You *are* responsible for managing *you*. (I hope in your case these are not the same!)

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean shows you how to apply cutting-edge brain science to resolve regressions. It can help you and the people around you live a better life. This knowledge isn't curative without diligent application. You must take action to change your brain. When you turn this page and begin the next chapter, you'll have started on your way.

Chapter 2: Sinking into the Abyss

A few minutes ago, Elizabeth was having a wonderful day. The sun was shining, and she had walked outside to enjoy it. People were out and about, relishing the warmth and light of the afternoon. The air was fresh, cleansed by the morning rain. A gentle breeze ruffled Elizabeth's hair, and she began to relax. She leaned back against the park bench and took in the smell of wet autumn leaves. A golden glow hung over the hillside park.

Then the phone rang.

Dennis, Elizabeth's soon-to-be ex-husband, didn't waste a moment. "You're going to be hearing from my lawyer, so I thought I'd give you a heads up. He's convinced me that I'm far too generous with you, and he's sending you a different proposal that is fairer to me. I know I told you not to worry about money. But I can't put myself in a difficult financial position just because I had an affair."

"Wait!" Elizabeth blurted out. "Hold it! My head is spinning!! What are you saying?!"

Dennis' tone was like honey over vinegar. He knew he was upsetting Elizabeth, and he was enjoying it. "I'm really sorry. This wasn't my idea. I was blinded by guilt, I didn't see I was giving away too much." Dennis previously planted in Elizabeth's mind

the anticipation of an amicable divorce with financial security to keep her collaborative up to this point.

Elizabeth was tongue-tied and brain dead. She was at a loss for words and could hardly speak. She was barely able to think straight. Too many different thoughts were pounding in her head. Too many emotional reactions were competing for attention.

“Wait! You told me last week I shouldn’t bother getting my own attorney. You said we would see a mediator. Now you got your own attorney?! What’s changed?!”

“Nothing’s changed,” Dennis soothed. “I said I’d take care of you and I will. But I can’t just be too much a good guy about this. I’m realizing it’s OK to think about myself too.”

“What?! Dennis! What are you saying?!”

“I’m saying what I said a moment ago. Didn’t you hear what I’m saying? I wanted to give you a heads up, so you’re not shocked when my lawyer contacts you. I’m trying to soften this for you because I don’t want to upset you.”

“UPSET ME?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU DON’T WANT TO UPSET ME?! I’M UPSET!!”

Dennis’ voice was patronizingly calm. “I can tell. Obviously, this is not a good time for us to talk. We can try again when you’re not so emotional.” With that, Dennis hung up.

In the blink of an eye, Elizabeth’s world completely changed. For several moments, her world view collapsed to her throat and stomach as she fought off sudden

waves of nausea. Her breathing became shallow. She suddenly felt cold and clammy. She sat back on the bench and opened her shirt collar, gasping for air to quell the pit in her stomach. That commanded her full attention until she knew she wasn't going to throw up.

Elizabeth gradually became aware of people walking by and playing in the park. She leaned forward, holding her head in her hands, reflecting on what just happened. As she reviewed her call with Dennis, she was hit with overwhelming anxiety, insecurity, self-recrimination and rage. Not that Elizabeth was capable of deconstructing what she was feeling at that moment.

Elizabeth was suddenly drowning in her inner mental world. It was like the ground suddenly turned to quicksand and she was sinking. As she descended, her inner mental world flooded with self-recrimination. *“How could you be so stupid to think Dennis could be trusted?! When are you ever going to learn?! This is who Dennis is! Minimum rancor between you?! Minimum upset for the kids?! Minimum money wasted on lawyers?! Elizabeth, you're a fool!”*

Then Elizabeth thought about Dennis telling her not to get a lawyer--while he was hiring one for himself. She was dazed to realize he had been setting her up all along. How blind and trusting she must have seemed to Dennis while she went along with this! In a flash, Elizabeth's mind turned against her again.

“How could I be so stupid?! I trusted this guy who cheated on me! What's wrong with me?! How could I believe him when he said he'd take care of me in the divorce! Now he's got the upper hand! I'm going to get screwed in the settlement! I asked for this,

and now I'm going to get it! I'm just a stupid old cow! He found someone younger, prettier and better than me. I should have expected this! How could I be so naïve?! Why didn't I see this coming?! I feel so worthless! I want to run away and hide! I wish I were dead!!"

Elizabeth dragged herself off the park bench and walked back home. Her energy was gone. She felt weak and spent. Her mouth was dry. She glanced at the clock. In fifteen minutes, she had gone from everything being OK, to trying to escape from a bottomless pit of despair, anxiety, and self-recrimination. She felt like crap and things looked hopeless.

This experience was depressingly familiar to Elizabeth throughout most of her adult life. Dennis ambushing her about the divorce was just the latest trigger. Elizabeth didn't know it yet, but she was in the middle of an acute brain regression.

Let yourself remember what you felt like during the most catastrophic or anxiety-provoking experience of your life. You were probably acutely regressed at this time.

“Quicksand” reaction: The bottom falls out!

That's what it's like to have an acute brain regression. Sudden, overpowering and all-consuming. Your feelings seem to go on forever. When you're acutely regressed, your feelings eat you alive.

Remember back to the worst experiences in your life. Times when you thought you were living through a nightmare. Particularly occasions when you thought *you* were the nightmare. Instances where you were drowning in anxiety, self-recrimination and self-loathing. Odds are you were regressed during these times.

Then revisualize the craziest, most short-sighted, brain-dead stupid things you've ever said or done. Things that, in retrospect, you can't believe you did! Or times you received some terrible news that rocked your world and left you speechless. You were probably regressed during these times too.

Next, recall times you were filled with massive anger that you could hardly contain. Occasions when you were emotionally labile, hyper-reactive, and ready to explode at anyone who made a trivial mistake. Include when you went from talking calmly and thinking logically, to spitting angry and ranting and raving at the top of your

If you've wondered if you're emotionally unstable or a complete lunatic, the worrisome things you've seen yourself do may be symptoms of acute regressions.

lungs in the blink of an eye. Times you "really lost it." Sudden full-bore escalations. These are examples where you were regressed too.

If you realize you and regressions are old friends, you're not alone. Everyone has regressions at one time or another. Including episodes that make you look, feel and behave as if you are temporarily insane. Everyone has them. You can learn to handle them better.

If you have *frequent* regressions, they consume your attention, shape your personality, strangle your relationships, and control your life. If you suspect you might be emotionally unstable, seriously disturbed, or a complete lunatic, the worrisome things you've seen in yourself may be symptoms of acute regressions. Initially, I thought people wouldn't like hearing they had a brain problem. But so many folks feel relieved to discover they're not crazy.

When I first started treating acute regressions, one client called her problem the *quicksand reaction*. It remains one of the best descriptions of acute regressions I've ever heard. One minute you feel emotionally stable, and the next one you feel like you're sinking into the abyss, drowning in your feelings. Your feelings are eating you alive, consuming you as you drop. The deeper you go, the more hopeless you become. You have no time perspective. You are locked in the moment, which seems to go on forever.

Before I came up with the Mariana Trench Model, I used the "quicksand reaction" to explain acute regressions. It captures what it feels like to be acutely regressed and facilitates you identifying this within yourself. Regressions *feel terrible*. They command your attention, sap your resources, and torment you. They also impair your interactions with others. These are some of the reasons people control their regressions once they know what's happening to them.

Typical behavior in acute regressions

Some people won't address their regressions, come Hell or high water. They'll do almost anything to stabilize themselves when they are drowning in quicksand (regression). Any collaborative alliance they might have had with you suddenly evaporates. They will climb on your head to keep themselves emotionally afloat, even if you are their kin.

Climb on top of someone else

Visualize a case in point: Elizabeth was nine years old. She and her mother were on their way back home from the principal's office. Elizabeth had said the F-word several times at school, and the principal asked her mother to come in. As her mother parked the car in front of their house, she was shrieking at Elizabeth.

"I can't believe how you humiliated me in front of everyone at school! I just can't get over it! I'll never be able to show my face there again!!"

"I'm sorry, Mama," Elizabeth sobbed. "I didn't want to embarrass you! I love you!"

"I'm not so sure. Did you get some kind of pleasure making me look like a fool?! I just can't believe you did that! You enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"I didn't enjoy it, Mama," Elizabeth blubbered. "I didn't! I promise!!"

"Why did you tell them I say the F word?!" Mother enunciated each word with pure menace.

"They asked me, Mama! They asked me where I heard it before!"

"You shouldn't have told them I talk like that!!"

“I didn’t, Mama! I promise! I told them I heard you say it when you were upset! I told them you don’t say it a lot!”

Mother turned crimson with anger. *“There! That proves it! You said it yourself! You told them that I say the F-word! You betrayed me! You embarrassed me!”*

Then, without another word, Mother grabbed Elizabeth and whisked her into the kitchen, where she washed her mouth out with soap.

“You didn’t hear me say that word!”

“I did, Mama. I’m not lying!”

“You’re lying now. Do you want me to wash your mouth out again?”

“No, Mama!”

“You didn’t hear me say that word, did you?!”

“No, Mama.”

“Did you?!”

“No, Mama. I didn’t! I promise! I just thought I did!”

“Now, apologize for embarrassing me!”

“I apologize, Mama! I’m sorry!”

“Well, then, OK! You better not do this again!”

After a few minutes, Mother broke the silence. “Let’s let bygones be bygones. Let’s get you a nice piece of chocolate cake and a cold glass of milk.”

I hope you recognize you're looking at *two* badly regressed people. Elizabeth's mother was not functioning well at all. Elizabeth was also acutely regressed and suffering from traumatic mind mapping.

How could Elizabeth's mother act like this? It's not as simple as the fact that your judgement evaporates when you're acutely regressed. It feels *good* to pound on the people around you when you're in this brain state. It also brings your functioning up a notch! You may feel and think a little better when you hammer someone else because it organizes you. With this trifecta, it's easy to see why other people get abused when someone goes into an acute regression.

Visualize a time when you witnessed someone in a regression. Map out what's going through that person's mind while he or she is regressed.

Grab the moral high ground

Regressed people commonly attempt to grab the moral high ground, just like a drowning person climbs on anything they think will keep them afloat. They assume the high ground in arguments, claiming their position is more accurate, more important, more selfless, more righteous, or more spiritually enlightened. Or they position themselves as the more insightful, or more feeling-oriented partner, or easily hurt party, or more victimized. They take the fact that their feelings are hurt as proof they are more sensitive, and hence, a more accurate judge of how they were wronged.

To show you what this looks like in action, visualize a couple, Marjan and Sophie, sitting together having breakfast. Marjan was upset because she felt Sophie forgot her birthday. She was wringing her hands and sobbing.

“When I got up today, you didn’t have a birthday card for me! You really hurt my feelings!”

“I’m really sorry,” Sophie replied earnestly. “I was planning to buy flowers and a card for you today when I went grocery shopping and have them for you when I made your favorite dinner tonight.”

“Well, I would have appreciated at least having the card this morning when I got up. I was looking forward to opening it over breakfast and feeling your love for me.”

Sophie reached out to take Marjan’s hand. “I can see that. I screwed up. It may not make any difference to you, and I don’t offer this as an excuse, but I was planning to get you a card and flowers yesterday and have it for you this morning.”

“*Well, why didn’t you?!*” Marjan was not requesting information. It was a complaint.

“There was a major breakdown on the highway coming home. Two sixteen wheelers overturned and blocked the road. I was stuck on the highway and couldn’t get off for hours. The roads were slick and icing up. It was late. I decided the safest thing was just to come home and get these things for you today.”

“Well, I’m glad your safe. But, honestly, it’s always like you to think of yourself first.”

Sophie was stunned. “What do you mean?”

“You thought of yourself first, right?”

“It was late at night! The roads were icing up!”

“I understand that. But this is what I mean. You were thinking of yourself first. You don’t have to get so defensive. I’ve learned not to take it personally.”

Sophie started getting angry about Marjan’s superior attitude, coupled with her playing victim. *“I’m going to get you the flowers and card as soon as I get dressed!”*

“It won’t be the same as waking up to the card! That opportunity is gone. That boat has sailed.”

Sophie was losing patience but making a final conciliatory effort. “Come on! Don’t ruin your birthday! Let’s start over.”

*When you take the moral high ground,
there’s a good chance you’re sinking in “quicksand.”*

Marjan wasn’t finished trying to get Sophie to beg for forgiveness. “You can’t put the milk back in the cow! Don’t bother with the card. And I don’t need the flowers. Let’s just have dinner together.”

Sophie realized Marjan wasn’t going to let her make amends. “Shit! I woke up thinking I was going to do something nice today, and before I have a shower, I find out I’ve screwed things up beyond repair!”

“Don’t you dare act like the victim!” Marjan shrieked. *“Don’t you dare! I’m the one who got her heart broken today! You could have been more considerate about how I would feel if you didn’t have a card for me when I woke up!”*

“For crying out loud! I did think about that! That’s why I was going to get them for you on my way home yesterday! I tried!”

“Well, you have to do more than *think* about it! *You have to act on it!*” Marjan got up to leave, acting like she had been harpooned. By the time Marjan examined Sophie’s initial slight for every possible infraction, Sophie was not getting out of this without more torture.

Pound on someone

When you’re regressed, sometimes the best thing is to just be with yourself. But this doesn’t mean you want to leave other people and go off alone. Very often, you start pounding on other people emotionally. And if you are severely regressed, it can turn physical.

As I mentioned above, pounding on your partner’s feelings when you’re regressed somewhat improves your functioning. It organizes you and gives you something on which to focus. And it feels good. I’m not justifying this; I’m just describing the way it is.

This is one of the unfortunate truth about regressions: Your functioning briefly increases if you emotionally hammer on your partner. The same way many of us go to other people for reassurance when we are insecure, we often seek out someone else to pound on when we're regressed. It works twice as good if you can get him or her to apologize. Maybe you think of it as "trying to have a conversation," or "clearing things up." People in acute regressions are often looking to "get something off their chest," at the very moment they should be focusing on getting their brain/mind together.

One unfortunate truth about regressions is your functioning briefly increases if you emotionally pound on someone else.

Act wounded

Regressed people present an intimidating combination of acting wounded while they pound on you. You won't find a better example of this than when Anne Marie parked Stephan's Porsche 911 Carrera GTS too close to the garage shelving, scratching his precious "baby."

"Do you realize what you've done?!" Stephan shrieked, wringing his hands through his hair.

"I scratched your car. I'm sorry." Anne Marie's tone said she didn't mean it.

"No! You did more than scratch my car! You ruined the whole paint job!"

“I didn’t ruin the entire paint job, Stephan! I put a small scratch on the door. That’s all.”

“That’s all?! Are you crazy, Anne Marie?! Or just blind?! You ruined the entire paint job! When the scratch is fixed, it won’t fade like the rest of the car! The paint on the scratch will be a slightly different color!!”

“No one will notice.”

“What do you mean no one? I’ll notice it! I’m not no one!”

“I meant no one else would notice it.”

“I’m no one to you?! You obviously don’t care about what’s important to me!”

“You’re not no one to me, Stephan! And I’m sorry I scratched your damn car.”

“I’m no one to you?!”

“I just told you! You’re not no one to me!”

“Well, you don’t seem very sorry or overwhelmed with guilt for doing something that hurt me deeply!”

“Jesus, Stephan, what do you want from me? Blood?! OK! I scratched your precious car! I’m sorry! Get over it!” Anne Marie was fed up, and it showed. Now she was regressed too.

“I’ll bet you deliberately did this to hurt me!”

Stephan sank further into a foul regression. Granted, he had a reason to be angry, disappointed and frustrated. But he wanted Anne Marie to see herself as perpetrating on him and see him as her victim. And he preferred to take his frustrations out on her.

Generate anger on the spot

In Chapter One, I said your attitude towards your feelings greatly influences your ability to deal with regressions. Dealing with anger is a case in point. It's hard to know what to do with all the anger that surfaces when you're regressed. That's why understanding what's going is so important.

It's easy to think this enormous anger surfaces because you aren't over past hurts or wounds. Meaning, your anger is "stored up" and needs to be expressed. When you believe this, the apparent solution is to let it out. This doesn't work, although it feels good at the time.

Here is the new view you need: When you're in a regression, you start *generating new anger* to keep yourself organized. It isn't "stored up," you produce it on the spot. You dredge up memories that make you angry and organize and legitimize your current behavior. The real solution is self-confrontation and self-soothing (self-regulation)—precisely what you don't want to do at that moment.

Dennis told me about a time where he confronted Elizabeth about embarrassing him at a party by talking about his appearance with other guests. She was quick to give me her version too. Elizabeth was so clearly out of line she begrudgingly acknowledged his point. Dennis thanked her, saying "I'm glad we've able to talk about this without fighting. I very much appreciate you being able to say you were wrong. I know that's not easy for you."

Elizabeth's brittle self-control had reached its limit. "I'm not saying I'm wrong. I'm just acknowledging that I could do better. We both could do better. Are you saying you couldn't do better?"

"Of course not. I'd like to do better too. I was just saying thank you for your acknowledgement."

"Your welcome." It didn't sound like it.

A minute of awkward silence ensued. Elizabeth was the first to break it.

"You know, you could have been nicer to me when you brought this up."

Dennis' tone suddenly turned defensive. "I'm not exactly sure what you're referring to, but I probably could have been nicer to you. I wasn't feeling positively towards you at the time.

"You're not taking what I'm saying seriously!"

The self-satisfied look on Dennis' face melted into the universal expression known to all married people that says, "*Here we go again!*" He said, "I *am* taking you seriously! I also think we should end this conversation right here."

Elizabeth functioning continued to decline. "*See! You are dismissing what I'm saying! You're not taking me seriously!*"

"I can take you seriously and not want to talk to you at the same time! These are not mutually exclusive!"

"There you go with your psychobabble double talk!"

“It’s not double talk! I’m taking you seriously! And I seriously think we should stop!”

“You think you’re so clever with words! Mister Superior! Mister High and Mighty!”

“Look! I get it! If you can’t handle acknowledging you’re wrong, let’s just forget you did!” Dennis was smiling.

“FUCK YOU, DENNIS!! DON’T PSYCHOANALIZE ME!! You can take my acknowledgement and shove it up your ass! I’m sleeping in the other bedroom! I’m not going to let you abuse me!!”

*When you’re regressed, you dredge up memories that make you angry
and organize and legitimize your current behavior.*

Common situations for regressions

I’ve been describing regressions in terms of common behaviors. Another way you can look at regressions is the circumstances in which they most often occur. These are so frequent and predictable, it’s possible to deduce the two underlying factors involved. These are usually some combination of (1) high anxiety and (2) high meaning. I’ll explain later what these have to do with underlying shifts in brain function.

High anxiety situations

Let's go back to things you recalled from your own life when I started describing acute regressions. Odds are some of these memories involved high anxiety. In later chapters I'll describe high anxiety situations that often occur in childhood. Here are some of the most likely situations in adult life:

1. Marital problems. Sexual difficulties.
2. Parenting issues.
3. Parents or in-laws problems.
4. Money problems.
5. Illnesses, real or suspected. Medical procedures.
6. Injuries and accidents.
7. Moving or relocating your home.
8. Getting a new job, starting a new business or losing employment.
9. Couple or family vacations.

High anxiety situations trigger psychophysiological reactions that make it harder to keep your mind straight and your brain and body under control. Anxiety triggers a flood of powerful neurotransmitters that prepare your body for action (like cortisol and adrenalin). That's great if you're going to do something physical, like kill a sabre-tooth tiger, fend off a mugger or clean out your garage. But if you wait until the night before

Watch the YouTube video of Gail King's CBS-TV interview with singer R.

Kelly for a scary example of a severe acute regression

your exam to study, high levels of cortisol and adrenalin interfere with accurate recall and complex problem solving under pressure. Count on the same thing happening when you are acutely regressed.

It's not good for your brain to continuously be bathed in cortisol. This kills the cortisol-down-regulating-cells in your hypothalamus. They can grow back if you get your anxiety under control. If you don't--like kids growing up in troubled homes--your cortisol levels stay elevated all night while you sleep. Constantly marinating your brain in cortisol takes a definite toll. If you come from this kind of background, you enter everyday high-anxiety situations with disadvantaged coping ability. If you now live in a high anxiety situation—marriage or business or both—expect your recall of events and problem-solving skills to be similarly impaired.

High anxiety situations can look good on the surface. Ask yourself, “What could be tough about going on vacations or making decisions?” You'll be using your left-brain, and you'll come up with intellectual answers. In other words, you won't get it. Instead, revisualize your family going on vacations. Or remember a time when your parents argued about an important decision, like having another family member move in or relocating to another city. When you approach things from a right brain point of view, it's

National Lampoon Family Vacation *depicts the common vacation-from-hell experience in which one or more family members are acutely regressed at any given time*

easier to see what I mean. Many things that initially sound like good ideas turn out to be regression-triggering high-anxiety situations in practice.

High meaning situations

Situations and circumstances of great meaning and significance can also make you more regression-prone. Folk wisdom says families go nuts at births, weddings, and funerals—three situations of tremendous meaning and importance. Hospital staff have witnessed brawls in the delivery room. Many brides have been shattered on the morning of their wedding when their mothers announce they're not attending unless someone is moved to the head table. Fistfights at funerals are legendary in families where relatives settle old grudges once the deceased is in the ground.

Here are other high-meaning situations in which people frequently regress:

1. Interactions with parents and inlaws.
2. Death of a parent, spouse or child.
3. Life-changing awards and promotions.
4. Life transitions. (E.g., children start school or start dating.)
5. Power balance shifts in your marriage.
6. Menopause.
7. Retirement.
8. Divorce.

When you start saving for retirement, you picture going off happily into the sunset. By the time you're ready to do it, retirement often looks entirely different. To some men, it the loss of importance or purpose to their lives. Or the time of life where they stop pole-vaulting into bed. Lots of hanging-by-a-thread marriages fall apart as partners regress under the prospect of spending more time together. It happens in some marriages when the kids leave home for college. The meaning of the situation turns people's brains to Jello.

Watch the YouTube video of the arrest of Sandra Brown for a frightening example of a policeman and a black citizen both in severe acute regressions.

For some women, the anxiety of unwanted pregnancy is replaced by the meaning of menopause. To them, menopause means induction into the Society of Invisible Women and the end of men looking at them as sex objects. Whereas some women thrive during this phase of life, to others this means it's high time for a facelift! (Stephan's thriving plastic surgery practice depended on this.) However, there isn't a tummy tuck or boob job perfect enough to pull a woman out of regression.

Regressions in couples and families

Interactions with in-laws and parents always seem to be high-meaning encounters, even when they are good ones. Hopefully, you have high-meaning *positive* contacts. But

loads of people find interacting with their parents or in-laws incredibly stressful *negative* high-meaning encounters.

Regressions in marriages and families are like fish in the ocean. You find them everywhere, but rarely do you take time to process what's really going on between them. These are not cherished moments you want to think back to—and traumatic mind mapping makes this tougher.

But it's sobering when you analyze how much goes on when you sink into an acute regression. You stop seeing yourself losing your temper or dissolving into tears, and you start seeing yourself as the source of interpersonal neurobiology-in-action.

To start this process, consider the *interpersonal* neurobiological impacts of regressions. I don't merely mean visualizing a couple arguing, and watching how one partner's mind or behavior triggers a regression in the other. I'm referring to what happens next: the neurobiological impact of the other partner's regressions on both of them.

Your regressions create traumatic mind mapping for your partner, your children and other family members, and very possibly your dog. (Dogs can map human minds.) Creating repeated traumatic mind mapping for other people harms their brains. It also works the other way around. Your partner's or your children's repeated regressions can have a neurobiological impact on you.

Regressions instill traumatic mind mapping in the people around you. The more significant you are to these people, and the younger they are, your impact is that much

greater. Don't kid yourself that your regressions don't impact your children. Apologizing doesn't fix things—and repeated apologies inflict additional damage.

Beyond the neurobiological impacts, systemic “power and control” issues surface around repeat regressions. Some people gain *de facto* control their relationships, by using their regressions to establish patterns in which their mate appeases and placates them at every turn.

Lots of us can be manipulated by a partner who repeatedly escalates things to the point we back down or capitulate. But if you readily regress into tears and spaghetti brain when stressed, you're especially vulnerable to being controlled by your partner. Some people are held captive through their high potential for regressions.

Your pattern of regressions shapes your relationships. If you and your partner readily regress into rage and accusations, then you're going to have repeated terrible arguments. If you both regress into feelings of worthlessness, your relationship will oscillate between “can't live without him/her” and “can't live with him/her” cycles. The intensity of the cycle is controlled by (1) how far you are willing to go when you're regressed, and (2) how soon are you going to stop?

The question of how far you're willing to go when you're regressed is critical because that's not a time most people want to reign themselves in. For some of us, it's time to let it *all* hang out. There's almost no limit to what some of us will do. We often feel entitled to do it. We feel like the other person has got it coming, and by God, we're going to give it to them!

I've had clients describe how their parents fought by pouring boiling water on the unsuspecting other. Or launch into patently disgusting verbal tirades. We often feel *entitled* to do disgusting things when we're regressed. And the dreadful things we do trigger involuntary disgust reactions in the brains and minds of the people around us. Frequent disgusting things are particularly damaging. In Chapter Four I'll explain the importance and relevance of my referring to disgusting things. Hopefully, this will motivate you to work harder to get your regressions under control, and likewise, protect yourself in kind.

Many people have never had sex when they weren't regressed to some degree.

Have you ever had sex when you weren't regressed?

If you review the prior lists of anxiety-provoking and high-meaning situations, you'll notice two things: They are all predictable life events, and while these are big things, they don't happen frequently. It's not surprising you are regressed while going through or witnessing childbirth, or burying a parent, or starting a business, or your kids starting college. But how often does that happen in your life?

On the other hand, think about how many times you have had sex. People regress during sex much more frequently. In fact, lots of people never had sex when they *weren't* regressed. Arguably, most people are regressed the first time they have sex because of the enormous anxiety and meaning involved.

Sex isn't what you'd typically think of as a top candidate for "most popular place to regress." If I asked you to visualize someone with an unfortunate history of sexual abuse having sex, maybe you'd imagine someone completely dissociated (extremely tuned out). But short of this, sex probably wouldn't be the first place you'd pick if you wanted to study regressed people. The public image of sex is that it's all fun and games, and a great place to hang out.

But remember back to when you were just starting to have sex. Most people's initial sexual experiences are high anxiety, high meaning, and terribly awkward (but mercifully brief) encounters. Force yourself to remember how brain-dead anxious you were, because you may have only been dimly aware of what was happening. The only reason some teenage couples manage to lose their virginity is that the boy is scared stiff, and the girl can open her legs.

There is no big mystery why so many people are regressed when they start having sex: To start with, they don't have a collaborative alliance with or from their partner. *Who are they going to tell? Do they have a sexually transmitted disease they're not disclosing?* There's often so much unknown—and things you don't want known—anxiety is virtually a given.

Then there are common individual concerns that frequently plague people during sex. Things like:

1. Performance anxiety
2. Fears of inadequacy and rejection

3. Fears of pregnancy and disease
4. Negative teachings about sexuality
5. Religious prohibitions

In addition to these generic anxieties and meanings most people carry into sex, Elizabeth brought additional layers that weighed on her. In the years before she met Dennis, Elizabeth had several short-lived relationships. Most lasted three to six months, some were overnight pickups, and the longest lasted a year. All of them ended because her partners couldn't handle Elizabeth's emotional neediness and dependency. Their second-most frequent complaint was that she wasn't very good in bed. None of them knew enough to figure out that Elizabeth was acute regressed during sex.

Elizabeth's partners saw she had difficulty settling down and getting in the mood. She took a long time to get aroused. She was often ticklish at the outset, sometimes extremely so. She was passive and never made any sounds of arousal. She never had an orgasm. Most guys took this to mean Elizabeth wasn't into sex.

None of Elizabeth's partners knew what went on inside her head while they had sex with her. That's the way she wanted it. The last thing she wanted was a man knowing her inner mental world. Especially, while she was having *sex* with him!

On the other hand, you probably wouldn't want to map Elizabeth's mind during sex. It was noisy and full of swirling thoughts. Full of anxious worrying and self-blaming castigations. Intrusive snippets from a cornucopia of concerns. Mind-wandering, tangential thoughts, and fragments of conversations. Anticipations of rejection.

I'm not feeling anything! Oh, God, what is wrong with me! He's touching me, but I feel nothing. I'm not getting aroused! I'm not lubricating. What's wrong with me?!

I look fat! How can he like touching me because I'm gross!

Look! He switched hands! He's had it! He's getting ready to give up! I'm taking too long! What is the matter with me?! Why can't I just relax and have a good sexual experience like every other normal woman?! They can cum! Why can't I!? I am such a disappointment! He's going to break up with me! It's coming! I know it! He's just trying not to show it!"

You would also encounter the torturous, cruel mental voice that ruled Elizabeth's inner mental world: *"What's the matter with you?! Why are you taking so long?! A normal woman would be turned on by now. She would have cum already. He's getting tired! He's probably losing his patience!!*

You are such a loser! I'll bet his prior sex partners would have finished by now! He's watching to see if you're going to have an orgasm. He's never seen you have one. He's going to give up on you like all your other partners."

From what her partners could see, there wasn't much going on inside Elizabeth when she had sex, but her mind was a regular three-ring circus. These thoughts paraded through Elizabeth's mind whenever she had sex. Only, Elizabeth didn't identify these as regressed thoughts because she didn't recognize she was regressed. From her own experience, this is who she knew herself to be sexually. Elizabeth simply thought disparagingly, *"This is who I am!"*

Over time Elizabeth changed somewhat. She got to the point she didn't need to get drunk or high to have sex. She progressed from not really wanting to be there at all, to being sort of OK with it. She was still regressed when she had it, but being touched stopped feeling so noxious. From there, she began to relax enough to have some enjoyment. Her level of regression continued to preclude her from becoming highly aroused or having an orgasm. But as Elizabeth's interest in sex began to increase, her inner mental world flipped to a different criticism. Now her fatal flaw wasn't she was uptight and inhibited. Her new fatal flaw was she was a *slut!*

Controlling acute regressions lets you control your life

The more you know about acute regressions, the more you will recognize them in daily life. They show up everywhere, although they're typically categorized differently.

What about temper tantrums, or bad temper or anger management problems? You certainly see these issues in acute regressions. Crushingly low self-esteem and self-worth? These surface in acute regressions too. How about acute panic attacks? You can check this box too. What about borderline personality disorder? "Borderlines" have acute regressions all the time. So much so, this is one of the *defining characteristics* of

borderline personality disorder. ^{ix}

The “more familiar” problems I just mentioned are, in many people’s experience, difficult or impossible to fix. That certainly was true for my clients. However, by approaching their problems as acute regressions, they were finally able to control their lives.

If you have frequent acute regressions, the people around you know it. Acute regressions are hard to hide, and often you’re in no mood to hide it. There’s no point in denying your regressions. Justifying them is a losing strategy. You can’t solve a problem you refuse to acknowledge. Getting them under control is the way to go.

Acute regressions are treatable. You can modify them two ways:

1. *You can learn how to handle your regressions better.* You can identify them while they’re occurring and stop them in mid-process.
2. *You can reduce their frequency, depth, and duration.* You can also shorten your recovery time.

Sections Two is devoted to resolving acute regressions. There’s a lot you can do—and need to do—to stop them. Three chapters will show you how to accomplish this. Just the fact this is possible should make you hopeful.

But before we get into this, I want to tell you about the other major type of regression. If you think what you’ve learned about acute regressions is impressive, wait till you see what’s next!

Chapter 3: Living Submerged

Stephan and Anne Marie originally came to me for four days of marital and sex therapy. They had bitter arguments over a load of issues, and their sex life was in shambles. You initially met Stephan in Chapter One, where I contrasted him with Elizabeth. Stephan was a well-established plastic surgeon sought by beautiful women seeking youth and perfection. His wife, Anne Marie, was a former model. Both Stephan and Anne Marie were smart talented college-educated people seeming to live lives of success and excess.

However, everything Stephan and Anne Marie had was falling apart. Their marriage was in tatters, and they were on the verge of divorce. Both Stephan and Anne Marie were at war with their in-laws. Neither wanted to deal with their own parents. This made for constant arguments about *“Why can’t you see what your parents are doing?!”* And *“If you’re not going to deal with your parents, I don’t have to deal with mine!”*

Stephan and Anne Marie had something else in common: Neither wanted to face themselves. Each could see the other’s shortcomings, and each was blind to his or her own failings. By attacking each other’s avoidances and sore spots, Stephan and Anne Marie didn’t have to confront themselves.

From our initial moments together, Anne Marie tried to set the stage for our sessions. She started by saying, “Doctor, I don’t have much hope for our marriage if Stephan won’t deal with his parents!”

Stephan was equally quick to fend her off. “Don’t go there, Anne Marie! I’m warning you! Don’t blame our problems on my parents!!”

From the outset, Anne Marie swore Stephan’s parents were their biggest problem. She wasn’t complaining about Stephan’s bouts of abusive anger. It wasn’t that she didn’t consider this to be problematic. Anne Marie was pointing to something she thought they could solve. From their years together, Anne Marie took Stephan’s abusive temper and difficulty relating to people civilly as this was who he was.

Anne Marie saw herself as the reasonable and responsible person in their relationship. She had no awareness that when she ranted about Stephan’s mother, her yelling, hand-waving, and dismissive tone were like waving a red cape in front of a bull.

“If your mother does her ‘I’m just being a mother’ routine one more time, Stephan, I’m going to puke! God, I hate the way she constantly pushes for what she wants while claiming she just wants everyone else to be happy! If she would just acknowledge that she wants her way, I could deal with her! But the way she tries to cover up what she’s doing drives me nuts! It makes me act like I don’t see what she’s doing--and give her what she wants at the same time!”

Stephan grimaced and scrunched his fingers, broadcasting his intense distaste and hatred for Anne Marie. He liked to mimic her responses to subvert them and poke fun at her. *“God! I hate the way you won’t shut up, Anne Marie! You just go on and on!”*

Anne Marie rolled her eyes dismissively. *“You are so like your father, Stephan! Just like him! I should never have married you!”*

“I told you not to go there, Anne Marie!! Don’t talk about my parents!!” Stephan shouted. *“They did their best! They meant well! And it’s not their fault you’re a lousy housekeeper! My mother didn’t mean anything by her comment. She was just trying to be helpful.”*

“Don’t you tell me what I can and can’t talk about, Stephan!!” Anne Marie shouted back. *“You should have stood up to your mother and told her not to talk to your wife that way!”*

“No, Anne Marie!! You should have spent less time at the gym and picked up the house before my parents arrived, or gotten a job so we could afford a housekeeper. You are such a cashmere princess!” Stephan knew he had struck a nerve with Anne Marie.

Anne Marie was the kind of woman who wears pearls and earrings and is always in style. Anne Marie preferred cashmere coats, turtleneck sweaters and leather boots. She was perpetually well dressed, sleek and classy. She enjoyed having a slightly aristocratic quality, always clean, no hair out of place.

Jealous women said Anne Marie looked like she invested copious time before she walked out the door, too eager to appear “well put together.” Like she was going to attend

a function, even to get groceries. Nothing was casual for Anne Marie, even when she wore casual clothes. So, when Stephan referred to his mother criticizing Anne Marie's housekeeping, he was poking her where he knew she felt vulnerable.

"We can afford a housekeeper, Stephan!" Anne Marie exploded. *"You just want to make me do housework, because you're angry I don't bring in money to contribute to our expenses!"*

"That's because you're afraid to get a job, Anne Marie!" Stephan shot back. *"You don't think you can get one with enough status and good pay! You don't want to embarrass yourself!"* Stephan acted triumphant like he had harpooned Anne Marie.

Unfortunately, Anne Marie responded like that's precisely what he had done. "That's not true!" she weakly protested. "I'm still looking into possibilities. I just haven't found anything yet." Anne Marie sounded like she had difficulty believing this herself.

If I still practiced conventional marital therapy, I probably would have offered Stephan and Anne Marie an interpretation like, "The two of you have significant areas of disagreement like dealing with in-laws and sharing household responsibilities. These are common marital problems, but I need to see this from both of your perspectives. Tell me more about this."

Luckily for Stephan and Anne Marie, I don't practice that way anymore. When I first started treating regressions, I would teach couples what was happening to them when they started to "lose it" mid-session. (This was a left-brain solution to a right-brain

problem.) But then as I gained more experience, I began to do regression-based treatment from the outset. This completely changed the way I practice psychotherapy.

That's why, thirty minutes into our first session, I realized Stephan and Anne Marie were both living regressed. So, rather than accommodate their low functioning, I dealt with them as more workable people than they appeared to be. My goal was to take them to a higher level of functioning than their current behavior suggested. I knew from experience this wasn't going to happen by my complimenting their potential.

I said, "It's clear you both are ready, willing, and able to go after each other. You know each other well enough to know where to poke. At the same time, you are both functioning like you can't see yourselves. You complain that your partner is blind, while you act like you become invisible whenever you refuse to acknowledge what you're doing!"

Stephan and Anne Marie certainly didn't expect this a half-hour into our initial session. I was their fourth therapist. Prior attempts at couple therapy went nowhere because one or the other felt the therapist-of-the-moment was biased. I avoided this landmine by calling both of them to task. Their immediate response was to quiet down and stop sparring with each other.

Stephan and Anne Marie sat quietly, waiting for me to continue. When I didn't, Stephan motioned for me to say something. I said, "But I'm not going to talk with you about what I just said." This really got their attention. Stephan and Anne Marie waited for my explanation. However, I didn't offer one.

After several seconds of stunned silence, Stephan asked, “Why not?” Anne Marie nodded in agreement.

I took a deep breath. “Because you’re not functioning at a high enough level that there’s any point in discussing the heavy topics you are throwing at each other. If this is the best you folks can do, you’re probably going to fail. I don’t say this to offend you.”

What happened next didn’t surprise me one bit, although I always find it remarkable. Stephanie and Anne Marie looked stunned for several seconds. They genuinely couldn’t figure out what I was doing. None of their prior therapists responded so quickly and directly to them. I violated every expectation they had about what therapy was supposed to be.

Stephan and Anne Marie lacked any frame of reference to understand what was happening. They started paying more attention to what I was doing so they could map me out. That’s exactly what I wanted them to do. Besides giving them a clearer picture of how my mind works and how I do therapy, I wanted to create a profound “moment of meeting” between us right from the outset.

“If I start negotiating between your two positions, or ask you about your feelings, I’d be agreeing to do therapy on the level you know how to do it. It’s the level you both are functioning on now. But that’s not going to get you anywhere, which is exactly where this session is going.”

“I feel unheard in my marriage!” Annie Marie floated another trial balloon to move our session onto more familiar turf.

“*Me too!*” I responded. Anne Marie gave me a sharp look, taking my measure. I smiled to make it easier for her to map out I was joking.

“But this is therapy, and I don’t think *you* are hearing *me*. I think you’re dealing with bigger issues than ‘communication problems.’ And you are likely to fail if you insist on doing therapy at the same level of functioning you are living at. At this moment, neither of you are functioning at a high enough level that resolving your issues is remotely possible. If you want to start acting like you, Stephan, are capable of being a competent plastic surgeon, and you, Anne Marie, are a smart woman who doesn’t have to rely on her looks, maybe we can get somewhere!”

Stephan sat up straight in his chair. “Are you saying we’re not smart enough to solve our problems?!” His tone was threatening and demanding.

“No. You are plenty bright, that’s for sure! But Einstein said problems can’t be solved by the same level of intelligence that created them. I’m saying you need to function at a higher level than either of you are doing at this moment if you want a chance of succeeding.”

The stunning change in Stephan and Anne Marie told me I made the right response. All the oxygen in the room stopped being consumed by their emotional combat. My assessment of their abilities—and their impairments--was correct. Anne Marie looked me over a second time, retaking my measure. She didn’t say, “*I underestimated you,*” but that came across when she said, “I hear what you’re saying.”

“If that’s really happening, I’m glad.”

Anne Marie did a double-take. “You’re not taking my word for it. You’re not making any assumptions.”

This confirmed my estimation of Anne Marie. She picked up my message. She had excellent mind-mapping ability, and she was smarter and faster than she looked.

“You have excellent mind mapping ability!” I replied. “Like most people, you have the ability to make mental maps of how other people’s minds work. Since that’s the case, how come you act like you can’t see Stephen and you don’t know how his mind works?” I knew I was asking a loaded question.

Anne Marie acted like she couldn’t map Stephan. She let him represent himself as being whoever he imagined because their relationship remained stable as long as she went along with him. Arguing with Stephan about his parents was one thing. Expressing a view of Stephan that differed from how he saw himself triggered his next regression and Anne Marie’s next brow-beating.

Stephan’s hair-trigger temper came in two versions: The hot version was fireworks! Cursing. Yelling. Throwing magazines! Storming out! Slamming doors! The cold version was like a python cornering a mouse. Cold-blooded. Coiled and ready to strike. Hunting, cornering prey and devouring it. You didn’t want to trigger either version of him.

Anne Marie looked startled by my question. Several moments passed while she decided how to answer. She eventually said, “I’m afraid to do that. Stephen doesn’t like it.”

I looked Anne Marie in the eyes and smiled. When it was to time to stand up and speak the truth, she did. “Then I guess you heard me when I said you needed to function at a higher level. That’s much better.” Anne Marie smiled back and nodded.

Stephan watched with squinty eyes that said, “*I’m not sure I’m buying what you’re selling!*” My move wasn’t optimal for creating a balanced treatment alliance. I was focused on pulling Stephan and Anne Marie’s functioning up, so our interactions could occur at a higher level and give us something better to build on. I knew I still had a ways to go.

“By chance,” I asked Stephan, “Are you a lousy plastic surgeon?”

“No.” Stephan’s expression said, “*What are you doing?!*”

“Or are you a good plastic surgeon with an expensive drug habit?”

Stephan’s face instantaneously became a blank impassive mask. He stopped to clear his throat, stalling for time to map out where I was going. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to figure out why you can’t afford to hire someone to do housework?”

Instantly, Stephen went from being confused about what I was doing, to realizing I saw the move he made with Anne Marie, to recognizing I wasn’t afraid to call him on it. He also saw Anne Marie was taking this all in too. Stephan shot me a reappraising look.

It bothered Stephan that Anne Marie never got a job. It wasn’t that they needed the money. He didn’t like the idea she had an “easy life.” Stephan obviously wasn’t factoring in what it was like to live with him.

“Very surgical. Well done. I’m impressed!” Stephan didn’t acknowledge trying to manipulate Anne Marie, but his attention and engagement increased as the session progressed. Simply stated, he was better behaved and more thoughtful. He turned out to be frighteningly smart.

As our four-hour session continued, Stephan and Anne Marie’s participation improved. They talked more frankly and pulled less crap. They answered my questions instead of saying whatever they wanted to say. They maintained better self-control instead of spinning out as they had previously. Their improved functioning allowed us to tackle issues at a much higher level. This didn’t produce instant solutions to their problems. Still, it gave us a more accurate picture of their abilities and limitations.

My intervention also changed everything that followed in the next three days. It increased the pace of treatment, allowing us to go deeper into issues than if I accommodated their poor functioning at the outset. I was able to do this because I recognized Stephan and Anne Marie were living in steady-state regressions. I’ve learned that I often need to pull up people’s functioning at the outset of treatment, before I can get anywhere working on their issues.

When I started doing psychotherapy, I didn’t know this was possible. For one thing, I didn’t even know steady-state regressions existed. I never imagined people could live with their functioning suppressed long-term. I never knew people were capable of operating dramatically better, intellectually and emotionally, within twenty-four hours.

But I've learned that, given the right circumstances, their hidden talents and abilities quickly surface.

I've seen belligerent, unpleasant, seemingly-oblivious people turn into observant, thoughtful, workable clients overnight if I managed to pull their functioning up. Once I realized this was possible, I stopped offering intellectual interpretations or helping clients vent their feelings. I focused on yanking their brains to higher levels of functioning, at which point their thoughts and feelings changed, and they were able to solve their problems.

Long-term steady-state regressions

The human costs of long-term regressions are staggering. In addition to lost time at work, workers' reduced attention and cognitive acuity lead to errors in design and quality control, which show up in elevated prices for shoddy goods and services. Besides short-sighted business decisions and increased health care costs, steady-state regressions waste human potential and growth opportunities especially among our most disadvantaged communities. Whereas acute regressions produce tragedies like workplace shootings, the impact of widespread steady-state regressions is largely invisible.

Have you ever scheduled a repairman to fix something in your house and he doesn't come with the right tools for the job? Or watched someone repeatedly make incredibly obvious mistakes? Or, talked with someone who thinks so slowly you'd swear his or her brain is lubricated with molasses. These kinds of things make you wonder,

“What are these people thinking?! Are they thinking at all?! They are walking and talking in their sleep! Hello people!! Wake up!!!”

Many people are living regressed. It’s their typical conscious state. Some have been this way for much of their life. This doesn’t stop some seriously regressed people from becoming financially successful, famous personalities, powerful leaders, or pioneers in their field—particularly if this involves being ruthless, cunning, and opportunistic.

Living in a long-term steady-state regression controls your picture of yourself and your place in the world. It shapes how people relate to you and how you relate to yourself. You can live regressed for years. Your functioning is suppressed so long, you think this is your personality. You lose quality of life, vitality, adaptability and enjoyment of your talents. Everything pushes you to accept your place in life and believe this is who you are.

You can be regressed for years

Stephan and Anne Marie exemplify how clients look when they first come to see me. They thought they had communication problems or some other skill-deficit. They were looking for a therapy “tune-up.” They never suspected their pictures of themselves and their lives could be so far off, or they might have interpersonal neurobiological problems requiring a brain overhaul.

The best proof of a steady-state regression is when you experience quick increments in functioning when you work on it directly. This often occurs as you wake up to the real picture of your childhood and adolescence. Let me tell you about Stephan and

Anne Marie's backgrounds, so you can understand the significance of what transpired in treatment.

Anne Marie had a troubled adolescence, progressively doing better as she became an adult. In addition to constant dieting, she secretly engaged in bingeing and purging to keep her weight down. Eventually, this stopped in her late 20's, although she continued to monitor her figure carefully to this day.

Anne Marie also struggled with panic attacks all her life. From the time she was a young girl, Anne Marie remembered being afraid of when the next one would occur. She felt immobilized when they hit her, seemingly out of nowhere for no apparent reason. Some fear or anticipated catastrophe would suddenly overwhelm her. Often this involved people she loved becoming ill or dying. But it could also involve looking dumb or some other social embarrassment. It didn't matter how likely or probable it was. Once the possibility surfaced in her mind, Anne Marie's anxieties became debilitating.

Anne Marie had some understanding of her dysfunctional upbringing from several periods of therapy, starting when she went to college. But Anne Marie hadn't really come to grips with the big picture.

For instance, Anne Marie knew her father was a severe alcoholic, and she had terrifying memories of him driving drunk and slurring his words. He bragged to Anne Marie about keeping the tarmac centerline lined up with the hood ornament of his car to keep from driving off the road. Many times she tried to move away from him because he

reeked of alcohol, and to this day sometimes she had a strong physical reaction around people who were drinking.

Anne Marie's brother, Jake, was dealing drugs while they were adolescents. After he totaled his car in his late 20s, nearly killing himself and two of his friends, Jake cleaned up his act. Anne Marie considered herself the daughter of a drunk and the sister of a drug addict. In her mind, this was as far as it went. This was bad enough. She didn't include what happened with her mother around this.

When Anne Marie told her mother about Jake dealing drugs, her mother said she shouldn't make up stories. They were an upstanding family and incapable of what she was describing. But Jake's drug deals were becoming increasingly brazen so Anne Marie spoke to her mother about this again. Mother eventually asked Jake if he was doing drugs and he vehemently denied it. She took the position that a good mother wouldn't choose between her children when they had competing claims, so therefore she did nothing. They also never discussed the fact that Anne Marie's father had a serious drinking problem. Anne Marie's mother left her to deal with both things on her own. This didn't figure into Anne Marie's picture when she thought about her life.

As Anne Marie saw it, she had one good parent who helped her through adolescence. That was her mother. Anne Marie spoke with her several times a week and felt they shared a warm, mutually supportive relationship. Even today, Jake relied on

You can be living in a steady-state regression for most of your life.

their mother for financial help and emotional support. Anne Marie hadn't spoken with her father in years. There were more than enough traumatic mind mapping incidents in her memories to explain how she ended up living in a steady-state regression.

Stephan had even more traumatizing interactions in his family history. He had vivid memories of his father being marched off in handcuffs when he was ten years old. He remembered his sobbing mother frantically running after the police saying his father was sorry.

Stephan's mother took over all parenting responsibilities and kept the family going while his father was in prison. As far as Stephan was concerned, she was the bedrock while his father was gone and also after he returned. He felt it was understandable she was controlling at times, having shouldered all the responsibilities for so many years. If there was one reliable person in his life, Stephan thought it was his mother.

The fact that Stephan's mother was intrusive, manipulative and thoroughly untrustworthy was completely missing from this picture. You could count on her to put three square meals on the table every day, but Mother wasn't a safe person to come to when you needed help. You'd probably end up taking care of Mother instead of the other way around. Stephan's mother was an incredibly narcissistic woman, who drew attention to herself through huge displays about always selflessly thinking about what was best for other people.

It was understandable and appropriate that Stephan appreciated his mother for taking care of him while his father was gone. But love and appreciation never involve going blind to the truth of who people are, because real love is never blind. Stephan was demonstrating a neurobiological impairment: He could not bring himself to see his mother's mind accurately.

Stephan had similar blind spots with his father. He kept overlooking past incidents demonstrating his father was a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel. No one wants to think these kinds of things about his parent, but this was something more.

Stephan was surprised when I suggested his vignettes painted a picture of his father as a man of questionable integrity. He reassured me his father was a pillar of their church. I replied both things could be true. Stephan looked at me quizzically, trying to figure out how I could be so wrong and not see it. How could his father become a mainstay of their congregation if he was a liar, a cheat and a scoundrel?!

This was evidence of Stephan's neurobiological impairment. He couldn't see what he couldn't see. That's the nature of these kinds of problems: You are blind to them until they become shockingly obvious.

"Low mode" functioning

Steady-state regressions, like acute regressions, are a form of "low mode" brain functioning. I didn't start off trying to solve steady-state regressions because I didn't know they existed. It took me a while to convince myself they do exist. Confirmation

came by treating clients as if their steady-state regressions existed and watching their functioning improve.

This is tricky because assessing improvement isn't as straight-forward as measuring the yield from a new strain of corn seed, or sales from a new ad campaign. It's more like measuring dark matter--you're not even sure it exists at first. How do you measure something you've never imagined before, but you're beginning to suspect exists?

Another complicating factor is therapists and clients are predisposed to see progress where there is none. There's a tremendous halo-effect when you're working your ass off to help people get better, and you want your efforts to amount to something. Clients also frequently report more progress than they achieve, especially "breakthroughs" that turn out to be insights-that-go-nowhere.

Once I was certain steady-state regressions existed, I waited a long time to decide if clients' functioning improved. These improvements included subsequent brightening followed by real-world gains in cognitive and emotional functioning. They were able to think better under stress. They were less subject to spaghetti brain. They had more resilience to regressions. And they were able to deal with their antagonists much better.

The Intensive Therapy format was a real boon in making these assessments because I saw my clients for four days in a row. This allowed me to (1) discover the existence of "brightening" and (2) document brightening in the day following psychotherapy sessions in which clients confronted difficult truths about their lives. What

I saw couldn't be explained by learning or insight. Neither produces the kinds of changes I witnessed. The more parsimonious explanation was these were shifts in brain functioning.

Like you, I can imagine brilliant screwed up people. I've met more than a few in my lifetime, and I'm sure you have too. But when you have people sitting in front of you that are smarter than you—scary smart and difficult to deal with as they are—it's hard to make your brain contemplate they are *even smarter* than they look.

Do smart people living in steady-state regressions get even smarter when they're less regressed? The answer is *yes!* But it's not like they gain an additional fifty IQ points. They gain in social intelligence. Their judgement is less impaired. They use their smarts to solve their problems rather than to defeat their partner in arguments. Their thinking becomes more flexible, and they are better able to change mindsets. They break out of dysfunctional response patterns and come up with creative solutions to long-standing problems. Despite these clients' being frighteningly smart to begin with, it's possible to discern marked improvements in their functioning.

This pattern of improvement wasn't reserved just for my exceptionally smart clients. I noted similar trends in most clients who got better. It's impressive when people, who look like they couldn't find their way out of an elevator, start coming up with new solutions to previously intractable problems.

Still, I considered that the improvements I observed were nothing more than “counter-transference” (inaccurate perceptions based on my own needs and prior

experiences), “wish fulfillment” (seeing what I want to see), and self-delusion (seeing what I expect to see). Two things argued against this. First, I monitored my clients’ partners’ reactions to ascertain if they recognized the same things I saw. A new client might be able to beat my radar and implant a false belief in me about making progress. But they weren’t likely to succeed with their mate, who was suspicious and doubtful of them from the outset.

Second, I watched to see if apparent improvements held up across time and difficult circumstances. What I saw indicated clients were able to improve their steady-state regressions and these improvements were maintainable. Their steady-state regression might increase if they had a traumatic mind mapping experience, for example, with a parent or spouse. But if they were willing to pull their functioning up (like I’ll show you in Part Three), their steady-state regressions improved.

Steady-state regressions versus acute regressions

There are significant differences between acute and steady-state regressions, although both involve impaired functioning. Acute regressions are episodic (like collaborative alliances). They come and go. Acute regressions are moment-to-moment

*Long-term steady-state regressions have gradual onset,
whereas acute regressions come on suddenly*

things. One moment you can be OK, and the next moment you're not. And a moment later, your acute regression can start to lift.

No so with steady-state regressions. They extend over a longer time, often lasting weeks, months, years, or decades. You can be living in a steady-state regression for much of your life. You can have peak professional success, but your mood and outlook remain hopeless. You're dower when you could be having the time of your life. You don't find gratification in things you could enjoy. Your inner mental world doesn't respond to positive real-world experiences.

These symptoms might suggest you're depressed, but you may not feel depressed. If you felt seriously depressed, at least you'd feel *something* acutely. The problem is, you're not feeling much of anything at all. "Constant blah" is a good way to describe steady-state regressions. Some people experience them as walking around in a fog or feeling "distant," like they're not really in touch with other people or situations.

The first time I met Anne Marie, I had the impression there was a lot more substance to her than showed on the surface. Initially, I thought perhaps she was deliberately "laying low" to mask her intelligence until she mapped me out. When our interactions suggested she was making a good-faith effort, it became clearer that Anne Marie was an extremely smart woman who thought she wasn't very bright at all.

Steady-state regressions don't feel like anything. That's the problem. It feels "normal." It's familiar to you. You accept the ways you are now as who you are, and the ways things are now are the way things should be. You don't recognize anything is out of sorts because you've lived like this for so long. Steady-state regressions cause enormous unnoticed wastes of human resources and abilities.

The movie Terms of Endearment contains a scene of two children saying goodbye to their terminally ill mother. The older boy demonstrates the bland facial characteristics and behavior of a steady-state regression.

In some ways, it's easier to describe what you *look like* when you're in a steady-state regression:

1. You have an unhealthy appearance: Your eyes look dull, there's a pallor to your skin, and you look like you lack much inner life.
2. You have low energy and endurance.
3. You look dumber and less competent than you are. You have difficulty recognizing important discrepancies and contradictions, and keeping your thoughts from going off on tangents (impaired cognitive function).
4. You seem unable to control your emotions (impaired emotional functioning).

Living in a steady-state regression predisposes you to frequent acute regressions. It's not hard to understand why: You are already regressed! It's not uncommon to have trouble with both acute and steady-state regressions because one promotes the other. That's why people commonly struggle with regressions throughout their lives.

Resolving steady-state regression is its own reward. You feel so much better. You look and think better too. You are more resilient to subsequent acute regressions. If your acute regressions have been intensely bad experiences, maybe this gives you additional motivation to resolve your long-term regression. You have more to gain.

*If you have problems with acute regressions, you're probably
living in a steady-state regression too.*

Steady-state regressions verses other disorders

What's the difference between a steady-state regression and a depression? I'm not sure there is one. I've treated a lot of people who struggled with being depressed for years. I never got anywhere while I treated them for depression, but their depressions lifted when their steady-state regressions improved.

What about ADHD (attention deficit—hyperactive disorder)? How about autism spectrum disorders? Clearly, some people have diagnosable physiological ADHD and autism problems. I'm not suggesting otherwise. However, both problems have been too widely (and wrongly) self-diagnosed.

Long-term steady-state regressions are frequently misdiagnosed as ADHD, high-functioning autism, and Asperger's Syndrome.

Vast numbers of people have sought ways to identify, understand and justify their cognitive and emotional impairments. Until now, ADHD and “being on the autism spectrum” are how laymen have diagnosed themselves. You'll probably find regressions are a more productive and proactive way to approach your problems.

Impacts of long-term steady-state regressions

Acute regressions are easy to identify. They are subjectively intense experiences accompanied by marked changes in behavior from what preceded it. In contrast, steady-state regressions feel “normal” and show much less variation in intensity, which make them harder to identify.

I've never had clients seek treatment for long-term regressions. You can only recognize you've been living in a steady-state regression retrospectively. You need some detectable change that establishes a new baseline from which to understand your prior

functioning. Very often, you have no idea you are living regressed until one of two things happen:

1. *Your functioning comes up.* Your brain becomes blind to steady-state conditions, but it's brilliant at detecting differences. My clients recognize all sorts of subtle symptoms: The world looks "brighter." They describe feeling "lighter." They have an increased sense of overall well-being. They are less grumpy and less available to be triggered emotionally. They have more of a sense of humor.
2. *Your impairments show up in ways you can't deny.* In practice, my clients first realize they are living in a steady-state regression when I deliberately do something that noticeably decreases their functioning. Sooner or later, I will steer the conversation to where they have systematic blind spots in their mind-mapping radar for the important people in their life. Typically this causes their functioning to diminish. Momentarily they look gravely impaired. So much so, even *they* can see their own reduced state. Fortunately, watching their functioning decrease allows them to do something about it.

You only recognize living regressed retrospectively, because you need a detectable change that establishes a new baseline for understanding your prior functioning.

For many clients, this is enough to motivate them to push through their blind spot. They retrieve memories and process them more accurately. This finally allows them to

escape from the invisible box in which they've been living. That's what a long-term steady-state regression is: An invisible box.

When my clients do this, their functioning goes up. They feel pain and grief and cry about what they see. But this is *clean* pain, which improves their functioning and lets them move on. Within a matter of hours or days, they look and function better and feel more grounded. They're not jumping for joy because it's a sad time in many ways. But it's like someone came home to an empty dark house and finally turned the lights on.

Asleep at the wheel

Many people are walking around "asleep" and need to awaken. This may sound like a presumptuous over-statement. But I mean this the same way the goal of Buddhism is to help people wake up to reality and the nature of life (bodhi, Awakening). Buddhism says the focus of awakening is personal development characterized by an absence of illusion and insight into profound truths (I.e., "Enlightenment")

If you are living in a steady-state regression, you are "asleep."

In the next several pages, I'll describe the negative impacts of steady-state regressions. As far as I'm concerned, waking up means resolving these adverse effects. Removing blind spots in your mind-mapping radar. Gaining wisdom from your own life by repairing the holes in your autobiographical memory. This allows greater freedom in thought, feeling and action by liberating yourself from self-delusions. However, I don't

expect you to become Enlightened. My goals for your awakening are less lofty but in the same direction. You just need to wake up to the reality of your past, present and future.

Going blind becomes a form of relatedness

One client told me that when he was growing up, every payday his stepfather came home drunk and sexually assaulted his mother. He vividly remembered sitting in

So many people are “asleep,” it shapes daily life

his bedroom with the blanket over his head, hoping the inevitable wouldn't happen.

When his mother shifted from yelling to crying, he knew his stepfather was about to appear at his bedroom door. That's when he began plastering a frozen smile on his face that might save him from another beating.

Now, think about what's involved in this man's brief description. When children figure out their parents are blind to themselves, repeated traumatic mind mapping experiences with them reveal the extent of their blindness. Children also figure out how their parents see themselves, and mirror back the self-images their parents want to see. To accomplish this, children's brains must go through six different steps:

1. Develop accurate maps of their parents' minds.
2. Map out *how* parents see themselves, including *why* they want to see themselves these ways. To achieve this, children's brains must develop

maps of minds that don't actually exist. (I.e., how parents would *like* to think their minds worked.)

3. Recognize discrepancies between these competing mental maps of who their parents are. Make meaning of these discrepancies.
4. Predict their parents' reactions if their inaccurate-but-preferred self-images aren't reinforced.
5. Feed back the self-image that supports their parents' minds, and reduces the potential for additional parental regressions.
6. Mask their own minds to make this look believable.

Parents who won't confront themselves or allow themselves to be accurately seen force their children to "go to sleep" and live regressed.

This man described other vignettes depicting him being traumatized by his stepfather's terrible behavior. The aggregate was like a documentary of him progressively being pounded into a steady-state regression through repeated traumatic mind mapping experiences.

But the most striking thing was how this man saw his stepfather: *He didn't see much at all.* Subjectively, he accepted his stepfather's behavior as normal ("normal for this person.") The negative impacts of traumatic mind mapping made being around his stepfather less wearing. "Blindness" is adaptive when you're living in constant anxiety,

but I'm not suggesting "secondary gain." I'm referring to brain impairments rather than some action taken by your unconscious.

Holes in your autobiographical memory

An astounding number of people say, "*I can't remember anything from my childhood!*" I'm convinced they are not describing repression or forgetfulness. A more parsimonious explanation is they've experienced traumatic mind mapping and are living

Holes in autobiographical memory are common in steady-state regressions.

Repairing these holes often improves your functioning.

in a steady-state regression. Their memories probably exist in implicit memory, but the information has not yet been processed into verbal memory. This means they can't deliberately recall memories when they try to. But then again, these are not the kinds of events you'd be dying to remember anyway. We're talking about experiences that prompt a mental attitude of "just don't go there."

One brain mechanism involved in "going blind" are holes in your autobiographical memory. These holes result from your mind mapping ability repeatedly crashing due to traumatic mind mapping and repeated disgust reactions. (I'll explain disgust reactions next chapter.) It doesn't have to involve blockbuster traumatic events. All it takes is a steady stream of daily traumas and heartbreaking disappointments to create holes in your autobiographical memory. It could be caused by someone in the

family who is an alcoholic, drug abuser, adulterer, criminal, or pathological liar, or who is seriously physically or mentally ill.

Gaps in your mind-mapping radar

A second brain mechanism involved in “going blind” are narrow-band gaps in your mind-mapping radar. This means you have difficulty correctly perceiving important people in your life and accurately mapping their minds. Narrow gaps in your mind-mapping radar can result from traumatic mind mapping, anticipatory traumatic mind mapping and repeated disgust reactions. These gaps are usually specific to particular people (or people in their role). Often, there’s corresponding hypervigilance towards everyone else.

Gaps in your mind-mapping radar have the same impact as retrieval errors when trying to remember your past: You’ll be repeatedly surprised and disappointed. You’ll have difficulty reading what your antagonist is doing or anticipating his or her behavior. You won’t appear to learn about who you’re dealing with from past experiences.

Many relationships depend on one or both partners’ impairments. This is how the marriages of chronic liars and philanderers survive. It only takes a good liar/philanderer one or two repetitions to map out holes in their mate’s mind-mapping radar. From then on, they exploit their partner’s neurobiological problem and take advantage of their blind spots.

This was true of Stephan’s and Anne Marie’s many arguments about each other’s parents. Each was blind to their own parents and hypervigilant about their in-laws. Each

could see what the other was blind to while remaining blind to their own blindness. Stephan railed about Anne Marie's frequent phone calls with her mother being inappropriate. Anne Marie attributed Stephan's accusation to his difficulties with his manipulative mother and emotionally absent father, which he refused to acknowledge.

Refusal to map your antagonist's mind

A third mechanism in "going blind" is refusing to map your antagonist's mind. It can involve refusing to map your antagonist's mind in traumatic incidents you can remember, or through what he or she is currently doing. This refusal often stems from anticipatory traumatic mind mapping. You don't want to see your antagonists mind, and you don't want to show that you can map him or her. You know revealing this secret is likely to trigger unpleasant versions of this person that you've seen before.

A crucial clarification about "caring" is necessary at this point. You can see how Stephan could feel protective of his mother and indebted to her for parenting him while his father went to prison. But that doesn't mean that he actually cared about her. I'm talking about Stephan protecting the stability of his inner mental world, which came undone when he looked at Mother's negative characteristics. He couldn't stand the complex mix of disappointment and loathing she triggered in him, nor his guilt for feeling this way about her.

Likewise, it wasn't easy for Stephan to look at his father accurately. It was a big emotional hit to accept that his father was a low-life operator rather than the pillar of the community he presented himself to be. The same issues surfaced for Anne Marie

regarding her own parents. Accurately mapping their parents challenged the rules in their families and the stability in their heads.

People's refusal to map their parents is often mistaken for caring or loyalty. When we're discussing families that don't teach or inspire these virtues, self-preservation is more often the motive: Specifically, preserving the equilibrium and stability of your own inner mental world. No matter how regressed you are, this will always be a primary motivator. Caring and loyalty aren't strong motivations when you're living in a steady-state regression.

Emotional dead spots

Given the impact steady-state regressions have on your cognitive functioning, it's not surprising they debilitate your emotional functioning as well. One characteristic of a steady-state regression is a major blunting or flattening effect. You are indifferent to things that ought to grab your attention. You sleepwalk through life, not feeling very much. You are physically living, but not emotionally *alive*. Maybe you can get passionate about a cause—and that's precisely why you get involved. But when you're off your soapbox, you're sort of flat and empty. There's no vibrancy to you.

Maybe you're a food fanatic, totally obsessed with what you put in your mouth. Or you belong to a wine club. Or you do yoga religiously. But the truth may be that, in general, despite your latest passions, you don't feel very much at all.

Oh, you can feel hot and cold, and you can taste sweet and sour. You can even tell when there's too much sugar in a Chinese plum sauce. But the truth may be there isn't

much sweetness in your life. You can light up and be charming when sharing food and wine with friends. But you're not feeling *alive*, and Michelin four-star cuisine won't change that.

As I focused on my clients' steady-state regressions, I identified patterns I now call "emotional dead spots." Someone with an emotional dead spot has a marked absence of emotional responsiveness in some narrow-but-profound way. This typically surfaced as an inability to care about and invest in another human being.

You can be highly successful in business or career and still be living in a steady-state regression.

Emotional dead-spots are typical in long-term regressions. Don't get me wrong. I know there are loads of out-and-out incorrigible sociopaths. (You could be one of them.) But some clients, who looked sociopathic at the outset, were able to resolve their emotional dead spot as their steady-state regression lessened. This was the case with Stephan.

It took me a while to come to this conclusion because it was antithetical to what I had learned in school. My initial thought was these cold and seemingly heartless people

People with emotional dead spots show an absence of emotional responsiveness in some narrow-but-profound way.

lacked empathy. *Empathy* is the ability to intuit and comprehend other people's experience.

But on closer examination, I realized *these people had empathy and mind mapping ability too*. They could detect what other people were feeling and thinking. They understood and could anticipate other people's feelings. They could also predict how others might react to what they were going to do. But the point was, they simply didn't care.

This was difficult to recognize because society generally conflates empathy with compassion. *Compassion* is a sympathetic concern for what other people are feeling. We assume people care once they know other people's experience, and attribute indifference or exploitation to lack of empathy. But when I encountered neurobiology research discussing empathy *without* compassion, it blew my mind.

I never imagined someone could have empathy *without* compassion. My constricted view presumed empathy was always *prosocial*. But once my mind was liberated, *antisocial empathy* made perfect sense: Some folks understand other people's inner mental worlds, but they don't give a damn or use their empathic abilities to manipulate or harm others.

People like Stephan have *antisocial* empathy. They are like a bell without a clangor. They lack compassion. They simply don't care. My job is to help them become capable of caring. Trying to do this by helping them understand other people's feelings doesn't work because they already can. Instead, I accomplish this by resolving their

steady-state regression and improving their brain functioning to the point that they're capable of caring about someone else.

Waking up is not easy

Buddhism and Crucible Neurobiological Therapy concur that waking up is not easy. They both offer methods to accomplish their versions of waking up. Buddhism is a lifetime practice with far loftier goals. Resolving steady-state regressions requires more aggressive solutions that produce faster results. For Stephan and Anne Marie, waking up meant confronting themselves, accepting whole new ways of seeing themselves and their parents, and dealing with them instead of leaving this for their mate to handle out of necessity.

In this chapter, we've covered some heavy topics about steady-state regressions: Living asleep, holes in your autobiographical memory, gaps in your mind-mapping radar and emotional dead spots. In Section Three, we'll cover how to bring these nightmares to an end. Four chapters will guide you through the process of "waking up." But we don't have to wait until then to point out several things about this:

Waking up is not easy. It's downright difficult. It takes repeated applications of will. You need to be stubborn from the best in you.

Waking up is not pleasant. Digesting things that make you want to puke is virtually guaranteed. You won't like the process. Nobody does. You do it for the same reason everyone else does: You want the benefits.

Don't take waking up for granted. Many people never wake up, in part, because they have no idea they're asleep. Others know they are asleep and they have every intention to remain that way. They have no desire to deal with things they are avoiding.

Our next chapter, the conclusion of Section One, takes a further look into common causes of regressions. This will prepare you for Section Two, where we'll focus on pulling yourself out acute regressions while you're lost in them. The things you'll learn about traumatic mind mapping and interpersonal "moves" (manipulations) are essential for understanding what triggers regression in the first place. You'll probably wish somebody had told you these things many years ago!

Chapter 4: What Drags You Down?

Elizabeth always worried about what other people thought of her. She was dependent on what I call *a reflected sense of self*. If other people liked and valued her, she felt good about herself. If others were angry or displeased with her, Elizabeth's self-worth sank like a rock. She lacked a solid sense of self--a stable, accurate internalized picture of herself that didn't hinge on other people's reactions. Depending on others for a positive reflected sense of self is a common problem throughout many people's lives.

People who rely on a reflected sense of self spend all their waking moments mapping other people's minds. Sometimes Elizabeth jumped to inaccurate conclusions, but overall, she was pretty good at it. This is true of most people because mind mapping is a survival skill. In this case, it was Elizabeth's emotional survival.

There's an important lesson to learn here: People who depend on other people's validation hone their mind mapping abilities out of necessity. If you want to estimate how many people have mind-mapping ability, start counting all the emotionally insecure people you know who look to others for validation. You'll be looking at people whose dependence on a reflected sense of self makes them vulnerable to acute regressions.

Guess what happens when they don't get the validation they need!

Descending into the deep

Elizabeth came into our next therapy session upset about her latest altercation with Dennis. She had lost her grip on herself, and started screaming and ranting and couldn't stop. When Dennis eventually walked out, she *really* went crazy! Running through the house wailing! In retrospect, she was thankful Paul was at school, but that's all that was good about it.

Elizabeth tried to get Dennis to sit down and talk to her. When he refused, Elizabeth punched him in the chest! For a moment, they were both shocked! Elizabeth hadn't hurt him physically, but that wasn't the issue. Elizabeth crossed an invisible line from which there was no turning back. She had actually *hit* her partner!

Maybe you come from a place where this is no big deal, where people hit each other all the time. But for most people, this crosses a line of basic decency that triggers an involuntary sense of revulsion (disgust brain reaction). Elizabeth couldn't believe she did that! She felt terrible. *How could she do that?! What caused her to act so out of control?!*

Elizabeth was very upset, but I couldn't help but smile. Having seen other clients go through this, I was pleased she was distraught. In this instance, getting upset about her behavior wasn't a regression. It was a good sign.

Instantly, Elizabeth was on me, demanding to know why I was smiling when she was upset! Was I like Dennis, who took pleasure in upsetting her?! It helped that I was genuinely delighted for Elizabeth. As she mapped my mind, she realized I was dead-serious: I saw what she was doing as her opportunity to change her life.

Rather than get into why Elizabeth hit Dennis, I directed her attention to the moment of actually hitting him and her shock at herself. Up came a flood of heartbreaking memories. By the end of the session, Elizabeth was in remarkably better shape than she had been in for some time.

For example, Elizabeth's father cornered her and hit her physically when she disobeyed him. Or if she didn't jump up and do whatever he wanted fast enough to make him feel like he ruled the house. He, at least, was predictable.

In contrast, Elizabeth's mother frequently lashed out and slapped Elizabeth's face, suddenly without warning. It could come at any moment that Mother was within striking distance. The trigger could be something Elizabeth just said that set her mother off, or something Mother had been stewing about for days. Of the two parents, Mother's assaults were harder to deal with because of the element of surprise. Elizabeth suspected her mother particularly enjoyed doing it this way.

The highpoint of Elizabeth's childhood was standing up to her parents at age twelve and saying, "*You will not hit me again!*" And they didn't. But Mother became more emotionally brutal, and Elizabeth never drew the line with her on that. Interactions with Mother frequently ended with Elizabeth saying, "*Ok, I'll say or do whatever you want! I'll even make it up! Just leave me alone!*"

As Elizabeth revisualized these memories, her functioning started improving. Her next thoughts looked at how she immediately "gave in" when discussing small things. If Dennis suggested something different from what she had in mind, Elizabeth quickly

capitulated because “it wasn’t worth fighting over.” The picture Elizabeth described was that she was selling herself out, rather than focusing on Dennis pressuring her.

Elizabeth realized she felt cornered by Dennis during sex, always feeling like he was about to take her over. She had sex with him the same way she dealt with her parents: *“I’ll do what you want, if you leave me alone.”* Elizabeth wasn’t saying this as an excuse. She was confronting herself, and this is what she saw. Her apology to Dennis for hitting him underscored this. Dennis accepted Elizabeth’s apology and expressed regret for surprising her with an alternative divorce settlement offer. No doubt, you can imagine the intensity of this session!

But the big shock wasn’t Elizabeth’s insights! Or this couple’s reciprocal apologies. *A half-hour later, Elizabeth realized she was furious! And she had no idea why she was angry!*

Elizabeth had difficulty tracking, processing and retaining her own emotion-laden experiences. The fact she was angry wasn’t the problem. Being rageful made perfect sense! Not recognizing *why* she was fuming was the problem!

Had I never seen this before, I would have sworn Elizabeth was pulling my leg about not understanding why she was rageful. After going through such an incredible chain of associations and memories, putting all that together, how could someone not understand why they are hugely pissed off shortly thereafter?! With a little prodding, Elizabeth recalled what transpired earlier, leaving her shocked by the gap in her functioning.

The first time someone talks to me about recognizing his or her brain misfunctions, it's a game-changer. Rather than getting completely regressed, Elizabeth had a response I've seen many times: After the initial "Oh my God!" reaction, she settled down and became more workable. She said, *"I knew there was something wrong with me! I'm glad I'm not just plain crazy! There's something wrong with my brain! It helps to know you've seen this before and that it's treatable. I thought I'd be like this for the rest of my life!"*

There's a paradoxical impact when your impairment shows up so clearly, you can't deny it any longer. It frees you up to do something about it. This paved the way for Elizabeth recognizing being seriously out of touch with herself, and having difficulty thinking straight at times. This wasn't easy, but it was easier than accepting that she was insane. Ultimately, Elizabeth was able to know herself better than many people do, and identify her misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misconstructions of people and situations.

Swimming in deep water

Here in Chapter Four, I want to take a broader view of what triggers regressions and look at what this means in practice. To do this, let's consider five major causes of regressions in turn:

- Anxiety and meaning
- Traumatic mind mapping
- Interpersonal moves

- Weak 4 Points of Balance
- Reactive regressions

We'll look at these principle causes of regressions throughout this chapter.

Anxiety and Meaning

In Chapter Two, I told you two primary causes of acute regressions are anxiety and meaning. High anxiety and high meaning situations are where you're particularly likely to encounter people in mid-regression. Or be regressed yourself. This is easy to understand if you visualize what I'm about to describe. Let's begin by envisioning everyday situations involving high anxiety.

- *Relationship problems.* Whenever you have relationship problems, you're going to be regression-prone. The more important the relationship, and the more volatile the issues, the higher your potential for regressions. Your marriage is where you're most likely to become a lunatic. You can envision couples screaming over sexual difficulties, parenting issues, and power balance shifts. Problems with in-laws and ageing parents aren't far behind.
- *Financial stress.* Think about losing your job. Beyond the sting of getting fired, you're wondering how to make ends meet. Or you borrow money from everyone you know to start a new business. Your nerves are on edge. Your emotions are locked and loaded. Difficult decisions paralyze your judgement and next thing you know, you're yelling at your family over things they didn't do.

- *Medical problems.* You find a lump in your breast or groin and find out that it's cancer. The last thing you want to do when facing illnesses and medical procedures is make things worse by dumping your feelings on the people around you. But because of the high anxiety involved, you're predisposed to do it.
- *Major life transitions.* Picture yourself as a stay-at-home mother when your children start school or leave home for college. Or you relocate your home, or go through menopause, retire, get married, or get a divorce. Going through major life transitions is not the time to make problems for yourself—but that's when many of us do.
- *Major disappointments.* Imagine your fiance breaks up with you when you had no idea this was coming. Or one of your parents passes away unexpectedly. Or your favorite pet dies. Most of us get regressed when we experience big disappointments and major losses.
- *Defiance of discipline.* Visualize a father is beating his child because the father perceives the child to be defying his will and challenging his authority. That father is severely regressed as he is belting his child. The child is regressed too.
- *A child is hurt or ill.* If you are invested in your child's wellbeing, there's a good chance you regress when your child is injured or sick. First-time parents get regressed when their toddler falls down. Second-time parents get regressed when the kid falls down and bleeds. You can recognize more experienced parents because it takes more anxiety and meaning to turn them into lunatics. Most

parents lose it when their teenager comes home late with the family car and there's obviously been drinking and partying going on.

- *Unwanted pregnancy.* Imagine you are seventeen years old, and you find out you are pregnant, but you're not ready to have a child, Anticipations of your parents' response, social condemnation from your peers, self-recrimination and thoughts about not going to college are swirling through your mind. It occurs to you that the best solution is to kill yourself. Of course, you're regressed! The anxiety and meaning of your situation are enough to melt anyone's mind. And, in this condition, you have to make one of the biggest decisions of your life: How to handle your pregnancy.
- *Initial sexual experience.* Think back to the first time you had sex. Was it particularly relaxing or erotic? Often you're brain-dead with anxiety. The important thing was changing your status from virgin to „been there, done that, and got the T-shirt.“ Lots of us regress the first several times we have sex. For some of us, it never stops.

Anxiety and high meaning trigger acute regressions.

Anxiety tolerance

If you envision yourself in each of these situations, you get an intuitive sense of what I mean by high-anxiety/high-meaning situations. But what constitutes *high* anxiety and *high* meaning depends on your situation, your background, and who you are. It's not reducible to specific characteristics of the circumstances themselves.

Your *anxiety tolerance*, and the particular meaning you place on things greatly determine which situations will trigger your regressions. If you're not in good emotional shape, and you're tired and stressed, high-anxiety and high-meaning situations develop over relatively minor things because your anxiety tolerance is low. Not everyone has an acute regression over:

- A minor auto accident in which no one is hurt.
- A friend stands you up.
- You make a foolish mistake.
- Your poached eggs don't hold together when you cook them.
- The stock market goes up, and you're upset over the profits you missed on the stock you didn't buy.

The relevance of MEANING

Most people readily grasp how anxiety negatively impacts the brain. Anxiety has inherent physical components to which our brain reacts (e.g., adrenalin and cortisol). The inherent link between anxiety and the brain seems obvious. The central role of *meaning* in triggering regressions requires consideration.

The link between meaning and the brain is less immediately apparent. That is, until you approach things through the lens of mind mapping and interpersonal neurobiology. You begin to see how the connections between meaning, mind-mapping and regressions are complex. We are meaning-making animals. Meaning is inherent to what it means to be human. One of your brain's primary functions is to assign meaning to physical sensations and events.¹⁰

What makes human sexuality human is our ability to bring meaning to sex. One of the impacts of sexual abuse is the emotional significance of the relationship between perpetrator and victim. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of sexual abuse occurs on the level of mind mapping. These meaning-driven impacts give seemingly minor inappropriate touching adverse effects. Traumatic mind mapping and involuntary disgust brain reactions exemplify how meaning triggers brain reactions.

On top of this, consider that the most powerful forms of self-soothing ever devised by human beings involve giving your dilemma *meaning*. When you contemplate all these connections, it's not surprising that *meaning* largely determines the point at which your brain turns to mush.

Here's another way you can see the power of meaning: The impact of the picture you're visualizing changes completely if you drop in a small additional piece of information. This often happens when you consider your antagonist's education, employment, and other professional or public activities. Seemingly minor details reveal important-but-difficult-to-hold-on-to information that simply overwhelms your brain. The

quintessential example is when you realize your antagonist has mind-mapping ability and antisocial empathy.¹¹ This totally changes the meaning of what he or she is doing.

Positive high meaning situations can trigger regressions too. Things like life-changing big awards, promotions, and financial windfalls. There's a reason why so many jackpot lottery winners, movie stars and professional athletes end up broke. There's more going on than unbridled narcissism and too much cocaine. The high meaning (and financial bonanza) of winning an Emmy or being voted the Superbowl MVP (most valuable player) turns their executive brain functions into smoke.

Your background creates relevance

From this perspective, you can see where your personal life fits in this picture. Childhood experiences and family dynamics shape the way you see the world and interpret events. Your past experiences determine, in part, the meanings and importance you place on current things. Your background shapes what stands out to you, what you ignore, what you take offense over, and what you let pass by you.

Wouldn't you think Elizabeth would be able to detect and anticipate Dennis's actions after spending years with him? On the other hand, once you understand how traumatic mind mapping works, it makes perfect sense she was blind to him. Hypervigilance plus blindness are typical results of prior traumatic mind mapping. Let me tell you a little about Elizabeth's mother and father in this regard.

Elizabeth's maternal grandparents were wealthy people who suddenly lost everything in a fire. There was no insurance, and Elizabeth's grandfather drank and

gambled away what little money they had. Elizabeth's grandmother miscarried a second pregnancy, and their marriage fell apart. Elizabeth's mother was sent to live with an aunt and uncle, where she remained throughout her adolescence.

Dennis was not the first person in Elizabeth's life who excelled at making moves on people. Her mother was full of them. When Elizabeth's mother and father married, she didn't tell him her uncle had repeatedly raped her until several nights after the wedding. She presented this as "she had no right to be happy." What she was doing was destroying *his* happiness. Elizabeth's mother was histrionic, brittle, malicious, and often twisted events around.

Elizabeth's father's parents' marriage was so dysfunctional that he and his brother were placed in foster care before they were five. Her father eventually left at age fourteen to live on the streets, where panhandling, stealing, lying, and manipulating became a way of life for him. His brother committed suicide several years after he left.

In his marriage, Elizabeth's father pulled off some moves of his own. He purchased slums and forced Elizabeth's mother to renovate (paint and wash) them, while he refused to work. He often proudly stated, "*Working is for fools and horses!*" demeaning Elizabeth's mother at the dinner table.

Having grown up with two highly manipulative parents, wouldn't Elizabeth recognize Dennis' maneuverings a mile away? Given how the brain loves to do pattern recognition, wouldn't that give Elizabeth an edge in spotting him? In fact, wouldn't her past predispose her to see mischief even when it wasn't there?

You might be inclined to think that if you didn't know about traumatic mind mapping. You'd be correct that Elizabeth's past would make her hypervigilant for manipulators. But you wouldn't understand how she could be so blind to Dennis' deceptions.

Traumatic mind mapping

It's time to explain traumatic mind mapping more fully and give it due consideration. I thought it best to focus on regressions at the outset of *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean*, and not complicate things by introducing a second major topic like traumatic mind mapping. Now that you have some basic understanding of regressions, there's room to explain traumatic mind mapping in greater depth. Traumatic mind mapping is one of the major causes of regressions.

Traumatic mind mapping is a major cause of acute and steady-state regressions.

Mind mapping

To comprehend this, you first need to understand *mind mapping*.¹² Mind mapping is your brain's innate ability to make mental maps of other people's minds, including how they think and feel, what they know, and what they want. Mind mapping allows you to predict what other people are going to do. It's a survival skill humans inherited from

reptiles, which explains why mind mapping is so robust. (Details of children's mind mapping abilities are available in this endnote.¹³)

Growing up in a troubled home doesn't impair mind-mapping ability. It facilitates mind-mapping *and* mind-masking ability. *Mind-masking is the ability to conceal your mind and defeat someone's attempt to map you.* If you've ever hidden your sexual interest in someone else or successfully manipulated other people, you have demonstrated your mind-masking ability.

Whether your parents read you books at bedtime or threw dinner plates against the wall, both actions educate about mind mapping. Interpersonal conflict and discipline situations facilitate children's mind-mapping ability. That's when family members talk most about their feeling and perceptions, and mind mapping is all about deducing other people's mental states. *That's why children who come from unhappy, unstable high-*

People from troubled homes develop mind mapping and mind masking abilities.

conflict families become great mind-mappers, just like kids from good homes. The difference is conflict and instability also teach you to develop mind-masking.

Mind mapping and mind masking are the basis for two other brain-shaping processes: Lying and mind-twisting. You can't be a good liar without mind mapping and mind masking ability! Lying involves deliberate tampering with the truth and requires masking your mind—a lesson three-year-old budding liars haven't learned yet because their laughter gives them away!

Mind-twisting means deliberately implanting a false picture of your mind in someone else's head for an ulterior motive. This involves more than being able to mask your mind. You have to be an excellent mind mapper and masker too. A master mind-twister inserts the false picture in your brain by appearing to be self-revealing. Recognizing this underlying process is what makes detecting mind-twisting in a trusted person so devastating.

Impacts of traumatic mind mapping

Now I can further explain *traumatic mind mapping*. As noted previously, traumatic mind mapping occurs when you map out someone else's mind and what you see is so horrible, it blows your mind and traumatizes your brain. The hallmark of traumatic mind mapping is *spaghetti-brain*: shockingly reduced cognitive function. Your thinking is foggy, your thoughts are slow, unclear and sparse, you make logical errors, and you lose track of what's most important. Traumatic mind mapping produces strong emotional reactions (fear, anxiety, anger, disappointment), and reduced emotional regulation (crying, panic, yelling).

Detecting lying and mind-twisting from a trusted partner, parent, friend, child or co-worker can create traumatic mind mapping. Their actions don't even have to be aimed at you. All it takes is people who are personally important to you, turning out to be different than who they say they are, or behaving differently than they espouse in some core way. This is especially true if they have positioned themselves as having parental, moral or spiritual authority.

When you have traumatic mind mapping, your mind-mapping system collapses.¹⁴ This creates distortions or holes in your autobiographical memory. You might not remember the event at all. But it's more likely you'll remember the event, together with distortions you probably don't recognize. For instance, if you revisualize a traumatic encounter in your life, you won't realize the mind-mapping information about the person who gave you traumatic mind mapping is missing (until now). It's amazingly reliable.

Movies like Kramer vs. Kramer and Dwaine Hopewood depict children's complex mind-mapping in family interactions.

When traumatic mind-mapping causes your mind-mapping system to collapse, the missing mind-mapping information about your antagonist is still stored in your memory. In one of your memories, actually. I'll bet you didn't know you have two memory systems, did you?!¹⁵ When trauma occurs, the contents of your two memory systems become desynchronized. In Chapter Nine, I'll explain how differences between your two memory systems increase your likelihood of traumatic flashbacks and regressions. I'll also show you how you can reduce this. For now, here's the takeaway: Traumatic mind mapping impacts your brain in ways that increase your predisposition for regressions.

Disgust reactions and self-awareness

When traumatic mind mapping becomes severe enough, it can trigger an involuntary disgust brain reaction. Disgust is one of six hard-wired primary emotions.¹⁶

Disgust, like mind mapping, is a survival mechanism designed to keep you alive. Disgust creates an overwhelming urge to distance yourself from the offending object or person.¹⁷

(A complete review of disgust research is available in *Brain Talk*.)

The science behind disgust reactions helped me understand the impact of traumatic mind mapping: Brain scan studies of disgust reactions reveal that the portion of your brain called the *anterior insula* plays a central role. Your anterior insula is also an information highway, passing information to other parts of your brain. Your anterior insula shares connections with other brain portions involved in mapping your own mind and other people's minds too. It also plays a central in knowing what's going on inside your own body (*interoceptive awareness*) and interpreting other people's experiences.

The movie, *Mommy Dearest*, contains numerous examples of disgusting parental behavior throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

When you have a disgust reaction, your anterior insula activates, causing the mind-mapping modules in your brain to deactivate, which shuts down your mind-mapping ability. Repeated disgust reactions from traumatic mind mapping also impair your interoceptive awareness. You cease being aware of what's happening inside your own body. This is why traumatized people report feeling "hollow," meaning they don't feel much.¹⁸

Anosognosia (catastrophic loss of self-awareness) is a neurological condition of the anterior insula. A shocking number of people suffer from limited interoceptive awareness. They often have no real clue what goes on inside them. People suffering from anosognosia have no idea how severely impaired they are. In fact, they usually think they are the most self-aware and perceptive people in the room (or family)!

Instilling disgust

Interacting with people who are blind to themselves creates traumatic mind mapping. A good example is someone who does destructive things while claiming positive intent. Things get disgusting when they confabulate inner experiences that fit the current situation and maintain their unshakable positive self-image. On top of this, they usually insist they are the ultimate expert on their feelings, intentions, motivations. I'm describing many of my clients' parents.

This happened when Elizabeth talked to her mother about the time she asked her for help during adolescence because her brother was touching her inappropriately. Elizabeth had started to develop sexually, and the anxiety and meaning of being groped by her brother blew her mind. But Elizabeth's mother obfuscated and changed the topic rather than help her.

Now when Elizabeth brought this up again, Mother initially said she didn't remember anything about this. Then she said she remembered, but Elizabeth hadn't made a big deal of it at the time. Mother was sure of this because if Elizabeth had made it clear

this was serious, Mother knew she would have done something about it. How? Any good mother would have done that, and above all else, she was a good mother.

Elizabeth saw her mother making it *her* fault that her mother failed to take appropriate action. But it was her mother's self-aggrandizing logic that really whacked her out. Mother's complete refusal to help now or question her prior behavior did more than hurt Elizabeth's feelings. It triggered involuntary disgust reactions in Elizabeth's brain.

Here's where our discussion of profound meaning triggering regressions comes in. This evoked a secondary guilt reaction in Elizabeth for feeling this way about her mother. People feel guilty for seeing their parents, spouse or child as disgusting and being disgusted by them, even though it's an involuntary brain reaction. The *meaning* of being disgusted by someone you love is sufficient to trigger brain regressions. This brought up an impulse in Elizabeth to punish herself some way, another way regressions from traumatic mind mapping show up.

Interpersonal neurobiology in regressions

The interpersonal impact of regressions is powerful. People who experience repeated trauma often show reduced heart rate variability (HRV) because the "fight-or-flight" cortisol priming response in their brain has worn out. Their hearts show less adaptive change when they are stressed.¹⁹ I've found clients who describe their parents often doing disgusting things show reduced HRV.

Some of my clients wear wireless biometric devices during sessions so I can monitor their heart rate variability. One husband's HRV was frequently suppressed when things got difficult. HRV below 22 milliseconds is considered unhealthy. His HRV was often in the teens, and on occasion dropped to single digits.

These real-time measurements indicated the husband's nervous system was compromised by his past experiences. First responders, emergency room doctors and surgeons frequently show reduced HRV as a result of repeated work-related experiences. This husband's low HRV readings appeared to result from a long history of prior emotional traumas.

However, the real shocker showed up in his wife's readings! Typically, she showed good HRV (35-90 milliseconds). But when her husband became severely regressed during our sessions, *her* nervous system was massively impacted. The impact on her was evident long after he calmed down. The wife's nervous system demonstrated hyper-reactivity (more easily triggered) and elevated heart rate variability (150 milliseconds) for hours after that. She showed clear neurobiological impacts from exposure to her husband's regressions! This stunning demonstration of interpersonal neurobiology during psychotherapy opened my eyes!

Interpersonal Moves

A common trigger for acute regressions is when someone tries to manipulate you. I refer to this as someone making "moves" on you. A "move" is an attempt to influence

or manipulate you in some way you don't want or is not in your best interest. People make moves on each other all the time.

When you realize people are making moves on you, the shock often triggers an acute regression. The traumatic mind mapping they induce helps them get away with their agendas. Your ability to map your antagonist's mind diminishes. Your cognitive ability to think clearly and respond effectively evaporates. So does your ability to regulate your own emotions. You'll have an instinctive reaction to "look away," because you don't want to deal with this.

Handling people who make moves on you is a great way to get better control of your acute regressions. It's often a necessity in resolving steady-state regressions. This involves managing yourself in high-intensity interactions with the important people in your life. I've devoted significant space in Section Three of this book to this very topic. In Chapter Eleven, I'll outline time-tested methods for dealing with people who make moves on you.

Weak 4 Points of Balance

When we're considering anxiety and meaning, traumatic mind mapping, and interpersonal moves as common triggers for regressions, we're looking at things that have both physical and psychological dimensions. There's also a psychological predisposition for regressions that involves the strength of your sense of self: When your sense of self starts to deteriorate, you are headed for a regression.

The Crucible® Four Points of Balance are the pillars of the human self. They are four uniquely human abilities that make having a “self” possible. That’s because a “self” involves consistency in thought, feeling and behavior over time and circumstance despite external pressure to change. It also involves the ability to change despite precedence and pressure to remain the same. This is what it means to have yourself “under control.”²⁰

Solid Flexible Self

A solid self is rooted in principles and values that evolve from repeated challenge and examination. A solid self retains its shape under pressure to conform from other people and circumstances. But a solid self is not rigid and inflexible. It grows and changes with experience. You can change course without losing your sense of identity or direction.

When your Four Points of Balance are compromised, your “self” starts to fall apart. You stop operating out of an internalized set of core values and principles developed through repeated self-confrontation. Your behavior starts to violate what you believe and value. Once you do that, events are more likely to rock you.

Many of us lack a solid sense of self. Instead, we depend on getting a positive reflected sense of self from others. This inevitably leads us to present ourselves as we want other people to see us, rather than the way we truly are. We think this protects us

Weak Four Points of Balance predisposes regressions.

from rejection and wins us acceptance. We don't see that this false constructed persona creates a vulnerability that sets up our next acute regression.

Quiet Mind and Calm Heart

It's not hard to see how the ability to quiet your mind and soothe your own heart is directly involved in regressions. The hallmark of acute regressions is an inability to quiet your inner mental world. You can't control your thoughts or soothe your emotional bruises. Instead, you are usually upsetting yourself with your own thoughts. You also probably need other people to apologize in order to quiet yourself down. This makes you vulnerable to additional (and deeper) regressions when they don't.

If your thoughts and feelings constantly run away with you, you can't keep your behavior in line with your values or harness your abilities to accomplish your goals. Being able to quiet your mind and calm your heart is essential to maintaining your sense of self. However, if you decide you are "a highly sensitive person," your difficulties controlling your inner mental world becomes part of your identity. You make a liability look like a virtue.

Grounded Responding

Your sense of self is based, in part, on how you act over time. Character boils down to consistency and resilience under pressure. A key part of developing a "self" involves modulating your reactivity. If you repeatedly over-react to things that provoke you, or you ignore and avoid difficult issues and situations, this shapes your inner sense

of self and the “self” you insert into the world. Emotional brittleness sets you up to be triggered by minor provocations and be unable to calm down on your own.

One of the hallmarks of acute regressions is hyper-reactivity and disproportionate responses to situations and people. Overreacting to minor events triggers more regressions. Overreacting to other people’s over-reactions (regressions) predisposes additional regressions. Once you’re regressed, controlling your reactivity is the name of the game.

Likewise, failure to respond to problems is more characteristic of steady-state regressions. When you visualize someone ranting and raging, under-reacting might sound like a good thing. But making yourself address what you’d rather avoid is part of getting yourself out of a steady-state regression. Making yourself do what you don’t want to do and refraining from doing things you shouldn’t is essential.

Meaningful Endurance

Resilience to regressions often lies in your willingness to endure hardship to achieve your goals. If you can’t tolerate things not going your way, you’ll be having regressions all the time. Likewise, pulling yourself out of acute and steady-state regressions requires effort and forbearance in the face of disappointment, frustration, and failure. You can spend your life struggling with regressions if you’re not willing to tolerate discomfort for growth,

The more your “self” is resilient in the face of disappointments and criticisms (i.e., anxiety and meaning), the less likely you are to have regressions. Developing your

Four Points of Balance strengthens and supports your sense of “self” and reduces your tendency to regress.

Reactive regressions: Getting better makes your brain fall apart

Reactive regressions are a type of acute regression we haven’t covered until now. They are like other acute regressions, except what *causes* them is unique: Reactive regressions are triggered by you getting better instead of getting worse.

The “oh shit!” reaction

Understanding this requires recognizing that the hallmark of insight is not the “eureka” experience, but rather the “oh, shit!” experience. When people finally get the best in themselves to stand up and they confront themselves—finally seeing the truth of what has been happening—their improved functioning triggers an immediate regression.

Your more accurate insight creates increased anxiety and profound meaning that turns your brain to spaghetti. As your brain falls apart from seeing things straight, your “smartness” falls away precipitously. You can’t put together obvious observations or simple conclusions. You must fight for clarity within your own mind, as your brain fends off putting two and two together.

Reactive regressions are a sign you're getting better. But if you don't know reactive regressions exist—or what causes them—you might misinterpret them as another failure.

Reactive regressions occur when your functioning comes up and you finally understand the mess you're in.

Becoming less regressed triggers your next one

Recognize progress where it exists. The up-and-down functioning caused by reactive regressions is critically important to understand. What's happening is often completely invisible to you. You don't see progress. All you see is one more regression.

You need to recognize this particular regression is different. It's caused by you emerging from your steady-state regression, and your functioning is coming up. As you wake up, the realities you went to sleep about are enough to make the bottom fall out again.

You can get three things out of dealing with reactive regressions: First, it's a sign of progress. Second, you may be too ready to believe the worst in yourself. And third, you still have things ahead you don't want to handle.

Create hope. If your regressions leave you hopeless, reactive regressions can keep you stuck in this vicious loop forever. Hopelessness potentiates regressions. For the

moment, accept that your progress may trigger your next regression. That's the price you pay to break out of the cycle.

What else predisposes regressions?

Some people are more prone than others to regressions. It takes less to trigger their meltdowns. Here are things that can predispose you to have acute regressions:

Trait anxiety. Do you have a general tendency to get anxious and worry about things? This is called "trait anxiety." Trait anxiety is a personality variable. It describes people who have a greater tendency to get anxious and create troubling mental scenarios. People high in trait anxiety are more likely to experience physical anxiety and are more likely to become regressed.

Anticipatory traumatic mind mapping. Prior traumatic mind mapping makes you more vulnerable to future regressions, because the resulting hypervigilance subsequently surfaces as *anticipatory* traumatic mind mapping. By anticipating what's likely to happen, you can trigger your own regression without your antagonist making a move on you. Your anticipatory traumatic mind mapping creates fight-or-flight cortisol priming in

Imagine confronting a dysfunctional parent who refuses to confront himself or be seen accurately. This is what anticipatory traumatic mind mapping feels like.

your brain. You are more likely to regress, even if your antagonist is not doing something upsetting at that moment

Epigenetic effects on stress tolerance. Trait anxiety and prior trauma significantly increase your likelihood of regressions. It turns out there's even a genetic level to this. Neurotransmitters like dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin buffer your brain from trauma. MAOA is an enzyme that affects the production of these transmitters. Some people have a variant of the MAOA gene (allele) that produces low amounts of MAOA. These folks are more likely to be negatively impacted by a given stressor than other people, making them more susceptible to regress in that circumstance.

Going forward

By now, you have a good idea of what regressions look and how they feel. You've visualized examples and identified times you and the important people in your life were (or are) seriously regressed. You understand the difference between acute and steady-state regressions and how they look and feel. You also know the common causes of regressions, and how your personal characteristics and lived experiences can make you particularly likely to have them. Knowing common regression triggers, together with your predispositions to regress, increases your likelihood of tackling your regressions successfully and getting them under control.

Now you know enough for us to start focusing on resolving these problems. I'm looking forward to sharing Sections Two and Three with you. I'm also looking forward

to adopting a lighter tone. Things we've talked about thus far are no laughing matter, but starting next chapter, I'll have more of a sense of humor. That's because I finally can talk to you about the Mariana Trench model of regressions.

The hard work and dark levity are about to start. Both are necessary to accomplish our goals. In Section Two, we'll shift our attention to resolving acute regressions. Solving steady-state regressions is the focus of Section Three. The Mariana Trench model will help us handle both problems and provide helpful perspective along the way.

I'm excited to share these tools with you because you'll be amazed by what you can accomplish. However, these tools are only useful if you *use them repeatedly*. I can't stress enough the importance of repetition in rewiring your brain. Applying what you'll learn is as important as understanding why these methods work. Understanding helps, but it won't replace Grounded Responding and Meaningful Endurance.

It's time for action! Resolving regressions is within your grasp. Get ready for a swimming lesson in the Mariana Trench!

SECTION TWO: SWIMMING WITH THE UGLY FISH

Chapter 5: The Mariana Trench Model of Regressions

Elizabeth was so outraged she couldn't contain himself! She was *spitting* angry! She could feel the blood pounding in her ears! She was huffing and puffing, her chest was heaving, and she had a death-grip on the long-handled kitchen spatula. She was grasping the handle so tight her fingers hurt. The head of the spatula was somewhere on the other side of the room, where it landed when Elizabeth snapped it off. It sailed through the air when she slammed it against the stove in a fit of rage.

You should visualize the scene because it was quite a sight! Elizabeth was standing with one arm raised above her head, holding the remains of the kitchen utensil like a crazy version of the Statue of Liberty. Her face was snarling, she was screaming, and she was anything but welcoming and inviting. She was bellowing, *“I am sick and tired of being treated worse than a slave!”*

The other collateral damage of her fit of rage looked back at her. Her husband, Dennis, and her teenage son, Paul, were mapping her and they looked shocked! Paul almost started laughing because he was so nervous!

The pattern of Elizabeth's regressions was predictable. At her worst, she ranted about being treated like a commodity. She was a thing, a deliverer of services to other people, a non-person. In Elizabeth's mind, she went along with this because she had low

self-esteem and she let people use her to compensate. More accurately, Elizabeth had a pattern of initially responding to her insecurities by ingratiating herself to others, and then subsequently perceiving herself to be the victim of other people exploiting her good nature.

In this case, Elizabeth had offered to make Paul's favorite breakfast, eggs benedict. She was great in the kitchen and often volunteered to cook for people. Only today the kitchen gods were not cooperating. The poached eggs wouldn't congeal in nice shapes, and the first batch of hollandaise sauce was too lemony. The toaster burnt the English muffins. Everything was going wrong, and Elizabeth was on the verge of losing it.

Paul tried to ease the situation by saying these things weren't that important. But rather than it having the desired effect, Elizabeth got pissed off that Paul didn't appreciate the extent she was willing to go to for him.

Paul recognized this was just like when Elizabeth began storming around the house "tidying things up." Once Paul and Dennis saw these warning signs, they had anticipatory traumatic mind mapping about what was coming next. They knew her typical rant by heart.

"I can't believe the way the house is such a mess! I just cleaned this up! I guess my efforts to keep things nice don't matter! Nobody respects my efforts! I guess all I'm worth around here is as a servant! That's what I am, and it's my own damn fault! A

servant! My parents never taught me I'd be taken advantage of by the people I love most!"

Paul knew Elizabeth being angry about breakfast was just the arming device on the bomb. When it exploded, Elizabeth would sink into a massive acute regression. There would be an emotional eruption and emotional collapse at the same time. She would alternately berate herself, declare surrender, and pound on everyone else. Elizabeth's rants could go on forever. But when Elizabeth eventually stormed out of the room, the rants didn't stop in her mind. She went on for hours, ruminating about how poorly she'd been treated.

Paul developed different patterns of reacting to Elizabeth's problems. When he was younger, he got concerned when Elizabeth flipped out. Now, having seen it for years, Paul mostly tried to tune her out. He paid enough attention that he didn't set Elizabeth off more by looking like he was completely ignoring her. That would trigger another tirade about being disrespectful. Paul learned to mask his mind and look at Elizabeth like he was listening to her.

Growing up near the bottom of the ocean

With all her focus on other people treating her poorly, it never occurred to Elisabeth that she could be wrong. Wrong about what she was upset about, or how she saw things. It never crossed her mind that Paul was trying to be gracious and accepting about her making breakfast for him. He was trying to tell her that it didn't need to be perfect. He was trying to be supportive, but Elizabeth thought Paul was blowing her off.

Similarly, it never occurred to Elizabeth that she could be wrong about her past. Elizabeth went through repeated traumatic mind mapping and involuntary disgust reactions with both her parents, who exploited her shamelessly. These kinds of traumatic events often produce gaps in your autobiographical memory.

From a young age, Elizabeth witnessed her parents' terrible fights over money at the dinner table. One time this segwayed into her father demeaning her mother for not doing a good job cleaning his tenement building. When she told him to do it himself, his response of "Work is for fools and horses!" prompted her mother to dump her hot soup in his lap!

Elizabeth's mother was histrionic, brittle, malicious, and often twisted events around. There was the time her mother broke her down till she was in tears in the car, following a visit to the principal's office for saying a "dirty word" at school. Repeated instances of her mother suddenly slapping her face without warning brought Elizabeth face-to-face with her mother's enjoyment of cold-cocking her.

I hope you're getting the picture of Elizabeth's parents being emotionally brutal people. Their impulsive combative interactions exposed her to numerous mind-blowing and brain-damaging events, like her mother throwing a glass of water at father and her father smashing the glass against the wall.

The fact that Elizabeth had to stop both her parents hitting her should tell you something. Elizabeth saying, "*Ok, I'll say or do whatever you want! I'll even make it up! Just leave me alone!*" depicts her mother continuing to hammer away at her. Yet, if you

asked Elizabeth, she would tell you her parents had difficulty controlling their tempers at times and leave it at that.

Elizabeth was living in a steady-state regression, punctuated with frequent deep acute regressions. The gaps in Elizabeth's autobiographical memory showed up in her maps of her parents' minds. Her pictures of her parents were much better than they were in reality, because the mind mapping information about them was missing in Elizabeth's memories. What they wanted, how they were feeling about Elizabeth, and their reactions to their impacts on her was completely absent. Elizabeth approached her memories like she was watching a movie about someone else's life, and she didn't know who the characters were.

Swimming in the deep later in life

The impact left Elizabeth in psychotherapy for most of her life. Elizabeth started seeing therapists since adolescence when the first boy she had sex with broke up with her. There was a lot more going on than guilt for giving up her virginity, which showed up in her being a lousy sex partner and not enjoying sex with subsequent partners.

Elizabeth was neither a knock-out beauty nor terribly unattractive. She was fairly average looking, and she made the most of her eyes, nice smile and thick hair. Her physical appearance wouldn't make her stand out in a crowd—except for one thing: She had disproportionately large breasts compared to her short stature. This was the bane of her existence—together with two parents who constantly disappointed her.

Elizabeth went through much of her life watching people stare at her chest while they talked to her. She felt like sex was the first thing—and often the only thing—people saw in her, no matter how much she tried to cover up. Her breasts weren't outrageously big, but disproportionally large for her body. They started growing when she was thirteen, and if she could have controlled this, she certainly would have. Her brother groped and ogled her, made stupid comments, and embarrassed her with her bras.

Some women enjoy having large breasts, but Elizabeth wasn't one of them. She wore heavy eye makeup to distract from her breasts. She felt they were too round, full and heavy, and often in the way of her doing what she wanted. She didn't like the boys brushing up against her and jealous girls making fun of her.

This issue was very much at play in Elizabeth's initial sexual encounters. It made her ill at ease and unable to enjoy sex at first. She didn't like the boys playing with her boobs, and their offish clumsiness didn't help any. It made her so self-conscious, she felt like a piece of meat. This killed any sense of pleasure or enthusiasm for her.

From the time they first got together, Elizabeth's emotional meltdowns were obvious to Dennis. It was part of the collusive alliance they developed early in their dating.²¹ Dennis didn't push Elizabeth about her hyper-emotionality and emotional meltdowns, and she accepted he was a flirtatious guy who didn't mean anything when he chatted up waitresses. She secretly thought one reason Dennis picked her was because of her breasts, but she never brought this up for fear it was true.

Initially, Dennis played the role of Elizabeth's protector. He was sympathetic and supportive when she got into spats with other people. But eventually, Elizabeth's criticisms focused on him. Dennis didn't like it when she switched from "*You're my Hero!*" to "*You son-of-a-bitch!*"

Elizabeth often complained that Dennis deliberately provoked her to get angry, but this was her complaining that he repeatedly pulled her trigger. And, in truth, Dennis went out of his way to do this. For instance, he'd make plans with her and then not show up, but the dynamite was when he'd make some lame excuse that revealed he was lying. In a way, Dennis knew he was fabricating something that would blow Elizabeth up. Elizabeth was so outraged, she wanted to blow him up too. Instead, she rewarded his efforts with a massive regression—the equivalent of blowing herself up instead.

Elizabeth couldn't stop her regressions by trying to control Dennis' provocations. She had to defuse her trigger. To do this, Elizabeth had to look to herself.

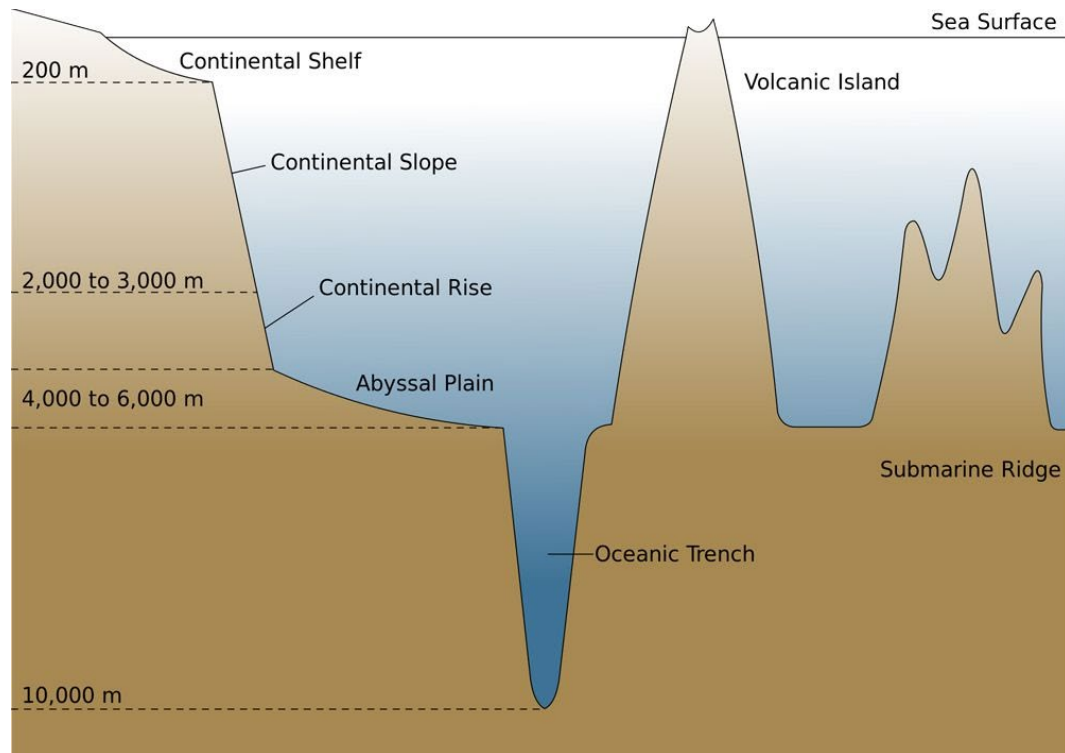
The Mariana Trench model of regressions!

Regressing into the Mariana Trench

I'm going to show you a way to *envision* regressions that will help you when you really need help. To derive real benefit from this, notice that I just referred to *visualizing*.

You could simply read what I describe like an intellectual idea, but you'd be making a big mistake. I'm going to show you a *picture*.

To start with, I want you to visualize the deepest, darkest, coldest depths of the ocean. It's an actual place called the Mariana Trench, located about one hundred miles from the Mariana Islands in the western Pacific Ocean. It's fifteen hundred miles long and forty-three miles wide, located off the Continental Shelf at the intersection of two geologic tectonic plates. The distance between the ocean surface and the Trench's deepest point—called the Challenger Deep—is nearly seven miles (eleven kilometers). At this depth, the ambient pressure is over 8 tons per square inch--more than one thousand times greater than on the surface. The temperature is a frigid 34 degrees Fahrenheit (1 degree Celsius). If you placed Mount Everest in the Mariana Trench, the mountain peak would still be more than a mile below the mouth of it (called the Abyssal Plain).



Here's why I want you to visualize the Mariana Trench and its distance from the surface. This image provides a great framework for tracking your regressions and firmly establishes the reality of regressions in your mind. Here's how it works: The more regressed you are, the deeper you have sunk!

The Mariana Trench is where you go when you have an acute regression. Down here, the pressure is crushing—but not to you, because you're well adapted to living at this profound level of regression. Unfortunately, the pressure has a detrimental impact on your brain and your life.

The Mariana Trench is also home to the ugliest, scariest, nightmare-looking fish.²² Predators perfectly adapted to their environment. When you think back to your

most flipped out moments, and you try to imagine what you looked like then, there might be a striking resemblance to the Ugly Fish I'm about to show you.

When you have an acute regression, you're down here with the Ugly Fish. You probably look and act like a giant Black Dragonfish!



Or maybe you look more like a predator who can make its own light!

Thank you to Neal Argwal for permission to use the photos from his wonderfully interactive website of the Marianna Trench:
<https://neal.fun/deep-sea/>

Thank you Neal!



Look on the Internet for pictures of deep-sea fish. You might feel like you're looking at a family album. You won't find *Nemo* or your pet goldfish down here. At these depths, it's a constant fight for survival.



Do you know the feeling of wanting to let your temper flare and take a bite out of someone? Well, a lot of us do! But, of course, we only feel it when they deserve it! When you're down in the Mariana Trench, *everyone* deserves it! And you're the Ugly Fish that's ready to give it to them!



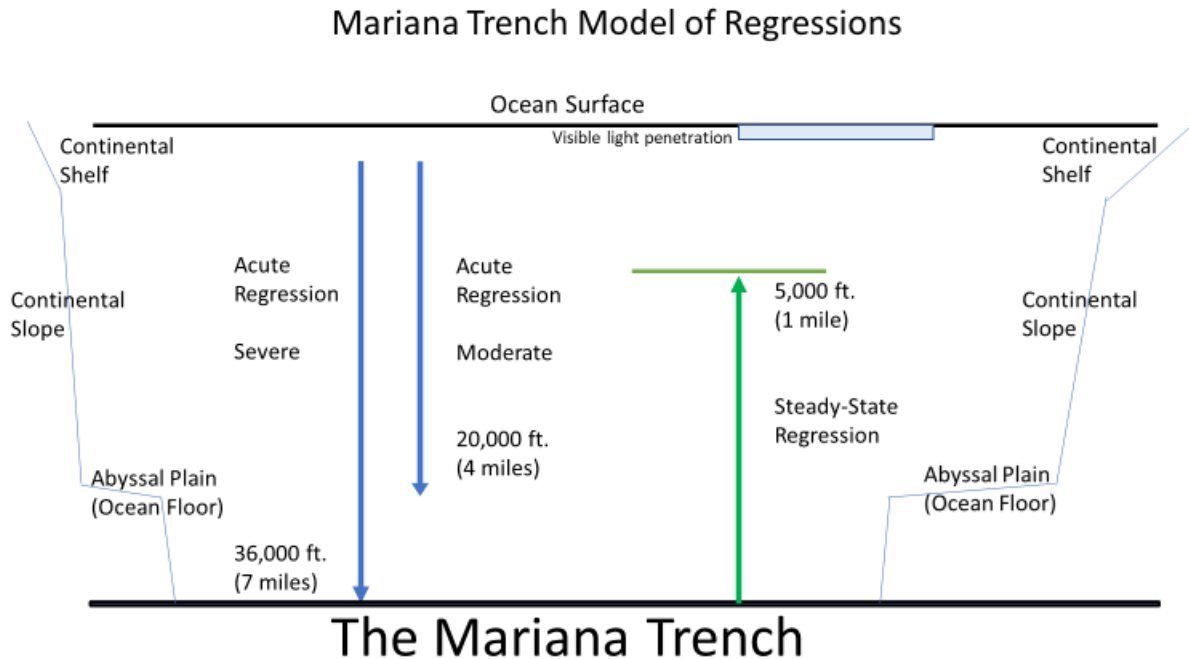
Ugly Fish don't have bad hair days. But when Ugly Fish get upset, friends and family can go from being dinner guests to being the main course in the blink of an eye! You can tell them it's not your fault because you're an Ugly Fish! That's the way it is down here in The Trench! Just don't expect to be invited for family gatherings, unless you've been looking tasty to your kin.

Don't be an Ugly Fish!

Acute and steady-state regressions

Thus far, you have a useful picture of how acute regressions work. When “the bottom falls out,” you end up at the bottom of the ocean where most sharks don't go. You are down in the Mariana Trench!

Now let's add steady-state regressions to the picture. This diagram of the Mariana Trench Model will help us do this.



On the left, two acute regressions of different severity are depicted (in blue). When you're in a severe regression, you are seven miles down at the bottom of the Mariana Trench and swimming with the Ugly Fish. That's when you think it's appropriate and necessary to kill anything that moves. When you're moderately regressed, you're only four miles down. That's when you know you shouldn't be doing what you're doing, but you're doing it anyway.

When you're regressed, you're swimming in the Mariana Trench!

As you come out of your acute regression, your functioning comes up. You think and feel better. You look better too. Anyone who knows you can tell you're feeling and functioning better too. Everything stops being a matter of life and death, and you stop looking like the Grim Reaper or death warmed-over.

So, now let's move to steady-state regressions: When you come up from an acute regression, you may not come back up to the surface! When this episode passes, you're going to think you are back up on the surface, since your functioning has improved. You may be right that your functioning has increased, but you may be wrong about how far you've come up.

You only come up to about a mile down. This is shown on the right side of the diagram, which depicts a steady-state regression (in green). In other words, you are living regressed. When your acute regression passes, you are still underwater.

However, if you've been living in a steady state regression, you're back on the surface as far as you're concerned. It's particularly true if you grew up in a troubled home. As far as you know, you've gotten over your regression. This is true as far as your acute regression is concerned. But you have no idea you're living in a steady-state regression with your functioning suppressed.

When you're swimming in the Mariana Trench, you are an Ugly Fish!

Applications of Mariana Trench Model

You now have a picture of acute and steady-state regressions and what you're like when you're regressed. It depicts your frame of mind, what you are like to deal with, and what your relationships look like too. There are no schools of fish (fish "families") down in the Mariana Trench. No collaborative alliances. It's a cold hard eat-or-be-eaten place where everyone is out for themselves. You certainly can't trust other Ugly Fish who talk about unconditional positive regard and fears of abandonment.

I like the Mariana Trench Model because it's not a static picture. You can mentally track your level of acute regression in a given moment and over time. As I'll describe shortly, this has very practical applications. If you're in a relationship, the Mariana Trench model provides a jointly-shared framework for you and your partner to use together.

The Mariana Trench model contextualizes steady-state regressions and puts them on your mental map. It keeps you aware that when your acute regression is over, *you may only come up to a less regressed state*. You are still regressed, nonetheless. You still can be a mile or two down, but as far as you are concerned, you're on the surface.

I also like how the Mariana Trench model imputes an unflattering self-portrait when you're regressed (an Ugly Fish). Some people may find actual images of deep-sea creatures disturbing. (I do too.) I think this impact is warranted and appropriate to the task at hand. It focuses attention on how you come across to others rather than glorifying your feelings, "honoring the wound," or indulging your sense of entitlement. It's certainly not as gratifying as seeing yourself as a wounded child. Picturing yourself as an

Ugly Fish helps you keep an eye on yourself, not take yourself too seriously, and perturbs you enough to do something about it.

Swim for the surface!

Part of the elegance of the Mariana Trench model is how it handles issues of “depth”: how badly are you regressed? Tracking the depth of your regressions keeps you aware of them.

The more deeply regressed you are, the harder it is to think straight. The same is true for divers, who have more difficulty concentrating the deeper they go. Lots of us try to be the smartest Ugly Fish in the Mariana Trench, rather than becoming less regressed and better able to perceive and think clearly.

Other compression effects occur when you’re down real deep. At these depths, eight tons of pressure make it hard to come up. You’ve lost positive buoyancy. You can’t just float, because you’ll sink! You must work *hard* to get to the surface. This requires sustained effort and willingness to struggle. You’ll have less urge to pull yourself up and it will be hard to do.

I love the way the Mariana Trench model tells you what to do when you are regressed. You need simple instructions because, as just noted, you’re going to be thinking brilliantly—for a squid! The Mariana Trench model tells you what to do when you are so regressed you think other Ugly Fish are starting to feel sorry for you:

Swim for the surface!

You may think I’m kidding, but I’m not.

Swim for the surface!

Swim for the surface as hard as you can!

Visualize yourself deep underwater and look upwards. You can't see the surface because sunlight drops out in the first thirty feet. Down here, there are no colors. It is dark and cold.

If you were only thirty feet down, you'd see light from the sun. The water is much warmer. Colors pop out at you. The reduced pressure makes it easier to think. Life is easier. This is where you want to go!

Swim for the surface as hard as you can!

The Mariana Trench model organizes your efforts in ways that assist you getting out of regressions: *Visualize swimming for the surface to pull your functioning up!* It really helps! I'm not kidding! Envisioning yourself swimming and clawing your way to the surface helps pull yourself up from the bottom of the ocean!

How bad do you get?

Does my picture of regressed people swimming in the Mariana Trench seem overstated? I confess to enjoying seeing you, me, and other people as Ugly Fish when we're lost in acute regressions. This picture facilitates self-awareness when you're regressed and keeps you from playing the victim. Every fish you meet in the Marianna Trench is a perpetrator, one way or another: Some have adapted to their environment by

masking themselves. Others have learned to trick their prey through deception. And some survive by being the biggest bad-ass predator around. (Which one are you?)

This is the proper backdrop to ask you an important question: *Just how bad do you get?!* It's a tough question, because lots of people can get *bad!*

It's possible to have psychotic-level acute regressions. Some people have such profound acute regressions they exhibit psychotic-like symptoms. I don't mean they become delusional or think they're someone else. Or believe Martians are beaming thoughts into their heads.

But, at her worst, Elizabeth's ability to track who was doing what evaporated. She told me that I had said something, when, in fact, she introduced that idea into the conversation. Similar problems showed up when she shouted, "*We're here to make me look bad, aren't we! That's the purpose here! You're trying to make me look and feel crazy!*"

When Elizabeth was in the Challenger Deep of the Mariana Trench, she was utterly lost in her inner mental world. Sometimes Elizabeth contradicted herself from one paragraph to the next without realizing it. Other times what Elizabeth said was simply illogical. Because she didn't see this, Elizabeth put other people's confusion together as she wasn't being understood or respected. Or maybe she wasn't expressing herself clearly because she was upset. Elizabeth didn't accept that sometimes she said things upside down or backwards.

Over the course of our sessions, Elizabeth threw a slew of accusations at me:

“You think I’m crazy!!”

“You want to get rid of me!”

“You think Dennis should divorce me!”

“I don’t trust you!!”

“Focus on Dennis! Stop acting like I’m the problem!!”

“You’re picking on me!”

Elizabeth had selective processing errors. That’s when your brain has been on red alert for so long, your hippocampus works overtime detecting incoming threats. Your brain is hypervigilant to other people’s perceptions. It pulls out trigger words from what people say and comes up with critical meanings when none were intended.

The sins Elizabeth accused me of were not true, but they have three things in common: (1) they attempt to organize the situation in ways Elizabeth could handle, and (2) they involve distortions of mind mapping. (3) Elizabeth’s accusations helped her position herself in relation to me (in dysfunctional ways). Finding something to attack or criticize organizes your thinking, controls the topic of conversation and shapes your interactions with people.

I’ve seen Elizabeth’s symptoms first-hand when she regressed in our sessions and it wasn’t pleasant. It’s tough being empathic while I’m being worked over. Elizabeth would act like I was going after her, when, in fact, she was coming after me. It helped that I saw her she was drowning rather than attacking me personally. This kept me from defending myself and dropping my collaborative alliance.

Your inner mental world

When you're regressed, there's a strong tendency to want other people to understand how you feel. That's all well and good. But the problem is, in that same moment, you *don't* want anyone knowing what's going on in your inner mental world. There's a big difference between *wanting* other people to accept, accommodate, or validate you, and *believing* they'd do that if they knew what was running through your head!

When Elizabeth was down in the Mariana Trench, she didn't want anyone knowing her inner mental world. But she still acted shocked and devastated when Dennis couldn't predict how she was feeling. When Elizabeth was swimming with the Ugly Fish, she'd demand the very thing she couldn't handle, and fend off all attempts to give her what she said she wanted.

From Elizabeth's perspective, she was being perfectly clear, and the responses she received from Dennis were heartbreaking, heartless and cruel. "Heartbreaking, heartless and cruel" became a catch-phrase Elizabeth frequently invoked to describe Dennis' behavior. Elizabeth received heartbreaking, heartless and cruel messages from him all the time. She would frequently accuse him of this when she was regressed. "*You're cruel, Dennis! Heartbreaking, heartless and cruel!*"

Wouldn't you think Elizabeth would never forget this, if this is her preferred regression-rant? But Elizabeth only mentioned this when she was regressed. Other times, it was like she didn't know this about Dennis. For years, Elizabeth remained mind-blind

to his mind-twisting passive-aggressive statements and behavior. She never really confronted Dennis's cruelty. I attributed this to her unwillingness to recognize cruelty in herself. This was a contributing factor, but it turned out there was more to it.

Up a bit from down below

There's a turning point in therapy many clients don't see coming. I'm not referring to a turning point that promptly leads to a happy ending. It's more like a turning point early in treatment where it enters a new productive phase. This doesn't necessarily involve discussing particular topics. Here's the key factor in this turning point: The best in one (or both) client(s) stands up and they confront themselves with the truth.

My job is to produce this turning point. This is no small endeavor in the best of circumstances. But remember, we're talking about people who are swimming in the Mariana Trench! Getting them to stand on their own two feet sounds as likely as getting Ugly Fish to grow legs!

But I've found a fairly reliable method for doing this. In part, I do this through collaborative confrontation. I talk to the best in people about the worst in themselves. I also do this by bringing up a necessary topic most couples try to avoid, that arises as a direct result of regressions.

Typically, hatred is a taboo topic best approached hesitantly, because it shatters partners' image of what they supposedly feel for each other. But what else would you expect to feel towards your partner when you're living in the Mariana Trench?!

Your narcissism wants to say, *“How could you possibly feel hatred towards me?! You are a horrible person!”* The best in you says, *“Of course you hate me! What other option have I given you?!”*

This all comes together when I bring up partners’ anger and hatred for each other fairly early in treatment. They perceive themselves descending into ugly truths about their relationship, What I see is the best in them finally starting to stand up.

In treating regressions, the topic of anger and hatred usually surfaces at different points. At the outset, I’m confronting clients’ about their unbridled anger. But the treatment dynamics shift when clients start confronting their own hatred.

This took shape when Elizabeth told me she worried about an urge she had to hurt Dennis. She thought this said something terrible about her. I thought it said she was human, given how Dennis went out of his way to provoke her—but I didn’t tell her that. When people start talking about hating their spouse—and their focus is more on themselves than complaining about their partner—I know I’m watching the best in them stand up.

Rather than talk about hatred intellectually, I asked Elizabeth if she knew how to tear someone’s heart out. I was asking her if she was a heart-eater. In other words, when she regressed, did she like inducing sorrow, guilt, disappointment or grief?

At first, Elizabeth thought I was making fun of her or criticizing her. For a few seconds, she couldn’t figure out what I was doing. Eventually, Elizabeth decided I was

asking her this question because I was trying to help her, rather than impeach her. I was trying to hand her a lifeline to help pull her functioning up.

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, fearing Dennis's reaction. Then she looked me in the eye and said solidly and clearly, "*Yes!*"

Self-awareness at the bottom of the ocean

This "yes" was a turning point in Elizabeth's life. She demonstrated there was realistic hope she could get her regressions under control. Her "yes" confirmed several important things:

1. *Self-regulation.* Elizabeth didn't blow up at me when I asked this difficult question, and didn't blow afterwards as a delayed reaction.
2. *Self-confrontation.* Elizabeth acknowledged something difficult about herself.
3. *Self-awareness in the middle of a regression.* Elizabeth focused on the most crucial aspect of her situation.
4. *Maintaining a collaborative alliance.* She remained focused on my question rather than locking into me or Dennis.

This was a remarkable day for Elizabeth. She demonstrated the capacity to save her own life. These four abilities are crucial to resolving regressions.

What gave Elizabeth enough clarity to say "*Yes!*" to being a heart eater, when typically she would have mounted a crusade for justice and fair treatment? I attribute this

to several things. One is the powerful impact of the Mariana Trench model when people first encounter it. Don't be surprised if it impacts you this way too.

The Mariana Trench model makes you more inclined to acknowledge bad behavior and negative thoughts and feelings. It stipulates to your poor functioning, disordered thinking and dark emotions from the outset. It takes away your moral high ground and offers you an unflattering picture of yourself.

The Mariana Trench model offers a way to see yourself from the outside, a side view of yourself, rather than just operating from your feelings. It doesn't dismiss your feelings, and in fact, explains them--although the explanation is less gratifying than you'd prefer.

But the good news is this sobering depiction makes the best in you want to stand up. The humor encourages you to laugh at yourself and not take your feelings-of-the-moment too seriously. The Mariana Trench model instills motivation to change.

Another factor that increased Elizabeth's willingness to confront her destructive impulses was a recent encounter with her son, Paul. Elizabeth watched Paul's reactions to her "ripping Dennis a new one." Elizabeth had seen this look on Paul before. And whenever she did, she thought to herself, "*Oh my God! Paul looks horrified! I must be a monster!*" Mapping out Paul's reaction was enough to send Elizabeth into her next regression, driven by thoughts of "*I'm a monster!!*"

But this time Elizabeth thought, "*Oh my God! Paul looks horrified!! I must look like an Ugly Fish! I must be down in the Mariana Trench! I MUST BE REGRESSED!!*"

Elizabeth grabbed onto realizing she was regressed rather than reacting to the idea she was a monster. The Mariana Trench model gave her something useful to hold onto, which helped her be aware that she was regressed while it was happening.

This is what subsequently prompted Elizabeth to talk to me about wanting to hurt Dennis. Elizabeth wasn't telling me she was about to lose control, and she wasn't

You can't get yourself out of an acute regression if you don't realize you're in one.

Realizing you're regressed is the doorway out!

threatening Dennis. She was demonstrating better self-control than she had previously. Elizabeth was ready to deal with herself.

Two magic words

I can't overstress the importance of developing self-awareness in the middle of a regression. This is what Elizabeth experienced when she thought of herself as an Ugly Fish. To her, this was one of the worst moments of her life. I thought it was possibly one of her best. It was the first time she was capable of being aware of herself while she was losing it. It was the doorway out of her regressions.

When I was a kid, I was fascinated with magic words: Abracadabra! Alakazam! Hocus Pocus! Open Sesame! Presto Change-o! I've tried them all. And, trust me, none of them works worth a damn on regressions! But it turns out there's a two-word magic phrase that works so good for getting out of regressions you won't believe it!

I'm regressed!!

That's it! Nice and simple! You can remember this even when you're swimming with the Ugly Fish! Just thinking these two words can improve your functioning. Saying these two enchanted words emphatically often produces immediate improvements!

Don't take my word for it! Give this a try right now! (It won't hurt you if you're not regressed.) Recite this powerful mantra out loud and say it like you mean it!

I'm regressed!!

You may still think I'm kidding, but I'm not. It's probably the single most powerful move you can make when you are swimming in The Trench. I can't overstate how important this is. It's not only possible to become self-aware in the middle of a full-blown acute regression, it's *absolutely necessary!*

Elizabeth experienced increased self-awareness and impulse control from realizing she was regressed. She still had to control her emotions and get her thoughts back under control, but at least now she had a fighting chance.

How far under are you?

Once you know about the Mariana Trench, we have a shared visual frame of reference and a common language to talk about regressions. Think about the last time you had a severe regression. Now I can ask you:

1. How far under did you sink? Did you go down 2 miles? 4 miles? Down to the bottom of The Trench?
2. How long did it take for you to come up to some degree?

3. How far were you able to come up? Did you sulk for a week a few miles down?
4. What was your pattern of recovery? Did you start to come up and then lose it again? Or once you started ascending, did you keep going?

Give yourself a moment to visualize what I'm asking you. Notice the way it gives form to your emotional crashes, and how it helps you organize your experience of getting disorganized. Also, recognize we're now operating in a framework that implicitly involves awareness in the middle of a regression. How far down are you? There you go.

The Mariana Trench model is great, but it's not perfect. Nothing is so perfect it can't be misused by someone wanting to remain blind to themselves. For example, visualize a couple having breakfast after a serious argument the night before. One regressed partner asks the other, "How far under are you?"

The other responds, "*Me?! You* were pretty 'under' last night, yourself! You were *really* down in the Mariana Trench! You were definitely swimming with the Ugly Fish!"

"*Me?!*" the first one screams. "You're regressed *now*! You're a Vampire Squid!"

"*ME?!*" the other shouts. "*You're the one who's screaming!!* You're so regressed, you're a Fangtooth Fish!"

Everyone learns this lesson the hard way: Only a seriously regressed person points his finger at his partner and shouts, "*YOU ARE REGRESSED!! GET A GRIP ON YOURSELF!!*" However, having done this myself, I understand that when you're down in the Mariana Trench, you have the dual delusions that (a) you're trying to be helpful, and (b) this is going to work.

When partners are good at pulling themselves out of regressions, there's some chance they might succeed in reminding their partner when he or she is regressed. But when you're starting out, you're more likely to lose a digit if you point your finger at your partner and yell, "*YOU'RE REGRESSED!*"

Cruel mental voice

Earlier I touched on what your inner mental world is like when you're swimming in the Mariana Trench. When divers descend to great depths, some offer their breathing apparatus to the fish swimming by, whom they feel are communicating with them. This is known as "rapture of the deep" (nitrogen narcosis). Obviously, they're not thinking straight because they can drown!

Similarly, when you regress down to the Mariana Trench, your inner mental world changes, but it is never rapturous. Your thoughts and emotional control decline. For Elizabeth, the cruel mental voice in her head started talking again.

"You are nothing but a piece of shit! Worthless! Not fit to take up space on a crowded planet!"

Lots of people have a cruel mental voice in their inner mental world. ²³ According to a random study, one out of ten people admits to having a cruel mental voice that torments them. There is even an international society of "voice hearers."

Earlier I said I often bring up partners' mutual cruelty if they've been patrolling the Mariana Trench. Admitting your own cruelty often brings remarkable benefits. One is finally being able to deal effectively with a cruel mental voice.

Hearing a cruel mental voice in your inner mental world is a function of your regression level. When you're sufficiently regressed, the Voice talks to you. It's part of your current brain state. When you're less regressed, the Voice stops. Consider the implications of this proposition: Would it surprise you that one out of ten people walking down the street is living in a regression?

People who have a cruel mental voice are often blind to the Voice's cruelty until it is pointed out. Sometimes they think the Voice is being "honest" or "helpful." It reflects the kinds of relationships they have previously experienced. Monitoring the Voice's cruelty often sensitizes people to cruelty within themselves in helpful ways.

Can you swim on your own?

When you're down in the Mariana Trench, you can only count on yourself to find a way out. Elizabeth couldn't count on Dennis to help her. He was often doing things to upset her. You must be able to pull yourself out of The Trench without other people's help, including when they are inflicting traumatic mind mapping to sink you.

Differentiation

The Mariana Trench is no place for warm-blooded people with a complex sense of self. Only cold-blooded creatures with a simple self survive here. Denizens of The Trench operate on instinct and nerve reflex, not principles, values and ideals. Every Ugly

Fish has some organizing system that allows it to exist, but it has limited adaptability.

The human self is in a different class altogether and requires different handling.

Earlier I said you are high risk for regressions when your sense of self falls apart. This occurs when your level of differentiation is exceeded. ***Differentiation*** is your ability to maintain a clear sense of self, while you're deeply involved in relationships with the important people in your life. The more you depend on others for your identity, emotional stability and motivation, the more poorly differentiated you are as a person. The better differentiated you are, the more you can function *autonomous* and *in conjunction with* other people. You are more able to:

- Productively engage with the significant people in your life.
- Function well when you are apart from them.
- Hold onto yourself when these people pressure you to conform and adapt.
- Make necessary changes as your good judgement dictates.

There's a strong relationship between differentiation, emotional fusion and regressions. Your level of differentiation and your level of regression determine whether (to what degree) you feel like your "self" is in peril or not. The more poorly differentiated you are, the more you are prone to regressions because your sense of self is easily threatened. Likewise, the more poorly differentiated you are, the more your relationships serve the function of maintaining your sense of self. The more that borrowed functioning²⁴ is occurring, the more regression-prone you will be because anything that jeopardizes that purpose creates massive anxiety and meaning.

The link between differentiation and regressions is so strong that when a new client immediately starts crying upon entering my office, I hypothesize that they are living in a steady-state regression that maintains the equilibrium in an emotional fusion with a highly dysfunctional “significant other.” (e.g., spouse, parent, child, etc.).

The less differentiated you are, the sooner and more intensely you feel “you can’t be yourself” or “you need space” as your relationship develops. Conversely, becoming incredibly dependent, jealous, and controlling once you’re in a relationship is a different form of your self falling apart. Poorly differentiated people use their relationships to maintain their sense of self. They pull their partner towards them or push him or her away, according to what their sense of self requires. When you can maintain your sense of self independently, you can let your partner move closer or farther away as the situation and his or her level of functioning dictates.

Partners are generally at the same level of personal development (differentiation). This means, when you’re swimming with the Ugly Fish, your partner is usually right there in the Mariana Trench too and doesn’t have a helping hand (fin) to lend you. You can’t rely on your partner soothing or supporting you; instead, he or she probably be a hindrance or destabilizing influence. The only reliable way of dealing with your regressions is you must be capable of handling them yourself.

Crucible® 4 Points of Balance

This is a good time to return to a topic we began in Chapter Four. Differentiation is best understood through the Crucible Four Points of Balance.

Necessity is the mother of differentiation. You don't develop your Four Points of Balance by reading about them. You develop them the hard way: Typically, you're in a tough situation, and you need better ways of dealing with it. Or you're upset, and you need better ways to handle your feelings and emotions. Or you need to stop overreacting. Or step up and face things you are avoiding. Or stop chasing hopeless causes.

Necessity is the mother of differentiation!

Necessity surfaced when Elizabeth needed better ways of handling Dennis' provocations. She had to find better ways of handling her regressions herself, rather than seeking out Dennis' help or complaining he was useless. She also needed better ways of dealing with her son, Paul. Developing her Four Points of Balance would allow her to do this.

First Point of Balance: Solid Flexible Self. Elizabeth needed better ways of dealing with Dennis, but the first order of business was getting herself out of the Mariana Trench. It was tempting to just focus on Dennis, while she had the problem-solving ability of an Ugly Fish. Instead, Elizabeth had to stay focused on what was most important when Dennis made a move on her. Monitoring her level of regression and keeping herself together took priority over disputing what he was saying.

Second Point of Balance: Quiet Mind & Calm Heart. Elizabeth had to stop getting her feelings hurt and realize this was business. Instead of letting her mind run away with her, picturing Dennis coming out on top and laughing at her, Elizabeth had to discipline

herself to envision better outcomes. She started talking to herself, giving herself good advice. The hard part was making herself listen to herself. It helped when she realized she'd take the advice she was offering if it came from someone else.

Third Point of Balance: Grounded Responding. Dennis loved to bait Elizabeth. She was usually so reactive he could make her functioning go up and down like a Yo-Yo. Elizabeth had to focus on controlling her reactivity. Part of this involved getting over being afraid of Dennis. Her fear made her avoid issues she needed to address with him. Then she'd over-react to minor provocations that were better to ignore.

Fourth Point of Balance: Meaningful Endurance. Elizabeth had to give up her wish this would be a quick clean divorce, without giving up hope she could come out OK. Instead of the collaborative mediation she had begun to envision, the struggles with Dennis were just starting. In some ways, Elizabeth's struggles with herself were just starting too. What made her think she could master her regressions when they'd ruined her life up to now? What made her imagine she could get out of the Mariana Trench? Who was she to think she could do better going forward?

New solutions, new hope

All this goes back to the moment in our therapy when Elizabeth acknowledged she could be a heart-eater. I saw she had what she needed to succeed. She could get the best in her to stand up. It was the best in her admitting she could be cruel. How did I know this was the best in her? Remember: *Only the best in us talks about the worst in us, because the worst in us lies about its own existence.*

There was also Elizabeth's experience with Paul. At a moment when she was seriously regressed, Elizabeth was willing to hold on to herself and make herself function. This was the first time Elizabeth demonstrated self-awareness in the middle of a regression. It told me there was a reasonable chance Elizabeth could find her way to the surface.

You can do things to help regulate your brain, like maintaining a healthy diet and getting enough sleep and exercise. Anything that changes your brain states for the better is a good thing, whether it's meditation art, music, dancing, yoga or snowboarding.

Differentiation-based Crucible® Therapy and mind-mapping-based Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy are more direct ways of changing your brain state.

Fast forward to the future

What if I told you that in the future, you almost wouldn't recognize Elizabeth because she changed so much? Like many clients, Elizabeth followed the methods you'll learn in this book and succeeded in ways that gave her a new life. No more hair-trigger temper. No more sudden meltdowns. No more emotional crashes.

Elizabeth turned out to be a bright, resourceful likeable person. Through her repeated positive interactions with people, she began to expect different reactions from them. She had a new-found sense of humor and a more easy-going style. Her eyes were brighter, she looked more alive, and the smarts I always thought she had showed up!

Throughout the rest of *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean*, I'll show you how Elizabeth got there. By the time we're done, you'll see how you can do this in your own life. With diligent mindful effort, you can accomplish similar things too.

Next chapter we'll focus on helping you get out of acute regressions. We'll shift from focusing on Elizabeth and Dennis and look in on Stephan and Anne Marie. I'll show you the best conditions for treating regressions, and they're probably not what you'd predict. I'll also outline good brain-changing strategies and introduce you to Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy, which I developed to address regressions.

There's a whole lot to tell you all about in our next chapter! Please turn the page because I'm dying to get started!

Chapter 6: Coming Up from The Depths

If you've been living in the Mariana Trench, coming up from the depths is doable but not easy. Other people have done it. If you are going to succeed, you need to prepare for the long haul. Healthy stubbornness (resilience) is an essential ingredient in success. Brain-dead rigidity (from the worst in you) can keep you stuck forever.

Some common difficulties in treating regressions are anticipatable. These include:

- Presuming your problems are untreatable, and this is just the way you are.
- Fears of finding out you are crazy.
- Unwillingness to accept you have regressions.
- Overreacting to having a “brain problem.”
- Perceiving yourself as reacting appropriately to the “terrible“ people around you.
- Unwillingness to control your regressions while in the grips of them.

Knowing these pitfalls prepares you to confront them before they take control of you. They all involve getting your willfulness under control. That's always a good place to start. But you need to augment your efforts with brain science if you're going to succeed.

Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy

If you're going to make it from the Mariana Trench all the way to the surface, the first thing you need to do is plan your ascent. You must consider the known difficulties and potential problems. Realistic expectations for the arduousness of the journey help muster your resilience, forbearance, and courage. Divers have a less wordy way of saying this: *Plan your dive and dive your plan.*

Mind-mapping-based therapy

Crucible Neurobiological Therapy (CNT) offers new hope to people who have been unable to control their regressions. That's because CNT is different from most therapies. Crucible Neurobiological Therapy is rooted in mind-mapping the brain's ability to make mental maps of how other people's minds work. This means it's perfect for resolving the impacts of traumatic mind mapping and disgust reactions that cause regressions. Crucible Neurobiological Therapy was designed from the outset to target interpersonal neurobiological impairments.

Crucible Neurobiological therapy is based on mind mapping, your brain's innate ability to mental maps of how other people's minds work.

CNT is a right-brain-focused therapy. CNT uses right-brain-dominant methods, including visualizations and written mental dialogues. It is more of a "tell me what you

see” therapy versus “tell me how you feel.” It doesn’t rely on left-brain dominant methods such as introspection, journaling, and prose.

Brain-rewiring therapy

Crucible Neurobiological Therapy focuses on brain-change. CNT is consistent with differentiation-based Crucible Therapy, which focuses on relationship problems. My prior books, *Passionate Marriage, Intimacy & Desire* and *Resurrecting Sex*, are based on Crucible Therapy.

If you’re interested in rewiring your brain, Crucible Therapy and Crucible Neurobiological Therapy make a great combination to do this. By design, they are perfect for rewiring your brain when it is in a highly-plastic condition due to high anxiety, stress, and profound meaning.²⁵

Here’s where I differ from Murray Bowen, the creator of differentiation theory, who I mentioned in Chapter One. My therapy diverges from Bowen’s application of his own theory. Because Bowen recognized the brain-disorganizing impacts of emotions and anxiety, Bowen Therapy is a calm, low-anxiety and low-intensity therapy designed not to overwhelm people’s cognitive (left-brain) functioning. In contrast, for this same reason, Crucible Therapy occurs at a much higher intensity level that requires people to keep their brain/mind together under challenging circumstances.

Crucible Therapy is an *anxiety-tolerance-based* approach. (Read: At the upper levels of your “window of tolerance,” which I’ll explain in a moment.) Treatment occurs at a higher level of anxiety and meaning than in conventional *anxiety-reduction-based*

therapies which focus on making you feel safe and secure. This makes Crucible Therapy a good platform for brain-changing therapy and a great companion for Crucible Neurobiological Therapy.

Harness interpersonal neurobiology

Living at the Bottom of the Ocean combines these two approaches. You've got to deal with regressions and relationship difficulties simultaneously because that's the way life presents them to you. That's why I talked to you about the relationships among differentiation, emotional fusion, borrowed functioning and regressions last chapter.

Crucible Therapy (marital and sex therapy) harnesses couples' predictable issues around sexual desire, sexual dysfunctions, intimacy, extramarital affairs, parenting, careers, money, and decision-making to enhance people's differentiation. In contrast, Crucible Neurobiological Therapy uses common everyday situations to resolve interpersonal neurobiological problems. Together, they harness the optimal conditions and opportunities Mother Nature provides for raising your differentiation and rewiring your brain by dealing with naturally occurring relationship issues.

Couples come to me for relationship problems. Invariably they have differentiation issues and often have interpersonal neurobiological problems too. And yet, we always end up talking about their relationship problems anyway, because it's the best way to solve both difficulties.

For forty years, Crucible Therapy has used couples' emotional gridlock and two-choice dilemmas—when they are on the brink of divorce—to enhance their

differentiation and improve their functioning to permit new solutions. As you'll see in subsequent chapters, Crucible Neurobiological Therapy harnesses relationship interactions that previously would have produced traumatic mind mapping, turning them into curative experiences that resolve prior trauma. Together, they make a potent brain-changing process.

Differentiation in your situation

Why am I telling you this? You may have different relationship problems than Elizabeth and Dennis or Stephan and Anne Marie. What you may have in common is problems with regressions. If so, you need to do some “mental substitution” when you read about these couples, to see how regressions and differentiation apply to your particular issues and situation. In subsequent chapters, I'll lay out basic strategies for dealing with regressions that also raise your differentiation. You'll see there are predictable patterns for both. Your job is to adapt what you read to your own relationship problems, so you can understand the underlying differentiation issues playing out.

A lot can be gained by running a second track in your mind in which you change the storyline to fit your life and circumstances. Regressing while discussing having a baby isn't much different than regressing over parenting decisions once the kid is born. No different than regressing when your kid goes off to school, or gets thrown out of school, or drops out of school one semester short of graduating. You need to deal with regressions in any event, and there's a differentiation issue in each situation. Recognizing

the differentiation issues and handling them well gives you more control of your regressions.

In a nutshell, differentiation involves holding on to yourself when the important people in your life pressure you to conform to their wishes. Holding onto yourself doesn't mean doing whatever you want or assuming you are right. Holding onto yourself involves confronting yourself, and not assuming your partner should give up his or her position for you. This is important because differentiation issues most commonly surface in naturally occurring conflict situations:

- Dealing with emotional gridlock.
- Confronting two-choice dilemmas.

Emotional gridlock arises over things you and your partner (1) don't agree on, (2) can't agree to disagree about and (3) can't ignore because your integrity and sense of selfhood are on the line. Your version could occur over financial decisions, sexual dysfunctions, changing your job, going back to school, dealing with your teenager getting arrested, or your partner's alcoholism or domestic abuse.

Two-choice dilemmas are inherent forced-choice decisions built into relationships: You can't have and not have sex tonight. You can't have and not have a baby, or save and spend the same dollar. Having your mother-in-law live with you works the same way. It's one way or the other.

Throughout the rest of this book, I'll show you how Stephan and Anne Marie and Elizabeth and Dennis created corrective experiences by facing their emotional gridlock

and two-choice dilemmas. While you're reading, develop a mental picture that replaces their relationship issues with your problems.

For instance, you may be struggling over whether to marry, or get a divorce, or start a high-risk business, rather than in-law problems. Focus on what these all have in common: You need to hold on to yourself when dealing with your partner, and monitor your level of acute regression. The things we'll cover will help you deal with regressions regardless of the specific problems you're facing. (If you want an in-depth understanding of differentiation tailored to a variety of relationship problems, read *Passionate Marriage or Intimacy & Desire*.)

Adopt a brain-state focus

You need one more thing to get the most from your reading: You should adopt a *brain state focus*, rather than focusing on your emotions and feelings. There's a relationship between regressions, your emotional and cognitive functioning, and the content of your thoughts and feelings. Your emotions, feelings and thoughts are tied to different brain states. When your brain state changes, your thoughts, feelings and emotions change too.

When you are regressed, you are better off focusing on your brain state, rather than trying to change your feelings per se. Catharsis for Ugly Fish is a waste of time. Expressing your feelings won't improve your regressions. However, the other way around works much better: Focusing on your regressions improves your emotional

functioning. Crucible Neurobiological Therapy is a "Swim for the surface! Pull your functioning up! *Then* tell me how you feel!" approach.

Increasing brain plasticity

I have no simple solution for one of humankind's biggest problems. But I do have solutions that work. That's what's most important. We're going to cover some no-fooling-around hard-core industrial-strength methods. All of them stretch your Four Points of Balance. I anticipate the reluctant part of you asking, "*Doc, do you have a handy checklist I can use instead? How about an app?! Maybe something for my Fitbit?*" The answer, in advance, is no, I don't!

Dealing with regressions requires something akin to the oven in a glass-blowing studio. This mini-furnace quickly turns glass *plastic* so it can be shaped and molded. *Plastic* refers to materials becoming malleable and pliable. Plasticity also refers to an organism's adaptability to changes in its environment. Brain plasticity describes the brain's ability to change in response to lived experiences. Learning is an example of positive brain plasticity.

In prior generations, scientists thought the impact of lived experiences, especially negative childhood experiences, were engraved in your brain like carvings in stone. Unchangeable and determinant. More recently, however, researchers discovered that your brain is more like silly putty, and some sections can regenerate new cells. Your brain

remains plastic throughout your life. That's good news for anyone who has come out of a highly dysfunctional home.

Although brain plasticity is generally positive, that's not always true. There's also negative plasticity, wherein the brain changes in negative ways in response to untoward experiences. Drowning in your own emotions in the Mariana Trench is a prime example of negative brain plasticity. Traumatic mind mapping and involuntary disgust reactions create negative brain plasticity. If you look back to our discussion of what causes regressions in Chapter Four, you'll recognize we were actually talking about what causes negative brain plasticity.

If you want to resolve regressions, it helps to make your brain more plastic (*hyperplastic*) to facilitate reorganization. Intellectualizing about your problems won't suffice. To accomplish this, you need situations involving moderate to high levels of meaning and anxiety that turn out positive. Moreover, the meanings you attribute to your situation or interaction must be *accurate* (but not necessarily pleasant) for repair to occur. Getting yourself worked up and telling yourself lies won't help you. You also need to do this repeatedly. In later chapters, I'll show you detailed ways how to do this.

Working on the edge of regression

The image of a super-hot quick-acting glass furnace conveys the kind of brief intense conditions that can help you. I'm not talking about creating situations where you're out of control in your regression. I'm talking about keeping yourself *under control* when you'd generally get *out of control* and dive deep into The Mariana Trench.

This means keeping a grip on yourself when you would typically lose it, and pulling yourself out of your regression while you're in the thick of it. In both cases, you'll be working on the precarious edge of regression, where you could easily lose your balance and fall into it.

Not the most optimal working conditions, you might think. But then, you'd be wrong! I'm certainly not describing the most *comfortable* circumstances. Still, they are *optimal* conditions for positive brain-change and probably the most inevitable ones.

It's important to challenge your brain if you want to change it.

Resolving acute regressions involves trying to do better when your brain is right on the edge of falling apart. This means you can't give up struggling to regain control of yourself in situations where you usually lose it. You *need* difficult issues and circumstances in which you'd often fall apart. That's where you have to keep yourself going. You have to force yourself to think straight as you get spaghetti brain, rather than avoiding things to maintain your composure.

Like many people, Stephan didn't want to do therapy on the edge of regression. He kept a tight lid on his emotions. His strategy was to be "logical" as long as possible. When his feelings started to overwhelm him, Stephan told himself the situation was irretrievable. Stephan didn't like being on the verge of losing control. This is when he liked to walk out.

Anne Marie didn't want to do therapy on the edge of regression either. (Who does?) She didn't want to cry. She didn't want to have another meltdown. And she didn't want Stephan losing his cool and berating her again. Anne Marie was demoralized that Stephan wouldn't deal with his parents, because he got so regressed whenever the topic came up. But situations where your brain typically falls apart are your optimal working points. Resolving regressions requires continuing when you would ordinarily stop.

Window of Tolerance

Perhaps you think what I'm describing is entirely backwards: Maybe the last place demoralized people should work on their problems is where they have a good chance of failing. I understand this kind of thinking. I recognize the natural desire to have things stacked in your favor with success assured and safety guaranteed. It turns out situations in which you could easily fail also present your greatest chances of long-term success. All I can say is, it's a good thing the Grand Design of Life wasn't left up to us. We would never have become the most adaptable animal on the planet.

What I'm saying makes more sense if you know about your *window of tolerance*. It's the range of activation and stress under which you can function, learn and grow. For our purposes, your window of tolerance refers to how much input you need and can absorb to get the most out of therapy.²⁶

You need to be working close to the top of your window of tolerance.

When your stress level is too low (at the bottom of the window), you aren't sufficiently stimulated. When it's too high (at the very top), you are overwhelmed. When dealing with brain regressions, if your arousal level is too low, traumatic images and implicit memory are not accessed.²⁷ If your arousal is too high, you can lose contact with your immediate situation and surroundings (briefly dissociate).

For optimal benefit and growth, you want to be operating near the top of your window of tolerance. The places, issues or circumstances where you have been unable to function well is often the best place to work. You can't learn to control your reactivity when you are unstressed. Unwarranted escalations and reflexive "locking in" only show when you're stressed. Too far from the edge of regression doesn't help. Jumping into one doesn't help either.

I'm hoping this encourages you to take a different stance when you're right on the edge of regression. Of course, you're going to fail sometimes! It's part of the process if you want to succeed. If you're serious about rewiring your brain, don't beat yourself up if sometimes you lose it when you're trying to keep yourself together. At best it's unnecessary, and at worst it's self-indulgent. Save your energy for next time!

Your brain rewires during "moments of meeting"

I'm going to show you how to approach common relationship problems in ways that can help you rewire your brain. When I said you need to harness interpersonal neurobiology, I had practical things in mind that could help you with everyday problems.

Let's look at how relationships operate at different times and then consider how regressions factor into this. You can picture an important relationship going through different phases or multiple relationships with different people.

Types of relationship alliances

A single relationship can have four different types of alliances. These can be stable for long periods, and they also can change in the blink of an eye. The four types of alliances are:

- Collaborative alliance
- Collusive alliance
- Combative alliance
- No alliance

A collaborative alliance is what most people consider "having a (good) relationship." In a collaborative alliance, the best in both partners work together towards mutual goals, and each other's individual goals which might not be shared. It's the gold standard everyone wants--although not everyone wants to do what's required.

Here's the golden rule of collaborative alliances:

1. *The first person you confront in any situation is YOU.*

That's enough to eliminate lots of us right there. Here are a few other rules:

2. *You don't mess with the truth; you tell the whole truth even when it's personally disadvantageous.*
3. *How you are feeling isn't the top priority; it's fulfilling your responsibilities.*

4. *Responsibilities are unilateral*, not reciprocal. ²⁸

All these aspects differ from the other three types of alliances, which involve shirking your responsibilities and appealing to the worst in you. A *collusive alliance* is a bad-faith agreement that allows both partners to avoid their responsibilities. The classic collusive alliance is “*I won’t complain about where you fall short, if you overlook where I’m goofing off.*” Collusive alliances fall apart as soon as one (or both) partners can’t get away with something anymore.

A *combative alliance* is an agreement to fight or argue, rather than face difficult issues and work things out. When partners have a combative alliance, arguing isn’t a breakdown in the relationship. It *is* the relationship. It’s a style of relating that allows partners to avoid confronting themselves or fulfilling their responsibilities. (“*Since we’re fighting, I don’t have to fulfill my part of our relationship!*”) A combative alliance is a way of locking into your partner, so you don’t have to confront yourself.

Some couples have *no alliance*, meaning anything goes. During wartime, nations supposedly operate under “rules of engagement.” Some things are still off-limits. There are things you don’t do. However, couples who have no alliance wreak havoc on each other with shocking violations of basic decency. Retaliation, rather than self-confrontation, becomes the most important thing.

Now that you understand the four types of relationship alliances, we have a basis for looking at regressions in terms of what happens when alliances shift. Conversely, we

can also examine what happens to alliances when someone makes a warp-speed deep dive into the Mariana Trench.

In practice, many couples never have a *collaborative* alliance. The “good phase” of their relationship is when they have a *collusive* alliance. Nobody rocks the boat by bringing up difficult issues when they’re not fighting. The “bad phase” is when their collusion collapses and shifts to a *combative* alliance or *no* alliance. Things never get resolved if you resort to collusive alliances, rather than confronting yourself to stop the battles.

Many things in daily life can trigger shifts in a couple’s alliance. Just like acute regressions, relationship alliances can shift in the blink of an eye. When things are going smoothly, and anxiety is low, it’s easiest to maintain a collaborative alliance (if you had one). If something suddenly confronts you with an issue you’re avoiding--particularly if it’s important or raises your anxiety--you can easily slip into a collusive alliance. That’s where you try to appease your partner, so you don’t have to really change. If this doesn’t succeed, you can adopt a combative alliance and spar with your partner to divert his or her attention.

Alliances continuously shift in daily life. But what happens when you add regressions into the picture, particularly if these alliance-shifts have high meaning and anxiety for you and you’re prone to regress? Relationships can be an endless cycle of dives into the Mariana Trench, constant hurt feelings, and things never getting worked out!

One of the most common reactions people have as they start to regress is they drop their collaborative alliance with their partner (if one pre-existed). Your ability to maintain a collaborative alliance dramatically hinges on your brain state. Collaborative alliances are hard to maintain when you're regressed.

When you're down in the Mariana Trench, you're usually not functioning well enough to have a collaborative alliance—particularly with another Ugly Fish. The first time you maintain a collaborative alliance while you're acutely regressed, you've passed a mile marker on your journey to the surface.

The first time you maintain a collaborative alliance while you're acutely regressed, you have taken an important step in your path to the surface.

Maintain your collaborative alliance while you regress

Stephan started tracking his pattern of regressions and his interactions with Anne Marie. By analyzing Stephan's notes, we saw that since our last meeting, there was an incident where he shifted his stance with Anne Marie when he regressed. To appreciate this, you have to understand more of Stephan's background and what was happening in treatment.

Our sessions were starting to show dividends. (I'll describe the kinds of intense encounters that allowed this to happen in a moment. I'll also describe additional methods in Section Three.) Stephan and Anne Marie stopped complaining about their inlaws and

started looking at their own parents. They also started looking at themselves. They were begging to develop a collaborative alliance. As a result, Stephan and Anne Marie's marriage and Stephan's control of his regressions were starting to improve.

Stephan's perpetual issues about being disrespected apparently came from growing up with a father to whom this was the cardinal sin. His father took any infraction of his rules as a personal affront. This is how Stephan's father structured virtually all their interactions. Either you were respecting him, or you weren't. Stephan told me a vignette of his father beating him with a belt while bellowing in a towering rage, *"This is my house! When you disrespect the things in this house, you disrespect me! You sat in my chair! That's MY chair! And I'm not going to tolerate your disrespect!!"*

Whether Stephan's father's reaction stemmed from spending time in prison, or feeling displaced when the family went on without him, Stephan never came to grips with his father acting like a lunatic. Instead, Stephan went through life wearing an invisible combat helmet, chin strap tightened, ready for war.

Anne Marie related an incident where she paid Stephan a compliment. They were in a restaurant and the service was particularly bad. The waiter was overwhelmed with the crowd of customers, and he accidentally spilled a small amount of wine while he was refreshing their glasses. Normally Stephan would have tongue-lashed the waiter, stiffed him with no tip, and complained to the manager about feeling disrespected or insulted.

Instead, Stephan cocked his head to one side and looked at the hapless waiter. *"Not having a particularly good night tonight, are you?!"* The waiter apologized

profusely and Stephan didn't make a big deal out of it. The manager came over to offer complimentary deserts. Stephan responded graciously, tipping the waiter nicely in the process.

Anne Marie was surprised and impressed. She had been holding her breath awaiting the explosion that didn't happen. She reached out across the table for Stephan's hand and told him so, emphasizing how well he treated the waiter.

Stephan responded, *"I don't want to sound like I'm getting defensive, but I have to disagree with you!"* Anne Marie was dumbfounded! Here she was trying to pay Stephan a compliment, and he wanted to disagree! Stephan couldn't stop opposing Anne Marie--even when she agreed with him!

Anne Marie tried again to compliment Stephan, which he disagreed with a second time. When she finally asked him what he disagreed with, Stephan didn't know what to say at first. He knew he disagreed with something. Stephan always had to be right, so this was the kind of moment where things usually fell apart. Anne Marie could read the warning signs that Stephan was going to regress and find something to dispute.

Instead, Stephan said, "Would you please repeat what you were saying. I'm sorry, I was distracted. My thoughts went off, and I really didn't hear you." Instead of organizing himself by turning Anne Marie into his adversary, Stephan reached out and established a collaborative alliance with her. It didn't involve a card and flowers. All it took was Stephan saying, "Would you please repeat what you were saying. I'm sorry, I was distracted."

Sometimes it's easier for people to *feel* something significant happening in the moment than to figure out what it is. Stephan was maintaining a collaborative alliance with Anne Marie instead of becoming combative. He was being open about his inner mental world instead of putting on his battle helmet. But the biggest part was this was occurring while Stephan's functioning was diminishing. In this episode, Stephan exercised his will *while he was regressed*. He was regressing under the impact of their positive connection.

Actually, Stephan had *lots* of intrusive thoughts he never "bothered" to tell anyone. Stephan offered, "I don't know if this is important, but I'm realizing I have a "backchannel" of dialogue going on in my head. The backchannel seems to be thoughts that I know are there, but I don't pay attention to them. They're like shadows moving through my mind. I never saw this before. I just happened to catch a glimpse of it. The mental chatter is negative, like, "*Oh, don't tell her, she's probably not interested in that.*"

Stephan maintained a collaborative alliance by telling Anne Marie he was having intrusive thoughts. He didn't tell her because he just realized this. He did it because he was *trying* to be collaborative. He wanted to hear what she had to say, and he was trying to be more open-minded. Stephan *never* did this. By revealing his intrusive thoughts, Stephan maintained a collaborative alliance with Anne Marie, and let her map him as he'd never done before.

As it turned out, this episode wasn't over. Later in the day, Stephan said, "I feel like we've taken a little step in our relationship."

Anne Marie studied Stephan with a startled expression. She said, "Yes, I believe we have." She had tears in her eyes.

"Did I say something wrong?" Stephan looked perplexed.

Anne Marie smiled. "No. I'm just touched to see you make a real effort to connect with me." For several minutes there was a warm connection between them.

Stephan presumed the conversation was over, and he didn't say anything else. (Terrible thinking). They had crossed a Rubicon of sorts, a landmark in their relationship. That was the end of it as far as Stephan was concerned. When asked later in our session, Stephan explained, "What more needed to be said? I said what I had to say. I asked her a question, and she answered it. I thought we were finished!"

Most people regress when they get their feelings hurt. That's when they are most prone to drop their collaborative alliances. But Stephan dropped his alliance with Anne Marie *when she was receptive to him*. Stephan's ability to track what was going on evaporated when things were going well. These kinds of problems only become evident when couples start to do better.

Stephan regressed *when he and Anne Marie had warm interactions*. His tolerance was *several minutes*. Heretofore, Anne Marie saw this as Stephan avoiding her, and in truth, often he was. Now she saw that, when he wasn't intentionally avoiding her, he was melting down because he wasn't. He stopped thinking straight *because* he was starting to

connect with her. Between Stephan regressing when he *didn't* connect with Anne Marie, and him regressing when they *did*, you can see why they didn't have much opportunity for a satisfying relationship until now.

"Now" moments

Stephan and Anne Marie didn't know it, but when Stephan began taking notes, he started creating a *now moment* in their lives. A *now moment* is a present moment that spontaneously arises through the natural processes of differentiation in emotionally committed relationships.²⁹ It's a highly charged intersubjective moment that questions the basis and future of your relationship. It comes from breaking unwritten and explicit rules of how you and your partner are supposed to be together.

A now moment is an emerging interpersonal process. What's at stake is how you will be together, and if you will be together at all. Your rising level of anxiety pulls you into the present moment. These unpredictable conjointly-created situations set up a crisis that demands resolution.

*Emotional gridlock is an inevitable "now" moment in relationships
driven by the natural processes of differentiation.*

For Anne Marie and Stephan, their *now moment* was Stephan's father's 75th birthday. This wasn't a now moment because a 75th birthday is special. It was a now moment because:

1. Stephan's mother wanted to throw a grand celebration. It was essential to her that everyone show up, including Anne Marie. Mother also wanted Stephan and Anne Marie to sit at a table with people who had already made it clear "they were on Stephan's mother's side."
2. Mother handled Anne Marie's request to sit elsewhere like she was dealing with an impudent child. She asked Stephan, "*Doesn't Anne Marie see that this special day is not about her? Can't she stand not being the center of attention for once?!*"
3. Anne Marie was upset by the way Mother treated her, and more upset with Stephan because he refused to speak up for her.
4. Stephan's mother wanted Stephan's reassurance he and Anne Marie were attending his father's birthday celebration. In other words, she wanted Stephan to make clear his first allegiance was to his parents.
5. Stephan wanted to give his father the idealizing son he wanted. He was planning to give a toast and speech. Anne Marie took Stephan's emotional investment in this celebration as "abandonment."
6. Anne Marie felt this was the time for Stephan to declare his priorities, once and for all. Who was it going to be? Who was top on his list? His wife or his mother and father?

Being born, giving birth, and dying exemplify predictable now moments. But often you don't see these emotionally charged developments coming, and yet they

happen all the time. There was nothing inherent in Stephan's father's 75th birthday that made it a now moment for Stephan and Anne Marie. And yet, Stephan's mother decided to give his father a birthday party, and the next thing Stephan and Anne Marie's knew, the future of their marriage was in question.

The big question was, could Stephan and Anne Marie break their habitual interaction patterns to save their marriage? Closely tied to this was, were they willing to change the rules of how they related to their parents? Dealing with seating arrangements pulled Stephan and Anne Marie into a time-based crisis and the clock was ticking. What were they going to do?

Moments of meeting

I'll bet you've had a few "now" moments in your life, where it was time for the best in you to step up and take a position that defines who you are. On the surface it may look like you're deciding which seat to sit in, but what you'll really doing is defining a "self" (who you are). In the process of facing high-anxiety and high-meaning situations like this, many people regress instead.

Now moments get resolved in *moments of meeting*. In a moment of meeting, the unfolding co-created reality sensitizes you to each other's mind.³⁰ This experience becomes a landmark reference point in the narrative history of your relationship. Moments of meeting reshape the intersubjective world between you and someone else and alter your emerging relationship. This is why you avoid moments of meeting with the

highly dysfunctional people with whom you're maintaining emotionally fused relationships.

In other words, moments of meeting are times of change. Changes in relationships and brain changes too. Scientists believe your brain wires and rewires itself as a result of moments of meeting. In subsequent chapters, I'll describe how to create powerful moments of meeting that can help your regressions. For now, pay attention to two important aspects:

Moments of meeting require meaningful responses tailored to the situation. The intersubjective reality is mutually sensed as different from what preceded it.

Moments of meeting require making a response that fits a specific crisis. Your typical generic response won't produce a moment of meeting. The necessary response must be personally authentic and tailored to that situation and circumstance. This charges and expands the shared reality between you and someone else. You both sense your relationship is now different from what preceded it.

Moments of meeting involve mutual mind mapping. Highly charged moments of meeting often generate jolts of anxiety and adrenaline. There's a tangible experience that your brain registers as body learning. You and your partner holding your newborn child is a moment of meeting. So is the first time you connect sexually with a new partner. Likewise, for new sexual behaviors that reveal previously hidden sides of your eroticism. These moments of meeting seem engraved in your mind. They feel much better than the

moment of meeting when Stephan and Anne Marie told his parents they wouldn't attend his father's birthday party if they couldn't sit where they'd both feel comfortable.

Brightening

There was a whole lot of mind mapping going on when Stephan and Anne Marie informed his parents. Stephan's mother and father were trying to figure out what was occurring because this violated their existing maps of Stephan. How much of this was Anne Marie's doing, and how much did this reflect Stephan's thinking? What was happening? What did this mean?

Although Stephan and Anne Marie focused their attention on Stephan's parents' reactions, they also closely tracked each other throughout this interchange. The unfolding reality sensitized them to each other's mind. It was very much a moment of meeting that reshaped the intersubjective world between them. They created a landmark in their marriage that altered the emerging landscape.

When I next saw Stephan and Anne Marie, they looked and sounded much better. They demonstrated what I've come to call *brightening*. As far as I can tell, *brightening* reflects positive changes in someone's brain state. Profound moments of meeting often have this impact. Think of brightening as your brain's way of telling you that you're on the right track. When you do things that are truly helpful for you, you look better and feel better too.

Your brain can detect minute shifts in other people's brain states. It tracks changes in people's regression level, even if you don't realize what you are picking up. You are impacted by things like the tremulousness of someone's voice, even if you are not aware of it.

Brightening refers to attractive changes in physical appearance and demeanor as people come out of regression. You can especially see this in their face, eyes, and voice. People go from looking old, harsh, dead eyes, with an ashen pallor to their skin, to looking vivacious, alive, and more appealing. Sometimes even small improvements in regression level are apparent.

The results of productive intensive therapy sessions are often evident within twenty-four hours. Clients who experience brightening become more attractive as people. Their top-end abilities are often surprising. They often turn out to be bright, witty, and creative. They don't become this way overnight--they had these strengths and abilities all along. The only thing that happened was these pre-existing abilities became evident. They experienced overnight shifts in brain state as a result of what we did earlier that day.

My clients look more youthful, vibrant, alive, and sexually attractive. They look "less mean," more approachable, and intrinsically more inviting. Their partners can see these changes even from preliminary progress. It's delightfully reinforcing when other people see physical changes in you that correspond to changes in your inner mental world!

Applying interpersonal neurobiology in everyday life

No doubt you're wondering about Stephan's mother's and father's reactions. Stephan was making a deliberate move to redefine his relationship with them in which his alliance with Anne Marie was primary. This certainly wasn't lost on them, particularly Stephan's mother. It was Stephan's father's birthday, but it was HER party, and Stephan wasn't giving her the response she wanted and expected.

Stephan didn't do this to hurt or defy his mother. He knew his mother would be hurt—and angry—nonetheless! But faced with the two-choice dilemma of who's feelings he was going to hurt, Stephan decided his first loyalty belonged to Anne Marie. This set in motion a whole series of *now* moments that I'll describe in detail as we go forward.

We've been preparing you to deal with acute and steady-state regressions. We've established the necessary "brain state" framework you need for approaching your inner mental world. You have appropriate expectations that controlling your regressions is going to stretch your personal development. It's going to happen outside your comfort zone and at the upper limits of what you can tolerate. That's always the case when your differentiation is being stretched, and you're holding onto yourself on the verge of regression.

I'm guessing this doesn't sound particularly appealing. But I'm not trying to sell you a new car or an island vacation. I'm talking about saving your life. This value proposition allows me to be straightforward. I don't have to promise an easy time or

pander to the self-righteous, self-indulgent, and overly-entitled parts of you that like to confuse confronting other people with “standing up for yourself.”

You can turn situations and interactions that previously produced traumatic mind mapping into healthy experiences for yourself that resolve prior negative impacts. The key is getting the best in you to stand up, and turn *now moments* into decisive *moments of meeting* that define you as a person. Invariably the person you end up confronting, first and foremost, is yourself.

The remaining chapters of *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean* cover practical ways of setting sophisticated brain processes into motion. Next chapter, I’ll show you how to handle times when you or your partner regress into Ugly Fish patrolling the Mariana Trench. Subsequent chapters do the same for steady-state regressions, We’re coming to the “time to take action” phase of getting you to the surface!

Chapter 7: You Won't Find Nemo Down Here!

When you're in a severe acute regression, you're not swimming with the cute clownfish from the Disney movie, "Finding Nemo." If you're doing a fair job of keeping yourself together, you are swimming with the sharks. But when you're *really* losing it, the Ugly Fish are your neighbors. Unfortunately, you think you're the only air-breathing smart-thinking good looking cuddly fish down there.

In this chapter, we'll cover things you can do to recover from acute regressions. I'll give you some best practices and a realistic plan that genuinely works. We'll also discuss what to do when your partner, rather than you, is swimming in the Mariana Trench.

You can do lots of things to pull yourself out of an acute regression. But knowing this is useless if you aren't aware of what you're doing and what needs to be done. You won't try to pull yourself out of an acute regression if you're not aware you're in one!

Self-awareness is not a high priority when you're swimming in The Trench. The trouble is, you mistakenly think you already have it! Self-consciousness disappears in acute regressions, replaced by an unshakable belief in the correctness of your perceptions and the righteousness of your cause. Neither of these helps you get out of them.

Self-awareness turns out to be *important* when you're in the Mariana Trench. It's the lynchpin for getting out!

Becoming self-aware in the middle of a regression

In Chapter Five, I stressed the importance of Elizabeth acknowledging that she was a heart-eater. She was able to confront this about herself during her regression. It was her initial demonstration of being capable of self-awareness while she was regressed. And as noted previously, being able to say out loud that she was regressed significantly helped her.

Don't underestimate the impact of realizing you are regressed while it's happening. It is one of the most important steps you can take. It's *essential*. You can't solve a problem you don't know you have. When you don't realize you are regressed, you won't attempt to control it.

Another reason I stress self-awareness in the middle of regressions has to do with maintaining responsibility for stopping them. Many people don't expect themselves to recognize or stop their regressions while they are regressed. They're not interested in stopping themselves in mid-regression, because in their perception they've been poorly treated. Lots of people feel entitled to remain regressed until they're good and ready to get over it!

Recognize you are regressed!

In moments when you're seriously regressed, you need to recognize your experience as "regression" and invoke the two magic words I told you earlier, "*I'm regressed!*" Realizing you're regressed and labeling your experience as regression is the

first (and arguably the most important) thing you can do at that moment. It reorganizes your experience in actionable ways.

It's not enough to tell yourself, "I'm upset" or "I'm angry," or "I'm hungry" when you're swimming in the Mariana Trench. I've seen clients do this many times, and it just doesn't work. You'll slip back into focusing on your feelings instead of your brain-state. I can't over-emphasize the importance of recognizing and labeling your experience as "regression."

Say it out loud: "I'm regressed!"

I don't want to sound dogmatic, but this makes a huge difference. *The issue isn't talking about your feelings. It's organizing your experience in a brain-state framework so you can do something about it.*

You *can* have self-awareness in the middle of a regression. It's the only way you (and everyone else) have a chance. Without this realization, you won't apply what you learn here about stopping regressions.

Exercise your will

After recognizing you're regressed and calling it out, what comes next? Well, you've actually started: You need to *exercise your will* in the middle of your regression. Once again, it's not only possible, it's the only way you control them. You've got to shake off spaghetti brain and not give into your feelings, while your fight-or-flight

reaction is trying to take over. At these times it's incredibly tempting to "bite" your partner.

If you can't recognize when you're regressed, you'll be apologizing forever because you'll only identify your regressions after the fact. Well, if you can realize when you are regressed, but you don't exercise your will in the middle of it, the result is the same: Things won't change. You'll still be short on solutions, and long on excuses and apologies.

Here's where productive stubbornness comes in. You're probably not used to your stubbornness being run by the best in you. But here's a situation where meaningful determination makes you more likely to succeed. In practice, this might look like not letting your spouse or child "get your goat," no matter how provocative, insulting or disrespectful they are.

Relax!

Getting out of the Mariana Trench is a very active process. There are lots of things you can and should do. One of these things is relaxing your mind and body in very deliberate ways. This is not a time out or a relaxing leisure break.

Shifting to a brain-state perspective doesn't automatically make your feelings go away. It gives you a different perspective on emotions and new alternatives in how to deal with them. But you can't overlook your feelings when you're drowning in them. That's one of the biggest problems with acute regression.

So, let me show you a better way to approach things: Reducing the physical and emotional load on your brain will lessen your regression, making your feelings and emotions easier to modulate.

I suggest you deal with overwhelming emotions like deadly underwater currents and riptides. If you know what to do when you're caught in a riptide, then you know an important step in getting out of acute regressions:

Never struggle against the "undertow" when you feel it pulling you down. That's how people drown. This will tire you out. Even though you're afraid of drowning, *you have to relax*. Instead of trying to stay vertical with your head above water, you must put your face in the water and float! You must trust that when you're ready to breathe, your next breath of fresh air will be there.

In other words, when your feelings are eating you alive in the middle of a severe regression, you must do the exact opposite of what your mind is telling you: *You need to RELAX!*

I can't say this too many times: You have to relax while your inner mental world is screaming, "*You're going to die!*" If you give in to the panic in your mind, you'll drown in your emotions!

Relaxing in the middle of an acute regression takes willpower. Your mind and body won't want to do it. Your natural tendency will be to tense up to protect yourself, which only makes things worse. You must control your mind to discipline your body. Focus on relaxing your thighs, neck, face, scalp and torso. It's worth the effort. You'll

feel much less shaky. Learning to relax when an acute regression comes on sets the stage for doing something else that can help you.

Learn how to handle emotional pain

I often help people deal with emotional pain when they regress in my office. I think this is something every parent should teach their child. Teaching children to manage emotional pain is a gift. Unfortunately, parents don't often do this—particularly those who do painful things to their children.

Relax!

Open your throat! Breathe!!

When you are hurting, there's an automatic tendency to maintain emotional control by closing the back of your throat (glottis) to keep the lid on your feelings. Unfortunately, this usually makes you hurt ten times more than is necessary. Instead, you need to do the exact opposite of what your mind tells you: Open your throat and mouth and *breathe!*

This requires willpower, but let's be clear what I mean. I'm not suggesting stifling your feeling and emotions or denying your pain. Getting your feelings hurt is a prime trigger for acute regressions, and once you're regressed you're going to hurt more. I'm

Focus on your body!

talking about learning to handle emotional pain. This involves willfully making your body and mind relax when you would otherwise tighten up. In practice, you need to:

1. *Sit yourself down and get your body organized.* Sit straight in a firm chair with your feet on the floor and your legs uncrossed. Sit upright with your torso positioned symmetrically.
2. *Start with your breathing.* Slow and deepen it by exhaling deeply and slowly. Slowly inhale to ground yourself within your body. Breathe from your belly. Let your chest and stomach relax.
3. *Scan your body for where you are most tense.* Focus your attention and deliberately relax that part of your body. You probably have multiple spots needing attention. Focus on relaxing your face, then your ears, then the middle space between your ears.
4. *Make your body relax by systematically scanning for clenched muscles and deliberately releasing them.* Physically regulating your body will make your regression more manageable.
5. *Don't clench your teeth. Don't lock your jaw.* Jut your jaw forward if you need to work it loose.
6. *Let the pain wash over you and allow yourself feel it. Don't brace your body or tighten up!* Let yourself relax! This won't go on forever (despite what your mind may say). The end of the pain cannot emerge until you grieve your losses.

7. *Pain often comes in waves as you experience different aspects of your loss or disappointment.* Don't expect to process it in a single flow, so you won't be disappointed when the next wave of pain starts.
8. *Make yourself breathe!* Don't hold your breath!
9. *Keep your eyes open to ground yourself in the real world.* Make yourself stay present. The middle of a regression is not a good time to "go inside."
10. *Give yourself time.* Don't restart talking until you have settled down. Don't rush to speak.

It takes time to stem your tendency to regress. But the *start* of that process, and tangible evidence that it's possible, can occur overnight. It begins with you getting control of yourself while you're swimming in the Mariana Trench! Focusing on your physical body in the middle of a regression will help you come out of it.

Focus on your mind

My next suggestion for handling acute regressions involves focusing on your mind. Like my prior suggestions about regulating your body, this requires willpower. You must fight off spaghetti brain and clear your head. This takes several forms:

- *Don't believe everything in your mind.* Once you realize you're in an acute regression, don't take anything that happens too personally or seriously. You're not in any condition to have great epiphanies. Handle your experience like you would if you were on a bad drug trip: Tell yourself nothing is as bad

Don't believe everything in your mind!

or as good as it seems at the time.

- *Don't let your feelings run away with you.* Remember the emergency room doctors' motto: *In an emergency, the first person's pulse to take is your own!* Take stock of yourself. This is not the time to be triaging everyone else.
- *Focus on regaining emotional self-control.* Stop thinking about disputed topics. Stay focused on the fact that you are regressed. You have a brain-state problem. Direct your attention between your ears. When you're swimming with the Ugly Fish, the first order of business is getting your thoughts and feelings under control.
- *If you can't control your emotions, control your behavior.* When you're regressed, you don't have great wisdom to impart to others. *When you can't control your feelings, shut your mouth!* Don't go to your partner for a hug or an apology. Don't get other people to empathize or agree with you. You won't learn to control your regressions by other people calming you down.

- *If you can't control your thoughts and feelings, study them.* When your feelings are overwhelming, and you are lost in your inner mental world, you can still watch what's going on. How do you see things? At least this way, you can learn something about yourself. It helps to know how the world looks to you when you're seriously regressed.

There's an important lesson here beyond these specific suggestions: *There is always a response you can make that's an improvement in functioning, no matter how regressed you get.* It boils down to having the will power to find it and do it. *Don't give up!*

Best practices for resolving acute regressions

Once you know about regressions, this becomes a basic way you see the world and everyone in it. But rather than this producing a jaundiced view of humanity, your brightening gives you a more optimistic outlook. *Nothing makes the world a better place faster than when you function better.*

Thus far, we've focused on things you can do to pull yourself out of an acute regression while you're in the midst of it. But other things can help you deal with acute regressions as a whole. Here are five additional "best practices" for getting yourself out of the Mariana Trench.

Assume you're regressed until proven otherwise

Clients always ask for solutions that don't require being self-aware when they're regressed. Some are lazy and don't want to be expected to keep an eye on themselves. But for others, this is an earnest request. They are saying, "*What can I do if I'm not aware that I'm losing it? Is there anything else I can do? Is there no fall-back position, no other way to handle this?!?*"

For a while, I was stumped. I didn't know what else to tell them. But then it finally dawned on me. Here's your best general strategy and it really works!

Assume you're regressed until proven otherwise!

Presume you're regressed all the time!!

I understand it's onerous to presume you are regressed at times when you can't tell. It's a drag. But it's also your best strategy. It takes into consideration that you're bound to make mistakes—particularly at first-- when you're trying to control your regressions. You're bound to fail sometimes.

Assume you're regressed until proven otherwise!

But here's the critical issue: When you turn out to be wrong about whether or not you're regressed, who does this fall on? People usually handle their regressions so the fallout lands on someone else. This happens when you assume you're *not* regressed, and you turn out to be wrong.

If your regressions have brought your relationship to an unstable place and its future is questionable, you have no extra room for mistakes. "I'm regressed unless proven

otherwise” is a perfect strategy for you. By using the “I’m always regressed” strategy, if you’re wrong things still work out well. At worst, you end up handling yourself as if you are regressed when you’re not. It beats the typical strategy where everyone else pays the price when you’re mistaken.

This “regressed until proven otherwise” strategy is also based on two reasonable assumptions: (1) At any given time, there’s bound to be at least one regressed person in your house. (2) The most conservative (and collaborative) assumption is it’s probably YOU! Whether or not your partner is also regressed is debatable, but that’s not the issue at the moment. The most important thing is getting *yourself* out of your acute regression, and this strategy can help you do this.

I told you I would show you to some industrial-strength solutions, and this is one of them. *This strategy also exposes if you’re posturing as wanting to control your regressions, but you’re not willing to do the work to make it happen.*

Recognize the “mouth” of your regressions

A second “best practice” involves recognizing the characteristic “mouth” (entrance) of your regressions. Identifying the mouth of your regressions facilitates stopping them just as they start. *The easiest place to control your regressions is at the mouth before they really get going.* Discovering your typical thoughts and feelings as your brain starts to fall apart helps you recognize when you’re beginning to regress.

The “mouth” of your regression are the thoughts and emotions you usually feel or complain about as you start to dive into the Mariana Trench. Everyone has their own

characteristic thought patterns and accompanying emotional reactions. Other people probably think of these as the warning signs of your regressions. Perhaps you rant: “I feel disrespected!” Or, “I don’t feel appreciated!” Or, “We ought to get a divorce!”

Or maybe you begin to feel like a worthless piece of garbage. Perhaps you feel like you don’t deserve to take up space on the face of the earth. Or you start thinking other people are exploiting or taking advantage of you. A common mouth-of-regression feature is a cruel mental voice starts talking in your inner mental world.

The mouth of your regression also has a “feel” to it. This shifting brain state has a subjective component. You may experience this as sensations in your body, or a way you head feels, or a state of mind. Once you recognize your particular sensory pattern, this becomes an additional way of realizing when your functioning is going down.

If you’re still unable to recognize the mouth of your regressions, here’s another way you can identify what you’re looking for: What’s the excuse or “face” you put on your regressions? How do you label them? Do you call them “getting your feelings hurt” or “feeling like you’re invisible”? I’m not proposing your labels are accurate. I’m just directing your attention to the mouth of your regression. The phenomena you are labeling are what you’re looking for.

Recognize the “mouth” of your regressions.

Identify your regression triggers

A third “best practice” involves identifying the people and circumstances that often trigger your regressions. Forewarned is forearmed. This prepares you to identify the mouth of your regression. You are primed to recognize when you’re regressing, which can hasten your efforts to do something to stem this. *Remember, the easiest place to control your regressions is just as they start.*

High-risk situations are often predictable. Uncomfortable, irritating and stressful surroundings increase your regression-proneness, as does sleep deprivation, hunger, fatigue and your general physical condition. Dealing with your teenager lying to you, or your spouse having an affair will regress just about anyone. Emergencies and shocking events tend to regress everyone.

The more you recognize your personal “hot buttons,” the better you can limit your exposure to things that provoke you. For instance, you learn not to discuss politics with some people. Or you avoid certain people altogether. Or you learn not to put yourself in positions where you have to depend on people who are not reliable. If you’re deeply impacted by war movies or images of brutality and murder, you learn not to expose yourself.

Identify your regression-producing people and circumstances.

Adopt a recovery strategy you can pull off

A fourth “best practice” involves adopting recovery strategies you can accomplish when you're regressed. Keep it simple. Concentrate on your mind. Focus on your body. Organize your thoughts. Get your breathing under control. This is no time to deliver ultimatums or solve long-standing problems. Stop focusing on content issues and direct your attention to your brain state. The response strategy you're learning here is designed for when you're not up for anything complicated.

Motivate yourself to control your regressions

A fifth “best practice” entails increasing your motivation to manage your regressions. There are a lot of things you can do to resolve them. If one method doesn't work, try another. Or try several in combination. I recommend an industrial-strength solution utilizing all of them from the outset.

Frequently, the problem isn't lack of options. It's motivating yourself to implement them. Now that you have a better idea of things you can do, you need to make yourself do them.

Often the biggest motivator for redoubling your efforts is mitigating the negative impacts of your regressions on your children. Fear of losing your mate or your job prompts some people. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make any difference if what motivates you is saving your marriage or family, saving the whales, or saving the planet. It just has to be personally important enough to mobilize you to function better.

Regardless of what it is, you need to motivate yourself to pull yourself out of the Mariana Trench. Don't give in to the feeling that other people *deserve* the fallout from your regressions.

A realistic pattern of resolving acute regressions

A moment ago, I said one “best practice” involves adopting recovery strategies you can accomplish when you're regressed. One of the biggest problems in resolving acute regressions is establishing realistic expectations. People who promise to “never do that again” turn out to be most likely to fail.

Don't set yourself up for failure

Don't set yourself up for failure by deciding it won't happen again. This is particularly true at the beginning. When you're dealing with regressions, you're playing “catch up” after the fact until you are pretty far along in stopping them. (This doesn't excuse your impact on others.) You've got enough problems on your hands. Don't make things worse by setting unrealistic expectations for yourself. There's no point triggering your next regression because you don't have reasonable anticipations for solving them.

For example, Elizabeth was having difficulty not excoriating herself for her latest regression. I told her, “You need a more realistic picture of what your path of resolution is likely to be, instead of promising to do next time what you've *never* been able to do:

Stop your regressions once and for all. You're just going to trigger your next crash and break your own heart when you make unrealistic promises."

"So, what should I do?!" Elizabeth wailed.

"To start with, why don't you take a few deep breaths, stop tensing your face and body, and let yourself relax."

"I can't relax!" Elizabeth cried. But I could hear it starting to happen.

"Here's the deal: The first step is the retrospective realization of having been regressed. That's where you are today. You're telling me you just failed again. I'm telling you it's the first step if you use it that way. Your next step will be recognizing you are regressed in the moment but being unable to stop it."

Elizabeth looked unsure. "If I'm aware I'm regressed, why wouldn't I stop it?"

"If you stop right then, that would be great. But don't count on it the first time you're aware you're regressing. There's a good chance you'll be thinking Dennis deserves what you're dishing out." Elizabeth thought about this for a moment and nodded in agreement.

"But then you can progress to where you recognize you are regressing in the moment, and you stop and take a few minutes to get yourself under control. After that, you should be able to recognize your regression once it has started and pull out of it without breaking contact with your partner."

"Will I ever stop having them altogether?"

“Probably, if you’re willing to do the work. But to get to that point, you have to take two other steps: You have to be able to recognize your regressions once they start and stop them on the spot. And you need to recognize the mouth of your regressions and stop them before they go any further. From there, you can recognize high-risk-for-regression situations and stave them off before they start.”

*Don't set yourself up for failure with unrealistic expectations
and promises.*

Sequence for resolving acute regressions

Let’s go over these realistic steps for resolving acute regressions and reducing their frequency and intensity:

1. Start by retrospectively realizing you were regressed because you were probably lost in your regression at the time. Accept that you’re going to be (a) chagrined, (b) disappointed, and (c) apologizing to others.
2. Shorten the latency between becoming regressed and recognizing this. Change the delay from forever to days and from hours to minutes. You’ll still be recognizing your regressions after the fact.
3. Realize you are regressed in the middle of your regression. This is a milestone in getting your regressions under control. Self-awareness in the middle of a regression requires more investment and ability than recognizing your regressions

retrospectively. It shows you have what it takes to get on top of your regressions. You still may not be able to stop them yet, but at least you realize when you've lost your grip on yourself.

4. Shorten the time between self-awareness you're regressed and getting your regression under control. You may need a short break to do this at first. Eventually, you're able to take a deep breath and do this in real-time.
5. Become more resilient to regressions. No one ever becomes completely regression-proof, but increased resilience to regressions can change your life. We'll discuss things you can do so your regressions are less frequent or severe, and you are quicker to recover.

What about psychotic-level regressions?

As I previously mentioned, when you're living in the Challenger Deep of the Mariana Trench, it's possible to have psychotic-level acute regressions. When this occurs, your cognitive and emotional functioning become so severely impaired your reality testing declines. At that point, your judgement is atrocious, you can't recognize what's essential in a situation, and you may say things that aren't true. You're completely lost in your own reality—although you may think you finally see things clearly.

If you have psychotic-level acute regressions, you may be impulsive to the point of being a danger to yourself. The problem is you're too ready to act on your perceptions. One client with psychotic-level regressions locked herself away in a closet for days. A second screamed so much she damaged her vocal cords. A man went around slamming

doors so hard a repairman had to fix the door jams throughout his house. Many “road rage” incidents involve one or both drivers having psychotic-level regressions.

The first time I told Elizabeth she had psychotic-level regressions, I thought we’d be swimming in the Mariana Trench. I hesitated because she had excoriated me with criticisms when she regressed in prior sessions. I figured I was about to be worked over and prepared myself for it.

But much to my surprise, the exact opposite happened. Elizabeth’s functioning came right up. She said, “Thank you. I thought I was crazy. I knew there was something wrong with me. Terribly wrong. I’m glad you weren’t so afraid of me that you wouldn’t tell me this because I might blow up at you. I can see you’re not afraid of me. That really helps. Now I have hope I can get better.”

Acute regressions are hard to resolve, and psychotic-level regressions are even more so. But if you’re willing to do the work, psychotic-level regressions are possible to control too. You accomplish this the same way you solve non-psychotic acute regression—you just need a double dose.³¹

Willpower and Four Points of Balance

Elizabeth pulled herself out of the Mariana Trench by exercising her will and applying her Four Points of Balance. When you develop your 4 Points of Balance it’s easier to stop your regressions. You don’t sink as far, and it’s easier to recover.

Elizabeth’s progress surfaced in recognizing that she had lost it quickly after the fact. She didn’t need to see a horrified look on Paul’s face. Instead of perseverating about

how she had been mistreated, Elizabeth was able to see how she had gone off the rails. Sometimes she even had an idea about what set her off.

Things were starting to improve with Paul. When Elizabeth got serious about dealing with her regressions, she went to him and apologized for times she was patently abusive. It was clear Elizabeth wasn't just excusing herself, because the length of time for her to recover was already growing shorter and shorter.

Eventually, the day came where Elizabeth was able to catch herself right in the middle of regressing. She and Paul had just finished watching a TV program in the living room. She was feeling unneeded and insecure. Elizabeth started tossing magazines and ramping up her typical harangue.

“If somebody cared about me, maybe this place would be kept much neater. I'd like it if my efforts garnered a little more respect...”

Elizabeth stopped dead in her tracks and didn't say another word.

After half a minute, Paul asked, “Mom, what's wrong?”

Elizabeth was crying. “Nothing's wrong. I'm just upset.”

“What are you upset about?”

Elizabeth took a minute to catch her breath and wipe her eyes.

“I heard myself! I'm down in the Mariana Trench! I'm regressed!”

Paul was mapping Elizabeth for all he was worth. He'd never seen her stop herself once she started haranguing. He didn't know what to make of this.

“What did you hear?”

Elizabeth took her time answering. “I heard how mean I was...I was taking out my frustrations on you, and you didn’t deserve it.... I was being a terrible mother! I was really *ugly!*!”

Many people live in an invisible box. The walls of their box are the limitations imposed by their regressions. People who won’t apply their Four Points of Balance never get out of this box. Many never realize what’s happened to them.

Like many people I’ve had the pleasure of working with, Elizabeth wasn’t willing to live within her limitations. After months of hard work, she finally was able to stop herself at the mouth of her regression. This was a pivotal moment in Elizabeth’s life! She was self-directed. She self-soothed. She kept her reactivity under control. And she tolerated discomfort for growth. It was the first time Elizabeth experienced “free will.”

Trickle-down effect

This was good news for Paul too. When Elizabeth pulled herself together as she started to regress, this created a profound *moment of meeting* between them.

As you learned last chapter, moments of meeting involve mutual mind mapping that alters your relationship and reshapes the intersubjective field between you and someone else. You both experience a co-created reality that sensitizes you to each other’s mind. It becomes a landmark reference point in your shared history and opens the door for you to discuss it.

Moments of meeting require an authentic personal response from you, tailored to the current situation, that emotionally charges the relationship. It is mutually sensed as

different from what previously existed. This happened when Elizabeth stopped herself in mid-tirade for the first time and managed to say, “I’M REGRESSED!!”

Elizabeth pulling herself out of her regression hit Paul like a ton of bricks. He had spaghetti brain for a moment. Electric moments of meeting are often accompanied by jolts of anxiety and adrenaline. That’s what Paul experienced when Elizabeth looked at him and uttered these magic words. A swelling of emotions filled his throat. Paul teared up and looked at his mother and nodded in agreement.

This was the prototype interaction Elizabeth and Paul both needed. By working on the edge of regression, Elizabeth created the corrective moment of meeting Paul needed to resolve his traumatic mind mapping from repeatedly watching her regress in the past. Elizabeth catching her regression triggered new mind mapping by Paul. His non-traumatic mind mapping of Elizabeth created a positive trickle-down effect, beneficial to resolving his prior traumatic mind mapping.

This was the first time Elizabeth *interrupted* her typical regression pattern, giving her brain a chance to rewire itself. Some experts say repeating this 10,000 times guarantees your mind creates a new (healthier) groove in your brain. If you put in the repetitions and it happens sooner, you’ve gotten off cheap. If it takes more repetitions to get your regressions under control, you’ll get all the practice you need.

No one is regression-proof, but Elizabeth developed better resilience. It took a lot more anxiety and meaning to cause her to regress. Things were better between her and Paul than they had ever been. Kids are amazingly forgiving when they see you do the

best you can. You don't have to be perfect. They can handle you making mistakes. What they can't handle is when you won't look at yourself, because then they can't look you in the eye either.

If I saw Elizabeth's physical appearance and demeanor change, don't you think Paul noticed these changes too? Of course he tracked Elizabeth, trying to map out the meaning of the changes he saw! He knew she was handling Dennis much better, and in the process, handling herself better too.

Increasingly, Elizabeth was more aligned with Paul's happiness, and she looked for ways to help him get what he wanted. And rather than thinking, "*My mother is a lunatic!*" Paul was starting to think Elizabeth was kind of cool. Not that Elizabeth would ever know this. By the time kids hit adolescence, their mind masking abilities are well developed and Paul was no exception.

Elizabeth taught Paul the Mariana Trench model, and together they used it to describe everyone's functioning: Elizabeth, Dennis, Paul, his friends, even things that happened at school. Paul came to the breakfast table one morning and issued a warning:

"Don't talk to me! I'm regressed! I had a terrible night! I kept dreaming my girlfriend was breaking up with me!"

When your partner is an Ugly Fish

Thus far, I've talked as if you personally have problems with acute regressions. I've focused on this first-person perspective of you dealing with yourself. Let's continue

this perspective a little longer because I want to finish laying out the relationship implications.

If you have frequent acute regressions, getting defensive about them shapes the power balance in your relationship. ³² It shows up in who gets the benefit of the doubt in disputes. Or who has credibility in the family dynamics. Your regressions can create unbalanced triangular relationships with your children and partner in which you become the “identified patient” in the house.

Let me give you some examples of how bad things can get. For instance, your partner could:

- Look down on you with smugness and superiority.
- Repeatedly say you are crazy or insane.
- Blow you off when you know he or she is wrong and you are right.
- Dismiss anything you say as lacking credibility, making it impossible to confront him or her.
- Use your latest meltdown to maneuver you into agreeing to things he or she knows you don't want.
- Use your regressions to avoid responsibility for his or her own bad behavior.
- Exploit your regression-proneness to win arguments by overwhelming you so that you can't think straight or you break down emotionally.

- Trigger your regressions with his or her severely distorted thinking, lying, or sociopathic manipulations.

Why am I listing these unpleasant developments? These things routinely happen in relationships if you have frequent acute regressions. These will be the contexts you'll potentially have to cope with when dealing with a partner who has problems with regressions too.

When your partner is swimming in the Mariana Trench keep one eye on yourself, because it's very likely you're regressed too!

Is your partner swimming in the Mariana Trench?

In the remaining pages of this chapter, let's consider two other perspectives: One is where your partner is down in The Mariana Trench. The other is when you and your partner are both bottom dwellers at the same time.

From the outset, I've said you are completely responsible for what you do while you're regressed. But it's not your job to reign in your partner's acute regressions. However, it's in your best interest to handle yourself wisely when your partner is regressed. Here are guidelines for when your partner is swimming in the Mariana Trench:

1. *Keep one eye on yourself*, because it's very likely you'll regress when your partner is regressed. (Remember, in a collaborative alliance, the first person you always confront is yourself.)

2. *Don't mollify your partner "at any cost."* Don't apologize for something you haven't done wrong.
3. *There's no point trying to reason with an Ugly Fish* or get him or her to see the light. The only light down in the Mariana Trench is a bioluminescent Ugly Fish who's coming to eat you.
4. *Do your best not to be intimidated.* Looking scared invites an Ugly Fish to attack.
5. *There's no point telling an Ugly Fish he or she is regressed* because they just get uglier.
6. *Be willing to let you partner be angry or disappointed with you.* Still, there's no point in deliberately being provocative or disappointing.
7. *It's irritating when an Ugly Fish acts superior* while he or she is swimming in the Mariana Trench. Don't let your reflected sense of self run away with you.

Maintaining a collaborative alliance with an Ugly Fish

It's hard to maintain a collaborative alliance with people who are regressed. The accuracy of their perceptions goes down, their suspiciousness increases and they over-react. You can't count on reciprocity or good behavior. Count on receiving an emotional pounding.

However, it's not impossible to maintain a collaborative alliance with an Ugly Fish. That's because responsibilities in a collaborative alliance are unilateral, not

reciprocal. (Reciprocal responsibilities are characteristic of collusive alliances, which is why they fall apart when either partner regresses.)

In other words, it's possible to maintain a collaborative alliance with an Ugly Fish, who has no intention of doing the same with you—*IF you are sufficiently well-differentiated*. I have to do this with all my clients when they're regressing in my office. You have to do this at home when your partner is an Ugly Fish. From first-hand experience in both roles and settings, I can attest that it's easier in my office and a lot harder when I'm a civilian!

Most people drop their collaborative alliance when they regress (if they had one beforehand). Their functioning declines as their Four Points of Balance deteriorate. However, this becomes an even bigger problem if your partner likes to vindictively “crash the alliance” as he or she dives into The Trench. Some people reflexively establish a combative alliance as they descend. You end up riding out each regression and rebuilding the relationship afterwards. Over time, you develop anticipatory traumatic mind mapping that your partner will do this again (which makes *you* more likely to regress).

There *are* couples in which one partner supports and helps the other's attempts to control his or her regressions. These partners cheer their mates on, but they don't assume the role of a coach. They aren't standing on the sidelines with a stopwatch and clipboard, telling you to do better or instructing you how to do it. They act like a training partner, and the two of you work on yourselves together.

Truly supportive partners don't adopt a superior position. They don't become junior therapists or instant experts on regressions because they read this book. Partners who play junior therapist are engaging in borrowed functioning. The best encouragement you can give your partner to work on his or her regressions is working on your own.

I've seen lots of "caretaker relationships" based on one partner's acute regressions. Typically the "helper" has a vested interest in things staying the same, because the relationship hinges on the regression-prone partner needing help. In some cases, the "helper" was willing to stop helping the "patient partner" and get help themselves. When "helpers" stop "helping," they no longer look like the healthier partner as their own impairments become more apparent.

Handling things when you both regress

Typically, partners have achieved the same level of differentiation (even if they don't look like it).³³ This means when your partner is swimming in the Mariana Trench, you're usually on a deep dive too! The fact you think he or she is swimming a few feet lower is no reason to feel superior.

Even the most regression-resistant partners simultaneously "lose their cookies" sometimes. Whether your marriage is often in the Challenger Deep, or you only visit occasionally, here's how to handle things when you and your partner are both Ugly Fish:

Don't try to solve intractable relationship problems right now. Keep things simple. You're not in any condition to come up with brilliant new solutions. Especially not with your fish-brain.

Tell yourself there is (at least) one Ugly Fish in the room! And it's YOU! Right now, your biggest problem is YOU. Your Ugly Fish partner is a secondary issue.

Yes, your Ugly Fish partner is regressed too, but don't expect him or her to acknowledge it. The only acknowledgement you get from Ugly Fish is they orient towards you just before they eat or screw you.

Focus on soothing yourself. If you're looking for empathy and compassion, you've got to get closer to the surface. The only empathy that exists in the Mariana Trench is *antisocial empathy*. Giant squids don't offer validation and emotional support. But they understand how you feel and will gladly give you a big hug--so they can suck the life out of you!

If necessary, break contact with your partner to get yourself under control. Don't grab your partner for support when you're in the Challenger Deep. You need both hands to swim for the surface. There's a difference between "everyone for themselves" and "everyone has to get themselves under control for their own and everyone else's benefit."

Swim for the surface yourself. Trying to pull your partner's functioning up at this point guarantees neither of you will get there. Swim for the surface yourself, if you want to meet there eventually.

What does it take to mobilize your partner?

But, what if your partner isn't interested in swimming for the surface? Let's consider what it might take to mobilize a partner to deal with his or her acute regressions.

To start, you need to consider the possibility that NOTHING will mobilize your partner to deal with himself or herself. Lots of people prefer to find another partner rather than look at themselves. Dennis was a case in point. Elizabeth had more problems with acute regressions, but Dennis was not immune.

When Dennis regressed he was vicious. His acute regressions weren't as striking because he didn't get as wild as Elizabeth at her worst, and his typical mean, sneaky, manipulative behavior wasn't that big a contrast. But he wasn't going to look at himself under *any* circumstances.

This was a marriage of convenience as far as Dennis was concerned. He wasn't interested in working out a better relationship with Elizabeth. As long as he could do what he wanted—which included frequent affairs—he put up with her rants and meltdowns. But when she started to pull herself together and expect more from both of them, he made it clearer that he wanted a divorce.

Dennis framed his decision as they had too much water under the bridge to fix things, and he doubted whether Elizabeth could really change. The truth was he was seeing Elizabeth change and recognizing their relationship would change with it. He wouldn't be able to get away with having affairs, and he certainly wasn't up for looking at what kind of person he was. There was nothing, not even a parental concern for Paul, that was worth him putting out the effort.

So, if you want a more hopeful example that I've witnessed countless times, let's return to Stephan and Anne Marie, whom we discussed last chapter. There you saw Stephan take some important initial steps in dealing with his regressions. He started to have some self-awareness while he was regressed. He also maintained enough of a collaborative alliance with Anne Marie to tell his parents they wouldn't attend his father's 75th birthday if his mother stuck with her seating arrangements. These landmark developments set the stage for significant developments in their marriage.

Although, on the one hand, Stephan's good functioning was getting better,

*If your partner has severe regressions and won't deal with them,
you'll be facing a two-choice dilemma about staying or leaving.*

Stephan was still brutal, callous, and vindictive when he regressed. He continued to arrive at his familiar conclusion that he had been disrespected, victimized, and exploited, even when he was clearly at fault. At these times, Stephan acted like all he needed to do was make counter-arguments to Anne Marie's complaints. They were "even" in his mind. She was no better than him, so he didn't have to change.

In fact, since Stephan had shown some initial progress, he felt Anne Marie should be satisfied with that for a while. He couldn't appreciate that in some ways he was now more difficult for Anne Marie to deal with.

When Stephan was constantly adversarial and combative, Anne Marie knew how to position herself with him. But now that he'd shown some capacity to control his regressions, and he aligned with her on the birthday party, the range of emotion Anne Marie had to cope with was that much greater. In addition, Anne Marie's own desire to be closer to Stephan made things harder. This made her more susceptible to getting her feelings hurt. She also knew pushing Stephan for more intimacy was likely to trigger this happening.

Stephan continued to have serious regressions although they were somewhat less frequent. But when they occurred, he still dove down the Challenger Deep and turned into a top predator Ugly Fish. Afterwards, he'd point out ways Anne Marie wasn't perfect either.

At the same time Stephan was hypervigilant and suspicious about Anne Marie, he also had difficulty mapping her accurately. Stephan tried to fight her to a standoff as if she would put up with this stalemate forever. It was pretty clear Stephan couldn't see what was coming next, even though I warned him.

When Anne Marie finally announced she was ready to leave, Stephan was shocked! He acted like he had been sucker-punched! Like Anne Marie had sneakily torpedoed him, rather than this was clear all along and he refused to see it.

Typically, Stephan would indulge himself in a towering regression and try to make the situation revolve around him. But this time Anne Marie wasn't just warning or

begging him not to push her to leave. She was willing to have this happen. Finally, there was enough pressure in the system to mobilize Stephan to contain his regressions.

Critical mass for change

Critical mass is the level of anxiety and pressure necessary to make you or your partner deal with problems you've been avoiding. Situations often have to evolve before someone is willing to buckle down and work on their regressions. Although this creates conditions that may seem unfavorable for resolving acute regressions, many people only buckle down when their mate is ready to walk out the door. ³⁴ There's nothing magic

*OfentimeIs, people won't face their acute regressions until
their relationships hit critical mass.*

about threatening to leave, and just threatening won't do it. What I'm describing is the spontaneous arising of a "now" moment.

In *Passionate Marriage*, I wrote that *your partner can always force you to choose between staying married and keeping your integrity—and will often do this many times over the course of a marriage*. Your partner's acute regressions can push you to the point where your integrity is on the line. It may be their abusive language or out-of-control behavior, like driving erratically at high speeds while your children are in the car. Or doing patently disgusting things in front of your children. Your partner can refuse to address his or her regressions or deny having this problem.

People often don't seek treatment for acute regressions until their relationships are falling apart. "Falling apart" means you, their partner, will no longer put up with the status quo. This usually comes in stages:

- You've gone through being understanding, trying not to make your partner's regressions a big issue, and avoiding things that will set him or her off.
- Then you progress to being willing to speak up about your partner's regressions. But you're still held captive by them.
- Next, you insist your partner do something about his or her regressions. You back this up by threatening to leave.

We're still not at a serious stage yet.

- Eventually, you *stop* insisting your partner must work on his/her regressions. You're not willing to argue or cajol anymore. You refuse to be the restraining force that contains your partner's regressions, and you're not willing to put up with these regressions anymore.

This is finally critical mass for change. Notice how much critical mass involves mind mapping. Your partner realizes you're not willing to fight about this anymore. You're willing to let your partner handle himself/herself however he or she chooses—but that doesn't mean you'll continue to live with it. We didn't get any further in therapy until Anne Marie reached this point.

There were lots of reasons why Stephan wasn't eager to take things further. He didn't like the picture of being a doctor with a brain problem. He bristled at the idea that between acute regressions he lived in a steady-state regression. He particularly didn't want to address why his mind fell apart at the prospect of getting closer with Anne Marie when things were good between them. Not wanting to get closer when they were fighting made sense to Stephan. But why did he feel so irritable and ready to flare when they were getting along? Stephan wasn't eager to look into that.

Eventually, Anne Marie got tired of pushing Stephan to deal with himself. She told him she wasn't going to try to make him change any more. He didn't have to acknowledge he had difficulty having a warm loving marriage. He didn't even need to admit he was keeping her at arm's length. He didn't have to go any further in his development, and he didn't need to apologize for this.

But Anne Marie also made it clear she didn't want to live her life this way going forward. She wasn't going to apologize for this either. She wasn't going to try to control Stephan, but she was going to control herself. And Anne Marie wanted to be with someone who cherished her rather than disparaged her, and she wasn't going to settle for less. Anne Marie letting go of Stephan and shifting to holding on to herself was one of the key ingredients in them finally reaching critical mass for change. In Section Three, you'll watch the growth processes Stephan and Anne Marie subsequently went through.

You may be asking yourself, "*Why do things have to get this serious?!*" Section Three offers a more in-depth explanation, but here's a brief answer for now: *Most people*

would rather fight with their partner than confront themselves. It's easier for your partner to argue with you instead of getting on top of his or her regressions. That's why all along I've stressed the importance of learning to handle your regressions by yourself.

As for the question of "*why do things have to get so serious before people change?*" your relationship doesn't need to be falling apart if you take action sooner. In some ways, the sooner you deal with your own regressions, the lower the anxiety, pressure and instability in your relationship will be. I encourage you to do this proactively. But, generally speaking, the lower your and your partner's level of differentiation, the more likely you won't deal with your regressions until your other options are even more anxiety-provoking or unsatisfying.

What's next?

In Section Two, we've focused on acute regressions and getting you out of the Mariana Trench. If you want to stop living at the bottom of the ocean, you must be willing and able to get yourself out of there. In this chapter we've looked at ways to accomplish this.

You've seen the importance of recognizing when you're regressed and learned ways of pulling your functioning up. We've underscored the importance of exercising your will when your brain is falling apart. You must fight for self-awareness as your mind turns to spaghetti.

You've also learned ways of dealing with emotional pain. You know you need to *relax*! Stick out your jaw and work it back and forth! Open your throat! Breathe! This isn't easy, but you can succeed if you harness your stubbornness. You'll see the payoff in *brightening* and reduced regressions.

In Section Three, we'll shift our attention to dealing with steady-state regressions. The things we'll cover will help you with acute regressions too. But resolving steady-state regressions requires different efforts and offers unique benefits including coming more fully alive.

The methods I'll share with you in our remaining chapters are some of the most powerful tools I've developed. You'll get to watch Elizabeth and Dennis and Stephan and Anne Marie use these procedures to resolve their regressions and change their lives. We'll go over this in sufficient detail so you can understand how they did this. You'll also find out how our two couples ended up.

I can't wait to tell you about these exciting developments in our final section.

SECTION THREE: SWIMMING FOR THE SURFACE

Chapter 8: Heading Towards the Surface

It takes a lot to ascend from the cold dark depths of a steady-state regression and reach the warmth and light of the surface. If you've been living in the Mariana Trench—or just five miles down—you've got a long way to come up. No doubt you have questions, concerns and insecurities about emerging from the depths.

Here in Section Three, we'll focus on helping you make this journey. Before my clients start, I make them aware they're embarking on an arduous voyage. One they must commit to completing before they start. It's not a journey you only travel halfway. You must undertake to do whatever is required to complete your journey, realizing it will exceed whatever you plan for, take you outside your comfort zone, and stretch your endurance.

That is is the true nature of a journey. It means venturing outside your home and leaving your neighborhood. When you're well-adapted to living in the Mariana Trench, and you and your family and friends are Ugly Fish, you feel at home when you're living under tons of pressure. The prospect of living a less-pressured life can be scary. You may worry about being lonely if the other Ugly Fish don't come with you. Or you may fear that they will eat you alive if you try to leave The Trench!

Wake Up!

Instead of the dark realities of life in the Mariana Trench, wouldn't it be wonderful if life was a fairytale, like Sleeping Beauty! You wouldn't be asking for everything to be perfect. Evil exists in Sleeping Beauty's world, and bad stuff happens to her. But a handsome prince rescues Sleeping Beauty with a single kiss. She wakes up! That's the part of the fantasy we want most!

We want to wake up from long-term steady-state regressions through someone else's efforts. We want it to be as simple and as pleasant as a kiss. We don't like the reality that waking up often requires a kick in the ass rather than a kiss on the lips. To make matters worse, you must administer the kick yourself!

Talking in your sleep

Last chapter you saw Stephan and Anne Marie's relationship starting to improve in some ways. Stephan was developing more awareness of when he was regressed. They took a stand with Stephan's mother and refused to comply with her seating arrangements for his father's 75th birthday party, instead of fighting with each other as they normally they would. These were landmark events.

But these actions didn't fundamentally change things. Yes, they were steps in the right direction. But Stephan had multiple motivations for taking things slow with Anne Marie. For one thing, Stephan really didn't want to have to deal with his parents. Refusing to go along with his mother's seating arrangements was one thing. He wasn't interested in dealing with either of his parents more substantively.

Moreover, remember we discovered that Stephan regressed when things turned warm and tender with Anne Marie. This didn't disappear once we identified it, and it got worse as things improved and Anne Marie was interested in getting closer.

Stephan's ambivalences showed up in being difficult in treatment. He often withheld information that slowed the process down. He appeared oblivious to the point of conversations, when in fact, he was trying to derail where he thought they would go.

There were countervailing forces at work that also limited Stephan's ability to do this indefinitely. One big factor was his relationship with Anne Marie had reached critical mass for change. She wasn't willing to wait around until Stephan got good and ready to deal with his parents. He was welcome to take his time, but she wasn't going to waste her life hoping and waiting. If Stephan wanted to stay married, he not only needed to work faster, he needed to change his attitude. Anne Marie could see he was dragging his heels and this was no longer acceptable to her.

The other things reducing Stephan's opportunities to dodge his issues were his parents. They kept making moves that he could only ignore at the peril to his marriage with Anne Marie. This included Stephan's father approaching him to invest in a business deal and his mother pushing him to go along. When Stephan tried to play down what they were doing, it made things worse with Anne Marie.

“Jesus, Stephan, what's the matter with you? Can't you see what your father is doing when he says he has an idea he wants to run by you? He's about to hit you up for money! Again!!”

“Give it a rest, Anne Marie! He just wanted to get my opinion on something.
Can’t I talk with my father?! Do you have to control everything I say or do?!”

“What did he want your opinion on?”

“Why do you want to know that? Can’t I have a private conversation with my
father?! Do I ask you about everything you say to your mother?!”

“Leave my mother out of this, Stephan! What did your father want your opinion
about?”

“The economy.”

“What do you mean ‘the economy?’ Why would your father want to know about
the economy?! You’re not an economist! You’re a plastic surgeon, Stephan! Why would
your father need your advice on the economy?!”

A long pause ensued. Stephen finally said, “He wanted to know if this was a good
time to make an investment!”

For half a minute, Anne Marie didn’t say anything in response.

Stephan begrudgingly offered a little more information. “He asked me about
buying a piece of property.”

“*Him* buying it or *you* are buying it?”

“Him!”

Anne Marie looked at Stephan. Her expression said, “*I don’t believe you!*”

“It would be his name on the deed.”

“What does *that* mean?”

Stephan finally coughed up the information he knew Anne Marie was seeking. “I would loan him the money.”

“You would loan him the money?!” Anne Marie was starting to “flip out.” The outrage in her voice was a sure sign she was going into an acute regression. *“This is the economics lesson you gave your father?! Stephan, talk to me about the economy too! Because I’d like a new car! And maybe a new house while we’re at it!”*

Stephan’s strategy was the best defense is a good offense. “You should talk! Your father is a ne’er-do-well stumbling alcoholic who never amounted to anything. My father went to college and got an accounting degree and started a company!”

The cords in Anne Marie’s neck stood out when she screamed, *“Your father went to PRISON, Stephen! He embezzled money from his investors!”*

That finally got to Stephan. His composed “doctor face” melted away, replaced by the snarl he only showed at home. *“And your mother didn’t do anything when you told her your brother was dealing drugs and your father was a drunk!”*

You can be high functioning on the surface and asleep (regressed)

at the same time!

Shocking impairments in seemingly functional people

Anne Marie and Stephan were in familiar territory. Each knew the other was regressed and overwhelmed by emotions. The animosity between them was palpable. In

the past, their unwritten rules of engagement said expect no mercy and go for the jugular. Even though they were doing better, they could still turn back into Ugly Fish pretty easily.

Anne Marie was ready to keep the volley going. “Well, your mother used to hit you with a hairbrush!”

“That’s not as bad as what your mother did, Anne Marie!”

“I can’t believe you, Stephen! You sound like an eight-year-old having a name-calling contest during recess! You sound so immature! The issue isn’t what my mother did decades ago. You’re too blind to see your father wants to hit you up for money! You are such a patsy!”

“You have no business lecturing me, Anne Marie, when you still let your mother shamelessly take advantage of you!”

“She doesn’t take advantage of me, Stephen! I’m happy to give her what she wants.”

“She wants everything! And she wants it from you because she can’t get it from your father! And your brother is hopeless!”

“My brother, Jake, is just having difficulty sorting himself out. Leave him out of this!”

“Jake is having difficulty because he’s a wanker! A loser! He always has been! He always will be!”

“How can you be so sure, Stephan? People can change!”

This was my opportunity to cut in. “*What about the two of you?!*”

Anne Marie looked surprised. “*What about the two of us?*”

“*Can you change?*”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Stephen was ready to take me on. “Are you telling us we *can’t* change?!” I paused to take a breath and let the intensity of his challenge pass.

“From the way the two of you are going at each other, I’d be pretty foolish if I tried to tell you *anything!* Besides, I don’t bet against my clients, so I’m not going to say you can’t change. But I have no difficulty suggesting that the two of you are likely to fail if you keep going on like you are! I’m an empiricist, not a faith healer. If you can change, show me!”

Both Stephan and Anne Marie were startled. She asked, “What do you mean show you?! We can’t just change ourselves right here in front of you!”

“Sure, you can!” I replied. “That is, if you *can* change. Why don’t you start by telling me some shortcoming you’re willing to acknowledge in your own parents.”

Anne Marie looked at me like I had just requested the impossible. “You want us to tell you things our parents did *wrong?! Growing up!?*”

“I don’t care if it’s now or growing up. Show me you’re both not as blind to your parents as you seem to be to yourselves.”

Stephan and Anne Marie looked at each other, not quite sure what to do next. They understood I was asking them to talk about their own parents instead of poking at

their in-laws. They also got that I just told them I thought they were blind to themselves. However, I wasn't giving them room to discuss this at that moment. I was keeping them focused on what they *didn't* want to address in their parents.

Neither one wanted to speak first. We went through a minute of pantomime, each gesturing for the other to take the lead. Eventually, Anne Marie ventured a response like she was dipping her toe in hot water to test if it was scalding.

“Well...let's see...I don't know...My father sometimes drinks too much ...And my mother isn't the world's best housekeeper... Does this qualify?”

“That's not much. Especially about your mother. But at least you got *something* out! How about you, Stephan?”

“How do I feel about what Anne Marie said? I thought she....”

I cut Stephan off. “Nope. Why don't you tell me something about *your* parents?”

“Can I tell you something about Anne Marie's parents instead?”

“No. Tell me something about *your* parents.”

“Something negative? Why does it have to be negative?”

“I'm happy to sit here while you regale me with your parents' virtues. But sooner or later, we're going to get around to whether you can see anything less than perfection.”

“I know they're not perfect.”

“That will probably come as a surprise to Anne Marie. Why don't you prove it?!”

“Prove what?”

“Prove that you know your parents are not perfect.”

“Of course, they’re not perfect!”

“Then tell me a vignette from your past or present that would show you can see your parents’ greatest shortcomings. Even if they have few flaws, one is probably bigger than the others. Pick an event that captures their biggest imperfections.”

It took Stephan five minutes of silent reverie to come up with a story about his father. Stephan’s told me that his father went to prison for five years when Stephan was ten years old. This much I already knew from Anne Marie “outing” Stephan in our session. But as I listened, I realized Stephan’s vignette focused on two things Anne Marie hadn’t told me: One was the picture of Stephan’s father being escorted from their house in handcuffs by the police. Stephan was shocked, mortified and embarrassed as the neighbors watched his father hauled away. Stephan described himself being acutely regressed at the time, although he didn’t use this term.

The other thing embedded in Stephan’s story was not something he witnessed. It was something that never happened. Stephan’s father never told him why he went to prison. And Stephan never asked him. When Stephan asked his mother what happened, she told him she was too upset to discuss it and never brought it up afterwards. He never asked her again either. Stephan eventually found out from a relative.

As Stephan talked about this, his jaw started quivering. He tried to close the back of his throat to keep a lid on his emotions. It held for a few seconds, and then he suddenly burst into tears. As this occurred, Anne Marie shifted from being belittling and accusatory to being supportive and sympathetic.

This was certainly better than taunting each other. I noted they could quickly shift from being no-holds-barred combatants to the kind of clients most therapists would want. Stephan cried. Anne Marie empathized. They had a very touching moment. At one point they even held hands. And I just couldn't leave it alone.

"I really hate to break up what seems like a nice recovery from a vicious fight! But from what I can see, you've simply gone from a combative alliance to a collusive one. If I'm correct, what you are doing isn't as substantive as it looks. You're not actually resolving anything."

Anne Marie and Stephan were not expecting a response like this from me. Particularly Stephan. "I was getting into my feelings! Isn't that what I'm supposed to do here?! I never cry! Are you're telling me I'm pulling a maneuver?! Are you saying my tears are phony?!" Stephan's righteous outrage was starting to build.

"Your tears look real enough to me," I replied. "I'll be they're one hundred percent genuine saline! And I have no doubt you're starting to feel something very painful!"

Stephan couldn't figure out if I was serious or not. "Then what is it, Doctor?! What are you saying?!"

"I don't think what's happening here is you are 'getting in touch with your feelings.' There's nothing 'cathartic' happening here. I think you're starting to have an acute brain regression and you're getting overwhelmed by your feelings. That's not a virtue. Neither is your wife empathizing with you and encouraging you to 'go with your

feelings.’ But it positions both of you the way you prefer at the moment. Compared to repeatedly poking each other where you know the other is vulnerable, I guess this is better. But I don’t think it’s going to help you.”

“*Well then, what will?!*” Stephan’s demand was half challenge and half request for information.

“You still haven’t told me something about your mother.”

“*What?!* You still want me to tell you something negative about my mother? Why is that important? I just told you something big about my father. You don’t want to discuss that?”

“If you are this bad at mapping my mind, I doubt you could have made it as a plastic surgeon.”

“I just wanted to be sure.”

As it turned out, Stephen never told me anything about his mother. Not that he didn’t try. For the first thirty minutes, I wasn’t sure if he was really trying to come up with something. I thought perhaps he was being passive-aggressive. But as time wore on, Stephen became desperate as his mental block became more apparent with each failed attempt.

Wouldn’t you think Stephan would have told me his mother was very controlling, given his recent experience with her over his father’s birthday party? Or that she expected him to obey her? Or that she expected him to align with her rather than his own wife? It wasn’t like he needed to remember ancient history to come up with something negative.

Given that he was having difficulty coming up with anything, this would have at least gotten Stephan off the hook.

But the point was, Stephan had a memory retrieval error. When he asked himself, “*What negative things have I seen my mother do?*” nothing came up. He couldn’t think about his mother that way.

Anne Marie had no difficulty finding things to tell me. She recounted vignettes from adolescence in which her mother varied from ineffectively dealing with common parenting issues to acting downright bizarre. Anne Marie described severe punishments for transgressions of manners—especially at the dinner table--coupled with permissiveness-to-the-point-of-recklessness when it came to boys, cars, drinking and curfews. In other stories, it was hard to discern Anne Marie’s mother’s fundamentalist religiosity from what might be signs of real craziness.

By the time they left, Stephan and Anne Marie were somber. Particularly Stephan. He had gotten more out of our session than he anticipated. He came in with marital difficulties and walked out with possibly having a neurobiological problem. He wasn’t a happy camper.

Are you asleep?

In Chapter Three, I laid out the impacts of long-term steady-state regressions. I described how seeming high-functioning people can exist in an impaired brain state (“low mode functioning”) in which their functioning is diminished. It can be so stable that everyone mistakes this as an accurate measure of the person’s abilities (which it isn’t).

When people are in steady-state regressions, their eyes are dull, lifeless, and vacant. Some compensate with wide eyes and manic style when they're interacting with others, but when they are "off stage" they look flat. If you haven't seen them this way, you think this is just the way they look and take them at face value. As people come out of long-term regressions, their eyes become brighter, shining and alive. Their intelligence rises, and they become thoughtful and insightful.

Lots of my clients are incredibly talented people. Many are top-level business executives, physicians, politicians, and yes, therapists. In public, they look like they've actualized every fiber of their being. But in private, they are severely impaired people who don't enjoy living near as much as they seem to in public. When these folks come alive, they turn out to be even brighter, quicker-minded and more resourceful than they looked previously.

I also have clients who look like "dim bulbs" on the surface. You'd think they don't have much brain firepower from the way they function. Underneath, they are the most cunning mind-maskers you'll ever meet. They like to play dumb. They lay low when you first meet them, and they map you out while you think you're mapping them.

When I'm working with these kinds of high-functioning people, I highlight their impairments by contrasting their effectiveness at work with their ineffectiveness at home. Most of these professionals would lose their jobs or licenses if they functioned in the office the way they behave in their house.

“Pattern of Awakening” algorithm

When I refer to being asleep and waking up, I am suggesting the same things Buddhism focuses on.³⁵ The goal of Buddhist practice is “bodhi” or “Awakening.”³⁶ This means awakening from the slumber or stupor inflicted upon the mind, waking up fully to reality, and gaining wisdom or insight into the essence of things. *Kenshoo* refers to “seeing into one’s true nature.” The result of awakening is a sense of freedom, release and liberation based on entirely new understandings.

Far more people are asleep than you’d ever believe. Buddhism says it’s just about everyone. This condition is not “all or none.” There’s a seven-mile stretch between the Mariana Trench and the surface. I’ve come to think most people are asleep to varying degrees. It’s how and why many seeming-well-functioning people do incredibly stupid things, make repeated bad decisions, and seem to be blind to their impact. It is an everyday fact of life that creates so much misery and wasted human potential.

Waking up is a shock! Reactive regressions are often a result.!

“Waking up” from a steady-state regression is possible, but not easy or pleasant. It’s not a walk in the park. It’s not about blaming your parents or getting your feelings out. It takes hard pragmatic effort, outlined in four chapters in this section.

When you try to get out of a steady-state regression, the things you’ll go through and the hurdles you’ll face are predictable. I’ve seen lots of Ugly Fish make the journey

from the Mariana Trench to the surface. I've seen this enough that I've noticed they go through a reliable pattern involving disturbing realizations about the full measure of their situation and the issues involved.

I've come to think of this as the algorithm for waking up. These are the four stages you pass through in order to wake up:

- Stage One: First you're asleep and think you're awake.
- Stage Two: You start to wake up and think you're in a nightmare.
- Stage Three: You want to go back to sleep and tell yourself that you're awake.
- Stage Four: If you stay awake and don't go back to sleep, the nightmare passes and you just remain awake.

Knowing this four-stage progression is incredibly useful. It helps organize your efforts, lets you know where you are in the process, and offers hope of getting out of your steady-state regression. We'll follow Anne Marie and Stephan as they go through these four stages of awakening throughout this chapter.

But we should pause a moment to maintain a heartfelt perspective. Although it's great to discuss getting out of steady-state regressions in terms of algorithms and stages of a process, this can foster an unhelpful intellectual stance towards incredibly powerful and visceral life-changing experiences. As you read on, let the "four stages of awakening" algorithm structure your thinking, so you can see where you are in the process. But equally importantly, allow yourself to visualize personal vignettes from your life that fit into whatever stage of awakening we're considering.

First you are asleep and think you're awake!

Are you living in a steady-state regression? Acute regressions are readily apparent. Steady-state regressions are pretty much invisible. But if you frequently have acute regressions, you are likely living in a steady-state regression because this potentiates having them. You might have a hunch you are smarter than you have acted up to now, but you probably don't think of yourself as living regressed wherever you go.

If you suspect you are living in a steady-state regression, look for indications you are capable of better functioning right this moment. You won't see this if you're always down on yourself and preoccupied with your failures. You also won't recognize this if you're afraid other people will expect better functioning from you going forward. You must be honest with yourself in ways many people are not.

First you're asleep and think you're awake!

Look for brief periods in your life in which:

- You feel lighter, less burdened, and the world seems brighter.
- Your thinking seems clearer, more precise, or more sophisticated.
- Your resourceful surges. You generate new solutions that have stymied you up to now.
- Your creativity spikes and new ideas flow. Your energy seems more plentiful and renewable.

- You function more efficiently. You breeze through tasks in which you'd typically bog down.
- You have more tolerance and resilience. Frustrations and disappointments don't get to you as much.

You're more likely to observe these brief periods of improvement when you do your best and operate out of the best in you. Typically, this will be moments in which you:

1. Hold on to yourself when you would usually fall apart.
2. Confront your shortcomings and limitations.
3. Face your two-choice dilemmas.
4. Deal with issues and people you've been avoiding.
5. Dare to upset important-but-dysfunctional relationships by functioning better.
6. Do things that stretch your Four Points of Balance (differentiation).
7. Venture outside your comfort zone so you can grow.

Brief improvements in steady-state regressions are likely to surface when you get the best in you to stand up, or you do the right thing. This seems counterintuitive if you expect low-anxiety and low-stress circumstances to improve your functioning. So, pay attention to this lesson: Walking into your anxieties, acting with integrity, and earning your self-respect are more likely to lift your steady-state regression than a tropical island vacation and a half-dozen Pina Coladas.

Your start to wake up and think you're in a nightmare!

What do I mean by waking up in the middle of a nightmare? When I first discuss this with my clients, they have no real appreciation of what I'm foretelling. Later, when they look back on our discussions, they finally understand what I was trying to show them.

Waking up involves varying degrees of difficult self-acknowledgements, depending on who you are. At the very least, waking up requires acknowledging you have been asleep. You have been blind to important things. For some, waking up requires admitting you have lied to yourself, deluded yourself, and been unwilling to confront yourself. You stop seeing yourself as a victim and recognize you are a participant and co-creator of reality.

What does a nightmare look like?

If you're in a steady-state regression, you can take some things for granted: *You don't have an accurate picture of your situation, or the important people in your life, or who you really are.* This is what I mean when I say someone is "asleep." But I'm not just referring to this point in your life. I'm talking about being blind to your past, and the people who populated it, including how you ended up in a steady-state regression.

Waking up in the middle of a nightmare often involves realizing:

1. Your problems are more significant or pervasive than you imagined.
2. Other serious problems exist besides the one(s) you recognized.

3. These problems are often interrelated.
4. Multiple family members are involved.
5. Intergenerational family dysfunction, emotional fusion and borrowed functioning exist.
6. There are no simple solutions to these problems.
7. Other people will complicate your attempts to resolve things.

First there is the nightmare of waking up to who *you* are. For instance, it always bothered Stephan that Anne Marie never got a job. It wasn't that they needed the money. He didn't like the idea that she had an "easy life." Stephan obviously wasn't factoring in what it was like to live with him.

Waking up to yourself frees you from a steady-state regression, but waking up to yourself is a shock! Besides having to deal with unsavory characteristics you now see in yourself, you have to digest the fact you were blind to your B. S. too. As Pogo, the comic strip character wisely stated, "*We have met the enemy, and he is us!*" None of us wants to see how we are our own worst enemy—and we are our own worst enemy until we do.

Then there's the nightmare of waking up to painful truths about important people in your life. You can have massive gaps in your mind-mapping radar and holes in your autobiographical memory. Realizing this brings up frightening realizations that (a) you are not dealing with who the significant people in your life really are, (b) you *don't want* to deal with them about what you're avoiding, (c) which often includes their shortcomings that neither of you wants to face.

The universal nightmare about other people involves recognizing they have mind-mapping ability. It completely changes your understanding of past and present events and other people's intentions, motivations and behaviors. Most clients consider dealing with cruelty, antisocial empathy, meanness, indifference and harmful intent to be nightmares.

When you're asleep, the only place you can wake up is in a nightmare!

It's always a nightmare

As Stephan revealed more details of his interactions with his parents, he realized his problems were more serious and extensive than he initially suspected, and more meaningful than he wanted to address.

Stephan's father liked having "man-to-man" talks with Stephan. That usually meant he was hitting Stephan up for money. Stephan knew that whenever his father wanted to talk, he'd end up reaching for his checkbook. Anne Marie knew this too, and it pissed her off.

Given that Stephan's father went to prison for embezzlement, you'd think Stephan would be suspicious any time his father approached him about money. But you wouldn't be accounting for the impact of traumatic mind mapping. That's the very reason why Stephan had a gap in his mind mapping radar that allowed his father to maneuver him into additional financial transfusion. Stephan seemed to have difficulty mapping his father.

By analyzing Stephan's report of his interactions with his father, it seemed Stephan's father was keeping him hostage because Stephan lived in a steady-state regression. Father had been physically and emotionally abusive to Stephan when he was growing up. Once Father stopped hitting Stephan, he didn't have to beat him to keep him in line. All he had to do was ramp up his volume and pressure, and Stephan's mind fell apart. It didn't even require yelling and screaming every time.

Earlier when I told you about Stephan's difficulty coming up with something negative about his mother and father, did you remember that Stephan had previously told me about his father beating him with a belt? Where you surprised Stephan didn't mention this? I didn't attribute this to Stephan withholding information (which I knew he did at some points), because he was motivated to come up with something at the time. I took this as demonstrating a neurobiological impairment, consistent with Stephan's impaired functioning dealing with his father.

You can have an interpersonal neurobiological problem in which you have the same insight repeatedly, but you're not able to hold on to it. I'm describing a memory retrieval error in which your mind-mapping information about your antagonist is seemingly absent. Rather than learn from your prior experiences, each time seems novel and unique to you. You have difficulty generalizing or anticipating what's going to happen. As far as you're concerned, there is no way to see what's coming.

If you were Stephan, a good example would be lending your father money again and again, but he never pays it back. His prevarications let you know the recent money

you gave him isn't coming back either. But the next time he starts pitching his latest reason why you ought to take out your checkbook, it's like none of this exists. ³⁷

*Everyone wakes up in the middle of a nightmare because that's the only
place you can wake up!*

Anne Marie didn't mind Stephan giving his father money—well, she did—but it stuck in her craw that Stephan's father dressed this up as father-son bonding. It doubly irked her that Stephan acted like he didn't know this was happening. He looked stupid and childish. Anne Marie didn't respect this, and it made him less sexually appealing.

This is why Anne Marie fought with Stephan about how he handled his father. There was a lot more to this than money. She couldn't stand watching Stephan's suppressed functioning. It drove her nuts. It made her willing to fight with him to get his attention—and even that didn't work.

Stephan had similar difficulties seeing his mother. Truthfully, Stephan thought he had one good parent and one bad one. When Stephan's father went to prison, Mother was all he had. Stephan saw his father during brief visits. In some ways, his father was like a hollow cutout figure in his mind.

In contrast, Mother was *there!* She made sure you knew it, too! Mother could start a conversation with a dead person. She'd chat you up and never leave you alone. Being near Stephan's mother meant never having a moment to think. But, between this and the Invisible Man, which parent do you think Stephan gravitated to?

Stephan felt he loved his mother. The gaps in his mind-mapping radar and holes in his autobiographical memory regarding his mother allowed him to love the parts of her he could see. But emotional superglue would better describe it. Stephan was trauma-bonded to his mother, which was just fine with her. She needed Stephan to keep feeding her the self-image she wanted. As far as she was concerned, this was the way a loving son should be with his loving mother.

Like many kids, Stephan wanted to think at least one parent was there for him. But Stephan thought this well into his adult years, and it was destroying his marriage because it simply wasn't true.

Mother was a dangerous woman. She played up to you to find your weaknesses and then used this against you when it suited her. Once you knew not to cross her and toed the line, she was a syrupy-sweet southern girl who'd love to fix you an iced tea.

The possibility that Stephan didn't accurately see his mother blew his mind! It didn't surprise Stephan that he didn't have a good map of his father. But he thought if there was one person he knew in the world, it was his mother.

Stephan's nightmares went beyond recognizing that both his parents let him down by not talking with him about why his father went to prison. Or that his father was a con artist, who had beaten him as a child. Or that he could be a plastic surgeon with a thriving practice and neurobiological blind spots.

Stephan got a call from his cousin telling him to give their parents the money they wanted. That's when Stephan realized he had even bigger problems than he thought.

When he got off the phone, he put together that his father or mother must have spoken to his cousin and complained or encouraged him to do this. Stephan always believed he and his cousin looked out for each other. But his cousin was telling him to give his parents whatever they wanted so he could preserve his own relationship with them! It's upsetting to realize your life story consists of the pieces you can remember, kludged together into a plausible-but-inaccurate account you can live with.

If you're living in a steady-state regression, you probably have holes in your autobiographical memory and gaps in your mind mapping radar.

You want to go back to sleep and tell yourself you're awake!

When clients start to wake up in the middle of their nightmares, I've got a pretty good idea of what will happen next. But my anticipation differs 180 degrees from theirs. That's why they're surprised and disappointed when they want to go back to sleep and tell themselves they're awake, and I'm not. Waking up in the middle of a nightmare involves challenges you'd rather not face.

Clients rightly feel they've taken a step by just realizing they've been asleep. This stretches your Four Points of Balance like crazy. However, this step is not *solid* differentiation yet. It has yet to be tested. Solid differentiation is the level of function you can maintain come Hell or high water.

That's what it feels like to wake up in the middle of your nightmare: HELL!! TSUNAMI!! EARTHQUAKE!! Whatever your point of reference, it's more than you think you can handle. Waking up always occurs outside your comfort zone. It can feel like your hair is on fire! But when you picture people's hair on fire, you expect them to jump up and do something about this! You don't expect them to sit there like nothing's going on, pour their cup of coffee on their head, and ask you what's for dinner!

Waking up in the middle of a nightmare triggers your urge to go back to sleep. If while you've been asleep, you've worked out a better relationship with a dysfunctional parent who's gotten less destructive as they've aged, you have lots of reasons not to wake up. If this gave you some semblance of the parent you've always wanted, you're primed to go back to sleep at the first inkling of awakening. This is when clients start saying things like, *"Now that I see my problem, I'll never be able to close my eyes to it! There's no going back!"*

That's when I start saying, *"Don't kid yourself! It's never too late to go back to sleep! When clients say what you just said, it's the talk of someone in danger of going back to sleep! Did you just say to me, 'Good Night?!'"*

It's never too late to go back to sleep! It's difficult when the significant people in your life are ready to help you do it. Steady-state regressions are part of borrowed functioning in emotionally-fused relationships. It's why the dysfunctional people in your

You want to go back to sleep and tell yourself you're awake!

life will often pressure you to stay impaired. Your impaired functioning supports other people's minds.

Predictable developments as you wake up

On the one hand, conflicts between Stephan and Anne Marie decreased as they increasingly acted like they could *see* their own parents. On the other hand, their anxieties about *dealing* with their parents increased as they started to function better.

The nightmare gets worse before it goes away. As you become less regressed, you get a better picture of what's been going on. You not only see what other people have been doing, you realize how you've been participating in it. You recognize the true nature of your immediate situation and its long-term impacts and implications. Reactive acute regressions can occur as a result.

Dysfunctions in yourself, your partner, parents, siblings and marriage become more apparent. As you wake up, you become more aware of your and your partner's impairments and the problems in your relationship. You also increasingly recognize other family members' antisocial behaviors and disturbing interactions. Stephan became more aware of how his father never gave a straight answer and continuously manipulated conversations. Likewise, he was shocked about how open his mother was about expecting him to defer to her on all matters.

Emotional super glue becomes apparent. Emotional super glue is the trauma-bonding that occurs from repeated disgust reactions. It is a reversal of the normal automatic overpowering urge to distance yourself from the offending person. The classic

sign of emotional superglue is a refusal to accurately map your parents' minds and deal with them accordingly. Stephan and Anne Marie were starting to be less emotionally fused with their parents. But neither wanted to see their mother or father accurately because they were disappointed with who their parents were.

Family members pressure you to conform to your original position/behavior.

Stephan's parents were urging him to stay sleep and give them the money they were demanding but also act like they never asked. It's painful and disappointing when you realize your parents aren't looking out for your best interests. But the call from Stephan's cousin pressuring him to enter into a bad deal was a double wallop. On top of this disappointing realization about his relationship with his cousin, Stephan saw how his whole family was emotionally fused.

Intertwined problems in marriage and family heat up. You could be a dual-career couple utilizing your parents and inlaws as babysitters to make your lifestyle possible. As you start to disentangle the emotional fusion, the complexities of your situation start to dawn on you. Likewise, when a family business is involved, or you receive or give money to your parents, things get complicated when you start to wake up and address the underlying dysfunctional relationship.

Fears of upsetting existing equilibriums

Seeing how your suppressed functioning maintains a dysfunctional relationship doesn't mean you are necessarily ready to change it. You may worry about what's going

to happen to everyone involved. Anne Marie and Stephan feared how their relationships with their parents would change.

Refusing to remain in a steady-state regression to maintain an existing relationship generates its own anxieties. If you come from an emotionally fused family, you can count on several things: First off, you violate the unwritten rules about stabilizing your parents when you won't subjugate yourself, diminish your functioning, or act like you don't see what's going on. Second, your parents are likely to escalate the pressure on you to capitulate (E.g., "You're going to break your father's heart!"). Third, your siblings and enmeshed relatives often kick into gear and pressure you to stay in your customary family role. *You should count on this happening. You need to be willing to take **all** this on and persevere until you are no longer living regressed.*

While you're going through this, don't try to hold on to one dysfunctional relationship while you try to deal with another one. Holding on to a dysfunctional marriage while you deal with your parents (or vice versa) is a losing strategy. You never learn to stand on your own two feet.

When you are willing to deal with anyone and everyone who is trying to drag you down, your odds of making it to the surface go WAY UP! Remember, the status quo only exists by consensus. Instead of feeling overwhelmed and mobbed, recognize that when you change, the relationship changes. You don't have to ask for permission to change, all you need to do is hold onto yourself. If you need permission, you're not changing.

Into the nightmare

Stephan's "now" moment with his father came when his father demanded another financial transfusion. On top of the property he wanted Stephan to pay for, Stephan's father had a deal in the works that would fall through if Stephan didn't give him the money. Stephan's father poured on the pressure, begging, blaming, yelling, and pouting. The barrage of self-contradictory statements usually pummeled Stephan into spaghetti brain: *"I'm just trying to do you a favor!" "I thought I could count on you to recognize a good deal with you see one!" "You don't know the problems this will create for me!" "I thought you'd be willing to help me out! I thought I could count on you! I was wrong!"*

But this time Stephan kept himself together when the anxiety, meaning and pressure would usually turn his brain to spaghetti. The result was things went to critical mass: There was enough anxiety, pressure, and meaning that Stephan felt he had to take action. He had to engage his father like he could see what his father was doing. Stephan didn't cave in like he usually did. Instead, Stephan told his father he wasn't going to give him the money.

Stephan's mother came right behind with her own way of working on Stephan. She said, "I'd like your father to have a little financial nest egg, so he can feel like he's accomplished something. I don't want him to feel like a complete failure when he compares himself to you. You've accomplished so much in your own life. Is it too much to ask that he gets a small taste of success –not on the level you've achieved, mind you— but still something he can be proud of?"

This was quite a move. Appealing to Stephan as if he had an elevated position from which his crumbs would mean everything to her was pretty disgusting (“Is it too much to ask?”). On top of this, Stephan’s mother was *indeed* asking too much! She was asking Stephan for more than money. She was asking him to go blind to who his father was—and who she was—and buy into the reality she was attempting to co-construct.

Stephan’s mother was creating a mental world where the only thing precluding Stephan’s father’s success was Stephan’s money. To buy into this reality, Stephan had to ignore his map of his father’s mind. She was insinuating Stephan should feel guilty for his achievements because they contributed to his father feeling like a failure. She put Stephan in charge of whether his father would ever enjoy success and be proud of himself.

Moreover, Stephan’s mother positioned herself as a selfless wife concerned for her husband--at the same time she was selling out her son. Her own selfish motives disappeared from view. This was a good example of how Stephen’s mother continually tweaked reality. Making things look the way she wanted instead of dealing with things the way they were. Forever covering her tracks. Reflexively batting away anyone’s attempts to map her. This is why I say, in addition to commanding Stephan to go blind to his father, Stephan’s mother was also demanding that he go blind to her too.

When your mother is willing to do this to you, it gives you traumatic mind mapping! Stephan didn’t want to believe his mother was doing this, and that she knew what she was doing. But then he watched his father make a move to whitewash it. He

said, *“Your mother didn’t mean anything by what she just said! Don’t take it personally! She’s just looking out for me!”*

Unlike prior times, Stephen paid attention instead of going blind. The fact his father was trying to cover his mother’s move meant he had seen it too! Stephen didn’t imagine it! His father was trying to make it disappear because he also thought this was significant.

Stephan confronted his mother on her attempts to coerce him to give them the money. Stephen’s mother tried to dodge the issue and turn the topic to something else. When Stephen would not be dissuaded, Mother finally acknowledged she knew what she was doing would make him feel guilty. Her begrudging acknowledgement, like everything she usually did, was veiled.

“I know it’s important for me to take responsibility for my actions, Stephan.”

“I appreciate you acknowledging you have fallen short, Mother.”

“You’re not going to keep throwing this up in my face, are you?”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Good. Let’s not speak about this again. It’s excruciating for me.”

Forcing your brain to keep functioning when you’re on the edge of falling apart changes your brain. Stephen knew this was a critical moment. He needed to speak up, but he didn’t know what else to say. Stephan knew his mother was making a move on him, but in his regressed state, he couldn’t figure out what it was.

“I can’t promise that!” Stephan blurted out.

Stephen's mother was shocked. She thought she made it clear she was done talking about her shortcomings. The topic was closed as far as she was concerned. She admonished Stephen, "You need to grow up and take responsibility for yourself! You can't be blaming all your problems on your parents for the rest of your life!"

Stephen pushed himself to think. It was like the neurotransmitters in his brain had been replaced with molasses. He had the impulse to argue with his mother that he wasn't acting immature or blaming her for everything. He was primed to go on the defensive and attempt to prove that his mother was wrong about him. But holding onto himself for all he was worth allowed Stephen to step back and see things differently for a change.

"I finally get it! I didn't want to accept it! You know what you're doing when you're manipulating me! You've known all along!"

Stephen's mother looked shocked. "I don't know what you're talking about! How can you talk to me that way?!"

"Believe me, it's not easy!"

"Then you should stop! You are mistreating your mother! I don't deserve this! I did the best I could! I'm a *good* mother! You've turned out OK. You're a doctor. You have money, a nice house, a trophy wife and precious kids. I must not have been that terrible a mother if you turned out like this! What more could you want?!"

That's when Stephen made a response demonstrating the beginnings of real awakening. "*I want a mother who is willing to confront herself about raising an incredibly narcissistic asshole like me!*"

More nightmares

In this chapter, I've primarily focused on Stephan's issues so you could watch his process in detail. But let me give you a quick update about Anne Marie: During this time Anne Marie also moved forward with her parents. Anne Marie dared to talk to her mother about not taking action when she told her that her brother was dealing drugs. Anne Marie's mother looked flustered and said she didn't know what Anne Marie was talking about. Her mother wasn't any more interested in confronting herself than was Stephan's mother.

The conversation never got farther than debating whether Anne Marie had ever told her mother or not. Her mother said maybe she should be angry at Anne Marie for not telling her. But at the very least, Anne Marie was finally willing to broach this topic with her mother.

Anne Marie got no further with her father. But, once again, she took the critical step of being willing to face him. Anne Marie brought up the topic of his drinking. But before she could talk about its impact on her, they bogged down debating whether he was an alcoholic. He'd admit to having a drinking problem, but he felt calling him an alcoholic was taking things too far. He felt insulted! And he wasn't going to tolerate this!

By the time their brief conversation was over, Anne Marie was on the defensive. But at least she crossed a threshold in trying to talk straight with both her parents. She was able to keep her brain together when it usually would fall apart. But she wasn't ready to pursue a conversation where she didn't back down.

If you stay awake, the nightmare passes

Stephan and Anne Marie had many things pulling them to go back to sleep and tell themselves that they had awakened. Some of these were unresolved marital problems they had yet to face. There were issues with their respective parents, siblings, and cousins they wanted to avoid. Each failed attempt to deal with any of these things—and there were many—was a huge temptation to go back to sleep and declare everything resolved. By now, you have some intuitive appreciation of the strength of the impulse to go back to sleep that they had to stave off.

I'm holding off telling you how things turned out for Stephan and Anne Marie, so you can watch it happen in subsequent chapters. You'll see how Stephan and Anne Marie used visualizations, written mental dialogues and face-to-face meetings to increase their ability to handle themselves with each other and their parents. I want you to realize that how you handle yourself through your nightmare determines how things turn out.

But it's not too early to share one sign of Stephan's improved functioning. At one point in our sessions, Stephan told me the following experience. He said he thought it would make me happy and it did. He had both of us accurately mapped:

"I was walking out of a train station. A homeless person in a wheelchair was putting creme on his forearm, and I wasn't sure what his situation was. I could feel my functioning going down as I walked past him. I could feel I was starting to regress. I was becoming quarrelsome, thinking he shouldn't be there."

“But I realized what was happening and I tried to change it. I stopped and gave him a few dollars. I walked out of the station and looked up at the sky. Snowflakes were falling and they were shining in the streetlight. For some reason, I found this uplifting, and I felt my functioning coming back to normal. I knew I was less regressed!”

The nightmare passes and you just stay awake

It’s not surprising that Anne Marie and Stephan’s functioning and the quality of their relationship improved, even though they had a long way to go. When you get to a less regressed state, many things happen concomitantly. Lots of things change as your steady-state regression lifts:

1. You are better able to use your abilities.
2. Physical and psychosomatic symptoms diminish or disappear.
3. You think more clearly and are more intelligent. You feel smarter too.
4. You feel better, happier, and less depressed.
5. You have better control of your emotions. Your feelings seem less overwhelming and become deeper and more meaningful.
6. You are more resilient, able to tolerate more discomfort for growth.
7. You’re more conscious about relationships. Your blindness and hypervigilance decrease.
8. You have more energy.
9. You are less reactive to other people’s anxiety and reactivity.
10. You have more sexual desire.

11. You are more pleasant to be around.

If you stay awake in the middle of the nightmare, the nightmare passes and you just stay awake.

Moving towards the surface

In this chapter, we've explored the disquieting realities involved in resolving steady-state regressions. I haven't tried to soft-pedal what's required. I want you to succeed, and you won't do that without realistic expectations for what you need to do. I also won't diminish the enormity of what my clients take on or my profound respect and awe of them. The reason so many people live in steady-state regressions is they don't want to face the reality of their lives.

I'd rather talk straight to you, and get the best in you to stand up, than pander to the worst in you that wants an easy unrealistic solution. So, earlier I said waking up in the middle of a nightmare feels like Hell! I suggest you heed the advice of Sir Winston Churchill, who said, *when you're going through Hell, KEEP GOING!*

Next chapter I'll show you how to reduce steady-state regressions through revisualizations. Revisualizations are an incredibly potent tool. All the visualizing you've been doing of the Mariana Trench will come in handy. If you think of Chapter Eight as

taking a deep breath and launching yourself upwards, Chapter Nine provides additional air and fuel to help you get to the surface.

Chapter 9: Revisualizations Make You Buoyant

Would you like something to help you see beyond your current picture of your past, present, and future? Crystal balls are fortune-telling objects associated with clairvoyance and scrying ("seeing"). Throughout history, perceived images have been used for making important decisions about love, marriage, finances, travel, and business.³⁸ Today, however, crystal balls are generally considered quackery.

But, this doesn't stop you from wanting something that could help you see your life beyond your ordinary perspective. Something that could help you better understand your past and inform life-shaping future decisions. A magic stone, or a magician's wand, or a Ouija board won't help you. But you already have everything you need inside you. All you need to do is learn how to gaze into the crystal ball of your mind and watch what shows up.

I'm referring to what I call *revisualization*: Reviewing past experiences through visual imagery rather than verbal recall. You probably do some version of this spontaneously. There's often a visual element to daydreaming and letting your mind wander. Who hasn't thought about their past? When you do this, you probably don't pay attention to *how* you do it, because it seems to happen naturally. You're focused on what you're remembering. But I've got something far more scientific and systematic in mind.

To give you a quick glimpse of where we're headed, sit back in your chair, close your eyes and go back to a time when you ate something or did something you truly

enjoyed. Let yourself savor the experience fully. Where are you? What's happening? Who is with you? What's capturing your attention? (Take a moment to try this.)

Without explicitly telling you to, you probably started seeing images. It seems to happen automatically. But *how* are you looking at what's happening? Are you watching yourself have the experience? Or are you seeing this through your own eyes? In other words, did you approach this from a third-person or first-person view? This is an angle you probably never considered because you didn't know this could be important.

This chapter lays out a game plan for using revisualizations to resolve steady-state regressions. I'll start by explaining the science behind it, follow it up with a detailed example, and then get into the specifics of doing revisualizations. As we move through the chapter, I'll tell you about how Elizabeth and Stephen and Anne Marie used revisualizations to help themselves.

Next-generation brain-based therapy

I don't have magic objects (except for the two magic words "I'm regressed!"), but I've got a knack for developing new psychotherapies. Developing neurobiological treatments for traumatic mind mapping is a new horizon for therapists. Brain research on disgust and self-awareness, and desynchronization of implicit and explicit memory systems, can guide these efforts.³⁹ But converting these insights into an effective action plan is uncharted waters. How therapists operationalize them will determine the effectiveness of different approaches. In this chapter, I'll show you how I do it. There's a

big difference between explaining the brain or referencing brain anatomy in treatment versus doing brain-changing therapy that stops regressions.

We've previously discussed how scientists discovered that mapping your own body and mind, imagining things happening to you, mapping other people's minds, and imagining things happening to them, all have a common neural pathway in the brain. This

*Say hello to your right anterior insula because it's hugely important
part of your brain!*

common neural pathway allows you to experience the physical correlates of how things feel to others (“empathic contagion”).⁴⁰ This common neural pathway exists in your right anterior insula (AI), the same place where your disgust reaction is centered.⁴¹

Your anterior insula makes feeling an emotion, seeing that emotion on someone else's face, and imagining yourself or someone else experiencing that emotion feel the same.⁴² This shared neural pathway is the basis of captivating experiences like watching movies of other people's experiences. It's at play while you're reading about Elizabeth, Dennis, Paul, Stephan and Anne Marie in this book.⁴³

The Mariana Trench model you've been visualizing throughout this book is another good example. Every time you envision swimming in the Challenger Deep—or clawing your way to the surface—or dealing with Ugly Fish—you activate your right brain. Even this book's name is a visualization: *Living at the Bottom of the Ocean*.

Crucible Neurobiological Therapy

Envisioning what you read, watch or imagine about other people's experiences, recruits the same brain regions involved in experiencing your own emotions. Exploiting this common neural basis of personal experience, mental imagery, mapping other people's minds and understanding their experiences lays the scientific foundation for new ways to treat traumatic mind mapping.

Crucible Neurobiological Therapy exploits this common neural pathway supporting self-awareness and embodied knowing of other people's observed and imagined feelings. It does this through revisualizations and written mental dialogues. Both methods allow your brain to retrieve the map of your antagonist's mind encoded in your visual imagery. This chapter is devoted to revisualizations, while the following one covers written mental dialogues.

Mind-mapping-based Crucible Neurobiological Therapy (CNT) keeps you interested in your inner experience and help you understand yourself better. This is important if you generally don't want to know what's going on inside you, or what happened to you. CNT doesn't work from your preexisting left-brain narratives and interpretations of your past.

Crucible Neurobiological Therapy is consistent with modern trauma treatment trends towards (1) reactivating trauma-related brain circuits via exposure therapy, (2) creating neuroplasticity through moderate anxiety and meaningful stress, (3) attending to

bodily experiences and (4) tolerating intense feelings. CNT's revisualizations are like virtual reality exposure techniques emphasizing visual stimulation.⁴⁴

Synchronizing memories through revisualizations

Before we get into using revisualizations to resolve steady-state regressions, let's consider the impacts of traumatic mind mapping and disgust brain reactions so you can see how this all fits together.

Synchronize implicit and explicit memory

Like most therapists, I've worked with memories one way or another for many years. The past just seems to keep popping up when you do therapy. But I really didn't know what I was doing until I started studying advances in brain research. You'll benefit from what I found out. I'll limit the scientific stuff to what you need to know because it covers incredible discoveries about how your brain works! This includes what your brain does while you are reading this book, or you visualize the Mariana Trench or personal past experiences. It has everything to do with resolving traumatic mind mapping and steady-state regressions.

Let's start with "flashbulb memories" which remain in your mind a long time, unlike quickly forgotten ordinary memories that fade over time. Flashbulb memories led scientists to suspect that a specialized memory system might be involved when you encounter surprising, significant emotion-arousing events. (Think: traumatic mind

mapping.) They speculated that flashbulb memories consist of images rather than verbal narratives, and a second non-verbal memory system might exist (which was subsequently proven).

Situationally accessible memory (SAM, also called implicit memory) is where memories are expressed in images, behaviors, and emotions. The SAM system contains extensive sensory information consisting of unprocessed perceptual data. This includes sights, smells, sounds, gut reactions, sexual “vibes,” mind-mapping information, and “empathic contagion” (visceral understanding of other people’s feelings and experiences). The SAM system stores information about bodily responses to trauma, such as changes in heart rate, flushing, temperature, and pain.⁴⁵ In traumatic events, this information is too briefly experienced to be integrated into conscious (explicit) memory and processed into long-term memory.

Verbal memory (VAM, also called explicit or narrative memory) encodes things you actively think about or mentally process into words. Verbally accessible memories of traumatic events contain information you consciously thought about before, during, and afterwards. These memories receive enough conscious processing to transfer them into your long-term memory. VAM can be retrieved at will and described in words. VAM is what you probably think of as memory, per se.

Your (explicit) memory of traumatic interactions consists of what’s in your verbally accessible memory. While VAM makes up your personal life history (what you can remember), it certainly isn’t the whole story.⁴⁶ When you think back to a traumatic

event or its consequences and implications, the VAM memories you access are often vague, confused, and full of gaps. Sometimes you may know this, but it's the case even if you think you have a vivid full recollection. That's because the information in VAM is limited to what you consciously focused on at the time.⁴⁷ Far more details are encoded in SAM than in VAM, particularly sights, sounds, smells, feelings, mind mapping and "empathic contagion" information (understanding of other people's experience).⁴⁸

You can retrieve mind-mapping information about your antagonist because implicit memories remain intact in SAM, even though they are initially absent from your verbal narrative (VAM). Unlike VAM memories, SAM memories aren't updated by subsequent autobiographical events. Your original traumatic memories with mind mapping and empathic contagion information continue to reside in SAM. It's how you can retrieve detailed traumatic mind mapping images you haven't thought about in years.

Discovering this helped me sharpen how I conducted psychotherapy. Previously, when clients told me about their past, I'd ask for specific examples so I could be clear about what they meant. But now, as I listen to my clients, I realize they are telling me insights, ideas, and theories they put together about their lives. In other words, they are giving me narratives from the content of their VAM.

So, now when I ask clients for examples about their past, I do it for different reasons, and I handle it differently. When they tell me a vignette, I ask if they can *see* it. Together we process their memory as an *image* (a moving picture, SAM) rather than as a *story* (text, insight, VAM). We focus on what they can *see*, rather than their feelings

about their verbal narrative. This is what led me to use revisualizations in treatment. It's the difference between intellectual understanding and conventional ways of doing psychotherapy, versus the methodology for resolving traumatic mind mapping and steady-state regressions.

Gaps in your autobiographical memory

Let me give you an example: Try to recall a terrible argument you had with your father when you were a teenager. You might not remember the incident at all if it was simply too much for you. But the odds are it's a red-hot image stuck in your mind that is difficult to forget. As you revisualize the event, you probably can see your father. You might be surprised by how many vivid details you can see as the scene unfolds. That's why you never suspect hugely important information about the event is absent from your picture! And I can tell you in advance what it is!

For example, if I asked you what your father was feeling in this episode, you might tell me he was angry. But if I asked more precisely, "What was your father thinking and feeling about *you*? What did he think *you* were feeling? How did he want *you* to feel? What did he want to happen to *you*?" You will probably tell me (perhaps to your surprise), "*I don't really know!*"

That's because the answers to these questions involve more than a gross generalization. They require two specific pieces of information: One is your map of your father's mind at the time. The other is the fact that your father, like most people, has mind-mapping ability. You don't realize until this moment that your interpretation of the

event is probably based on a mistaken belief that your father lacks mind-mapping ability. In other words, your map of your father's mind is missing in your memory of the event.

Trauma collapses your mind mapping ability

Traumatic mind mapping collapses your mind mapping system. Only the narrow central focus of your attention at the time is processed into VAM. Other information (like mind-mapping and empathic contagion data about other people) remains in SAM, stored as visual images, interoceptive bodily cues, and unprocessed sensory details. When this happens, the contents of your (right brain) SAM and (left brain) VAM become desynchronized. This creates holes in your autobiographical memory. You can only deliberately recall information processed into your (left brain) verbal memory.

Traumatic mind mapping collapses your mind mapping ability.

People who experience trauma report autobiographical memory problems (explicit memory deficits).⁴⁹ They remember traumatic events with gaps in details. Their memories are often vague, unclear and disorganized, making them vulnerable to being re-triggered and re-experienced. Reintegrating implicit and explicit memories makes them more coherent and reduces unwanted intrusions.⁵⁰ (If you have flashbacks during sex, for example, pay particular attention here.)

Trauma-related desynchronization of implicit (SAM) and explicit (VAM) memory systems surfaces another way: People often experience a fragmented sense of

self. Your emotions become disorganized from your cognitions, and your emotional experiences become overgeneralized beyond their actual context. Common frustrations and disappointments will have disproportionate impacts on you and send you into a nose-dive. A tenuous sense of self predisposes you to living in the Mariana Trench and engaging in (and remaining in) relationships that are not good for you.

Engage your right brain

I've been explaining why it's essential to engage your right brain in processing subtle interpersonal trauma (traumatic mind mapping). Situationally accessible memory (SAM) is primarily located in your picture-based right brain hemisphere (which lacks language). Verbally accessible memory (VAM) is located in your language-based left-brain region. Right-brain-based therapy can directly access information about traumatic events stored in SAM.

Insight-oriented psychotherapy can't fully resolve the neurobiological impacts of interpersonal trauma because it relies on VAM. Conventional talk therapy pays insufficient attention to disturbing physical sensations and physical reactions to trauma. The rational "executive" left brain that prevails in talk therapy has limited capacity to squelch sensations, control emotional arousal, or change fixed-action patterns. Your amygdala (emotional center) has far more connections with the visual areas of your brain compared to the auditory areas. If you want to quiet a hyper-reactive amygdala, revisualizations are an excellent way to do it.

Revisualizations

Revisualizations in Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy require a little clarification. For example, a revisualization involves imagination to some degree, but I'm not talking about making up imaginary scenarios of how you would like things to be or to have been. It's about *watching* things spontaneously unfold in your mind's eye. If you follow the difference, I'm describing an entirely different mental process than you might come up with on your own.

Revisualizations focus your attention inward on your *interoceptive cues*—what's going inside your body. Trauma survivors report reduced access to their inner sensations and perceptions. Moreover, they feel overwhelmed by their feelings when they experience them, so they avoid this. They also report feeling self-disgusted, helpless or panicked when re-experiencing trauma-related images and physical sensations. Instead of reacting with the typical “fight or flight” response to perceived threats, they become immobilized.

Revisualizing the scene allows you to reprocess it with a revised understanding of your antagonist and develop a more accurate map of his or her mind. Filling in the holes in your autobiographical memory changes the meaning of events and repairs the gaps in your mind-mapping radar.

Your anterior insula provides the basis for integrating personal experience and mapping other people in revisualizations. Revisualizations help you identify your physical sensations, integrate them with your feelings and perceptions, and translate them

into communicable language. This can enhance your emotional control and reduce your level of steady-state regression.

Retrieving information from SAM

Revisualizing events from your past often yields powerful realizations not obtainable in conventional talk therapy. For example, go back to the example of the adolescent incident in which you assumed your father was flipped out angry and in another world. Previously you thought he was so mad that he didn't realize what he was doing. Adding in the mind mapping opens you to the reality that your father was tracking how you were feeling while he was punishing or beating you, and he wanted you to feel the way you did. The fact that he *knew* what he was doing makes all the difference in understanding *what* he was doing.

Revisualizations help as few things can

Therapeutic memory reconsolidation provides the basis for regaining (developing)

Revisualizations force your right brain to participate.

your sense of self and your ability to regulate your emotions. The first time you revisualize a traumatic mind mapping experience, it has lots of impact. However, when you deliberately attend to these visual images, information present only in SAM is re-encoded into VAM, and memories are assigned “time and space” contexts. This helps

you feel more coherent and makes “the past stay in the past.” Flashbacks become less likely. Resolving the neurobiological impacts of traumatic mind mapping requires doing this repeatedly because lots of SAM information must be transferred into VAM.

Using revisualizations to resolve steady-state regressions

Using revisualizations to resolve steady-state regressions involves a deliberate attempt to wake up in the middle of a nightmare. Last chapter, you learned the pattern of “waking up” from steady-state regressions: (A) First you’re asleep and think you’re awake. (B) When you start to wake up, you think you’re in the middle of a nightmare. (C) Then you have the urge to go back to sleep and tell yourself that you’re awake. (D) But if you force yourself to stay awake in the middle of the nightmare, it eventually passes and you just remain awake.

Revisualizations are incredibly helpful in resolving steady-state regressions because they fit into every step of this process:

1. Revisualizations show you, in retrospect, how you’ve been walking and talking in your sleep.
2. They give you an initial idea of what your real nightmare looks like.
3. Revisualizations give you a tangible way to push “mental blocks.” They force your brain to re-evaluate memories with new realizations about what probably went through your antagonist’s mind, based on mind mapping and empathic contagion information. This radically changes your

previously inaccurate or absent attributions. You see things you should have interpreted, but you didn't.

4. Revisualizations facilitate reprogramming automatic physical responses and regulating physiological arousal. They allow you to learn to (A) tolerate feelings and sensations by increasing interoceptive awareness of your internal body states, and (B) modulate your level of physical and emotional arousal. ⁵¹
5. Putting the mind-mapping information back into your traumatic memories creates anxiety and high meaning, producing situations requiring you to keep your brain functioning when it would typically turn to spaghetti. This process of integrating new information, sensations, and memories under meaningful stress and hyper-plasticity resolves steady-state regressions.
6. Revisualizations involve multiple ways of deliberately taking action to raise your functioning. They force your brain/mind to see things you don't want to see. They require positive willfulness and empowering yourself to see your antagonists in new ways. They embody your refusal to maintain a distorted view of reality to maintain the equilibrium in your head or your relationship with your antagonist.
7. Revisualizations don't require taking any specific action towards your antagonist (compared to written mental dialogues or dealing with your antagonist in real-time). However, seeing your antagonist anew can feel

disloyal and disrespectful. It can trigger fears of disapproval and make you fearful of his or her response (anticipatory traumatic mind mapping). This is when you'll want to go back to sleep and tell yourself that you're awake.

Sometimes an initial revisualization can trigger an acute regression because new realizations can be upsetting and relieving at the same time. Shocking revelations can disrupt your view of your life, your world, and the people who populate it. New understandings can generate strong feelings. Keeping your mind together under these circumstances takes mental effort and draws on your 4 Points of Balance.

However, repeated acute regressions from revisualizations are atypical and deserve close attention. *If you have repeated acute regressions from doing revisualizations, —or you worry about having even one regression—please turn to the “window of tolerance” section later in this chapter where I discuss this.*

Revisualization example

To illustrate how revisualizations can help synchronize SAM and VAM, let me tell you about Elizabeth. During one session, she revisualized a time when she was fifteen years old, when she and her father walked by the windows of a large department store. One window had a beach vacation display, and all the manikins were wearing bathing suits. Elizabeth remembered feeling icky watching her father mesmerized by the teenage mannequin wearing a bikini.

“Come on, Dad! Let’s go!” Elizabeth tried to detach her father from the window.

Elizabeth’s father was transfixed. “You would look good in that bathing suit, Elizabeth.”

“Let’s go! We have other things we need to do!”

Elizabeth’s father looked spellbound by the manikin. “No, I mean it! You would look good in that bathing suit!”

Elizabeth remembered pulling her father away by the sleeve. Later, he brought it up again when they were eating pizza. “I wasn’t kidding about that bathing suit, Elizabeth! It would look terrific on you!”

I prodded Elizabeth to look at the picture in her mind. Given what her father was saying and doing, what was going on in his mind? It was several minutes before Elizabeth said anything. We both knew the answer. Elizabeth was struggling with saying it out loud. She was acting like it wasn’t real until it came out of her mouth. Until she publicly acknowledged it, she didn’t have to deal with it.

“He’s thinking about me sexually! He’s visualizing my body in that bathing suit! He imagines my big breasts in that skimpy bikini top. He likes what he sees! Maybe he thinks he can get away with what he’s doing under the guise of complimenting me! But he can’t get his vision of me out of his mind! *It makes me want to puke!*”

Elizabeth went home and had a difficult night. When she wasn’t raging at her father about what a piece of shit he was, she was crying about never getting the love she

desperately wanted. If these were alternating verses to a song, the chorus would be what a fool Elizabeth was for not seeing it.

How could Elizabeth carry this around and never look at it? Especially since she spent her adolescence wishing she wasn't so top-heavy. Who wants to look at stuff like this?! What kind of father does this?! How much more of this behavior went on, given that Elizabeth was just starting to recall things?

But since this was going on, did her mother see it? Did her mother know her father was like this?! For that matter, did her brother, Jake, see their father's sexual interest in Elizabeth? Did this have anything to do with Jake trying to fondle Elizabeth when they were teenagers? How did this whole picture fit together?!

Considering the massive anxiety and meaning in Elizabeth's revisualization, it's not surprising she briefly experienced an acute regression. As she descended into the Mariana Trench, she felt incredibly guilty for thinking her father could be like that. It was like her memory suddenly made him someone he had never been. As she entered the Challenger Deep, an image of her mother showed up in her head, telling her she was an unworthy piece of garbage with her mind in the gutter.

Amid all these deeply unpleasant realizations, Elizabeth handled herself remarkably well. She didn't let her mind get entirely out of control. She interpreted thinking of herself as garbage as proof *she must be regressed*, rather than taking her thought at face value.

The next day Elizabeth woke up feeling better than she had in a long time. It was like she'd gotten a good night's sleep, even though she hadn't. Elizabeth remembered going through a rough night with terrible thoughts swirling in her head. She seemed more relaxed and settled, although she also felt tired.

Elizabeth was proud of herself for having the guts to see what happened growing up. When she finally stopped lying to herself, she felt more comfortable in her own skin. This was when Elizabeth stopped hating her breasts and hating herself for having them. Shifting from focusing on the size of her breasts to seeing this as an issue of self-acceptance—*whatever size they were*—reflected improved cognitive functioning. Her steady-state regression had begun to lessen. Elizabeth was starting to experience *brightening*.

Game plan for revisualizations

I've often seen these kinds of results from a single revisualization. When you consider all the brain energy invested, and the conditions and underlying processes involved, it's not so surprising. Still, it never fails to amaze me when it happens.

It also happens with enough regularity for me to learn which things work best. I've developed them into a game plan of how to revisualize traumatic mind mapping events. I'm not talking about ways to make revisualization turn out the way you want. I'm referring to ways to maximize the benefits you derive from your revisualizations. The following sequence will help you do this.

Step 1: Set the stage

Start by looking at the vividness of your imagery. Is it in color or black and white? Increase the vividness by taking the time to let the picture develop and look at the details.

See the setting. Where are you? What is the setting? Are you outdoors or indoors? If you're indoors, in what room are you?

Look for details. What is the color of the walls? What's on the floor? What is the layout of the room? Where are the windows, doors and furniture? Can you see additional details of the room?

Who is there? Who is your antagonist in this memory? Your antagonist is your principal source of conflict in the event. Someone with a different agenda. A person who actively opposes or is hostile to you, or what you are doing, or want to do. Your antagonist is the person instilling traumatic mind mapping in this vignette.

What is your antagonist's position in this scene? Where is your antagonist located? Which way is your antagonist oriented? Where is he or she looking? Towards you or someone else in the scene? Where are you in the picture? How far apart are you?

Who else is present in the picture? Who are these people? Who is interacting with who? What is happening between them, or between them and you? If other people are there, what is everyone else doing?

Step 2: Watch the movie

Watch the movie unfold. Start with a general idea or impression of what's going on. What is this vignette about? If this was a movie, what is the plot? What is your antagonist doing? What is traumatic and upsetting about what's happening? How is he or she doing this?

Don't jump to conclusions. Don't assume you know the meaning of what you see until you have a chance to study the picture itself. Don't get lost in abstractions and intellectualizations.

Don't "stack the deck." Pay attention to what you actually see, not what you think you should see. Watch your antagonist. Watch the interaction between the two of you. What is your reaction to what's happening? If there are other people present, watch them too. What are their reactions to your antagonist?

Pay attention to what you can't see. Don't "fill in the dots." What's missing? Who is missing? What happens next that's not in the image?

Step 3: Map your antagonist's mind

An all-important focus of revisualizations in Crucible Neurobiological Therapy involves *mapping your antagonist's mind*. Revisualizations create the opportunity to take your antagonist's perspective and put this mind-mapping information back into traumatic memories.

Ask yourself, "Does my antagonist have mind-mapping ability? Was he or she mapping me while we interacted? How did he or she feel about my reactions? How was he or she using their map of me to do what he or she were doing?"

Focus on your antagonist's appearance and demeanor. Look at his or her clothing and body posture. How does he or she present himself/herself? Watch his or her facial expressions and behavior. What is he or she feeling? What is he or she subtly doing?

Listen to your antagonist's verbalizations. What is he or she saying? Pay attention to his or her choice of words, mood and affect. What additional messages is he or she trying to convey indirectly? What is he or she communicating without actually saying it?

Force your brain to take your antagonist's perspective. What does your antagonist think about you? How does he or she feel towards you? What's his or her agenda for you? Are they aiming for you, or are you collateral damage to another plan they have?

It takes willpower to make your brain focus on these kinds of questions. The rewards are often commensurate with the effort.

For instance, Elizabeth told me about another vignette when she went off to college in which her father asked her if she had intercourse yet. It wasn't just the question that started her. It was the fact that it seemed to come out of nowhere. It didn't flow from anything they were talking about. Her father popped the question during a lull in their conversation.

The game plan I just described walked Elizabeth into a fuller understanding of her father, her relationship with him, and how this shaped her relationships in general. To start with, when Elizabeth revisualized this encounter, she realized her father's question

about her sexual experiences didn't come out of nowhere. He was sitting there thinking about this while they were talking. The lull in their conversation presented the opportunity for him to say what was on his mind.

As Elizabeth watched her father deliver his question about her sex life, she noticed just before he looked away and stopped making eye contact. His delivery conveyed the idea that a far-away thought had suddenly occurred to him. He was covering up that he had been sitting there thinking about her sexually, and he was pivoting to talk about it.

He asked, "Have you started having sex yet? When Elizabeth didn't answer, he followed up with, "Now that you're going off to college, maybe I should talk to you about birth control. Are you using condoms?"

When Elizabeth slowly revisualized her father's moves, the audacity of his boundary violation stunned her. He wasn't worried about repercussions for violating basic decency—not from Elizabeth and not from his wife. That said a lot about the house in which Elizabeth grew up.

Elizabeth watched her father mask his sexual interest by asking if she was protecting herself with condoms. Elizabeth was struck by his sneaky behavior, the disgusting way he sexualized her, and his equally disgusting disingenuous posturing of being a concerned father. He was not just covering his tracks. By acting like he was trying to fulfill his parental responsibilities, Elizabeth's father made it difficult for her to

avoid answering him! He had found a way to corner her and make her reveal her sexuality.

Watching how her father attempted to corner her, Elizabeth realized this was generally his interpersonal style. He'd often start a conversation by asking Elizabeth a question, without offering any explanation of its source, purpose or consequence. Elizabeth's father liked to corner you or set you up before he revealed what he was after. You had to answer him—supposedly out of respect—before he filled you in on what was going on. He got his hooks into you before you knew his agenda, which made it harder not give him what he wanted.

Now that you know this is what Elizabeth grew up with, does it surprise you she had difficulty when she thought someone wanted or expected something from her? Once she felt someone trying to manipulate her, her mind-mapping ability collapsed, and she was worse than blind—she was painfully naïve and pliable. Dennis mapped this out about Elizabeth early on and exploited it throughout their marriage. It played an essential role in getting away with his affairs.

In the past, seeing her father's inappropriate sexual interest, or recognizing his manipulative interpersonal style, would have sent Elizabeth for a deep dive into the Mariana Trench. However, watching her revisualization and keeping her mind from falling apart while processing this information was healing for her.

It turned out Elizabeth had other memories that corroborated her new understanding of this event. But this exemplifies how a tremendous amount of

information exists in memories of a single event. Looking at the specifics of each example is often more helpful than amassing a number of superficially-examined vignettes that support your preexisting beliefs.

No doubt you're curious about what Elizabeth told her father. She told him she knew about condoms and the rest was none of his business. This was one of the few times Elizabeth drew a boundary with her father. It was another reason why this remained a flashbulb memory in her mind.

Step 4: Study your antagonist

Elizabeth also revisualized memories of dealing with Dennis over the years. She visualized times she confronted him about having affairs and how he denied it and made her look like a lunatic. Dennis claimed she was paranoid and imagining things. He said she was always having meltdowns, and this was one more he had to tolerate. Dennis indignantly stated he wasn't going to confess to things he hadn't done just because Elizabeth always needed to be right.

From a third-person "fly-on-the-wall" view, Elizabeth watched Dennis lie right to her face. It made her rageful to watch him do it—but at least she could make herself see it and experience how she felt about him now. Chagrin is usually the price of doing better, and Elizabeth was paying her dues.

But Elizabeth could not make herself get into Dennis' mind and look at how he saw and felt about *her*. She didn't want to look at herself through Dennis' eyes while he was lying to her. However, by repeatedly forcing herself to revisualize this, Elizabeth was

finally able to see Dennis had no respect for her. He thought she was a fool because she couldn't see what he was doing. Or maybe she saw him but was too afraid to do anything about it.

Several times Elizabeth found strong evidence that Dennis was screwing around, and he thought they would divorce. But each time she let him off the hook, he became more convinced she would put up with it. Each time he lost more respect for her, and this made him more inclined to do it again. Dennis intuitively recognized the gap in Elizabeth's mind-mapping radar, and he took advantage of it as long as he could. Her neurobiological problem was a crucial element in their marriage surviving as long as it did.

Seeing this brought up Elizabeth's hatred for Dennis, and her disappointment in herself for lacking the courage to confront him. But what really hit Elizabeth was seeing how the impacts of experiences with her parents shaped her marriage and much of her life. She was blind to her husband much the same way she had been blind to her father and mother.

The process of repeatedly forcing herself to map out Dennis' mind in revisualizations pushed Elizabeth's brain into beneficial SAM—to--VAM processing. She was sad, angry, chagrined, humiliated, and *invigorated*. Brightening showed in her eyes, her thinking, and her demeanor.

Step 5: How do things turn out?

When you're revisualizing memories, your focus naturally gravitates towards the peak of the action. But there's lots of information encoded besides these spotlighted moments of meeting. The data exists in your picture, but you can't see it until you focus your attention on it. You'll often remember smells, tastes, background sounds, humidity, and other sensory data. These physical sensations can be challenging to tolerate, but the harder part is usually accepting what you see:

How does the scene turn out? What is the outcome? What happens between you and your antagonist? What are the real-world impacts and residual implications going forward?

What happens after the scene ends? What happens between you and your antagonist in the future? How does this impact your relationship? How does this impact other people?

With whom did you discuss this event—or deliberately avoid discussing it? Did you discuss this with your parents, siblings, friends or current partner at the time? What went into your decision to share this event or keep it to yourself?

Elizabeth never told anyone about the repeated episodes of her father's inappropriate sexual interest. The more she looked at this, the more she realized this wasn't just that she was mortified and ashamed. There was no one she thought she could tell. Elizabeth's father's sexual impulses isolated her from other people.

This triggered another stunning realization: All during this time, Elizabeth had a picture in her mind that she and her mother were close and could talk about anything!

How could this be possible?! How could the picture in her head be so at odds with reality?! Realizing the magnitude of distortion in her brain staggered Elizabeth.

Step 6: Accept what you see

This painful experience also turned out to be incredibly beneficial. Elizabeth got a lesson in *clean pain*. *Clean pain* is what you feel when the best in you stands up and takes a necessary emotional hit. *Dirty pain* is what you feel when the worst in you dodges. It's what you feel while you're staying asleep. No amount of dirty pain is curative.

“Waking up” involves clean pain. Clean pain hurts like hell, but unlike dirty pain, it doesn't suppress your functioning. You don't get depressed. You just hurt—and get better.

Previously I said sexual abuse most often occurs through traumatic mind mapping, and this widespread problem often goes unrecognized and underappreciated. Inappropriate sexual interest within families frequently produces adolescent girls who live in steady-state regressions punctuated with deep-dives into the Mariana Trench. That's where all the bingeing and purging, bulimia and self-cutting takes place.

Nobody wants to wake up in this kind of nightmare. Elizabeth experienced sexual abuse growing up from her father and brother, and traumatic neglect with her mother when her mother refused to deal with this. It happens more frequently than most people want to recognize. But I've found lots of people are willing to wake up—and walk through fire if necessary—if there's some prospect of coming out significantly better on the other side.

Elizabeth's functioning started to improve. It was evident in how she felt, how she looked, and how she handled herself with the people in her life. Her demeanor started to change. She seemed less child-like and immature. She was less self-deprecating and took herself more seriously. She approached things more logically, and she was less carried away by her feelings, even when she recognized upsetting things.

Other signs of progress showed up in ways I've also seen with other clients. Elizabeth started luxuriating in the sensuality of scented bubble baths. She even experimented with masturbating, which put her more in touch with her body. Rather than just being a bunch of physical sensations, they were organized around a mental framework that gave them profound meaning: She was finally resolving the negative impact of her father sexualizing his relationship with her.

Elizabeth finally understood why she was uncomfortable when men found her sexually attractive. It made sense she had difficulty relaxing during sex and having orgasms. Allowing herself to pleasure herself required positive stubbornness. She had to do it repeatedly until she was able to relax and enjoy it. Her subsequent orgasms were good proof things were changing.

Comments from Elizabeth's mother's indicated she saw changes in Elizabeth too. It wasn't like Elizabeth was speaking up for herself or disagreeing with her mother. She wasn't ready to talk to her mother about her mother's refusal to deal with her father sexualizing her when Elizabeth asked her for help. But Elizabeth's idealized picture of their mother-daughter relationship was replaced by a more observant and discerning

attitude. For the first time, Elizabeth began to question why her mother treated her the way she did.

Elizabeth's mother asked Elizabeth to meet for coffee at a time when Elizabeth already had plans. All it took was Elizabeth not immediately agreeing to whatever her mother wanted for her to make sarcastic comments about Elizabeth not caring about her anymore. When Elizabeth took the time to decide what she wanted to do, her mother mapped out the change. She wasn't pleased about it.

Elizabeth's initial impulse was to reassure her mother by doing whatever she wanted. However, she decided this was not a good time to do that. Not while she was struggling with memories of her dysfunctional childhood and hard feelings about how her mother handled things. For the most part, their relationship remained the same, but her mother could tell things were changing. Elizabeth's mother was a shrewd mind mapper. She could tell Elizabeth wasn't as devoted and doting as she was in the past. (Next chapter, you'll see how Elizabeth used written mental dialogues to prepare for talking to her mother about this.)

Tips for maximizing revisualizations

Revisualizations are an incredibly powerful way to resolve traumatic mind mapping and steady-state regressions. Revisualizations bring the pictures of your life together in new ways. Let's look in on Stephan and Anne Marie's use of revisualizations to give you more examples:

Stephan remembered going to his mother as a young boy to ask why his father was in prison. He couldn't remember what her answer was, but he was sure he got the message he shouldn't push her to talk about this. Stephan never asked again why his father was in prison. After a while, it never crossed his mind again. It was like it never happened. He didn't think about it. As far as Stephan was concerned, he just didn't remember much of his childhood.

I suggested Stephan revisualize the moment when he asked his mother why his father was in prison. Stephan described himself standing next to his mother's favorite chair. He and his mother were talking to each other. When he asked his question, his mother turned away, saying the topic was just too painful.

I brought Stephan back to *moments before* his mother looked away. At that point, she was looking at him. I asked him to describe the expression on her face. What was she feeling? What was she thinking at that moment? Stephan said she looked happy. She was smiling. They were holding hands. She liked that. He didn't remember what they were talking about.

Then I asked if his mother ever looked back at him after he asked why his father went to prison. Stephan looked at me blankly. I said that unless she got up and walked away, at some point they must have looked at each other. I wanted to know what she looked like and what she did at that time.

Stephan looked startled like this never occurred to him. He didn't say anything at first. Instead, he closed his eyes to revisualize the scene better. As is usually the case, there was a lot more going on in the image than we heard about on first telling.

I had recognized a gap in Stephan's autobiographical memory. What really happened with his mother? I didn't know. But I tried to visualize what was happening. At first, I thought the issue was Stephan's mother knew he was upset and asking important questions, but she avoided the topic. I envisioned the possibility she turned back to him, changed the topic, and acted like he never asked. That's why I asked if his mother ever looked back at him.

Moreover, if this happened, Stephan's mother would have seen the impact of what she was doing. How did Stephan look at that point? What did she expect to see? Did she have any concerns about the negative impact of what she was doing?

It turned out I was wrong. (That's why I do therapy by generating multiple hypotheses. This was only one of them.) Stephan told me his mother started wailing about how his father going to prison destroyed the family's reputation. She was embarrassed to go out in public. His frantic attempts to reassure her brought forth more wailing and sobbing. When she finally pulled herself together, she said she wasn't going to tell Stephan why his father was in prison because it would break his heart. It was for his own good. She was doing a good thing for Stephan.

But I was correct when I asked if Stephan's mother ever looked back at him. From his description, it was clear she saw the impact of what she was doing—and *wanted*

the effect she was having. I asked Stephan what he thought of his mother's judgement in what he described. Without hesitation, Stephan told me she must have thought it was the best thing to do for him. I asked what made him think of that.

Stephan replied, "Well, why else would she have done that?"

"Why else, indeed?" I replied.

Stephan was saying his answer was obviously correct and I was saying it wasn't. I had my own hypotheses, but I wasn't asking Stephan to guess what I was thinking. I wanted Stephan to come up with alternative explanations, and in some ways, I didn't care what they were. Stephan was going brain-dead right where I was walking him into his blind spot!

Stephan eventually replied, "Because it was easier for her?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

Stephan's voice flattened into a statement. "Because it was easier for her." He wasn't happy about what he was seeing. He wasn't pleased by my prodding him not to settle for convenient answers. Stephan wasn't delighted about a lot of things I did, but he got better.

You could see it in subtle things like Stephan being less high-strung and quick to anger. He was less reactive and more comfortable to be around. His sense of humor was more good-natured. His outlook was less jaundiced. He was more open to my input and more willing to confront himself in our sessions. This showed up in the things Stephan was willing to tackle.

For instance, Stephan revisualized a terrible encounter he had with Anne Marie. In it, he was scolding her for being so stupid for something she did. He told her he couldn't trust her because her judgement was so impaired. She didn't care about what was important to him. She only did what was convenient for her.

Stephan felt this incident epitomized his frustrations with Anne Marie. He acknowledged he shouldn't have said she was stupid. But this was understandable and forgivable given how much this meant to him. He needed to be able to count on her and he couldn't, because she couldn't recognize the most crucial things in a situation.

As Stephan revisualized the event, however, it turned out Anne Marie wasn't wrong. He asked Anne Marie to take care of something, and she handled it perfectly adequately. She just handled it differently from how he would have done it. But in Stephan's world, this was the same as being stupid. He wanted to retrospectively micro-manage how Anne Marie did this and hold her accountable.

Stephan didn't get the validation of his feelings he anticipated. Instead, his revisualization depicted what he looked like when he was in the Mariana Trench. When Stephan regressed, he was unfair, unkind, and abusive. Since this unflattering picture was coming from his own memory rather than an interpretation from me, it was harder for him to dispute. Stephan's reflexive tendency to dispute everything was diminishing too. This allowed me to point out something he would have batted away in the past:

If Stephan was wrong about what Anne Marie had done, where did his rant about not being able to count on her come from? Stephan proposed he was wrong about that

too. I agreed that maybe he misjudged Anne Marie, but what he told her *about him* was correct. This was how *he* saw the world, especially when it came to women: He couldn't count on them.

I told Stephan, "In fact, your rant about Anne Marie sounded more appropriate for the mother in your other revisualization, the one who wouldn't discuss why your father went to prison because it was easier for her."

This stopped Stephan in his tracks and left him speechless. Seeing connections between powerful revisualizations has a profound impact on your brain. It's a positive brain-twist when you're working with anchored images of past experiences, and each is seen anew and put together in new ways. You might be able to feel it just from reading this.

After chewing this over, Stephan stepped up and acknowledged what he had done. It was possibly the first real apology Stephan ever gave anyone. The beneficial impact of this whole experience on him and Anne Marie—and their marriage--was predictable. Stephan started looking better. He looked healthier. He could see it when he looked in the mirror. That isn't lost on a cosmetic plastic surgeon—or his wife. Things were obviously moving in the right direction.

Take your antagonist's perspective

You can exploit your common neural pathway by revisualizing events where you *take your antagonist's perspective* while remaining aware of your interoceptive bodily sensations. You can facilitate this by forcing your brain to shift between first-person and

third-person perspectives.⁵² A first-person view is what you see when you look at things through your own eyes. Third-person view is the fly-on-the-wall perspective or looking at things through someone else's eyes. It sounds much harder to do when I'm describing it than it is in practice. Let me give you an example:

When you're revisualizing traumatic experiences, watch your antagonist's face as you map his or her mind. It gives you the physical correlates of your antagonist's experience. Understanding your antagonist's mental content and physical reactions help you comprehend the emotional significance of what's happening and its impact on you.

Studying your antagonist provides nonverbal cues that allow you to experience the bodily effects of current and anticipated happenings in the revisualization (i.e., traumatic mind mapping). Your brain turns these "body cues" into embodied knowledge of the situation that goes beyond deductive logic. Because the imagery triggers visceral reactions in your body, revisualizations help you map your antagonist's mind more accurately, and allow you to experience the full emotional significance of traumatic events,

Revisualizations overcome your reluctance to map your antagonist's mind and tolerate the short-term dysregulating effects of fully appreciating who this person is. For both reasons, try to relive the event as vividly as possible. Revisualize everything you recall seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, feeling, and thinking throughout the whole event. This can trigger new image-based information and non-deductive realizations to be

incorporated into your narrative memory (VAM). It's how revisualizations help you integrate implicit SAM memories with explicit VAM knowledge.

But now step back for a moment and consider how you're seeing things. There are two ways you could be visualizing the scene: One way you see only your antagonist. This is a first-person view. Another way is you could see both your antagonist and yourself, and still be able to map out your antagonist as I described. This is a third-person view. What method are you using?

When your first-person view is blocked

I'm taking the time to make this distinction because it's turned out to be important. When I started working with revisualizations, I ran into some highly motivated clients who had visual mental blocks. They initially reported being unable to visualize the traumatic scene or see their antagonist. Others could see some aspects of their

Shift to a third person view if your first-person view isn't working.

antagonist, but important details like the face were missing.

Initially, I was stumped. But gradually, I learned ways to get around these kinds of blocks. One was to ask clients about the visual perspective they were trying to use. Typically, most (but not all) people spontaneously utilize a first-person perspective.

That's why I wanted to establish your visual perspective in your revisualization. Are you viewing it from a first-person or third-person perspective? The reason I ask is

one view may be blocked but the other is not. You may have to shift your perspective to get a better view in order to map your antagonist's mind.

If your first-person view is blocked, changing to a third-person perspective often allows you to see the scene better and map your antagonist. Similarly, if your third-person view is blocked (which happens less frequently), visualize the scene using a first-person view.⁵³

Modifying your visual perspective often gets around these blocks. This amazes many people. It's pretty incredible that you can relocate yourself within the mental space of your mind, the same way architectural computer programs can show you different perspective within an imaginary house. It's even more astounding that this allows you to get around visual mental blocks.

Deliberately shifting perspectives is not inherent in revisualizing events. It took me over a decade to discover this work-around. I'm prompting you to do this because it probably wouldn't occur to you to try this! This isn't a commonly-tried solution!

What if you can't remember your past?

Lots of people report having few memories from childhood. Some say they have no memories at all. Whenever clients tell me they have no memories from growing up, I know I'm dealing with people who won't be happy about what they remember. Some have no desire to better understand their lives and think their claim presents a barrier to further exploration. A few claim this combatively, as if to say, "*OK, Doc, what are you going to do now?!*"

If you fit any of these descriptions, I have a one-size-fits-all solution for you: *Start with whatever memories are available!* I suggest you start with a flashbulb memory of a disquieting event. But if you are struggling with lack of memories—which itself usually indicates emotional trauma--use whatever you have.

Keep this forefront in your mind: *You ALWAYS have somewhere you can start!*
ALWAYS!

How do I know this? I'll ask you the same question I ask my clients: *How do you know you weren't born in a Petri dish and raised in a laboratory?*

See what I mean? Of course, you have memories! You're just discounting or dismissing them as unimportant.

If you're really at a loss for where to start, here's my stock suggestion:
Revisualize sitting at the dinner table when you were growing up. Can you see everyone

There are ALWAYS enough memories to do visualizations!

sitting there? Who sits to your left and right? Where are your parent(s) sitting? Who else is there? Who is talking to whom? Once you see this scene, consider the mood. What's it like to be there?

Most clients find the floodgates open after their first visualization. Loads of traumatic memories usually surface, many of which were sufficient to create holes in

their autobiographical memory. When multiple memories are available, start with the one you feel is most important, impactful or relevant to your current situation.

Five tips for revisualizations

All along, I've talked about the importance of positive stubbornness—harnessing your will to accomplish your goals. If you have a neurobiological problem from traumatic mind mapping, you're going to need stubbornness. You have to push your brain/mind to do things it doesn't want to do. This includes retrieving SAM information about traumatic events. Revisualizations give you a tangible and efficient way to do that.

Since we're talking about getting around mental blocks (memory retrieval errors), revisualizations aren't always as simple of closing your eyes and watching the extravaganza unfold. Perhaps you can see your antagonist plain as day, but you can't see the expression on his face. Or a part of the scene is missing. Or you know for a fact someone participated in the event, but you can't *see* her in your picture. If you run into visual blocks, whether they be large or small, here are some suggestions to help you deal with them.

1. *Don't make presumptions or "fill in the blanks."* I said this earlier, but it's worth repeating. Don't assume you know what's going on until you've had a chance to study your revisualization. It's better to remain open to what the missing data says and redouble your efforts to revisualize the scene. Here's where your positive stubbornness comes in.

2. *Use a “brute-strength” approach.* This requires applying your will.
You’re trying to make yourself see what you don’t want to see. You’re not expecting to enjoy seeing what’s missing.
3. *Bang your head against the wall until the wall moves.* Keep revisualizing the scene and looking at the missing piece(s). Make your brain grapple with what you are trying to see.
4. *Use your left brain to corner your right brain.* Corner your brain/mind with known facts and sequences of events. Try cross-referencing memories of traumatic events. Place the event you’re revisualizing in a timeline of events. Have this in the back of your mind as you look at the picture.
5. *Analyze correspondence.* Recordings of your antagonist (audio or video), writings samples and correspondence can be incredibly helpful in mapping his or her mind. These can offer additional depth to revisualizations.

Take a shower!

Stubbornness is a crucial component of Meaningful Endurance. So is knowing when to take a break. When you are stuck, take a shower! This is right-brain therapy too! I’m tempted to joke about cleaning up your act, but it’s true. Taking a shower is another form of action-taking.

Stephan became to believe in the neurobiological benefits of long hot showers. Water cascading over his ears muffled the sounds of the everyday world. It directed his attention inside his head to the feelings in his skull and the thoughts in his mind.

Stephan was in a private world, like finding a secret passage behind a waterfall. As long as he kept his head under the shower, he was submerged in his mind. This allowed him to experience things at a greater depth than he usually achieved.

Stephan finally experienced *clean* pain about who he was, how he grew up and who his parents were as people. It's no coincidence he experienced clean pain in the

When you're stuck, take a shower!

shower. Water streaming on his head focused his attention on his interoceptive cues. It put him more in touch with what he was feeling, and the hot steamy shower encouraged him to relax. The sensations on his skin and the smell of the lavender soap relaxed his body and mind. You must *relax* to get the full benefit of clean pain. If you relax and let it wash over you, you come out calmer on the other side. Learning this first-hand is essential.

Stephan and Anne Marie's progress

Stephan felt bad for remembering how his parents dealt poorly with his father going to prison. It was like his remembering created these events, and without his memories, they didn't exist. It was like HE made his father and mother look bad by

remembering what they did and didn't do. He couldn't shake off this feeling of being a bad kid. But realizing his distortions helped him not accept them at face value.

Stephan got clearer about how his parents had fallen short. Seeing himself adrift growing up helped him understand why he trusted *no one*. But rather than this fueling his super-sized sense of entitlement, it settled him down and quieted him. In Stephan's own words, it helped him understand why he was such a "narcissistic asshole." I was surprised and impressed when Stephan said this.

Stephan realized that cherishing someone, looking out for their welfare, was foreign to him. Taking care of patients as a doctor masked this completely. More accurately, he took care of people's appearances. When Stephan recognized this described his relationship with his parents—taking care of their appearances--this painful realization staggered him. The fact this demonstrated his steady-state regression was lifting was lost on him at that moment.

Some people take their parents' shortcomings as an I. O. U. that current people in their lives are supposed to repay. If that starts to happen when you do revisualizations, you're swimming in the wrong direction. Those are the kind of thoughts Ugly Fish have. Revisualizations generally sober you up, and there's a big difference between sober and self-indulgent.

Anne Marie's revisualization

While this was going on for Stephan, Anne Marie was confronting herself about her own family. That's one of the beautiful things that happens in marital therapy when

partners work on themselves in parallel. To be clear, this differs from partners working in tandem, one behind the other. Anne Marie wasn't being pulled along by Stephan's progress. She pursued her own development right alongside Stephan. If anything, you could say she was a half-step ahead of him.

Remember, it was Anne Marie who brought things with Stephan to the point of critical mass for change. Stephan should have thanked her for providing the stimulus he needed to finally kick his own ass. (Eventually, he did.) So, while Stephan was revisualizing difficult things in our sessions, Anne Marie was doing the same.

Anne Marie told me about trying to talk with her mother and her father about her father's alcoholism and her brother, Jake, dealing drugs. She described vignettes of both parents being unwilling to address either problem. It was clear they weren't interested.

Anne Marie revisualized an incident when she was a teenager involving her brother, Jake, selling drugs. Her description depicted her mother's Puritanical strictness coming up against her father's oppositional nature and love of frustrating his wife. Their battleground was how to handle Jake, who was arrested by the police for selling pot and Ecstasy.

As Anne Marie revisualized it, her parents were going at each other in their living room while she and Jake watched. They were screaming at each other at the top of their lungs. Anne Marie saw two people who were more invested in sabotaging each other than helping their kid while he drowned. They were letting their child go down the drain while they argued over how to clean him up.

Anne Marie couldn't tell if her parents were so angry they had no awareness she and Jake were there. That's because her parents sometimes used them as an audience and jury, and other times seemed completely out of control. Jake slouched in his chair with his arms across his chest and a disrespectful smirk on his face.

Anne Marie's mother said they ought to whip Jake with a switch. Her father said this was barbaric, but not surprising considering who it came from. He proposed they should hire a good lawyer and get Jake's charges dropped. Her mother countered that they should let Jake spend some time in jail and let him learn his lesson. She pointed her finger at Anne Marie's father and screamed, "*You wouldn't be so cavalier about driving drunk if you spent time in the drunk tank too!*"

That's when Anne Marie had a physical reaction in my office! The anxiety attacks of her younger years were now relatively rare, and she wasn't asking for help with them. But, next thing I knew, Anne Marie was feeling overwhelmed and short of breath. She did her best to calm herself down, which allowed us to stay focused on what triggered her. I was impressed by how well she handled it.

Anne Marie was having difficulty accepting what she saw her parents doing in her revisualization. She was having a powerful physiological reaction to what she was seeing: Her parents weren't rising to the occasion, putting their hatred for each other aside, and responding to their child who clearly needs help. They were sparing with each other and proposing solutions that allowed them to avoid their responsibilities. Her mother acknowledging her father's alcoholism also greatly impacted her. Anne Marie

was upset, hurt, angry, sad, and disgusted all at the same time. She was so mentally and physically activated, this triggered an anxiety reaction in her brain.

I suggested Anne Marie repeat this revisualization at home, but pace herself to keep from being overwhelmed. Not only *could* she control what she revisualized--and how long and how often she did this--she had a *responsibility* to do this effectively. Whatever she did was entirely up to her.

Anne Marie came into our next session asking, "Are my panic attacks a form of acute regression?" When I realized what she was asking, I smiled and said nothing.

"It is, isn't it! That's it! I knew it! That's what I finally figured out!" Anne Marie was ecstatic!

"Between sessions, I revisualized other scenes from my past. I didn't get as anxious as I thought I would. I even looked at interactions I had with Jake that were downright scary at the time! I don't have to be afraid of being overwhelmed by what I revisualize! And, approaching anxiety attacks as regressions gives me a new to handle them! I need to tell myself to swim for the surface! It really works!"

Anne Marie's mood suddenly darkened. "But what surprised me the most wasn't my anxiety level. It's my *anger*! I'm *furious* at my parents *and* my brother for what they did to me! And continue doing! I can see I have lots of things I need to talk with them about!"

Anne Marie paused to look at Stephan. "Truthfully, I'm not sure I would have said this in front of you in the past. I know you would have loved it and I wouldn't have

given you the satisfaction! But you referring to yourself as a narcissistic asshole makes it so much easier for me to admit I've been so blind to this! And I can't believe how royally pissed off I am!"

As a rule, people aren't attractive when they're angry. And at times when Anne Marie was an Ugly Fish swimming in the Mariana Trench, I'll bet she didn't look great either. But at that moment, as Anne Marie was starting to wake up, I'd best describe her as beatific. There was a beauty about her that only comes from within. The changes in Anne Marie weren't lost on Stephan.

Window of tolerance issues

It's challenging to confront deeply upsetting realizations and experience feelings, thoughts, and sensations associated with traumatic mind mapping. However, when traumatic memories are reactivated and reconsolidated with physical sensations and mind-mapping information, they become less distressing, more easily managed, and less likely to produce unwanted intrusions.

My clients don't freak out from doing revisualizations (or from written mental dialogues, or dealing with their antagonists). They do, however, have intense visual realizations. As I mentioned earlier, modern trauma treatments encourage you to participate near the upper range of your window of tolerance. A moderately high degree of stress is considered optimal.

This might exceed the level of discomfort you think is warranted. Guaranteed, it's going to be outside your comfort zone. Waiting until you feel comfortable is counterproductive. But so are anxiety attacks. I have no desire for you to experience

If you are getting upset using these methods, seek professional help in your local community. Don't hesitate to reach out to a local mental health professional.

frightening levels of anxiety and duress. From a neurobiological perspective, there's no point in "blowing yourself up." There's no need for you to have a single one of them.

Some of my clients experience flashback imagery, sensations in their bodies, shifts in taste and hearing, odd feelings in their heads, and even "sparks" in their vision. Once you know this can happen, these symptoms don't have to frighten you. You're not going insane. Trauma experts think this occurs from the long-overdue SAM-to-VAM processing.

*But what if you become so upset you can't go about your daily routine? Or you haven't slept for days? Or you become suicidal or seriously consider harming someone else? These things don't happened with my clients. But in these unlikely events, you should seek out professional help in your local community. **When in doubt, consult a mental health or medical expert.** Services are available in most communities through your place of religious worship, local public health department, or community mental health center.*

I greatly doubt things will come to this using the methods described here. But if they do, stop doing these activities, and talk to a mental health professional. This applies to

revisualizations, written mental dialogues, dealing with your real-world antagonists, and anything else you read in this book.

Going forward

I hope I haven't frightened you about using revisualizations. If anything I hope I've whetted your appetite for them. But now that you know how powerful they can be, you won't be caught by surprise if this happens for you.

Revisualizations can help lessen your steady-state regression. You're sitting on a wealth of information that can help you. It's pretty revealing if/when you realize you don't want to mine that gold. It's also amazing how much your functioning can improve when you do.

We've discussed revisualizing important events in your life. We've covered things to look for, pitfalls to watch out for, and ways to get around problems you may encounter.

Next chapter, our focus on right brain therapy will continue. The groundwork we've laid here about mapping your antagonist's mind will come in handy in new ways. We'll discuss another incredibly powerful tool for resolving steady-state regressions. Written mental dialogues are every bit as helpful as revisualizations. I'm excited to tell you all about it!

Chapter 10: Written Mental Dialogues Increase Your Ascent

When I started working with written mental dialogues, I had no idea they would turn out to be as powerful as they are. Experience has shown them to be one of the most potent right-brain methods I've developed. As with revisualizations, I'm still discovering things that happen inside written mental dialogues that make them incredibly helpful, revealing and healing.

Written mental dialogues are good for following up troubling incidents you revisualize. Like revisualizations, written mental dialogues require keeping your brain together while re-experiencing traumatic mind mapping and forcing it to function in previously restricted ways. Similarly, written mental dialogues circumvent avoidance and involve taking action. But written mental dialogues place additional demands on your mind and brain--like requiring you to interact with your antagonists--and so they offer other benefits. This chapter is brimming with essential suggestions to help you work with them.

You can't overestimate the power of written mental dialogues. Many clients love doing them, but just anticipating writing dialogues makes some people nervous. It's revealing when people pay good money to talk *ad nauseum* in therapy, but they get squirrely when the *prospect* of written mental dialogues comes up.

Written Mental Dialogues

A written mental dialogue looks like a play script in which the characters talk and react to each other. The scenario evolves out of a series of “He or she says (or does) X” and then “I say (or do) “Y” statements. So, for instance, let’s say you’re an intergalactic superhero and you’re confronting your arch-villain. Your written mental dialogue might look like this:

Me: “Megatron, I’m going to stop you from destroying the universe!”

Antagonist: “What makes you think can stop me?!”

Me: “I’m not sure I can, but I’m determined! The people on Uranus are counting on me!”

Unlike a play script, write your dialogues without editing them. Let it come out in one pass through. It may not come out in a smooth flow, and often emerges in chunks or response by response. But relax, trust the process, and let it come out of you without judgement. I’ll show you how to analyze it afterwards.

Just like revisualizations, written mental dialogues can help resolve steady-state regressions.

Since you’re not an intergalactic superhero, your written mental dialogues should be realistic rather than like a comic book or fairy tale. Written mental dialogues are serious conversations with difficult-to-deal-with people about unresolved problems and

challenging issues. I've worked with dialogues involving two antagonists at a time (e.g., talking to your parents in a three-way conversation). But you're much better dealing with one person at a time, especially to start.

Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy

Written mental dialogues in Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy draw out your preexisting map of your antagonist's mind. They allow you to see your map, including information (SAM) not available in your explicit memories (VAM). Implicit memories and non-conscious understandings are often embedded in the responses you develop for yourself and your antagonist. Written dialogues allow you to integrate interoceptive information about your antagonist's reactions and probable experience.

Writing dialogues requires taking your antagonist's perspective. Revisualizations might allow you to avoid this because it's not inherent in visualizing an image. However, mental dialogues cannot move forward without this occurring. Taking your antagonist's perspective forces your brain to shift back and forth between first-person and third-person views, which has its own beneficial impacts. Although these are not standard parts of trauma-focused writing therapies, they are crucial in CNT.

1. Responses you write for your antagonist should reflect your map of his or her mind, meaning what you think he or she would likely say and do. Topics of conversation should be subjects you avoid or interactions you haven't handled well. This is not the time to imagine ideal responses you'd like to receive.

2. Mental dialogues are action-oriented, in which you say, ask, or do whatever you feel is necessary to achieve closure. The goal is to *deal* with your antagonist and fully express yourself and claim your space. Dialogues allow you to work through prior traumatic interactions with your antagonist incrementally.
3. Map your antagonist *in the middle of the dialogue*, taking in his or her perspectives as the interaction evolves. Monitor his or her demeanor, thoughts and feelings. Comment on what your antagonist is doing right in front of you.
4. Written mental dialogues expose your hesitations to accurately map or effectively respond to your antagonist. They reveal reluctances to show your antagonist you can see him or her. Gold-standard responses (which I'll describe shortly) require removing gaps in your mind-mapping radar and inhibitions about responding. Repeated dialogues eventually allow you to keep up with your antagonist, and stop him or her from getting around you.

Written mental dialogues require responding to heated interactions with your antagonist, who you realize has mind-mapping ability. Eventually, by saying and doing what you feel you must, you evoke the responses you most fear from your antagonist. Then the task is to handle yourself in the face of whatever he or she says or does as best you can. Written mental dialogues allow you to deal with complex issues in slow-motion, by going back and studying them. They also give you as many chances as you need to keep your head together and come up to speed.

Multiple iterations allow you to modify how you respond, express yourself, and handle your antagonist. Over these iterations, your antagonist’s attitudes and responses usually change when you start making better responses. They don’t just roll over and play dead. They often resort to “Plan B” alternative strategies when you learn to handle what they usually do. Written dialogues allow you to examine your errors and strategies, and recognize aspects of your antagonist’s responses and strategies that you overlooked during the interchange. This increases your mind-mapping accuracy and prepares you for your next encounter.

Written mental dialogues allow you to work to a point where you feel you can pretty much cope with your antagonists regardless of what they do. You get more chances and more ways of dealing with people than you get in the real world. You can’t deal with your antagonist for the first time twice. Written mental dialogues let you save this golden opportunity for when you have a good chance of success. Things you learn through written mental dialogues readily transfer to real-time situations with your real-world antagonists.

Two clarifications

Written mental dialogues are primarily a right-brain process the way I use them. They allow you to work on issues in *visual* form if you do this correctly. It’s about

Written mental dialogues engage your right brain.

initially developing a picture of your interaction and then responding to it as it evolves. This requires visualizing your antagonist and envisioning his or her responses to what you're saying and doing. This is important because written mental dialogues can seem like a left-brain process because they also involve verbal language (text, writing, VAM). Focusing on your responses like you're writing a book misses the point.

Written mental dialogues are a tangible way to force your right-brain to get involved and avoid over-intellectualizing. All you have to do is map your antagonist's mind and see things from his perspective. Shifting mentally between first-person and third-person perspectives allows you to do this. This produces SAM to VAM memory synchronization that helps resolve steady-state regressions.

A second important point has to do with your antagonist's responses in the dialogue: You may think you're making up your antagonist's responses out of nowhere, but there's usually an abundance of mind mapping (SAM) information embedded in what you develop. That's not the case if you just make up something. But if you draw upon your knowledge of this person from prior experience, and consider what he or she has done in the past, the responses you develop for your antagonist will embody your mental map of his or her mind.

Written mental dialogues versus revisualizations

Written mental dialogues offer benefits that revisualizations don't. Whereas revisualizations involve re-seeing traumatic episodes, written mental dialogues require pulling yourself together and responding to them. Envisioning and writing dialogues is

far more active, engaged, and immersive. They are more taxing for your brain and activate more brain areas. They use more workspace in your inner mental world and engage “executive” brain functions in your prefrontal neocortex. Written mental dialogues produce neuroplasticity under higher-meaning and greater stress, and require greater emotional control. Like I said earlier, I’m still learning how written mental dialogues are so incredibly helpful in resolving steady-state regressions.

Written mental dialogues stretch your ability to maintain your functioning in dysfunctional relationships. They force you to operate more effectively right in front of your antagonist. Here’s why this is important: Steady-state regressions are an *interpersonal* neurobiological problem. They often result from repeated traumatic mind mapping experiences with poorly functioning people, and those are the people about whom you’re likely to end up writing dialogues. Dialogues let you practice putting an end to borrowed functioning and dealing with the fallout.

When you function better and make better responses in the dialogue, it’s not much different than doing this in real life, as far as the common neural pathway in your brain is concerned. If you take the dialogue seriously, you know your antagonist won’t be happy that you are handling him or her better. The same hesitancies, anxieties, and response inhibitions surface, often to a shocking degree. This allows you to get over inhibitions about making powerful responses and insecurities you may not even know you have.

Pushing yourself to engage your antagonist more effectively drives your brain to function at greater cognitive and emotional efficiency. But don’t be surprised if you go

brain-dead in your initial dialogues. Just as in real life, you might have anticipatory traumatic mind mapping about making better responses that show your antagonist you can see him!

I'm going to break down working with written mental dialogues into six steps. Each step will have illustrative examples. We'll cover best practices and common response errors to help you handle your antagonists. This six-step strategy can substantially lessen steady-state regressions. Things you learned last chapter will be useful here, and what we cover here will help in subsequent chapters too.

Step 1: Write your initial dialogues

Clients' initial dialogues are often brief. But no matter how insufficient they seem at first, they usually contain surprising amounts of information. I simply gave Elizabeth the suggestion that she write me the conversations she needed to have with her parents that had not yet occurred. The dialogues she wrote were brief and to the point.

Elizabeth's initial dialogue with her father was pretty sparse:

Elizabeth: "Hi, Dad. Do you have a moment to talk with me?"

Dad: "Sure, whatever you need. You know I'm always here for you."

Elizabeth: "That's what I want to talk to you about. You like to act like that was the case, but it wasn't always true."

Dad: "Nothing is always true, Beth, you know that." (No one calls me Beth except my father.)

Elizabeth: “Yes, Dad, but sometimes things are true. When I was growing up, the way you looked at me made me uncomfortable sometimes.”

Dad: “Beth, are you suggesting I looked at you sexually? Has your mother put this crazy idea in your head?”

Elizabeth: “No Dad, Mom denies anything like this happened too. I asked her.”

Dad: “Well, that should prove you’re wrong. Your mother has a good memory for those kinds of things.”

Elizabeth comes out on the short end of this dialogue. She gets nowhere introducing the topic of sexualization. The father in her head⁵⁴ displays a complete absence of concern or remorse for his past or current behavior. He has a whip-like reptilian mind, quickly pivoting from impeaching Elizabeth’s mother to using her as a credible authority to prove his point. He’s almost hypervigilant about the sexual implications of things and doesn’t hesitate to bring up the topic. He’s more focused on being right and staying on top of things than his daughter’s welfare or his shortcomings as a father.

To her credit, Elizabeth doesn’t hesitate to point out how this father inaccurately presents himself as an ideal father. As soon as she does, he shows his stripes. But when he starts his “you can’t believe anything” routine, Elizabeth loses her solid grounding. He gets the last word, and as far as both he and Elizabeth are concerned, he prevails. However, here’s what you can safely conclude from this initial dialogue: The father in Elizabeth’s head is untrustworthy!



Elizabeth's initial written mental dialogue with her mother looked like this:

Elizabeth: "Mom, do you have a moment. I'd like to talk to you about something from my childhood that's been on my mind a long time."

Mom: "Sure, sweetie. What's up?"

Elizabeth: "Do you remember the time I tried to talk to you about my being uncomfortable with the way dad looked at me when I was a teenager?"

Mom: "Let me think for a moment. Nope. Sorry, can't say that I do."

Elizabeth: "Could you try again to remember. It's important to me."

Mom: "OK. Let me try again.... Nope. Sorry. Not coming up with anything this time either."

Elizabeth: "Well, I did try to talk to you. It was about the time you bought me my first bra."

Mom: "I remember buying it for you. I thought you needed it. You were well-developed for your age."

Elizabeth: "That's what I'm trying to talk with you about. I couldn't stand the way Dad looked at me."

Mom: "I'm sorry, honey, I can't help you. I can't remember. Are you sure you talked to me?"

Elizabeth: "I'm sure."

Mom: “Well, I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t talk to you about something I don’t remember happening. I wish I could help you.”

On the surface, this mother is more open to helping Elizabeth than the father in her head. But if you pay attention, this mother is entirely ineffectual. At the very least, you could say the mother in Elizabeth’s head is not very helpful in contrast to her professed eagerness to assist.

Step 2: Analyze your dialogues

When you finish writing, you can get a second level of benefit from analyzing your dialogues. Let me show you what I look for so you can do this for yourself.

Things to look for

In Chapter Four you learned interpersonal moves are one common trigger for acute regressions. It’s important to analyze written mental dialogues for the moves your antagonist is making:

1. *Discover the position your antagonist wants to maneuver you into or out of.*

Does this person want to make you feel guilty? Or stop you feeling good

*Analyze your antagonist’s move and figure out
what he or she wants*

about yourself when you're feeling great? What is it he or she wants you to do or stop doing?

2. *Use your antagonist's move to figure out what he or she wants.* Now you can get into the "why" of things. If someone is trying to make you feel inadequate, what does he or she get out of this? Similarly, if someone's feeding your ego and saying you're the greatest, don't naively think you're finally getting the recognition you deserve. What's in it for him or her?

There are loads of additional things to look at besides analyzing people's moves. Here are a few of basic ones you can assess pretty early in the process:

3. What is the nature of the alliance? Is it combative, collusive or collaborative? If you're just starting to work with dialogues, think twice if you presume it's collaborative.
4. What is your antagonist's map of you? You can read this in the responses your antagonist thinks will work effectively with you.
5. Does your antagonist anticipate he or she will prevail? Are they operating with certainty and acting with impunity?
6. What is the dominant response patterns in your antagonist's replies? Antagonists often make predictable responses if you track them. Do they ask questions? Or take umbridge? Or act hurt?
7. What is your style of responding? Are you showing fears of speaking up, or a tendency to follow your antagonist's lead instead of your own?

Take the time to apply these points before you write your next interaction. This can significantly improve your second attempts.

Elizabeth's second attempts

Elizabeth's second set of dialogues were a little more direct:

Elizabeth: "Dad, I want to ask you about things that happened when I was growing up."

Dad: "What's this about?" (He looks suspicious.)

Elizabeth: "Sometimes, I was uncomfortable because I thought you were looking at me like you look at other women."

Dad: "I don't know what you mean. I don't look at other women."

Elizabeth: "I know you do. I've seen you, and I've watched mom get angry at you when you do that."

Dad: "I haven't done that in years, Beth. Why are you bringing this up now?"

Elizabeth: "I'm trying to figure myself out and how I feel about men."

Dad: "Are you a lesbian?"

Elizabeth: "No!"

Dad: "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Elizabeth: "I'm not talking about that!"

Dad: "Are you and Dennis breaking up?"

Elizabeth: "We're having issues."

Dad: "Do you think this is my fault?"

Elizabeth: "I'm trying to talk to you!"

Dad: "I wouldn't be surprised if you had trouble with men, Beth. Your mother always did! It ruined our marriage. Did she poison your mind with trash about men?!"

Elizabeth: "No, Dad. I'm trying to talk to you about things I've seen you do with me."

Dad: "Do with you? I don't do things with you! You're starting to make me angry with your accusations!"

Elizabeth: "Dad, I didn't accuse you of anything. I'm trying to talk to you about my feelings about growing up."

Dad: "Well, I'm not interested in talking about your feelings when you make me feel like I molested my daughter. I'm not going to put up with this!" (Dad walks off.)

Elizabeth did better this time. Granted, the father-in-her-head still retains control at the end and never gives her what she wants. But you can see Elizabeth starting to grapple with his mind. His pattern of controlling conversations by asking misleading questions shows up. When this happens, Elizabeth's functioning goes down and she answers his questions for the most part. To her credit, Elizabeth manages to get back on track although this father never responds productively. You can also see her fear of speaking directly to him about what she thinks happened between them.

There's greater depth to this second dialogue. The father in Elizabeth's head is more three-dimensional. He has more personality. The way he operates is more apparent.

His is a manipulative perpetrator who gets indignant when confronted. Elizabeth's difficulty dealing with him is more apparent.



Elizabeth's second written mental dialogue with the mother-in-her-head was similarly more direct, which brought out a corresponding defensiveness and guardedness from this mother. This is a big departure from this mother's "I'd love to help you but I can't" attitude in the first attempt.

Elizabeth: "Mom, can we talk about the time when I tried to speak to you about the way Dad was looking at me?"

Mom: "Are you going to end up blaming me?"

Elizabeth: "My main focus isn't to blame you. I'm interested in understanding the impacts of my childhood."

Mom: "You mean my negative impacts on you."

Elizabeth: "Are you saying you recognize that you had some?"

Mom: "Are you saying that I did?"

Elizabeth: "I'm not saying anything yet. I'm asking for information. I want you to talk with me. "

Mom: "No, you're not. You're gathering information so you can prove I was no good as a mother. I'm not going to help you do that. I'm going to protect myself and my reputation."

Elizabeth: “Is your reputation more important than your daughter?”

Mom: “If you’re out to prove that I was a bad mother, the answer is YES! I’m not going to let you drag me into some mess that your father made with you. It was long ago, whatever it was. And I’m not sure anything happened.”

Elizabeth: “I’m telling you it did!”

Mom: “Well, I can’t help you. I wasn’t there!”

The mother in this dialogue demonstrates hypervigilance and suspiciousness coupled with overly concrete thinking and bad logic. If you pair this with the first dialogue, you see a mother who initially appears to offer a collaborative alliance, but it is actually collusive and quickly sinks into a combative alliance. This also illustrates how children co-construct different versions of their parents by how they interact with them—even in a dialogue. When they present a more awake version of themselves, the parents they most fear dealing with show up.

Step 3: Improve your responses

The progressive improvements in Elizabeth’s written mental dialogues were impressive and pretty typical. If you study your responses, and correct where you’re going wrong, it puts you into entirely new territory. Your written mental dialogues become something akin to saying to your antagonist, “*OK, so what are you going to do now?!*”

When you function at a higher level in your written mental dialogue, you present your antagonist with an entirely different situation. Usually, it's a situation you're afraid to create in real life. Here's where your inner mental world is a step ahead of external reality, so you have to pay attention to see what shows up!

This is when written mental dialogues become incredibly interesting. And to get there, you have to improve your responses beyond your initial spontaneous efforts. Here are common errors to watch out for and additional suggestions for improvement:

1. *Force yourself to make a response.* Respond in ways that show your antagonists you can see what they are doing. This is crucial! It doesn't work to say "I know what you're doing!" You accomplish this by how you interact with them.
2. *Stay on message.* Conduct yourself in a businesslike manner. Don't be belligerent. Act like you know what you know. Don't bluff or threaten.
3. *Respond directly to what's happening at the moment.* Briefly shift your comments from topics being discussed to what's happening between you and your antagonist. Saying "You just changed the topic and I'm not going there" shows you're watching what he's doing. The same goes for saying "You and I had this same problem before when we talked about (fill in topic)."
4. *Comment on your antagonist's moves as they occur.* You might say, "I thought we could have a collaborative discussion, but you keep positioning me as having wronged you in some way." Or you could say "Your attempts to

make me feel guilty are not going to work!” Your antagonist is not likely to acknowledge doing this, but as long as you are accurate, he will know you’ve mapped him.

5. *Don't be indirect, sarcastic, or snarky.* Sarcasm and innuendo are a waste of time. Both require your antagonist figuring out what you mean, and he isn't going to do the extra work for you. Talking indirectly to your antagonist suggests you're not prepared to talk straight and deal with him.
6. *Make just one point each time you respond.* When you're spewing, you allow your antagonist to choose which of your points to address. She will invariably pick your weakest point and ignore your strongest or biggest ones. When you bring up more than one topic at a time, you make it easy for your antagonist to walk around you.
7. *Keep your antagonist from getting around you, sliding underneath you, or walking over you.* You probably don't want to do this, because you know it will trigger their bad behavior and create traumatic mind mapping for you. Your anticipatory traumatic mind mapping makes it easier for your antagonist to get around you. You know what will happen if they don't: It's going to get ugly.
8. *Present your antagonist with questions that require responses.* If you only make statements and pronouncements, your antagonist will sometimes ignore what you've said or just shrug it off. Make responses and ask questions

that require your antagonist to respond to your point. Then, prevent your antagonist from successfully getting around your questions. Keeping him from switching topics demonstrates you can see what he is doing.

In some ways, there is no difference between dealing with the antagonist-in-your-head and dealing with your real-world antagonist. It's all very real to your brain, thanks to the common neural pathway in your anterior insula. These eight points are so crucially important they will resurface next chapter too. That's where we'll deal with face-to-face interactions with your antagonist. You'll get to see how Elizabeth used what we covered here to finish her journey from the darkest corners of the Mariana Trench to climbing out of her steady-state regression and reaching daylight!

Shift perspectives back and forth between you and your antagonist.



Elizabeth's third dialogues are more to the point. This father's responses reveal Elizabeth's map of him and how she thinks he will act if she doesn't sugar-coat everything. It is also the beginning of her daring to face his wrath.

Elizabeth: "Dad, the way you looked at me when I was growing up made me uncomfortable."

Dad: "What?"

Elizabeth: “You eyeballed me like you were sizing me up sexually. There were times I couldn’t look at you because I was afraid I’d see you eyeing me.”

Dad: “You’re as crazy as your mother, Beth. I was hoping you wouldn’t turn out like her.”

Elizabeth: “Aren’t you even going to ask me what I’m talking about? I’m trying to put together what’s happened in my life and how it has affected me.”

Dad: “Are you in therapy, Beth? Are you talking to someone about me? Is that where this crap is coming from?”

Elizabeth: “Dad, please stick to what I’m trying to talk to you about. Stop changing the topic.”

Dad: “You better believe I’m going to change the topic, Beth! I’m not going to have you talk to me so disrespectfully!”

Elizabeth: “I’m not being disrespectful! I’m expecting you to act like my father for a change!”

Dad: “I *am* your father! And if you were younger, I’d give you the spanking of your life!”

Elizabeth: “Being cruel doesn’t make you my father! Caring about what happens to me does! So does respecting my boundaries as a young woman! Growing up trying to avoid your gaze, and telling myself you didn’t mean anything by it, has messed with my head!”

Dad: “That’s it! I’m not going to put up with this!”

Elizabeth: “So what are you going to do? Be even more absent from my life than you’ve been? You’ve been a real disappointment as a father.”

(Note: I wasn’t sure what my father would do at this point because I never said or did anything remotely like this. I never expressed disappointment in my father. But he didn’t hesitate to let me know I was a disappointment to him. So, I waited until the rest of this came up. For a long time, he just looked at me with rage on his face.)

Dad: “Are you going to keep me from seeing Paul?” (His question completely took me by surprise.)

Elizabeth: “This is between you and me, Dad.”

Dad: “No, it’s not! Are you going to poison his mind against me like your mother did with you?”

Elizabeth: “Dad, I’m trying to talk to you about what happened between you and me.”

Dad: “You’re a lost cause, Elizabeth! I can see that now. You women stick together! I want to know if you’re going to take my grandson away from me!”

Elizabeth: “You don’t give a shit about me, do you, Dad?”

Dad: “Why should I care about you when you only have bad things to say about me?!”

Elizabeth: “*Because that’s what you’d do if you wanted to be my father!*”

You probably can see Elizabeth's progress without my help, but the details are instructive. Elizabeth finally talks straight to her father and even gets the last word. She retains control throughout the conversation and stays on message.

I've seen this many times with my clients, but it thrills me every time I see the best in someone stand up--even in a dialogue. However, I love about working with dialogues because you can never predict the incredible information buried within them. She knows this father not very invested in her, and anticipates he will let go of the relationship if she confronts him. But did you catch that Elizabeth knows the-father-in-her-head is most interested in her son, Paul?



Here's Elizabeth's third written mental dialogue with her mother. It was hard to give Elizabeth disappointing news, particularly when she saw this as a step forward for her. Unfortunately, it wasn't as big a step as she wanted to think.

Elizabeth: "Mom, can we talk about our last conversation?"

Mother: "Sure. I'm your mother. I'm always here for you."

Elizabeth: "That's the problem. No, you're not. You just look like you are, but not. You do just enough to make yourself and other people think you are. I can't remember a single school activity you attended when I was young. When I tried to talk to you about my brother Elliot touching me, you didn't pay attention. You never seemed to have time for me. You were always too busy. You seemed more preoccupied with your

own interests than being my mother. I'm not sure you were ever really interested in being a mother."

Mother: "Are you telling me I never did anything right as a mother?"

Elizabeth: "No. You did a lot of things right. But not everything!"

Mother: "When are you going to grow up, Elizabeth?! No mother does everything right!"

Elizabeth: "That's not what I meant. I didn't feel safe! When I look back on that time, it would have been nice if sometime you asked me what I was feeling. I think that would have really helped. I felt all alone in the house. I know that you were physically there, but it was like you were emotionally gone. I don't know if you ever felt like you were emotionally checked out, but it felt to me like that.

Mother: "I'm sorry that you felt that way. I never said I was perfect."

Elizabeth: "I think you always favored Elliot."

Mother: "I bought you nice clothes I didn't buy for him!"

Elizabeth: "Clothes aren't a substitute for caring! I never could tell you that I thought you didn't like me."

Mother: "How can you hold me accountable when you never told me?! I'm not a magician. I can't see through walls!"

Elizabeth: "You could have asked me. I never got the feeling you cared about me. You were always too busy. You had other things to do. More important than me."

Mother: “I can’t believe you’re saying this! You have always been my number one concern. You and your brother. If I’ve done nothing else good in my life, at least I’ve been a devoted mother!”

Elizabeth: “I’m sorry for hurting your feelings. I know this isn’t easy for you either. But some things need to be said.”

Mother: “Well, you’re right about one thing. This isn’t easy for me. Now that you’ve got this off your chest, I hope you’re happy!”

Elizabeth: “I am proud of myself for speaking up!”

Elizabeth looked at this dialogue as a step forward because she let herself express her feelings more than in prior dialogues. There’s something to this, but not as much as she thought. That’s because Elizabeth’s emotional expression is unfocused and allows her antagonist to walk around most of it.

Elizabeth felt she really expressed herself in her two long initial responses. Unfortunately, this mother can ignore these rants for the most part because Elizabeth put more than one issue on the table at a time. This allows this mother to pick the one piece she wants to respond to.

Elizabeth’s mistakes nullify the good parts of her dialogue: She’s letting her mother walk around her. She isn’t speaking up all that much. She apologizes to her mother because her mother gets upset. She doesn’t confront her mother’s misrepresentations of herself. She doesn’t pick up on her mother’s denial of mind-

mapping ability. She's wailing, "*You hurt my feelings, you don't care about me!*" but she isn't bringing the action to her mother.

Yes, Elizabeth starts to express her anger at her mother. But in the process, she loses her focus. This mother's refusal to deal with the issue of inappropriate sexual behavior in the house—long ago or in this imagined conversation—gets lost. Elizabeth talking about her feelings becomes an end in itself. She's not responding to what's happening at this moment with this mother. It allows this mother to appear to listen while Elizabeth lets off steam. Elizabeth needs to do a much better job of mapping her mother's mind.



Sobered by the feedback she received on her prior dialogue, Elizabeth put it to good use. Her responses in her fourth dialogue were more concise and remained on point. As a result, this dialogue revealed how bad she thought her mother could get.

Elizabeth: "Mom, how did you cope with Dad eyeballing women all the time?"

Mother: "Your father was a slob when it came to women. I just accepted him the way he was. I knew I couldn't change him."

Elizabeth: "How did you handle him looking at me?"

Mother: "What do you mean?"

Elizabeth: "You saw him eyeballing me. You even paraded me in from of him for his approval when I bought a new bathing suit."

Mother: “I wanted your father’s opinion if it was too revealing. We both had a responsibility to make sure you weren’t getting too wild as a teenager.”

Elizabeth: “You just acknowledged knowing that Dad had a roving eye for women, but now you act like it never occurred to you that he would look at me the same way.”

Mother: “What are you saying, Elizabeth?!”

Elizabeth: “I think you could recognize what Dad was doing, and you did nothing when I even told you about it. How could you make me model a bathing suit in front of him?”

Mother: “Are you out of your mind, Elizabeth?! What you’re proposing is disgusting! Are you saying your father is some kind of pervert?!”

Elizabeth: “No, Mother. I’m talking about you!”

Mother: “Are you saying I got off pimping my daughter in front of my husband?! *Are you out of your mind?!*”

Elizabeth: “No, Mother. I’m saying right this moment, you are avoiding talking to me about this, and I’m not letting this go unnoticed.”

Mother: “Well, you’re wrong, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth: “Wrong about what?”

Mother: “Everything you’re saying! I can’t believe what you’re suggesting. Your father may ogle women, but you’re trying to involve me in this!”

Elizabeth: “I’m not suggesting anything other than you won’t talk to me about this. You’re more interested in protecting your precious self-image than helping me deal with what happened in our family!”

This dialogue operates at a higher level of functioning than Elizabeth’s prior efforts. She responds to what this mother is doing during the interaction. Her responses are more precise and strategic. She is far more successful in controlling the topic of conversation. She doesn’t follow her mother’s (mis)leads. She gives this mother far fewer opportunities to walk around her, and she references events that support her points.

At least according to Elizabeth’s dialogues, the vicious version of this mother shows up as Elizabeth’s functioning improves and she’s less regressed, As Elizabeth shows this mother that she can see her, the mother-in-her-head reveals she has the bonding capacity of a rock.



As Elizabeth’s work with written mental dialogues progressed, she wrote one between her and Dennis regarding current things developing at the time.

Dennis: “Elizabeth, why are you delaying signing the property settlement my lawyer sent you?”

Elizabeth: “I’m not delaying signing it. My attorney is looking over it.”

Dennis: “You know he’s going to tell you not to sign it. He makes more money that way. More back and forth between our attorneys costs us both more money.”

Elizabeth: “Perhaps, but I want a chance to look it over from a variety of perspectives. My financial future is at stake.”

Dennis: “Are you suggesting I’m not fair with you?”

Elizabeth: “I’m suggesting I need to look out for my own interests, just like you are.”

Dennis: “I’m just trying to be fair to both of us.”

Elizabeth: “No, Dennis. You’re trying to see how little you can get away with paying me. You’re looking out for yourself. I have a right to do that too!”

Dennis: “You are making this an adversarial process, Elizabeth! Why do you have to do that?! I was trying to avoid this happening!”

Elizabeth: “No, Dennis! You made this an adversarial process from the outset. You just dressed it up as you were going to be even-handed to keep me from hiring a lawyer while you were getting one for yourself.”

Dennis: “There’s no reasoning with you, Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth: “Well then, maybe I’m doing something right for a change! Because the entire time I thought I was being reasonable, I was actually a fool!”

Even if I don’t show you another dialogue for comparison, you can see progress in Elizabeth’s dialogue with Dennis. She’s not getting spaghetti brain when Dennis-in-the-dialogue waves his magic wand and constructs his version of reality. She’s not indulging herself in being snarky, indirect, or sarcastic, which would weaken the no-

nonsense, direct, clear-eyed way she comes across. This transferred over to real life. It prepared Elizabeth to deal with Dennis's real-world manipulations with the divorce.

What does improvement look like?

Take the time to review the evolution of Elizabeth's written mental dialogues. You'll recognize multiple instances of progress. Some show up as reduced timidity, more directness, willingness to bring up difficult topics, and staying on topic when her antagonist wanted to go off. These are the "structural" improvements in Elizabeth's dialogues.

But notice there are "strategic" improvements in Elizabeth's psychological position in the interactions. This is what's most important. The structural enhancements (e.g., being more direct) are just the means to this end. Elizabeth is beginning to occupy a different place in her inner mental world that she's never been willing to take in her external reality. There's more to this than powerful preparation for taking this next step in real life.

Elizabeth was working through the interpersonal neurobiological impacts of prior traumatic mind mapping in her written mental dialogues. As she was increasingly willing and able to engage the minds of her antagonists—and keep her own mind together in the process—the benefits were forthcoming. She was more resilient to getting spaghetti brain and could more easily recognize her antagonist's moves. This wasn't limited to her mental dialogues: Elizabeth was amazed how much easier it was for her to spot Dennis' shenanigans.

Notice the increased sophistication of Elizabeth's responses over the iterations. This doesn't come from becoming more familiar with doing dialogues, the same way practicing penmanship doesn't lead to artistic calligraphy. She's thinking more clearly and operating on a higher level. Her ability to assimilate what's happening in the moment into her next response has markedly improved. When you can function on this level, dealing with your antagonists becomes an entirely different proposition. You'll get to see this play out next chapter.

Stephan's dialogues

We don't have the space to show you the same kind of dialogue development with Stephan and Anne Marie. But I want to give you the essence of their dialogues because it will quickly tell you loads about both of them. It will also show you how a single written conveys an incredible amount of information. Here's a glimpse of some things they wrote.

Like most clients, Stephan's initial dialogues with his mother and father were hesitant, timid, and indirect. After several iterations, he became more explicit and willing to take a stand or define a position. But you could see, as far as Stephan saw it, the locus of control still resided with his parents. Here is Stephan's dialogue when he finally decided how to handle his father:

Stephan: "Dad, I don't think I'm going to be able to lend you the money to buy that property."

Father: “Why not?”

Stephan: “Because it’s not a good investment, and I don’t want to be involved in another of your get-rich schemes.”

Father: “If you don’t want to make money, that’s one thing. But there’s no reason to be insulting, Stephan.”

Stephan: “I’m not trying to insult you; I’m just describing you. You have always wanted to make a killing and live a life of luxury. It just never happened.”

Father: “I think I provided a damn good lifestyle for you and your mother!”

Stephan: “You didn’t support us. You went to jail! Mom had to make ends meet.”

Father: “Your mother is a good woman, Stephan.”

Stephan: “I know you must have meant well too, but did you have to steal to provide for us?”

Father: “I wanted the best for you and your mother.”

Stephan: “The best would have been for you to be at home!”

Father: “This conversation is over, Stephan! I hope you think about what you’ve said to me today! You can contact me when you’re ready to apologize!”

As you can see, Stephan expects to get nowhere with the father-in-his-head. At least, here he’s starting to express his disappointments. The father-in-his-head is having none of it. This father spins his version of reality and expects Stephan to buy it. Stephen makes mistakes when he presumes his father good intent because it signals he’s still not fully awake. It’s an unforced error that weakens his position with his father.

Still, Stephan refuses to give this father the money he expects and expressing his dissatisfaction to this father who refuses to deal with it. This was a significant step for Stephan. You'll see what this develops into in Chapter Twelve.



Stephan's written mental dialogues with his mother were equally conflicted. They showed signs of growing willingness to try to talk straight to her, together with a continual hesitancy about taking things too far:

Stephan: "Mom, how come you never told me why Dad went to prison?"

Mother: "Let's start over, Stephan. To begin with, why are you asking me this?"

Stephan: "It's been in the back of my mind for a while. For a long time, I never thought about it. But recently it's come to my attention."

Mother: "Somethings are better left unsaid."

Stephan: "I don't understand."

Mother: "There's nothing to understand. Nothing. I don't want to talk about this."

Stephan: "Why not?"

Mother: "It's no big deal. Leave it alone, Stephan. How are you and Anne Marie getting along?"

Stephan: "Wait! If it's no big deal, why can't we talk about it?!"

Mother: "What is it you want to say? I don't understand."

Stephan: “I want to know why I had to go through my childhood without knowing who my father was and what he did.”

Mother: “That’s your way of seeing it! I don’t agree. My way is I was saving you the embarrassment I was feeling. I didn’t tell you because I was thinking of you, Stephan.”

Stephan: “I appreciate that. I appreciate all you did for me. I just wish you would have told me.”

Mother: “I was doing the best I could. You know that. I devoted my life to raising you while your father was gone.”

Stephan: “I know that. And I appreciate it. I’m glad we finally talked about this.”

Mother: “I am too.”

Did you get Mother’s big-time move to take control of the conversation at the outset? I thought that was eye-opening, but Stephan indicated this would be customary for her to do. Did you get a feel for the impermeability of the mother-in-Stephan’s-head? Does this give you a better picture of what Stephan anticipates when he’s dealing with a woman?

As with his father-dialogue, this was the beginning of Stephan dealing with his mother. I’ll fill you in on how things turned out in our final chapter.



Stephan and Anne Marie also wrote mental dialogues with each other on the topic of “the conversation I need to have with *my partner* that I haven’t had yet.” Here is Anne Marie’s dialogue. You can see she thinks she’s dealing with a man who’s exasperated with her and who refuses to look at himself, even when she lays her heart out to him. Remember, what you’re reading is a mental dialogue between Anne Marie and the Stephan-in-her-head.

Anne Marie: “I want to talk to you about how you deal with your parents, Stephan, without you jumping all over me.”

Stephan: “Here we go again! What is it this time, Anne Marie?”

Anne Marie: “It’s not what you think.”

Stephan: “What is not what I think?”

Anne Marie: “I’m not complaining about you giving your father money or your mother’s constant manipulations.”

Stephan: “Then what is it this time?”

Anne Marie: “It’s about your blindness to them.”

Stephan: “You said this was going to be different, Anne Marie!”

Anne Marie: “I’m not complaining about them. And I’m not complaining about you. I’m worried about you.”

Stephan: “You’re not worried about me, Anne Marie. You only think of yourself!”

Anne Marie: “I’m not just scared you’ll never see what’s going on with your parents. I’m afraid you’ll never get over your pattern of pulling away when we have a good moment. How will we ever have a stable loving relationship?”

Stephan: “How will we ever have a loving relationship if we rarely have sex, Anne Marie?!”

Anne Marie: “Stephan, please. Stop! Listen to me! I’m trying to say this differently so you can hear me!”

Stephan: “This isn’t different, Anne Marie! It’s just more bitching!!”

Anne Marie: “I’m worried about you. I love you. You have a blind spot in your emotional radar, and you won’t do anything about it.”

Stephan: “You do too, Anne Marie! You do too!”

Anne Marie: “I know I do! I’m trying to fix it. I’m afraid you’re not!”

Stephan: “Worry about yourself, Anne Marie! Worry about yourself!”



Stephan’s “need to have” dialogue depicts a man blind to himself at the very moment he thinks he’s talking about his deepest truths and feelings. Stephan believes he’s talking to a combative woman who’s ready to argue with him about anything. He is so focused on being earnest, he has no idea he’s offering this woman a picture of herself that she could find irritating. After a point, continuing to talk about being afraid of the other partner getting angry is more than a waste of time. It’s provocative!

Stephan: “I’d like to talk to you about something, and I don’t want you to get angry at me.”

Anne Marie: “Why do you do that?! You always expect something negative from me!”

Stephan: “I wasn’t thinking something negative about you. I wanted to talk about something I’ve been thinking, and I’m afraid I’m going to make you angry.”

Anne Marie: “I don’t get angry about everything!”

Stephan: “You’re a sensitive person.”

Anne Marie: “Am I that terrible that I make you afraid of me? Why would you want to be with a person like that?”

Stephan: “I’m just trying to tell you what I’m feeling. I’d like to stop fighting.”

Anne Marie: “And I’m telling you what I’m feeling too! Stop acting like I’m an angry person.”

Stephan: “Please. I said I’d like to stop fighting.”

Anne Marie: “I’m saying I’d like to stop fighting too. What you’re saying doesn’t make you better than me.”

Stephan: “Please. I’m not trying to act superior. I’m trying to make peace.”

Anne Marie: “I’d like to make peace too, Stephan. When are you going to start being nice to me?”

Now if you consider both partner-dialogues together, you’ll notice something remarkable that’s not true in every case but is noteworthy in this one. They are

remarkably similar in several ways: For one thing, the author perceives himself or herself as making a heartfelt approach to an angry partner. The author's emphasis is on reaching out to the partner for a deeper relationship and being rebuffed. Both Stephan and Anne Marie envision dealing with someone who never stops fighting with them.

For another thing, despite Stephan and Anne Marie appearing to make progress in therapy, each harbors a lingering doubt that the other will really wake up. I had to consider that perhaps they were reading each other more accurately than I was, and I overestimated their progress. Another possibility was the mind maps in their inner mental worlds lagged behind their partner's development. And, a third possibility was they couldn't believe their partner would do what their parents refused to do: *Get the best in themselves to stand up.*

Gold standard responses

When the best in people stand up, this shows in different ways. One way we've already touched on at length: self-confrontation. Now, you can confront yourself about where you're *falling short*, and this is a big deal for many of us. But it's a whole other level of functioning to be confronting yourself about *doing the best you can*. There's a huge difference.

When people start to wake up, many confront the glaring inadequacies in their functioning. Often they make remarkable progress where they have previously fallen short. Their focus is they're *doing better*—and they can legitimately say they are. But

they don't necessarily finish dealing with their limitations or their antagonists. This is where they want to tell themselves they're done and go back to sleep.

On the other hand, you can confront yourself about doing the best you can or not. This requires holding yourself to an entirely different standard. Are you doing better isn't the question. You can do better for the rest of your life and never achieve your goals.

This brings us to the topic of "gold standard responses." Gold standard responses are the best responses you can make. They don't get any better than this. I love how these responses can be described clearly. There's nothing vague about them. If you follow the points I'm about to outline, you will make gold standard responses, guaranteed. Often this comes as a result of protracted practice and effort. But I've seen clients who make gold standard responses in their first dialogues, without any input from me.

However, before you fast-forward into what I'm about to tell you, consider what I'm saying about the urge to do better but not demand you do your best. That's another thing I love about gold standard responses. *You can see when you're not doing your best!*

This gets back to Stephan and Anne Marie's partner-dialogues in which they anticipated the other wouldn't do his or her best. There's more involved here than years of disappointing experiences with each other. How do you hold onto hope that someone you love will turn into a beautiful human being? Especially, when your lived experience with the people closest to you—including with yourself—is a disappointment? How do you get it through your head that this can really happen?

My clients do this through gold standard responses. They can see it in themselves when they respond this way, and they can see this in their partner when the other does it too. So there's more to gold standard responses than their impact on your antagonist.

Make gold standard responses!

When you are doing the best you can and you know it, this has an impact on you. It impacts your partner too. Conversely, the perpetual failure to make gold standard responses is equally revealing and impactful. Partner's track each other's effectiveness, even when they don't know about gold standard responses. But once you know what they look like, you can see where you and your partner are settling for not doing your best. With this preface in mind, let's get into gold standard responses:

There's a difference between a clever response and gold standard responses.

Sometimes a snappy comeback may be a good response. But it's a lousy response strategy if it doesn't get you where you want to go. All you're doing is refuting what your antagonist is saying. Effective response strategies don't just happen. They take forethought and preparation. To start with, it helps if you understand the general characteristics of a gold standard response:

Shift the locus of control from your antagonist to yourself. Do this by controlling what you do, not by telling your antagonists what they must do. For instance, don't foolishly issue ultimatums or threats. Don't ask if they understand what you're saying.

Make it clear *you* know what you're saying, and that's enough. Also, clarify that understanding you is not enough. It's what they do in response that's important.

Retain control of the topic of conversation. Recognize that you and your antagonists are negotiating about how your situation will be defined and handled. Your subject of conversation will determine this. They will try to shift the topic to where they think they have good ground. Good ground is a topic which gives you an advantageous position in discussions. Study where your antagonists try to drag the conversation. It will tell you how they see things, but don't let them do this.

Keep the conversation on topics that are good ground for you. Also, pay attention to how you articulate your own position. Don't be sloppy. Don't make it easy for them to take issue with something you say that is not your central point.

Keep up with your antagonist's moves. A gold standard response occurs at the same speed that you antagonist is making moves. It is the antithesis of deciding later that you wish you had said something in response to what your antagonist was doing. You can always say, "I want to come back to something you said five minutes ago." But this isn't as powerful as speaking up as soon as your antagonist tries to manipulate you.

Show your antagonist you can see him. Responding to your antagonist's moves in real-time shows that you can see him or her. This surfaces in the negotiation about the topic of conversation. You can also briefly comment on his or her attitude or things implied without being said directly.

Make your point. Stay on message. Don't follow your antagonists wherever they lead you. Bring the conversation back to your position when they change the topic. Don't get so locked into describing what they are doing that you fail to make your own point.

Turn this into a powerful moment of meeting between you and antagonist. All the forgoing "checklist items" build compelling interpersonal experiences. Gold standard responses create "now" moments of meeting. They rivet you and your antagonist into an intense face-to-face mind-to-mind encounter that says, "*I see you! And I want you to know that I see you!*"

The initial dialogues from Elizabeth, Stephan and Anne Marie tried to *avoid* this very thing from happening. As their dialogues improved, they were increasingly willing to produce the intense moments of meeting they needed to (A) deal with their antagonist, (B) produce a high level of neuroplasticity, (C) repair their traumatic mind mapping, and (D) resolve their steady-state regressions.

Common response errors

Studying dialogues and gold standard responses have helped me recognize the common mistakes people make. The most common error involves avoiding mapping your antagonist's mind. This comes in many forms. For example, perhaps you're not mapping what this person is thinking about you in the dialogue. Does this person respect you? What does this person think of your responses to his moves? What is he planning to do next in response to your interaction?

The other common error stems from not analyzing where your responses were off. Maybe they weren't terribly off, but how could you handle this better? Were your responses accurate and direct? What difficulties in responding showed up? How does your antagonist react to your difficulties?

Some responses are mistakes, no matter when or where you make them. Unforced errors waste your hard work and give up whatever ground you gained. Here are some examples:

- *Asking more than one question or making more than one point at a time.*
- *Letting your antagonist walk around you.*
- *Complimenting your antagonist.*
- *Stipulating to things unnecessarily.*
- *“Spewing” and ranting.*
- *Sarcasm.*

Errors that limit your effectiveness are often contextual. “Dynamic errors” occur when you say all the right things, but fail to respond to something your antagonist is doing or setting up. To avoid these kinds of errors, you must be mapping your antagonist's mind and recognizing his or her moves in real-time. This brings us back to the most common mistake people make: Failing to map their antagonist's mind, often due to anticipatory traumatic mind mapping.

Two-part response pattern

Let's get back to gold standard responses: There's a response pattern that works best when your antagonist is making moves on you. You still need to stay on message, but you add a brief initial commentary that tracks what your antagonist is doing right in front of you. Don't make the mistake of being so focused on your antagonist's historical bad behavior that you ignore what's happening at that moment. Often your antagonist is doing *precisely* what you're saying he or she did in the past! (But don't get so focused on your antagonist's current behavior that you lose your main point!)

This requires a response pattern where (1) first you briefly comment on your antagonist's current behavior and then (2) you make your own statement and continue on your point. You don't necessarily have to tie his current behavior to your point, but if it fits, it helps to point this out. A good response might be, "*I can see you're already closing your mind to what I'm saying, but I'm going continue because I'm not finished!*"

Use a two-part response pattern!

Step 4: Deal with your Antagonist

Written mental dialogues have a lot going for them. They provide the basis for pushing through mental blocks, identifying holes in mind-mapping radar, and getting over spaghetti brain. Dialogues allow practice, repetition, and improvement in dealing with an antagonist that real-world interactions don't permit. You can develop more than one scenario of how the conversation goes, and rework your responses until you're satisfied.

You only get one shot at dealing with your real-world antagonist for the first time. You can't deal with your antagonist for the first time twice. You get the most benefit from what you're able to accomplish on the first pass. Of course, you get a second shot at this in written mental dialogues and sometimes in real life. But you are best off maximizing your first encounter with your real-world antagonist if you can. Written mental dialogues allow you to preserve your face-to-face interactions for a time when you can make the most of them.

Is there a lynchpin you won't touch?

Having analyzed hundreds of dialogues, I've learned there's a subtle mistake you should try to avoid. You won't see it at first because it's only identifiable by studying a series of your dialogues. Your typical response patterns also get in the way of recognizing it.

I'm referring to a situation wherein your responses get better on the surface. You become more articulate, and you do an increasingly good job of speaking up. You bring up issues you never dared before. You stay on point, and you back up your points with data from past or present experiences. You express your feelings and finally have your say.

What could be wrong with something like this? If you look at all your responses as a whole, you may see you repeatedly stop short of *really* dealing with your antagonist. For instance, you may recite past grievances, but you're not calling your antagonist out on the most egregious issues. Or you're backing off when you get a superficial apology.

It can look like you are taking your antagonist to task, but you're not seriously holding him or her accountable. Maybe the rules are you're allowed to question your antagonist once, and he or she is allowed to give you answers that walk around your point. But you better not ask twice. Certainly not a third time when your antagonist continues to dodge you. *The point is you can be doing better, but you're still afraid of your antagonist and avoiding having a "now" moment of meeting with him or her.*

Cross the invisible line

What does it feel like to cross the invisible line or break the unspoken rule? To experience this, put yourself in the position of some of my clients, and you'll probably feel it in your body:

Some parents refer to themselves in the third person. For instance, a mother in these dialogues might say, "Mom doesn't want you to be unhappy. Mom thinks you would be happier if you did what she told you. You are defying her. You shouldn't do that." Or "You must be wrong! Mom wouldn't do what you are describing. Mom is a good mother!"

Generally, you respond in the first-person, even though your mother continually talks in the third person as if she's the mouthpiece for someone else. This pattern has gone on for years. You've accepted this as "the way my mother talks." She talks in the third person and you speak in the first person. You've accepted this as normal.

But you can feel the power of asking your mother, *"How come you always talk to me in the third-person as if you are talking about someone else?!"* When you experience

the emotional power of saying this, you recognize in retrospect this was an invisible line you knew not to cross. It's a lynchpin that better not be touched. You can feel how it's possible to craft a world-changing response in a single sentence!

Let's take this further. Suppose your mother's name was Helen, and you said, "*How come you always talk to me in the third person, Helen?!*" This sends an even stronger message by deliberately violating the unwritten rule that you don't address your mother directly, and certainly not by her name.

Better yet, let's say your name is Ramona. What if you responded by saying, "*Ramona would like to know why Mom always speaks to her in the third person!*" You can feel this response is even stronger! It does everything the prior response accomplished but dares to go further. At the same time that you call attention to your mother's response pattern, you use that same pattern to say you're not going along with it anymore. Besides being a more sophisticated response, you are interacting with your mother as an equal. In contrast, prior responses cast you in the role of a child.

In other words, you could make responses that make you look like you no longer subjugate yourself to your parents, while you're actually maintaining the old dysfunctional equilibrium. You can do this by going just so far—but no further—in ways that preserve the underlying dynamics.

Your mother or father may not refer to herself/himself in the third person. But there's a common version of this issue that may apply to you. Watch how you refer to your parents in your dialogues. Imagine shifting from referring to them as "Mom" or

“Father” to calling them by their first names. This triggers a visceral reaction in a surprising number of people.

Shifting how you refer to the parents-in-your-head has multiple powerful implications. Take a moment to envision the emotional impact on you and them. It may feel like the “armageddon nuclear option.” In a few cases, my clients found this necessary in real life. But I’m not proposing shifting to first names as a general strategy.

Instead, I bring up this example to give you the visceral experience of toying with a lynchpin and the fear of going too far. Pulling the lynchpin is probably required if you’re living in a steady-state regression that’s part of an emotional fusion with a dysfunctional family. Going too far isn’t what’s required, but you’ll inevitably struggle with this if you’re upsetting the borrowed functioning.

If you analyze your dialogues, is there a line you won’t cross with your antagonist?

What is it?

Anne Marie’s dialogues

What if you have these kinds of lynch-pin issues in your dialogues, but you don’t recognize this? It will probably surface if and when you decide to deal with your real-world antagonist. If you want to try to forestall this, I recommend writing enough dialogues so that this pattern emerges if it exists.

This general issue of holding back showed up in Anne Marie's dialogues. On the surface, it might look like she was taking a strong stand. But if you watched how she handled herself, it wasn't as strong as it sounded. It was like she was always dealing with an unstable situation and needed to be careful how far she went.

It was noteworthy since Stephan started confronting himself, in part, because Anne Marie wouldn't put up with his cruelty and abuse anymore. She was also tired of him dancing away whenever they started to get closer. Stephan was finally convinced Anne Marie was going to hold him accountable for his behavior.

But Anne Marie's written mental dialogues suggested a different picture. After her initial dialogue with her father, she never said he was an alcoholic when she referred to his drinking. She said he was a poor role model, but she never said he was complicit in her brother, Jake's, drug problems. She confronted him about driving drunk and putting other people at risk, but she never said he engaged in criminal behavior or lacked a social conscience. She said he never cared about anyone but himself, but she never said he didn't care about her.

Anne Marie's dialogues with her brother were much the same. She confronted him about using and dealing drugs, and hiding his stash in her room when he thought he might get caught. However, she couched her complaints as her concern for him, and not her anger for him using her and other people. She never addressed his sociopathic side, like selling drugs to minors.

Anne Marie's written mental dialogues with her mother were similar, but the restraining point occurred much sooner. She appeared more impaired when dealing with her mother. Anne Marie hesitated to say something her mother might take as criticism. Her dialogues were filled with padding like "Can you see the possibility?" And "I'm not saying that you're wrong...". When the mother in her dialogues sidetracked conversations by bringing up unrelated topics, Anne Marie followed wherever this mother led. Against a backdrop of not pushing things too far with her father and brother, Anne Marie handled her mother-dialogues even more gingerly.

This alerted me that Anne Marie's success was not an assured thing, even though she had set limits with Stephan. She still appeared ready to go back to sleep and tell herself she was awake. Anne Marie jokingly said this was an improvement because she was looking at reality with one eye. I replied I hoped she enjoyed the one-eyed view from within her box. Anne Marie knew I was referring to her steady-state regression.

Where we're headed

Written mental dialogues are a remarkable tool if you're living in a steady-state regression. A single dialogue can be your depth gauge for how far under you are. Try writing a dialogue when you're swimming in the Trench and read it when you've come up a little. It offers helpful perspective on how your mind works when you are regressed.

A sequence of dialogues creates the opportunity to fight for clarity as you map the minds of the problematic people in your life. It occurs by making increasingly accurate

and powerful responses to the same moves from your antagonists which typically make your mind fall apart. Written mental dialogues bring you “face to face” with the difficult people in your life within the space of your inner mental world. But the real issue is not face-to-face, but rather, mind-to-mind.

Steady-state regressions resolve in the same intersubjective mental space in which traumatic mind mapping and disgust brain reactions occur. The trajectory of Section Three is moving towards creating the intense moments of meeting you need to (A) deal with your antagonist, (B) produce a high level of neuroplasticity, (C) repair your traumatic mind mapping, and (D) resolve your steady-state regression.

As far as your inner mental world is concerned, written mental dialogues are closer to real-world interactions than revisualizations. Whereas you’re passively watching prior events in revisualizations, in written mental dialogues you are *interacting* with your antagonist anew. That’s a world of difference to lots of people, who have no trouble revisualizing past interactions, but dealing with their antagonist in a written mental dialogue freaks them out!

Written mental dialogues and face-to-face encounters with your antagonists have a lot in common, including the remarkable impact they have on the brain. But the anxiety generated by writing mental dialogues pales in comparison to real-world encounters. It’s one thing to screw up your courage and talk straight with the people in your inner mental world. There’s a whole other level of anxiety, meaning, purpose, and utility to do this in the real world with real people.

Next chapter, we'll focus on the life-changing experience of facing real-world antagonists, who instill traumatic mind mapping and turn your brain to spaghetti. I strongly encourage clients to do the necessary preparation for these interactions. In this book, previous chapters laid the groundwork you'll need to be able to keep up with the action. Our next chapter reveals some of the most powerful things you can do to get out of the box you're living in.

So, previously I described Chapter Nine (revisualizations) as launching yourself for the surface. Written mental dialogues provide additional oxygen and sustenance to get you there. Our next two chapters complete your journey from living at the bottom of the Mariana Trench to living the surface, where you're no longer operating in a steady-state regression. Let's get to it!

Chapter 11: Facing Your Antagonist Puts the Surface Within Reach

Our final two chapters address the penultimate experience our prior discussions have led us to: Dealing with your antagonists face to face in real-time. I fully understand the enormous difference between this and written mental dialogues with the antagonists in your head. Just contemplating a real-world meeting is enough to throw some people into the Challenger Deep.

You can accomplish incredible things with written mental dialogues, whether you deal directly with your real-world antagonist or not. This is particularly true when your antagonist is deceased (like Elizabeth's father). But if you're dealing with severe regressions, there is often no substitute for dealing with your antagonist directly if he or she is alive. I realize this triggers loads of questions and concerns in your mind, and I'll address them later in this chapter.

Let's remember why we're contemplating disquieting and disruptive interactions with the important people in your life: The issue at hand is getting out of a steady-state regression and living a better existence. Living regressed doesn't give you the right to beat up on other people—but it does make you more likely to do this.

So here's where confronting yourself first and assuming you're regressed until proven otherwise are real important. Together, they keep you from running off half-cocked trying to set other people straight about who they really are. The real issue here is

who *you* are. Or more accurately, who you're going to be. The issue is daring to take a new place in the real world you've never occupied before.

If you're in an emotionally-fused relationship, this automatically happens when you force yourself to keep your functioning up when you would normally fall apart. These situations frequently arise when your antagonists make moves on you. Keeping yourself together and responding effectively when this happens turns potentially-deleterious interactions into healing and helpful experiences for you.

Presuming you're regressed has multiple layers. Presuming you're living in a steady-state regression doesn't give you license to call out other people "to save your own life." But if presuming you're regressed makes you strive for better functioning when the people around you are losing it, that's what it's supposed to do. Everyone benefits.

"Calling out other people" and "calling bullshit" are cheap imitations of taking a new position in the world. If you're going to call out anyone, make sure it's yourself. This perspective is crucial because soon I'll talk about demonstrating you can see your antagonists for who they are. The point is you're revealing something about *yourself*, not about them. Said differently, this issue isn't that you can see *them*, the issue is *you're not blind!*

This revelation upsets the stability of relationships that depend on you being blind to your antagonist. When the holes in your autobiographical memory and gaps in your mind mapping radar are no longer there, these relationships become unstable. Keeping

your functioning up under these intense and meaningful circumstances helps resolve steady-state regressions.

Here's another layer of presuming you're regressed: It means you have to really watch *yourself*. Keep a lid on yourself. Don't be impulsive. Be cautious about what you're seeing because you're regressed. Don't take what you're feeling in the moment too seriously. If you're completely off the wall, paranoid, and narcissistic, presuming you're regressed is still your best strategy. You don't want to confuse an acute regression with Enlightenment.

And at the same time, if you're living in a steady-state regression, you must take your suppressed functioning more seriously than you usually do. This means empowering yourself to end the borrowed functioning in emotionally-fused relationships in order to resolve your steady-state regression. Speaking up, taking new positions, and daring to occupy a new place in the world. Letting your antagonists know you can see them. Taking action when you usually wouldn't.

Am I contradicting myself? Not for a moment. Am I proposing the impossible? You better hope not. I'm describing what it means to be awake. It doesn't mean you automatically see the truth. It means being vigilant for how you are blind to yourself and the different ways you might not see things straight. After confronting yourself about where you might be wrong, if you still see something that needs to be addressed, you stand up and do what it takes to handle it appropriately. When done from the best in you

rather than the worst in you, presuming you're regressed improves your accuracy and doesn't immobilize you.

This balance of self-restraint and self-empowerment is the hallmark of differentiation. It is the key to a successful life. It is what living on the surface is all about. Exercising self-restraint and self-empowerment while interacting with your antagonists gets you out of the Mariana Trench and lets you get on with your life. Simply arguing with them keeps you stuck forever.

Everything you learned about written mental dialogues applies to dealing with antagonists in real life.

Facing big Ugly Fish

In Section Three, we've focused on resolving steady-state regressions and "waking up in the middle of a nightmare." We started by encouraging you to map your antagonist's mind in visualizations and written mental dialogues. What constitutes a good response in written mental dialogues is generally a good response to make to your corresponding real-world antagonist. The methods we discussed in Chapter Ten are the same ones to use in a live encounter.

But let's not kid ourselves. Dealing with your real-world antagonist never boils down to just methodology. You won't believe how helpful it is to understand what a "move" is and know how to recognize and effectively deal with them. However, this

knowledge is no substitute for will power, commitment and courage. You'll need all four if you're going to deal successfully with your antagonists. The following discussion assumes you're ready to do this. "When you're ready" gets back to our prior talks about operating at the upper level of your window of tolerance.

Three points to remember

Dysfunctional partners, parents and children are the toughest real-world antagonists most people face. Dealing with these antagonists is more complicated than facing dysfunctional friends, bosses and co-workers because they are not replaceable.

Three basic principles are incredibly helpful when you begin to address them:

First, accept that people who are important to you will make moves on you. You don't need a jaundiced view of people, just an adult understanding of human nature. Stop being incensed when someone you care about tries to manipulate you. The more regressed people are, the more likely they will make moves on you, regardless of how important you are to them. It goes back to what we said earlier: People who can't control themselves control the people around them.

Second, remember that antagonists who make difficult-to-handle moves have good mind-mapping ability. It's hard to hold onto this! When your mind mapping collapses, you erroneously assume your antagonists don't have mind-mapping ability and don't know what they are doing. Your mind prefers this error because it diminishes the significance of their (in)actions. You don't want to recognize they are using their mind-mapping ability to track you.

Third, you're probably experiencing traumatic mind mapping. It's a shock to realize someone you care about is trying to manipulate you. The same thing happens when you realize your map of his or her mind is probably off in multiple ways. Anticipatory traumatic mind mapping can further blind you. You may have no accurate idea what's going on in his or her head, even if you are generally hypervigilant and suspicious!

It's possible to have relationships where people don't make moves on each other. But this requires people who can regulate their own emotions and handle conflicts of interest. It takes people who aren't living in steady-state regressions. Being blood relatives doesn't change this! If you want relationships where people don't exploit each other, swim for the surface!

For example, Elizabeth's mother called Elizabeth to ask for "a little favor." Elizabeth's mother wanted her to run an errand that her mother could do for herself. Going to the clothing store to pick up her mother's purchases was no big deal per se. Elizabeth's mother wasn't asking for something completely outrageous—although it was self-indulgent--it was the way she did this that set Elizabeth off.

Elizabeth's mother kept insisting her primary purpose was for Elizabeth to see if she wanted something in the store. She presented it as picking up her purchase was just an incidental thought. Elizabeth's mother wanted to portray herself as always looking out for Elizabeth, rather than thinking of herself first. She kept making moves that masked

the fact she was asking for something. This required Elizabeth to go along by acting like she didn't see that her mother expected to be indulged.

Actually, this was a test. Elizabeth's mother was testing to see if their typical interaction patterns were still intact. This move this week was a follow-up to her prior move last week. That's when Elizabeth's mother asked Elizabeth to agree to an unequal distribution of her estate that favored Elizabeth's brother. You don't ask your daughter to go blind when you're asking her to agree to her own deprivation.

This exemplified how Elizabeth's mother repeatedly pressured Elizabeth to defer to her will and control. Both moves were part of ongoing borrowed functioning that existed since Elizabeth was a young girl. That's when Elizabeth's mother took her as her "confidant," forcing Elizabeth to act like she didn't know her mother was having an affair. This history of traumatic mind mapping led Elizabeth to believe her mother was as blind to herself as she was to Elizabeth.

Real-world interpersonal neurobiology

If you're serious about applying interpersonal neurobiology, the name of the game is neuroplasticity. You want to make your brain more able to change through situations involving high meaning and moderate anxiety.

Best applications of interpersonal neurobiology occur in face-to-face meetings, followed by video conferencing where you can see each other. Telephone calls are the next step down. While extensive exchanges of emails and letters help some clients,⁵⁵ they

generally lack the immediacy, heightened anxiety and meaning, and opportunity to respond directly to your antagonist that make live encounters so beneficial. Chat and brief emails offer little benefit.

Here are some general goals to keep in mind if you're going to interact with your antagonist,

1. *Generate a high-plasticity interpersonal encounter.* Create a “now“ moment of meeting that revolves around (a) long-standing unresolved issues and (b) what your antagonist is doing while interacting with you.
2. *Try to make the interaction end positively for you.* This requires forcing yourself to map your antagonist's mind in real-time while you are interacting, so you can respond to his or her maneuvers. Prior written mental dialogues with the corresponding antagonist-in-your-head really help.
3. *Show your antagonist you can see him or her.* Revealing you know who this person is and what he or she is doing has a profound impact on your brain/mind and your relationship with your antagonist. You probably don't want to do this, because you fear it will trigger his or her bad behavior and create more traumatic mind mapping for you.

Show your antagonist you can see him (or her)!

4. *Keep your mind together when you usually would have spaghetti brain and disgust reactions.* If you come prepared to be shocked, you're less likely to

feel overwhelmed. You have to fight for clarity when your brain would typically fall apart. This takes determination, will power, and courage, and repeated written mental dialogues.

Incorporating more adaptive responses into stressful real-life interactions enhances brain restructuring.⁴¹ What might have caused traumatic mind mapping in the past now becomes curative--if you keep your brain from falling apart while processing this. PTSD patients receiving exposure therapy are encouraged to participate in real-life situations linked to their trauma. The aim is to overcome anticipated danger by provoking fear reactions and extinguish them by staying in place, focusing on the trauma reminders, and realizing you're safe. CNT takes this further by changing your interactions with your antagonist.

Modify your relationship

I've said one predictor of treatment failure is attempting to maintain a relationship with a highly dysfunctional person which requires you to live in a steady-state regression with your functioning suppressed. Dealing with your antagonist in real-time is how you change this. How you do this in each relationship is unique, as is how far you have to go because your antagonist's responses dictate both. There are, however, some general guidelines worth repeating:

Shift the locus of control from your antagonist to yourself. Do this by controlling what you say and do. Don't foolishly issue ultimatums or make threats or tell your antagonist what he or she must do.

Keep your message simple. Don't make every possible point you can. Don't bury your message in secondary issues. Stay with your main point. Don't get sidetracked by your antagonist's accusations.

Keep your antagonist from getting around, sliding underneath, or walking over you. You don't have to "pin" your antagonist or extract a confession, admission, or apology. You don't have to "come out on top." You just need to keep your antagonist from walking around you because this demonstrates you can see him or her.

It's not necessary to cut off your relationship with your antagonist, nor do I recommend it. (I've seen clients *avoid* dealing with their antagonists and preserve the status quo by cutting off contact with them.) But it *is* necessary to change the relationship. Your initial moves are landmark because you're announcing you're not blind anymore. Still, you haven't yet defined your position or dealt with your antagonist's reactions. There's usually more benefit in continuing to interact (at least for some time).

Handling people who make moves on you

Dealing with antagonists basically means handling their moves. We've been preparing you to do this all along. In Chapter Nine we started talking about recognizing manipulative moves in revisualizations, and using this to map out what someone wants. In Chapter Ten, we took this a step further and focused on responding to your antagonist's moves in written mental dialogues.

Here, in Chapters Eleven and Twelve, we'll take the final step of dealing with your real-world antagonists' moves in face-to-face interactions. The same way someone making moves on you often triggers acute regressions, handling people who make moves on you is a great way to gain control of your regressions. You'll get to watch Elizabeth go through this in this chapter, and Stephan and Anne Marie in the next one.

We're going to delve into handling moves in ways we haven't until now, including a six-part time-tested strategy. Pay attention to the steps I'll outline because, just like gold standard responses, they are "best practices." I'm going to start at the very beginning to help you develop the right attitude. You're not the new sheriff in town sniffing out the bad guys, or the exorcist priest rooting out satanic worshipers who make moves on unsuspecting town folk.

A "move" is an attempt to influence or manipulate you or someone else. Not all moves are negative. Deliberately misleading your husband about his surprise party is an example of a positive move. "Emergency lies," big lies, withholding information, and sexual seduction are all interpersonal moves. Some moves are more prosocial than others.

When I interrupt my clients' attempts to avoid difficult issues, I'm making a move. When they make a move, I make a countermove. If I couldn't handle their moves or make good moves myself, I wouldn't be a good therapist. I'm quite willing for clients to map my moves too. Discussing this with them creates intense moments of meeting.

Dealing with moves doesn't require counter-intelligence operations. You don't have to "get" or "catch" your antagonists and prosecute them for capital crimes. It's a matter of accepting that even within families and marriages, people make moves on each other—and the more dysfunctional the people are, the more likely these moves will be exploitive.

Once you recognize someone's making a move on you, the action slows down and you can watch it happening. This makes it easier to deal with.

Step 1: Watch the move

Your first order of business is realizing your situation. You're not having a casual conversation when someone makes a move on you. You're interacting with an antagonist who wants something from you or to happen to you. He or she is attempting to establish a picture of reality that supports or justifies the move he or she is making.

Let's go back to when Elizabeth's mother sent her a cryptic email saying, *"If you have time, I'd like to discuss something with you about your inheritance. Let me know if you're interested. Love, Mom."*

Elizabeth could feel her stomach tighten as she read this. She could feel her mother making a move on her. What she couldn't figure out at the time was where this was going. This was caused, in part, by Elizabeth's mother being intentionally vague. The other factor was Elizabeth was already starting to have anticipatory traumatic mind

mapping. Did you notice how this enormous issue of inheritance division seemingly came out of nowhere?! Elizabeth's mother rarely did anything without a motive.

When Elizabeth responded and agreed to meet, her mother kept going on and on about Elizabeth not needing to bother if she was too busy. This left her confused because her mother was raising a seemingly important topic as if it wasn't a high priority.

Elizabeth asked for some idea what this conversation was going to be about, but her mother said she preferred to wait until they were together.

When they met, Elizabeth's mother said: "I've given this a lot of thought, and I've decided that 'equal' isn't always the same thing as 'fair.' Your brother has two kids, and you have one. He has more need than you. So, I'm dividing my estate and giving him sixty-five percent. By the time both of you get done sending your kids to college, it will feel like I helped you about the same amount.

"As I've said, I've given this a lot of thought. But if you don't think this is a good idea, I could change my plans. I'd like to go ahead, but nothing is set in stone. What do you think?" Elizabeth's mother paused to take in Elizabeth's reaction.

Elizabeth couldn't think of what to say. She had total spaghetti brain!

"Well, I certainly didn't mean to leave you speechless!" Elizabeth couldn't miss her mother's histrionic brittleness.

"Don't just sit there like I've asked you to set your hair on fire! Elizabeth! Say something!"

Elizabeth felt dazed! She had traumatic mind mapping. She knew she was sinking into the Mariana Trench. Her mother had just blown her mind! She needed time to *think* and get her feelings under control.

“I need to think about this before I say anything...In fact, I think I need to go.”

Elizabeth started to gather up her things.

“You don’t like my plan!”

“Mom, I didn’t say that!”

“You don’t have to say anything, I can tell!”

“I want a chance to think about this.”

“It’s OK! I’ll change my plan!”

“You don’t have to change your plan. Mom. I just need time to think about this.”

“OK...So you’ll let me know what you think?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“I hope I haven’t hurt your feelings. I was only thinking about what would be good for both of you.”

“You haven’t hurt my feelings. Let me think about this. Maybe it’s OK.”

Step 2: Analyze the move

Moves are always self-revealing. Use your antagonist’s moves to map his or her mind. The style of the move is part of the story. Here’s another part: Whatever your antagonist is doing, he expects to get away with it. This not only tells you about his

perception of the situation, it reveals his map of YOU. How does this person see you? What does he feel about you? How does he feel about what he is doing to you?

When Elizabeth looked at what her mother was doing, she saw her mother set up this meeting to get her to sign off on this new version of her will. Basically, Elizabeth's mother was asking Elizabeth to participate in her own deprivation and unfair treatment. She was asking Elizabeth to go blind to what she was doing. Moreover, she didn't want Elizabeth to have time to think about this before agreeing. Elizabeth's mother wasn't asking to borrow her car, she was asking to borrow Elizabeth's mind.

Elizabeth's mother wanted to position herself as if she was thinking of both her children, although it seemed clear she was primarily thinking about what was best for Elizabeth's brother. At worst, she had it in for Elizabeth. Either way, who wants to think about your mother like this? Elizabeth's mother seemed to count on this.

Elizabeth's mother was making an issue between herself and Elizabeth, where there didn't need to be one. She was free to handle her estate any way she preferred. She didn't have to tell Elizabeth a word about it.

But Elizabeth's mother wanted Elizabeth to agree to her plan, and she knew in advance Elizabeth wasn't going to be happy. Most parents would recognize that Elizabeth would feel like her mother wasn't invested in her. Your mind doesn't want to consider that Elizabeth's mother was a shrewd mind-mapper.

Are you tracking how Elizabeth's mother was pushing for instant acquiescence? Her mother didn't like it when Elizabeth took the time to decide what was happening and

how she wanted to respond. When Elizabeth didn't immediately agree to whatever her mother wanted, Elizabeth's mother made sarcastic comments about Elizabeth not caring about her anymore.

When Elizabeth had time to think about this, she realized her mother's handling of her estate was another version of how she liked to hit Elizabeth when she was younger: She liked to suddenly slap Elizabeth's face without warning to maximize the element of surprise. Elizabeth's mother enjoyed cold-cocking Elizabeth. In bringing up the issue of inheritance the way she did, Elizabeth's mother was pushing Elizabeth to stay blind to this pattern.

Step 3: Break the move into its parts

Usually, a move has more than one aspect to it. Break the move into its component parts. Studying each piece individually allows a granular analysis. There were several parts to what Elizabeth's mother was doing.

- A. First, she was attempting to position herself from the outset as trying to be "fair."
- B. In talking about how Elizabeth was going to feel to in the future, Elizabeth's mother demonstrated the ability to anticipate how things feel to her.
- C. There's the part about Elizabeth's mother being determined to do this—but then maybe not. She wants to—unless Elizabeth doesn't want her to.

She presents it as an appeal to Elizabeth: Will Elizabeth allow her do what she wants?

- D. Elizabeth's mother presents herself as willing to give up doing what she wants for Elizabeth, because how Elizabeth feels is vital to her—except neither is true.
- E. Elizabeth's mother can see Elizabeth's immediate reaction: Elizabeth is not happy about her proposal. In fact, she's shocked. But rather than using this data to take her plan off the table, Elizabeth's mother implants a picture of hope that Elizabeth will change her mind. (Unfortunately, Elizabeth promised to reconsider this.)

Step 4: What does your antagonist want?

Figure out what your antagonist wants. You can always tell what your antagonist wants when he or she makes moves on you. They're doing it for one of two reasons:

- To move you into a position you don't currently occupy, and you don't want to be in, or
- To move you out of a position you currently hold that he or she doesn't want you to have.

Once you figure out the positions people are trying to maneuver you into or out of, you know what they want. And if you know what they want, you can predict their behavior. Knowing what people want and what they're likely to do helps you deal much better with moves they make on you.

Look at each piece of your antagonist's move through this lens: What option does your antagonist want to take away from you? What position does he or she want you to occupy or vacate? Then look at it as a whole and answer these questions again.

After their meeting, Elizabeth didn't sink into as deep an acute regression as she would have in the past. She knew she was wobbly. She could have ended up in the Mariana Trench. She couldn't believe her mother would pull a major stunt like that, even though she had seen her mother do manipulative things like this all her life.

Elizabeth was so busy trying to keep her head on straight, her lack of anger escaped her attention. She was preoccupied trying to think through her mother's onslaught of densely packed moves, one after the other. Judging from her behavior, Elizabeth's mother wanted to move Elizabeth into a position of anxiety, uncertainty and discomfort. Moreover, she wanted Elizabeth to submit to her will like a child, and be compliant with whatever she did.

Elizabeth's mother also wanted Elizabeth to give up any sense of ease between the two of them. She wanted to take away any generosity or benevolence involved in whatever money Elizabeth received.

By the next day, Elizabeth was doing better. She was unpacking pieces of her interaction with her mother, letting herself look at what was going on. If she had avoided this, as she usually would have, Elizabeth would have been unprepared for her mother's next move.

That evening, Elizabeth's mother sent an email. It read, "Everything OK?" She was probing Elizabeth to see if she was still willing to play along. She was checking to ensure their system of borrowed functioning was still intact. How could two simple words be so loaded?!

Elizabeth knew her mother was anxious and looking for reassurance. The real message was "*I'm not OK, reassure me!*" Elizabeth recognized this as another move. Once she saw it this way, she knew what to do.

Elizabeth waited several days before responding. During that time, she thought about what her response should be. She didn't want to say, "Yes, everything's OK." She also didn't want to say, "Everything's not OK." Elizabeth knew this opened the door for her mother positioning herself as concerned for her daughter, who wasn't doing well.

Sharks often "bump" their prey just before they attack, to see what kind of response they get. Similarly, your antagonists may contact you to check you out or put things back where they were. The best way to handle a probe is to figure out what they want to find out about you. Elizabeth's mother wanted to know if their old mother-daughter pattern of interacting was still intact.

Two days later, Elizabeth wrote back, "I'm fine. I've been thinking about our last conversation. We should talk again. Why don't you come for dinner and we'll discuss this." The time lag and content of Elizabeth's message said things were changing.

The next day Elizabeth's mother responded, "I'm so relieved. I was worried about you. I'll be happy to come to dinner. I'll bring dessert. I'll assume you're not on a diet!"

Elizabeth interpreted this to mean, “*I’m going act like nothing is happening!*” She also took her mother’s comment about dieting as a dig.

When Elizabeth’s mother came for dinner, the conversation finally turned serious:

“Mom, I want you to know that you hurt my feelings.”

“I didn’t know that, Elizabeth! I’m glad you told me!”

“I’d like you to be more sensitive to my feelings.”

“Now that you’ve told me, I’m happy to do that! I’m glad we can talk like mothers and daughters should.”

“But I want you to take me seriously this time! I feel like you don’t really listen to me.”

“Of course, I listen to you! You’re my daughter! I want you to feel like you can always come to me. About anything!”

“If you truly feel that way, I want you to change back to splitting your estate equally. I don’t think it’s fair if I get one third and my brother gets two thirds!”

“Oh, my! I didn’t know you were going to feel like that! I thought you might see your way to let me do this the way I want. He has two small children, and you have one, and your child is almost grown.”

Elizabeth sounded apologetic. “I’m sorry I’m disappointing you. But I need to stand up for myself.”

“I’m sorry you feel this way too. You don’t think you’ll change your mind on this, do you?”

“I don’t think so. Sooner or later, I have to stand up for myself.”

“Is it necessary that you make your great stand on this issue?”

“I think so.” Elizabeth sound like she wasn’t completely sure.

You can see Elizabeth’s struggles from her responses: There’s a complete absence of mapping her mother’s mind. She continues to hope her mother will turn around and become the mother she wants. She’s not watching her mother’s refusal to get the best in her to stand up when their relationship calls for it. She allows her mother to walk around her.

Perhaps the good thing in this conversation is Elizabeth daring to speak up at all. But this is nothing to celebrate. Elizabeth follows her mother’s lead even though she opened the conversation. She’s not confronting her mother about proposing a distribution her mother knew would hurt her feelings.

Step 5: Map your antagonist’s mind

Keep your antagonist’s mind-mapping ability in mind. Overcome your reluctance to map your antagonists’ minds. The closer they are to you, the more you’ll have difficulty remembering they have mind-mapping ability, and they can anticipate or see the impacts of their actions. It’s particularly hard to consider the possibility they have antisocial empathy, and they’re *enjoying* what they’re doing.

Elizabeth was having difficulty looking eye-to-eye with her mother. She didn’t want to accept that her mother had mind-mapping ability. Her mother wanted to act like

she wasn't manipulating Elizabeth, and Elizabeth wanted to see it that way too. But by shifting to a third-person view to revisualize their interaction, Elizabeth could see her mother knew she didn't want to go along. Her mother could feel her reluctance and

Make yourself map your antagonist's mind!

What does he (or she) want?!

discomfort but was asking Elizabeth to do it anyway.

Elizabeth also mapped her mother's attitude towards her: Her mother felt confident she would get away with this. She figured Elizabeth would forget about it or at least not hold it against her. She wasn't too worried about damaging her relationship with Elizabeth.

Step 6: Respond to the move

Respond from your own picture of reality. Don't let your antagonist control your view of reality. Pick a topic or issue that is meaningful to you, carries your message, and gives you good ground from which to respond. Don't let your antagonist dissuade you from the position you want to occupy. Don't get sidetracked disputing points your antagonist makes.

Respond to each piece of your antagonist's move. Challenge each part of your antagonist's move. Stay on message in your responses. Make sure you let your antagonist know you can see him or her.

For Elizabeth, this was the hardest part, because her mother was playing “*You don’t see me!*” to the hilt. But this extended as far back as adolescence, when Elizabeth’s mother failed to respond to Elizabeth’s plea for help with being sexually uncomfortable with her father and brother. Elizabeth was supposed to forget about this—and did for much of her life.

Elizabeth had plenty to discuss with her mother. She wasn’t ready to talk with her mother about sexual issues growing up, and facing the current issues on the table seemed more immediate and important. Since many old issues were replaying in the present, Elizabeth’s best option was to address what was currently happening. Handling things differently in the present is the best way to settle long-lingering matters. Once Elizabeth decided to reveal that she could see her mother, the pieces fell into place.

Make yourself respond to your antagonist’s move.

Elizabeth addresses her mother

In their next conversation, Elizabeth took a definitive step with her mother. She was increasingly angry at her mother’s refusal to hold herself accountable for anything. But Elizabeth kept her focus on the immediate situation and only discussed her mother’s latest maneuver.

Elizabeth started in with, “Let me start by saying your money is yours to do with as you see fit. You don’t have to be fair in how you distribute it to your children. You

don't have to answer to me for anything you do with it. But I'm not going to go along with the premise you floated last time we talked, that you were trying to be fair to both of your children. What you proposed was a sweet deal for my brother and sour grapes for me."

Mother looked startled and angry. "I beg your pardon! I'm not following you!"

"I remembered how you talked about how your proposed distribution would feel to me in the future."

"I'm always thinking about how you're feeling."

Elizabeth paused. "That's what I realized. I didn't want to accept this at first. But then I realized it's the truth."

"You don't want me to think about your feelings?!"

"No. I realized that you thought about how I was going to feel about your proposal before our last meeting. You took my feelings into account."

"I wasn't sure how you would feel about it. That's why I asked you."

"No, you had a pretty good idea about how I was going to feel about it. You wanted to go ahead anyway. And you wanted me to sign off on the deal so I would have no room to be angry with you later on."

Elizabeth's mother replied, "How terrible that you have to think things like that!" Her message was, "*How terrible YOU are for thinking of me like that!*"

"It's terrible that you *do* things like that."

"Elizabeth! How can you talk to your mother like this!"

“I kept telling myself you are so blind you don’t know what you’re doing. I didn’t want to believe that you could know this would hurt me and then do it anyway.”

Any shred of mock concern was replaced by a snarl. *“How should I know how you’d feel?! What’s the harm in asking?! Can’t a mother ask a question?!”*

“You’re acting like you have no idea who I am! That hurts all by itself. But then it hurts because you *do* know me. You’ve mapped my mind. That blew me away when I realized it. But there’s the other thing: You tell me you’re thinking about my welfare all the time, and you expect me to act like this is true, but you don’t show it. If I was a stranger, you’d do a better job of predicting how I’d feel about you leaving my brother more money than me.

“OK! OK! I’ll change my plans. I won’t do it!”

“It’s not OK! Do whatever you want with your money! I don’t want to be involved in it! Even if you couldn’t anticipate how I’d feel before we talked last time, you could see my reaction right there, plain as day. I couldn’t even hide it! I was shocked! But rather than retract your proposal, you made it clear you wanted me to continue considering it.”

“I can’t believe this! You’re forbidding me to ask you a question!! Do I need permission to talk to you again?!”

“No! I’m forbidding you from acting as if you care about me when you don’t!”

Heading for the surface!

As you can see, Elizabeth's functioning was coming up. Her responses were increasingly sophisticated, cogent and direct. This was a direct result of her work with written mental dialogues.

The biggest mistake you can make is attempting to deal with your antagonist without proper preparation. Don't go in unprepared. Elizabeth wrote loads of mental dialogues with the mother-in-her-head about her manipulations, which I reviewed and sent back with comments and suggestions. *Written mental dialogues allow preparation that isn't possible if you only stick to real-world encounters.*

Last chapter I said that what you learn about written mental dialogues would apply to dealing with real-world antagonists. I'll briefly summarize what we discussed to jog your memory:

1. Discover the position your antagonist wants to maneuver you into or out of.
2. Use your antagonist's move to figure out what he or she wants.
3. Force yourself to make a response.
4. Respond directly to what he or she is doing that moment.
5. Make gold-standard responses. Comment on your antagonist's moves as they occur.
6. Make just one point each time you respond.
7. Stay on message.
8. Present your antagonist with questions requiring responses.

9. Keep your antagonist from getting around you, sliding underneath you, or walking over you.

These are what you should be doing with real-world antagonists. Each one was something Elizabeth *didn't want to do* with her mother. It meant dealing openly with her

Make gold standard responses like you learned in Chapter Ten.

mother's constant manipulations, reality-tweaking, and misconstructions. That's why it was so life-changing when Elizabeth spoke to her mother the way she did. If you look over Elizabeth's responses, you'll see she applied virtually all of these points.

As you map your antagonist more accurately, anxieties often arise about having this new knowledge. Elizabeth started feeling like she carried top-secret information that could blow up her mother. She was anxious about relating to her mother, knowing what she now knew. She also started having conflicts about whether to mask her mind or not came up. Partly she feared being unable to mask her new understanding; partly she didn't want to mask at all. She knew letting her mother know she could accurately see her would impact their relationship. Anticipatory traumatic mind mapping told her this could trigger a more upsetting (regressed) version of her mother.

Elizabeth was tempted to continue appearing to be blind to her mother, to avoid destabilizing her mother's functioning. Previously I described this as the characteristic of people who fail in treatment: Willingness to remain impaired to maintain a relationship with a highly dysfunctional person.

Increase your differentiation

The process of modifying your relationship with your antagonist requires and results in increased differentiation. Handling yourself in real-time requires mind-mapping ability, perspective-taking, empathy, cognitive flexibility, and emotional control to handle manipulative moves while you're fighting off spaghetti brain from traumatic mind mapping. I know this sounds like juggling six balls at once. But this is not an impossible task. It's how everyone gets the job done.

Changing the way you relate to your antagonist helps you develop (1) a clearer sense of who you are, (2) more ability to soothe your emotions, (3) more control of your over-reactivity, and (4) greater forbearance and perseverance together with knowing when to stop. These are the Crucible 4 Points of Balance we've previously discussed. You can enhance your 4 Points of Balance through revisualizations, written mental dialogues, and real-life interactions with your antagonists. As you can feel in this chapter, dealing with your antagonist in real-time creates the biggest stretch. That stretch is you pushing the limits of your development.

I believe there's a part in all of us that yearns to do good if given the opportunity. Perhaps this may sound like I've gone to sleep and I'm telling myself I'm awake. But it's no different than recognizing we all have the same opportunistic impulse to do bad things too.

I try to mobilize this urge to do good in my clients. Our love of the truth, our impulse to do the right thing, and our drive to seek the light. Throughout *Living at the*

Bottom of the Ocean I've referred to this as getting the best in you to stand up. That's the part that makes you swim as hard as you can for the surface regardless of the costs.

Elizabeth faces her nightmares

Elizabeth decided it was time to stand her ground with her mother. She refused to act like she couldn't see her mother anymore. Her mother pulled one too many reality tweaks to maintain her self-image, and Elizabeth finally commented about this.

Elizabeth said, "I said the F-word at school when I was nine years old, and you were called to the principal's office. Afterwards, we sat outside the house in your car, and you shrieked at me until I broke down sobbing. Then you offered me some chocolate cake to compensate."

Elizabeth's mother grabbed the moral high ground. "I remember being mortified that you embarrassed your family in public with your disgraceful display of bad manners."

"Lots of times I ended up tell you, *I'll say or do whatever you want! Just leave me alone!* That wasn't the only time."

"That's the problem, Elizabeth! You think you can tell me what to do! You can't do that! Sometimes you needed discipline!"

"I remember you and Dad screaming at each other all the time. You threw a glass of water in his face, and he threw the glass against the wall and smashed it to pieces. There was no discipline!"

“How dare you bring up things between your father and me! What happens in a marriage is private!”

“It’s not private when I’m cutting my feet on the glass!”

“I couldn’t control your father! He never listened to me!”

“He, at least, was predictable! You frequently slapped my face without warning!”

“Sometimes you needed to be put in your place for your own good, right then and there!”

“I remember telling you and Dad, ‘*You will not hit me again!*’

“Of course, I remember, Elizabeth! You were always acting like you could order your father and me around in our own house!”

Elizabeth chose this time to bring up her mother’s complicity in her father’s and brother’s inappropriate sexual behavior. This was brewing ever since Elizabeth started writing mental dialogues. Elizabeth made a deliberate decision when she dared to broach this topic. Holding her mother accountable for falling short was previously unimaginable. Anything that made her mother look less than the idea parent was unacceptable. The resulting tidal wave of moral outrage, manipulation of meanings, mischaracterization of situations, and attacks on Elizabeth’s judgement, loyalty, and sanity was pretty overwhelming.

Elizabeth looked at her mother eye to eye. “When I talked to you about my brother touching me inappropriately, you weren’t helpful at all.”

Her mother spoke from the moral high ground again. “What could I do, Elizabeth? He was my child too. I couldn’t take your word over his. He’s my son.”

“You never expressed concern for what had happened to me. You didn’t ask for any details. You dismissed my point with a load of quick responses.”

“Details don’t make something true if it’s false, Elizabeth. Why would I want to know the details?”

“When I tried to talk with you about Dad eyeballing me sexually, you wouldn’t deal with this either.”

“Maybe you hadn’t mentioned this to me like you thought you did. I’m sure I would have done something if you had told me.”

“You turned the conversation to your problems, disappointments and resentments about your own life. You told me dealing with my dad was impossible because he got so angry about everything.”

“I’m sorry if I have done anything wrong, Elizabeth. But I didn’t do anything wrong because I didn’t know. And if I knew, I couldn’t have done anything about it anyway. My hands were tied! Our marriage was rocky. I was trying to keep our family together and a roof over your heads.”

“I felt guilty for feeling disgusted by how you handled this. It made me want to hurt myself for feeling this way about you.”

“Maybe that’s your feelings telling you that you are way out of line!”

“I don’t think so. More recently, when I tried to talk about this again, first you said you didn’t remember. Then you said you remembered but I hadn’t made a big enough deal of it. You made it my fault you failed to take action. You just did it again now.”

“I can’t say or do anything without you criticizing me! Stop it, Elizabeth!”

“In all of this, you never question how you handled things!”

“I can’t second guess every decision I’ve made, Elizabeth! Is that what you expect me to do?”

“You knew dad physically hit me if I disobeyed him or didn’t immediately jump up and do whatever he wanted. If he put his hands on me, why are you so surprised he put his eyes on me too?! You act like you didn’t know who your husband was!”

At this point, the uncensored vicious regressed version of Elizabeth’s mother surfaced. “*What do you want me to say?! That I was a terrible mother?! Is that going to make you happy? YOU’RE the one who acts like you don’t know who your husband is!*”

There is was! Elizabeth was wondering when her mother was going to throw the divorce at her. It still stunned her for a moment.

The venom in Elizabeth’s mother’s response was palpable. “Quite honestly, I took your divorce into account in deciding how to divide my money!”

“Meaning, you would have preferred I stayed miserable but married to Dennis?!”

Elizabeth’s mother sounded like a preacher damning a sinner to hell. “Maybe you should have thought more about your impact on Paul!”

“You should have thought more about YOUR impact on ME! My God! I blow my mind!”



Just as Elizabeth anticipated, Elizabeth’s mother had a fit when she didn’t back off. Her mother accused her of attacking everything she ever did as a mother. What a bad mother she must have been to raise a daughter like Elizabeth! How Elizabeth must hate her! She had nothing to live for! Everything she had invested in Elizabeth was a waste! She wasted her life!

According to Elizabeth’s mother, Elizabeth was at fault for taking things out of context, over-reacting and jumping to conclusions. She had done nothing wrong about her estate. She hadn’t asked Elizabeth to agree to anything. The decision was hers to make. Elizabeth was a terrible child, and she was a wounded, unappreciated, selfless mother.

Thankfully, Elizabeth prepared for this long-overdue conversation by writing the dialogues you read in Chapter 10. (Rereading those dialogues now will show you how they helped her.) They allowed her to keep her mind together and persevere when usually she’d have spaghetti brain. Although their interactions were grueling, Elizabeth came away looking better. Her brightening was so apparent, even Paul commented on it.

Ultimately, Elizabeth didn’t do what her mother wanted. She made it clear her mother had let her down when she needed her. Elizabeth didn’t have to be punitive to

make her point. But in being honest with herself, she realized a part of her would have liked to punish her mother. Admitting this to herself freed her to deal with her mother and not be a pushover.

Elizabeth's dealings with her mother were watershed experiences. She became more resilient with each interaction. It wasn't clear what her mother's estate plans would be. Elizabeth was tempted to make another pitch for equal distribution. But she felt this would be like touching the proverbial "golden goose"—she would be stuck to her mother forever. Elizabeth told herself that her mother's money was "too expensive."

Elizabeth continued to maintain a relationship with her mother, albeit a very different one. She no longer thought of it as a primary connection in her life. She found the love she was looking for in healthier relationships. This wasn't a fairytale ending, but Elizabeth ended up thanking her lucky stars.

Facing her father

Are you curious about Elizabeth's final resolution with her father? He died in a single-car automobile accident several years earlier, driving off the road in a snowstorm. He had been drinking. His unexpected death stunned Elizabeth and confused her about herself. She felt guilty when she didn't cry at his funeral. Mostly, it left her feeling empty and incomplete.

Written mental dialogues provided Elizabeth with opportunities to resolve her issues with her father that otherwise didn't exist. I'm happy to show you how someone can find resolution with an antagonist who is dead. Elizabeth visualized her father as she

wrote this dialogue. His responses reflect Elizabeth's map of his mind, just as it is in all cases. A lot of people facing this situation presume they are stuck. However, my clinical experience says otherwise.

Last chapter you saw how her dialogues with her father were initially hesitant and halting but improved with practice. Elizabeth wrote almost a dozen mental dialogues with her father about how he handled sexuality with her. By midway through this series Elizabeth was able to talk straight to him, and subsequent dialogues focused on dealing with his moves.

Elizabeth: "You cornered me and hit me when I didn't kiss your ass and make you feel like you ruled the house. You wanted me to jump when you snapped your fingers. You wanted me afraid of you."

Dad: "A man's home is his castle, Beth! I wanted you to see me as the authority. Being a little afraid of authority is appropriate."

Elizabeth: "You weren't any authority. You just thought you were superior to everyone else. You purchased slums and forced Mom to clean them while you refused to work. You thought hard work was for fools. You needed to be seen as a big man, too important to work for a living like everyone else."

Dad: "You're as ungrateful as your mother, Beth! I made the money that put food on the table and a roof over your head!"

Elizabeth: "Liar! I tried to help you financially because you and Mom had terrible fights over money. I remember using as little toothpaste as possible, hoping this would

save money and make you happy. Just before you died, you made money on the buildings you sold. But otherwise, we always scrimped to make ends meet.”

Dad: “I took my responsibilities as head of the house seriously!”

Elizabeth: “How can you say that?! Your uncontrolled anger and hair-trigger temper are not good examples of that! Neither is you sexualizing your relationship with me!”

Dad: “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Elizabeth: “Did you care about your impact on me?”

Dad: “Of course, I cared! I’m your father!”

Elizabeth: “More lies! You’re no better dead than you were alive. Are you going to help me?”

Dad: “That depends on whether you piss me off.”

Elizabeth: “How did you see me?”

Dad: “I thought you were a tasty morsel.”

Elizabeth: “*A tasty morsel?! You weren’t worried about Mom getting angry about what you were doing with me, were you?!*”

Dad: “You want to know the truth, Beth? I knew she wouldn’t do anything. She didn’t really care. And I think a part of her enjoyed seeing you squirm about sex.”

Elizabeth: “I think you are culpable for my brother trying to touch me. You not only didn’t teach him to respect women, he emulated you.”

Dad: “Don’t blame him on me! I said you were a tasty morsel! He could see it too!”

Elizabeth: “You make me want to puke! How did you think I felt about this? What kind of impact did you think this would have on me?”

Dad: “Actually, Beth, I enjoyed your awkwardness. I could feel my presence have an impact on you.”

Elizabeth: “I felt exposed because you stared at my underwear when I washed and hung them up to dry.”

Dad: “Like I said, Beth, you were a tasty morsel!”

Elizabeth: “You are disgusting!! You delight in doing disgusting things!”

Dad: “Get over it! Grow up, Beth! You had this hot body! I knew you were getting felt up by boys. It was easy to imagine. What did you expect me to do? Shut my mind to this?”

Elizabeth: “That’s *exactly* what I expected you to do! But instead, you indulged yourself. You were always trying to corner me with your trapping questions,”

Dad: “It was all part of the game, Beth. It’s a male-female thing. You can’t stop it.”

Elizabeth: “No! *You* can’t stop it! Do you have any regrets?”

Dad: “I would have liked an adoring grandson. Someone I could teach about life.”

Elizabeth: “I mean regrets with me.”

Dad: “You want the truth, Beth? Not really.”

Elizabeth: “I’m glad you’re not alive to impact Paul! You were a real shitty father! You would have been a lousy grandfather too! You would have spoiled him to make him like you.”

Dad: “You’re pretty harsh, Beth. I did my best.”

Elizabeth: “No, you didn’t! That’s my point! You never thought you needed to do your best! Other people had to do their best, but not you! You were above that!”

Dad: “So now what, Beth? You’re going to hold a grudge forever?!”

Elizabeth: “Nope. I’m done with you! There is no forever! You’re dead. I’m not! Your life is over and mine is just beginning. You’ve already had too much impact on my life. I’m not wasting any more time thinking about you! I’m done with you!!”



Elizabeth got to the point where she wasn’t afraid of her father anymore. She was able to handle whatever he threw at her in the dialogues. He carried no extraordinary power in her mind. Elizabeth decided to stop writing mental dialogues with her father. She felt emancipated and done. What follows is Elizabeth’s final written mental dialogue with her father.

Elizabeth: “I want to let you know from the outset this is the last time we will speak.”

Dad: “What do you mean? You’re going to stop writing dialogues?”

Elizabeth: “With you. I’m sure I’ll still write dialogues.”

Dad: “Why stop with me?”

Elizabeth: “Because I’ve accomplished what I needed to. That’s the only reason I’ve been doing this.”

Dad: “You haven’t accomplished anything in your miserable life, Beth! What the hell do you think you’ve accomplished?!”

Elizabeth: “You don’t impact me anymore.”

Dad: “Oh yeah?! What if I tell you that you’re a taste morsel?!”

Elizabeth: “You can tell me to my face that you want to fuck me, and it’s not going to make a difference. I’ve known it all along. It means you’re disgusting. I’ve known that too. I’m not fighting it any more.”

Dad: “I like when you get angry when I needle you about sex!”

Elizabeth: “Then you’re going to be disappointed. Take a look. I’m not angry. I’m not outraged. I don’t care enough about you to be that invested. I’m no longer shocked by how low you can sink.”

Dad: “Even if I tell you how much I loved looking at your tits?”

Elizabeth: “In the past, I know I would have screamed at you that you’re disgusting. But we both know what you just did is disgusting, so there’s no point in my saying it. Does it disappoint you that you’re not able to get a rise out of me?”

Dad: “A little. When you’re angry and your face gets red, it’s like a sex flush!”

Elizabeth: “This is the second time I would have told you in the past that you’re disgusting. Want to try again?”

Dad: “So, this is it?! You’re just going to throw your father away?!”

Elizabeth: “Yup! You have nothing of value to offer me. You threw away your opportunity to be my father. You don’t deserve any caring from me.”

Dad: “Beth...”

Elizabeth: “We’re done!”

Perhaps you feel unsatisfied that Elizabeth didn’t get to say these things to her father’s face. It wouldn’t surprise me. I understand that you might want Elizabeth to “settle the score” or “get back” at her father for what he did. My own sense of outrage was mollified by the fact that Elizabeth could get better despite her father. She didn’t need to get even. She just needed to get free.

Written mental dialogues helped Elizabeth come to a workable final resolution. But how much was unresolved because her father was deceased? What seems to be important is confronting *yourself* about your abuser, and functioning better in front of him. Because of the brain’s common neural pathways, this can be accomplished regardless of whether the abuser is physically alive or not.

Dealing with Dennis

Elizabeth faced Dennis’ long history of extramarital affairs and her years of traumatic mind mapping with him. She confronted her avoidance of dealing with his infidelities. Facing the gaps in her mind-mapping radar that contributed to this was equally difficult. As time went on, Dennis’ flings became increasingly bold and obvious. So was his lying, to the point of being patently disrespectful. Someone would have to be

severely impaired or willfully blind—or both— not to see he’s chronic philandering. Elizabeth was willing to accept she had been both.

Back when I first told you about Elizabeth, I said it’s a game-changer when someone talks to me about recognizing her brain misfunctions. Elizabeth accepted that she had been seriously out of touch with herself, and she often misperceived people and situations. By comparison, admitting she was hardly present during sex was easy.

Elizabeth also talked to me about wanting to hurt Dennis. She wasn’t telling me because she was about to lose control of herself. She was demonstrating better self-control than she ever had previously. Elizabeth was ready to deal with her backlog of anger and rage. Are you surprised this was sitting underneath Elizabeth’s appeasing behavior?

Getting a divorce brought up more than Elizabeth’s fears of other people’s disapproval (especially from her mother). It brought up serious questions about her being healthy, stable and strong enough to go through with it. The whole issue of her emotional stability was front and center. Given that Dennis could be counted on to make things as difficult as possible for her, deciding to go through with this was one of the biggest decisions Elizabeth ever made. Keeping herself together through it all was a crowning achievement and proof of her progress.

Negotiating the divorce settlement turned out to be good for Elizabeth. It was nothing like the blood bath she feared. The way she handled herself co-constructed this. Elizabeth got herself a female attorney with a reputation for not being intimidated by

“bulldog” male attorneys (which Dennis hired). Elizabeth struggled with wanting to turn over tactical decisions to her.

Ultimately, Elizabeth decided she couldn’t count on anyone to protect her like a child. So, her attorney advised about her options, and Elizabeth made the decisions about what to negotiate for, what to settle for, and bottom-line issues she wouldn’t relinquish. Elizabeth ended up feeling more like an adult than ever before.

Elizabeth dealt with Dennis’ moves on her, and he pulled a lot of crap. In the past, Elizabeth would have regressed on the spot. But keeping her brain together in revisualizations and written mental dialogues paid off. She didn’t get spaghetti brain when Dennis made disgusting moves, like renegotiating terms once they reached agreements, refusing to provide financial documents, and exploiting every opportunity to delay, complicate, and frustrate a final settlement.

A “now” moment arose over property distribution. Elizabeth’s mother wanted to receive the wedding gift she had given them, a Lalique glass vase worth several thousand dollars. Dennis seized upon this to maneuver Elizabeth into giving up something he knew she wanted: a bronze statue they purchased in their early years together. Elizabeth’s mother wanted her to take the deal. After much internal struggle, Elizabeth decided to choose the bronze statue, let Dennis have the Lalique vase, and cope with disappointing her mother. Elizabeth had to hold onto herself when Dennis and her mother pressured her to cave in.

There were other “now” moments of meeting along the way. Elizabeth was able to keep up with Dennis and make gold-standard responses when they sparred verbally in face-to-face meetings. Through her reactions, she showed Dennis she could see him, and she wasn’t afraid of him anymore. Dennis saw he was dealing with a different Elizabeth than when he first envisioned divorcing her. He was less inclined to mess with this version. He couldn’t count on pushing her into an acute regression or operating in her blind spot.

In the end, Dennis made a low-but-somewhat-reasonable settlement offer. Elizabeth negotiated up to what she considered a deal she could live with, emotionally and economically. She was tempted to be more aggressive, but she decided protracted negotiations with Dennis wasn’t worth it. Her priority was to get disentangled from him as much as she could and get on with her life.

Elizabeth’s acute regressions were under control. Her *brightening* gave her an entirely different countenance. She had a warmth that made you feel safe to be around her instead of anticipating her next sudden meltdown. I thought of her as the “warm Elizabeth,” compared to the “cold Elizabeth” who first came to see me.

Elizabeth started dating. It took a while to shift from feeling like she was going back to high school, to taking her place in the world. She was smart, reasonably attractive, and she had a good sense of humor. She also had an asset many people lack:

Helping your children helps you too!

She knew how crazy she could get, and she could control it. Not exactly how you'd describe yourself on a dating website, but that's a rare and valuable trait to bring to a new relationship. Knowing this about herself helped Elizabeth be discerning about who she dated. She was vigilant to possible blind spots about these new men.

Helping Paul

Then there was facing Paul. Elizabeth anticipated this would be the most challenging part of all. Back in Chapter Seven, I highlighted the trickle-down impacts of Elizabeth's improvement on Paul. His perception of Elizabeth and Dennis changed. He used to wonder how his father could stand his mother. Finding out there were other ways to see things was quite a lesson for him.

Elizabeth earned Paul's begrudging respect by getting her regressions under control and dealing with Dennis' lies and manipulations. She didn't go on rants or wailing fits as she did in the past when Dennis tormented her. Paul could tell Elizabeth wanted to be his mother, unlike Dennis, who spent his time with his girlfriend-of-the-moment.

If I saw changes in Elizabeth's physical appearance and demeanor, you can be sure Paul noticed them too! Increasingly, she was a friend of his happiness, facilitating things he wanted instead of reflexively punishing him. When you're wondering if your mother had a brain transplant—and maybe a heart transplant too—you track her closer than a cat chasing a butterfly!

That's the beauty of the intergenerational repair of traumatic mind mapping. The more you control your regressions, the more your children map your mind to figure out what's going on. The more coherent your mind, the more self-aware you are, and the more self-control you display, the more your children map your mind which resolves their traumatic mind mapping. You don't have to be perfect. No one is regression-proof. Your kids just need three key things:

1. *They need to see you confront yourself.* Children can handle parents making mistakes. What they can't abide is when you refuse to look at yourself, because then they can't look you in the eye either.
2. *They need to see the best in you stand up.* This requires an honest rather than a half-hearted effort. Kids are amazingly forgiving when they see their parents do the best they can.
3. *You need to be consistent.* Your ongoing observable progress allows your kids to start to relax. *Your self-control builds trust.*

Elizabeth feared Paul hated and looked down on her. In truth, Paul felt those things sometimes. Fortunately, Paul no longer walked around the house thinking, "*My mother is a lunatic!*" Paul found Elizabeth less irritating--which is a big thing from a teenager! In fact, Paul was starting to think she was kind of cool.

Previously I told you Elizabeth taught Paul the Mariana Trench Model of regressions. Paul came to breakfast one morning and issued a warning: "*Don't talk to me! I'm regressed! I dreamt my girlfriend broke up with me!*" He also came home

complaining about his friends swimming in the Mariana Trench and acting like Ugly Fish! When things like this happen with your child, it makes you think the Force must be with you! Or more realistically, you figure you haven't screwed up as badly as you thought. This opened the door for the conversation Elizabeth dreaded: She talked with Paul about the impact of her regressions on him.

Elizabeth figured Paul would either deny there was anything to talk about or tell her she'd destroyed his life. Instead, Paul revealed sometimes he heard Elizabeth's voice screaming at him inside his mind when he screwed up or made stupid mistakes. This disclosure knocked Elizabeth for a loop! She felt herself diving for the Challenger Deep, but she pulled herself up and quickly recovered.

If you've negatively impacted your children through traumatic mind mapping, what can you do about this? Consider letting your children read this book, taking their age, maturity, and needs into account. If you decide it's appropriate, allow them to control how much they read. Don't make this an assignment or a book report. Offer to discuss whatever they read.

You may want to let your child talk with a therapist who works with written mental dialogues and revisualizations.⁵⁶ Many therapists don't know about this yet, but this needn't disqualify them. Start by finding a solid therapist, preferably someone versed in differentiation-based therapy. Look for an experienced therapist willing to shift over to right-brain methods outlined in *Brain Talk*.

Elizabeth's outcome

Elizabeth became more differentiated by dealing with her parents and Dennis. Severing the borrowed functioning stretched her Four Points of Balance and reduced her steady-state regression. She displayed a level of ability she was unable to access when her brain was in its previous state. It was like she had found another “gear.” It was easier for her to think. She even seemed smarter to herself. Her cruel mental voice that use to say, “*You’re not fit to take up space on the planet!*” didn’t talk to her anymore.

Elizabeth’s *brightening* was visible to other people too. She looked bright-eyed. More alive. More intelligent. Sharper thinking. More ready to laugh. People spontaneously told her she was funny—more than anyone ever realized. Elizabeth saw how they had taken her prickly demeanor to be who she was. Now they reacted to her in more pleasant ways.

People who knew her said Elizabeth seemed “lighter.” This corresponded to how she felt. It was like a huge weight had lifted from her shoulders, and she felt freer to be herself.

I continued working with Elizabeth after her divorce and had the pleasure of watching her blossom. Starting to date again was an enormous stretch for her. Luckily, she managed to meet a lovely guy, Phillipe, through a dating website. It was a classic demonstration of “the fish that you catch is determined by the bait that you use.”

Elizabeth and Phillipe started seeing each other and began a sexual relationship. For the first time in her life, Elizabeth had sex when she wasn’t regressed. This made all the difference in the world. Elizabeth got to experience being with a man who wanted her

and respected her, a man she could respect too. She and Phillippe had brutally honest conversations in which he confronted himself about his mistakes in past relationships. Given her past experiences with men, it won't come as a huge surprise that Elizabeth started falling in love with him.

One session Elizabeth came in upset about Phillippe. At first, I thought she was distraught because they were breaking up. But it turned out they agreed to a monogamous commitment and things were getting serious.

Elizabeth said, "I thought about Phillippe dying. Isn't that nuts? Maybe I want him dead! Can you believe this?!"

I said, "I'm thinking you are falling in love with Phillippe because he's confronting himself and you admire that in him. This hasn't been your experience with men, and it put you in touch with your fear of losing him. I think that's more likely than you want him dead!"

Elizabeth dissolved into tears. "How long do you think I would go crazy if Phillippe died?"

I seriously considered this for a few moments. "*Really* crazy? At your worst? Maybe four days."

Elizabeth brightened. "Four days?! I can handle that easy! I can afford to love him!"

Elizabeth subsequently told Phillippe about our conversation. She said he replied, "That's a lot more than the five minutes I figured!"

When people go from being afraid to love, to wanting to love, that's successful treatment as far as I'm concerned. The best in you emerges almost spontaneously as you complete your journey from the Mariana Trench. When you aspire to be loving more than you aspire to be loved, and your compassion for others drives you as much as your own personal needs, these are signs you're approaching the surface.

Chapter 12: Reaching Warmth and Sunlight!

Our final chapter covers the completion of your transition from living at the bottom of the ocean. As you come up from the depths, you need to know about life near the surface so you can figure out where you are.

Below the ocean floor at 13,000 feet, temperatures hover just above freezing. If you've been living seven miles down in the Mariana Trench, this near-frozen state feels like home. Only cold-blooded animals survive there. As you ascend, the temperature minimally increases to 39 degrees (4 degrees Celsius) until you're only 3,000 feet down. From there, things warm up a little.

At 660 feet deep (200 meters) you reach the thermocline, the transition between the cooler deep water below and the warmer surface water above. It's easy to tell when you reach the thermocline because the temperature suddenly increases to a balmy 55 degrees Fahrenheit (13 degrees Celsius). When you feel this warming, you're getting close to the surface. Perhaps you can see daylight above. You won't see vivid colors or schools of fish until you're only a hundred feet from the surface.

The "sunlight zone" is the top surface layer which interacts with the wind and waves. It's distinctly warmer because of solar gain and heat exchange with the

atmosphere. Microscopic organisms convert the sun's energy through photosynthesis, producing an endless abundance of reef life. When the water is bath-warm and you see life all around you, you have reached the shallows!

Leaving familiar waters

Perhaps you anticipate being more comfortable when you're in warmer waters. It certainly could be the case! But don't presume this if you're someone who insists on staying inside your comfort zone and never venturing out. Remember, your comfort zone is seven miles down, pitch black and colder than the smile on an Anglerfish in the process of swallowing you whole in one gulp. Ugly Fish often must adapt to the warmth and relative calm of the surface. It takes a while to stop anticipating some apex predator will catch you with your guard down and gobble you up!

Sharks often bump their prey

Previously you witnessed Stephan and Anne Marie's efforts to deal with themselves using revisualizations and written mental dialogues. You know the issues they were facing. Last chapter we outlined a six-step framework for handling moves. Let's use it to bring you up to speed about where Stephan was in dealing with his parents:

1. *Watch the moves.* Stephan's father contacted Stephan to see if he was interested in making some "easy money." He was putting together yet

another high-risk business deal. In reality, the likelihood of it paying off was minimal.

2. *Analyze the moves.* Stephan's father wanted him to sign off on yet another pie-in-the-sky make-a-killing business deal he had cooked up. He knew he'd burnt Stephan on these kinds of schemes in the past, and yet, here he was trying to get Stephan involved again. Stephan never considered what this said about how his father saw him.
3. *Break the moves into their component parts.* Aside from the large amount of money involved, Stephan's father and mother were asking Stephan to function impaired. Like he was blind to the lack of merit in both the business deal and Stephan's father business acumen. His mother encouraged him to sell himself out by asking him to act like he appreciated his father's offer.
4. *What do your antagonists want?* Stephan's father (and mother) wanted the use of Stephan's money. But the bigger usury they were pushing for was the use of his mind. They wanted Stephan to go blind to who they were and what they wanted with him. Stephan's mother compounded this by pushing him to act like his father was doing him a favor.
5. *Map your antagonists' minds.* Stephan's father thought Stephan would go along with this one more time. He acted like Stephan wasn't onto him yet. Or, if Stephan knew what was going on, he wasn't going to call him out

about it. Stephan's mother expected Stephan to continue acting like she was whoever she said she was, and to give her whatever she wanted.

6. *Respond to the moves.* Stephan refused to give his father the money he requested. Moreover, he made it clear the money wasn't the main issue. Stephan said this a relationship issue between himself and his father and mother.

Predators patrol the escape routes

It wasn't as hard as Stephan anticipated to say he wasn't giving his father more money. He had already done this once before about the property his father wanted to buy. This second time Stephan was also more willing to face the larger issues. Once it was clear the gravy train was over, Stephan's father didn't have much to say. He disappeared into the background. Stephan's mother, however, was a different matter.

Stephan's mother had her own agenda and her own way of enforcing it. Her style was to start asking questions. Whatever you asked her or said to her, she responded with a question. From this position, she would probe until she found the weak spot in your point or argument, and then the questions would *really* start. These weren't requests for information. Stephan's mother mounted an attack of queries designed to put you on the defensive, deflect you from the point you were trying to make, and give her control of the conversation.

Lots of people use questions to control conversations. But their style of doing it and the questions they ask say a lot about who they are. For instance, Elizabeth's father

liked to start conversations by asking questions at the outset. He tried to pin you down and get you to commit to an answer before you knew his agenda. Then he would use your responses to corner you.

In contrast, Stephan's mother's questions were a more brute force approach. Whereas Elizabeth's father was sneaky and manipulative, Stephan's mother's method was authoritarian and dictatorial. She summarily took over conversations. Elizabeth's father maneuvered you by using your own words. Stephan's mother didn't feel she needed to maneuver you. Things were going to go her way, and you were going to do what she wanted. When Stephan said he wasn't giving them more money, the maternal juggernaut started up.

"I'd like to know, why you aren't going to help your father?"

Stephan replied, "I don't want to get into that right now. I think the most important thing is I'm giving you a clear answer, and I don't want to muddy the waters."

"But why not? I think you owe your father an explanation."

"I just explained why."

"No, you said you weren't going to explain why. Why don't you think you owe your father an explanation?"

Stephan dealt with his mother by refusing to answer her question. He said nothing.

Stephan's mother's responded by demanding, "*Why not?!*" trying to start her pattern all over again.

“I’m not going to answer that question.” Stephan had never done this before. He was refusing to enter into his mother’s way of controlling relationships. Stephan knew he was touching a lynch-pin issue.

Stephan’s mother was outraged! Why wouldn’t her own son tell her why he wouldn’t answer her question?! She accused Stephan of being disrespectful, withholding, hurtful, inconsiderate, unfair—whatever she could think of—to maneuver him into answering her. She did everything she could to force him into their old interaction patterns.

It wasn’t like Stephan was refusing to talk with her. Stephan stayed with his questions to his mother: Why didn’t *she* tell *him* why his father went to prison? Why couldn’t *she* recognize her husband was doing illegal things to amass the massive amounts of money they were spending? Why was she encouraging Stephan to make bad business deals with his untrustworthy father now?

Stephan’s mother continued to sidestep. When he chided her for dodging his questions but expecting him to answer hers, she coldly laid down her rules: “*I’m your mother, Stephan! I don’t have to answer your questions! I don’t answer to you!*”

Stephan took a moment to gather himself and then responded. “*When you start acting motherly towards me and looking out for my best interests, I’ll gladly answer any questions you have!*”

If Stephan hadn’t handled the mother-in-his-head in his written mental dialogues, he never would have gotten this out of his mouth! Usually, he’d have spaghetti brain

from his mother's stunningly cold pronouncement. But, because Stephan systematically prepared himself, this interaction was a turning point in his interactions with his parents.

Big fish eat little fish

Stephan's interactions with his parents continued to focus on family secrets. He had to push himself not to make errors, like acknowledging when his father made a good point, or said something true while continuing to be evasive. This wasn't just a strategic error. Stephan was padding conversations to keep his father from getting angry. When Stephan controlled himself not to do this, his father's self-control became the issue. It looked like this:

Stephan asked, "How come you never told me why you went to prison?!"

His father responded, "It's personal!"

"It's personal for me when my father disappears into jail, and no one tells me why!"

"Can't you understand it's embarrassing!"

Stephan replied, "My god! What's more important? Your embarrassment or your son!"

"Of course, you were more important! How can you think such things! I'm telling you how I felt! What more do you want me to do?!"

"I want you to talk straight for a change. What you're saying doesn't line up with what you did then or what you're doing now."

Stephan's father disingenuously asked, "What am I doing?"

“You’re refusing to consider the possibility that you fucked up with me!”

“Whatever I did, I was doing the best I could. One thing I can say about myself, I always try to do the best I can!”

In the past, Stephan’s brain fell apart when his father made an outrageous self-presentation. But this time Stephan responded, “Does that include whatever you did to go to prison? Were you the best at whatever you did?!”

Stephan’s father’s eyes widen in rage. *“How dare you! Who the hell do you think you are?!”*

Stephan paused to let his father’s onslaught pass. “Well, I used to think I was your son you cared about. Now I can see I only saw what I wanted to see.”

Stephan’s father screamed, *“You don’t see shit!”*

For a moment, Stephan debated how far to go. He shrugged his shoulders and said to himself, “Fuck it!” Stephan turned to his father and said, *“At this moment, that’s exactly what I see! I’m hoping eventually I see daylight!”*

Bottom dwellers don’t surface readily

This was quite a development given where Stephan started with his father. His interactions with his mother, whom he was even more afraid of, showed similar improvement:

Stephan asked, “Mom, how come you never told me why Dad went to prison? Didn’t you ever think I’d be curious or worried about this?”

Stephan's mother replied, "You know that whatever I did, I thought it was in your best interest, don't you?"

This was not a question. It was a command to go blind. Stephan paused for a moment, knowing any delay would be noted. "I don't want to start with that premise. I'd rather hear why you never told me."

"You were too young at the time."

"How about when I got older? Didn't you think I'd want to know why my father disappeared?"

"By that time, I didn't see any point in digging up the past. You seemed to be OK with it. You were a happy child. You never complained. You were easy to raise. You were a good boy."

"I wasn't happy, I was compliant. I knew you didn't want me to bring up the topic. The one time I did, you got very upset. But didn't you think I'd want to know once I was a teenager?"

Stephan's mother gave him a discerning glance, retaking his measure. "I guess I was thinking of your father. He was embarrassed and didn't want you to know."

Stephan didn't let her walk around him. "I'm trying to talk to you about me. ME! You're saying you were thinking about my father but not me."

Stephan's mother became indignant and reproving. "*He's your father, Stephan! You can't expect me to put you first above him!*" This attempt to make it sound like he was asking to be her top priority stunned Stephan.

“This isn’t about him! Or me! It’s about *you*! You put saving face above everything else! That’s your first concern! That’s why you never told me later what happened!”

“Well, it wasn’t like I did anything wrong!”

Stephan took a breath to gather his thoughts and keep his emotions under control. His hands were shaking and his heart was pounding. Realizing this made him pause and take another breath. It gave him another moment to reconsider how far to go. He visualized his head moving side to side and doubtfully asking himself, *“Are you ever going to say what’s on your mind?”*

Stephan looked at his mother. “Maybe you didn’t commit a prosecutable crime, but I think you did something wrong. I don’t know if you were complicit in what my father did, but you did something wrong with me. You were more concerned with how you felt than how I felt.”

It’s never too late to screw things up

If your child complains about serious wrongs he believes you committed, even if you don’t remember or agree, as a parent wouldn’t you be concerned that he sees things that way? If the accusations are particularly egregious, perhaps you keep your mouth shut and focus on soothing your hurt feelings, rather than trying to help your child. But, if you’re a decent parent, you don’t try to twist your kid’s mind. Moreover, you don’t do things you *know* will upset him. That is, if you’re a decent parent.

Stephan's father made a bad situation worse by going to Anne Marie's mother and asking her to invest in his business scheme. That alone was bad enough. But Anne Marie's mother gave him the money! To make matters worse, they both lied and hid this until Stephan and Anne Marie realized something was going on. I am perpetually amazed by the convoluted messes dysfunctional people create without necessarily planning each piece of fallout.

You can't rescue everyone

While this was going on, Anne Marie was dealing with her parents. Had she avoided this, Stephan would have had more room to dodge his own issues. But seeing Anne Marie making a real effort helped him. It gave him less opportunity to sidetrack their marital problems by fighting about her parents.

I was waiting to see if Anne Marie's hesitations in her dialogues to deal with her parents showed up in real life. When it came down to it, Anne Marie was willing to move forward. This appeared to come out her same resolve to move forward with Stephan and let the chips fall where they may. Now that she was willing to face reality with him, it made no sense to hold back with everyone else.

Anne Marie reached out to her father to talk about their almost non-existent relationship. They met for dinner, and by the time it was over, she was clear why it was that way. Things were cordial but tense at first. Her father ordered a double Scotch; she had sparkling water. As soon as Anne Marie spoke of his drinking, the atmosphere turned

chilly. By his second Scotch, Anne Marie's father wasn't interested in meaningful conversation after she said the word "alcoholism." By the time he finished his fourth Scotch, he was in no condition to drive home—but insisted on doing it anyway.

Dealing with Anne Marie's brother was much the same. Jake sounded like he couldn't wait to get together when Anne Marie first contacted him. But the day before they were supposed to meet, Jake emailed her saying something had come up. He said he'd recontact her to follow up, but he never did. Anne Marie made plans with him again, and this time he flat stood her up. Jake didn't recontact her after that, and Anne Marie decided not to pursue him further.

Dealing with Anne Marie's mother was more difficult. She acted like she wanted a closer relationship with Anne Marie. Maybe this is what she truly wanted, but she couldn't deliver her side of the relationship. Perhaps it was the just the right bait to keep Anne Marie hooked, because this was what she hoped for. Either way, things fell apart whenever Anne Marie tried to talk seriously with her mother.

It was hard to have a meaningful conversation because her mother sidetracked conversations with tangential thoughts and questions. Sometimes Anne Marie thought she did this deliberately. But other times it looked like her mother followed her associations wherever they led her.

When Anne Marie tried to stay on a given topic—particularly difficult ones-- things went to hell quickly. Anne Marie's mother's typical strategy involved grabbing the

moral high ground, dispensing vicious attacks dressed up as religious piety and prayers for Anne Marie's salvation.

For instance, wasn't it obvious why she gave Stephan's father the money for his wonderful business venture?! She did it for Anne Marie! She was also doing Stephan a favor, since she was helping his father! Why else would she do that?! Anne Marie needed to be more grateful when the Lord smiled upon her, and delivered to her a mother devoted to looking out for her best interests. This is why the Lord says to honor thy mother and father.

When Anne Marie pointed out the enormous entanglements this created, her mother quoted the bible (Mathew 5:11) "*Blessed are you when others revile and persecute you and utter false evils against you.*" The word of God was supposed to give Anne Marie's mother the last word in conversations.

When Anne Marie didn't follow this cue, her mother started "talking in tongues." *Glossolalia* is a religious practice in which the speaker, supposedly subservient and yielding to this gift from God, speaks an unknown divine language. Scientific research says glossolalia consists of nonsensical strings of syllables taken from a language the speaker knows, haphazardly put together in sentence-like units using realistic rhythm and melody.⁵⁷ All the signs said Anne Marie's mother was tenuously held together by her religious fundamentalism.⁵⁸

Appreciating Anne Marie's situation requires understanding "linguistic ideology." Anne Marie's mother presented Anne Marie with a two-choice dilemma: One option was

to relate to her mother like she was talking gibberish. The other was to act like her mother received a gift from the Holy Spirit and became a mouthpiece for the Divine. If Anne Marie acted as her mother expected, she would give her mother the use of her mind to prop up her mother's deteriorating functioning. It's the same "demand to borrow your mind" as when Stephan's mother pushed him to act as if his father was doing him a favor by asking him for money. These are classic examples of borrowed functioning and the characteristics of people who fail in therapy.

The clearer Anne Marie understood her mother, the less she thought of herself as fragile and easily overwhelmed. She had more appreciation for her own resilience. Growing up around her mother's mind would give *anyone* panic attacks! It's spooky enough when your mother starts talking word-salad! Having to respond as if you're witnessing the Divine would make sane people jump out of their skin!!

It finally made sense why Anne Marie hesitated to deal with her mother. It wasn't that she was afraid of rejection. She had anticipatory traumatic mind mapping from experiences of her mother babbling nonsense when she needed her to function. But there was still the question of how to handle the financial entanglements her mother made with Stephan's father.

Anne Marie decided that as far as she was concerned, her mother hadn't given *her* inheritance to Stephan's father. It was *her mother's* money, and Anne Marie didn't care if Stephan's father stole it, mishandled it, or pissed it away. It was not her problem. She didn't have to get involved.

Swimming away from the warmth

The impact of Stephan and Anne Marie dealing with their respective parents was predictable. They looked better, felt better, and functioned better too. They fought much less often, and when they did, it wasn't about their parents. There were still the "who's going to take out the garbage" issues of marriage to settle—the good news is when you stop regressing over them.

Relationships with parents were still big issues in Stephan and Anne Marie's marriage, but the vantage points and reasons were different. They talked openly about their own parents instead of complaining about their in-laws. Stephan and Anne Marie gave each other complete freedom to deal with their own parents and stayed out of their partner's way. When Anne Marie's mother asked to talk privately with Stephen, or Stephan's father called Anne Marie, they were redirected to their offspring to keep things straight.

This greatly enhanced Stephan and Anne Marie's marriage. Watching your partner deal with his or her dysfunctional parents rebuilds trust, respect and sexual desire. It broadens the breadth, depth and meaning of your connection. You're witnessing one of the most courageous acts of your partner's life: Deciding, once and for all, to finally wake up!

Unfortunately, as things improved between Stephan and Anne Marie, this brought up his issues with tenderness and intimacy. It didn't take much to trigger Stephan to withdraw. His reflexive response to Anne Marie's approaches was to push her away.

Now that you see who Stephan grew up with, it's not surprising this reaction was wired into his brain.

There was also another underlying dynamic surfacing that I've witnessed many times. As relationships improve, there's often a role reversal in the sexual relationship. Heretofore, Stephan was the Higher Desire Partner. But the real issue was Anne Marie wasn't interested in sex when they are arguing—which was pretty much all the time. Now that they weren't at each other's throats, it was becoming apparent that Anne Marie was actually more interested in sex than Stephan when things were good.

Underneath her somewhat tight demeanor, Anne Marie enjoyed her body. Being female was a more welcome currency for Anne Marie than for Elizabeth. She appreciated the responses she got from men. She liked getting massages, and she was sensual. Exercise made her feel good, and she liked staying trim and fit. Stephan wasn't used to dealing with a woman who enjoyed sex more often than he did.

This was the backdrop to a lovely dinner Stephan and Anne Marie shared at their favorite restaurant. Their plan was to have sex when they got home. As they got into bed, Stephan started talking about how he spent his days putting up with crazy sexy beautiful women. He should have known this would destroy Anne Marie's ardor, and at some level he did.

Stephan was feeling increasingly irritable as the time to make love approached. This wasn't the first time he experienced this. Usually, he justified his reaction by finding

something off-putting about Anne Marie. In this case, as far as Stephan was concerned, he was still unwinding from his hectic workday.

Anne Marie was distraught but not devastated by what Stephan was doing. As soon as she realized he was repeating his pattern, she stopped arguing about what he was saying. It wasn't important. It could have been anything that hurt or disappointed her enough to make her pull back from him.

Anne Marie looked at Stephan silently for a minute. Then she walked out of the bedroom, leaving him speechless. Stephan thought this was her "big move"—finally being able to walk out on him. But Anne Marie had no intention of letting it go this time. He was unprepared when, after taking two minutes to gather herself, Anne Marie returned to deal with him.

"You know, Stephan, I have the impulse to scream at you, *'Why did you do that?! You hurt my feelings!'* And unfortunately, you'd come up with some bullshit answer about something I did wrong. This time I'm not doing that, because I know the answer better than you do: You didn't do that because of something I did wrong. Everything was going great—*that's* why you did that!" Anne Marie was listening to herself as much as she was confronting Stephan.

Stephan was shocked. It wasn't just that Anne Marie described him in unflattering ways. She saw him clearly, and she knew what she knew. She was trusting her judgement, and she wasn't going to back down. He threw out a lame response while he tried to gather himself. "*Maybe I was afraid of rejection! I was just starting to relax!*"

“No Stephan, you’re afraid of *acceptance* and putting your heart into this. You always make sure I want you more than you want me, and then you misuse it. *I’m* the one who never gets to relax because I know you’re going to ruin it. It’s much easier for you to reject me and do things that would make a healthy woman leave you. That’s how you create your own fears of rejection! It’s easier for you to worry about things falling apart, rather than have the courage to love me, invest in our relationship, and make a real go at this!”

Stephan mapped out the changes in Anne Marie’s mind. She wasn’t wailing, complaining, blaming, or defending herself as usual. She wasn’t afraid to talk straight to him. She was finally willing to recognize her situation and less willing to put up with it.

This had an organizing effect on Stephan. Instead of inducing his next regression, it brought him to his senses. Rather than running his mouth like he usually did, Stephan looked at Anne Marie for a few moments and nodded.

Dealing with aging Ugly Fish

We’ve been watching difficult interactions among Stephan and Anne Marie and their parents. Sometimes Stephan and Anne Marie had to protect themselves. This is always difficult, disappointing, and disturbing because you have to acknowledge needing to defend yourself from your parents. It’s particularly hard if you’re dealing with *aging* parents. Society says this is when adult children should take care of their parents rather

than keeping them at a distance, especially if they become physically disabled, mentally ill or senile.

Caring for elderly parents is difficult in most places in the world. Some cultures handle this better than others. But cultural expectations from past generations collide with today's elongated lifespans as people now often live into their 80s and 90s.

In particular, this doesn't take into account parents who do disgusting things. Caring for them when they get older can force heartbreaking decisions. These parents often exploit situations to instill guilt, force compliance and inflict traumatic mind mapping. Some do this with their dying breath.

If you have young children and dysfunctional parents, finding an acceptable solution is much harder. Agreeing to disagree about how they act around your kids doesn't work. You have the responsibility and right to ensure your children aren't emotionally or physically abused. They come first—unless you're emotionally super-glued to your parents.

If your parents won't follow your guidelines on how to behave with your children, your recourse amounts to constraining the duration, frequency and structure of their visits. Unsupervised or extended visits may not be appropriate depending on your

Let your engagement level with traumatizing people be determined by how healthy they are at any point. This may vary across differing circumstances.

children's ages. Banning visits altogether should be reserved for absolute worst-case scenarios.

Determine your engagement level

If you want to resolve your steady-state regression, your level of engagement with your parents should be determined by how your parents are functioning with you. How much room do they leave you to interact with them without having to operate like you're impaired?

Let your level of engagement be determined by—and vary according to—your parents' functioning at any given time. How you go about this is unique, as is how far you have to go, because their responses dictate both. But the point is, you need to control your exposure when they're particularly destructive, manipulative, or plain crazy.

Dealing effectively with aging dysfunctional parents requires deciding what you feel responsible for providing: Money? Basic needs? Visitations? Emotional comfort? Validation as a good parent? A happy life? Often you can provide for basic needs without actually having contact, if necessary. Look for ways to fulfill your responsibilities (as you see them) without being taken hostage or abused in the process.

Ask yourself, “*What does the best in me say to do? How far do I have to go taking care of my parent? How far do I want to go? How much personal contact does this mean I have with him or her? How much contact do I want? How can I protect myself from traumatic mind mapping? If he or she starts doing disgusting things, how will I deal with it?*”

Dealing effectively with aging dysfunctional parents requires deciding what you feel responsible to provide.

Getting things straight before it's too late?

If you want meaningful resolution with aging dysfunctional parents, decide if you'll show them you can see them before they die. How deep a resolution are they interested in and capable of having? They may just want platitudes and glad-handing. For your own resolution, you may need to say things they don't want to hear.

If you're unwilling or unable to show your parents that you can see them, the alternative requires appearing blind until they pass on. Adult children superglued to disgusting parents consider this their final act of love. Unfortunately, once their parents are gone, they often can't get over their deaths and deify them instead. These are the folks who never emerge from their steady-state regressions.

People typically die the same way they lived. Hollywood-style last-minute reconciliations with disgusting parents rarely occur in real life. They don't happen

because these parents don't rise to this occasion, just like they didn't at other times. Some clients report their parents' last deliberate act on earth was to say or do something disgusting.

Ugly Fish sometimes try to block you from reaching the surface

Thus far we've discussed the importance of creating "now" moments of meeting to produce a hyperplastic state that facilitates positive brain change. The good news is that you can deliberately do this. The bad news is that other people can create "now" moments too. This is what I meant when I said earlier that I'm amazed by the complex messes highly dysfunctional people create without necessarily pre-thinking all the twists and turns. Whether intentional or not, other people create "now" moments that present you with a brain-shaping character-defining fork in the road. You can choose which path you take, but other people can force the timing of your decision.

When Stephan refused to give his father more money, he had made it clear it wasn't because the business deal was lousy. It *was* a terrible idea. However, Stephan declined because his father was asking him to go blind one more time. Stephan refused to remain bind to who his father was and what he was doing.

So, when Stephan's father went to Anne Marie's mother for money, he presented Stephan with the same demand one more time and doubled down. Now Stephan's mother-in-law was involved, and Stephan was supposed to act as if his father offered her a good business deal. In other words, Stephan was not only supposed to act blind to his

father when they were together, now he was supposed to do this in front of Anne Marie's mother too.

Stephan refused to bow to his father's latest command to go blind. He could see his father was setting him up. His reply to his father was clear-eyed and direct. So much so, Anne Marie took note of it. Stephan was displaying a new part of himself she *really* liked.

Stephan told his father, "You're not leaving me much room to be respectful towards you. Because you're not leaving me any room to keep my self-respect. When you pulled stunts like this in the past, I always wondered how you could be so blind that you couldn't anticipate the impact of what you were doing. Now I get it! You're *not* blind! You're *always* trying to play five steps ahead of anyone else! You're *always* figuring the angles! You must have been doing this when you were embezzling money.... So, I know you considered what my response would be before you went to Anne Marie's mother. What did you think it would be?"

Stephan's father didn't say anything! Instantly, his face was a blank mask! He was trying to shield his mind to buy time. He didn't know how to handle Stephan. He had never seen this version of him—and neither had anyone else.

Stephan paused. "Maybe you thought I'd slap you on the back and congratulate you, but I doubt it. You knew I'd be angry! But you were probably betting I wouldn't say anything! You set me up that I'm supposed to act like a blind twit who can't see you're a con man! You've done that to me before when you came to me with other business

schemes. But this time you dragged my in-laws into it, while you knew Anne Marie and I were having trouble! You knew I didn't need your business scheme on top of it! You're willing to sink my marriage to get what you wanted!"

Stephan's father flared, "I don't agree! I think you're taking lots of things out of context and jumping to conclusions! But I'll let you have the last word on this for now. There's no point arguing with you about this!" He didn't say much after that.

Stephan's father's attitude was "*We can agree to disagree!*" As far as he was concerned, this was an acceptable (lack of) resolution. However, you can bet Stephan's mother tracked Stephan's interaction with his father. She started pouring on the pressure in a loud voice to forestall Stephan doing the same with her.

"You may think you can talk to your father like that because he's been a criminal! *But don't you DARE talk to me like we are two adults!* You are my child, and that is who you will always be! That is not going to change! You will be deferent toward me because I am your mother! I don't care what Anne Marie says to turn you away from me..."

Stephan stopped his mother right there and drew a line in the sand. He would no longer tolerate her interfering in his marriage or being disrespectful to Anne Marie. There was no reason for her to mention Anne Marie at that moment, other than to make her a fighting point that made Stephan choose sides.

"Leave Anne Marie out of this. This is between you and me!"

When Stephan set a boundary, the steely cold side of his mother surfaced, the snarling side she usually hid behind a mask of gentility. “I know you don’t talk or think like this on your own!”

“I’m telling you, Mother, don’t do that again! You’re not going to like what happens if you do!” As soon as he said this, Stephan’s mother stepped over that line.

“I know you’re just being loyal, Stephan. That’s good. But Anne Marie is beneath your intellect, achievement, and ability. She can’t cook, she doesn’t like to entertain, and she doesn’t help you socially!”

If you were on Stephan’s mother’s “shit list,” she did everything to make sure you knew it. She wanted you to know you were dead to her. If you begged, she might let you back into the land of the living. To pull this off, she hammered you until you folded. Experience taught her this strategy worked. She had every reason to presume it would succeed this time too.

If Stephan acted blind and impaired again, his mother would resume looking like the perfect mother. But this was as far as she was willing to go. He could have this cardboard version of a mother *if* he acted like he didn’t see who she was. The image of falling to his knees and kissing the Pope’s ring came to his mind.

Instead of defending Anne Marie as he usually did, now Stephan understood this was between his mother and him. *He* was the target, not Anne Marie. His mother was saying, “*It’s my way or the highway!*” That was the deal all along. Stephan just hadn’t

pushed it, so it didn't show. Stephan's marriage and integrity were on the line. It was clear his mother was OK with him losing both if this interfered with what she wanted.

Ugly Fish don't get prettier when they get older

Think back to the struggles around Stephan's father's 75th birthday. Ultimately, Stephan and Anne Marie decided not to attend because Stephan's mother insisted on seating them with people with whom Anne Marie wasn't comfortable. Stephan's mother presented this to Stephan as "You're not going to attend your father's 75th Birthday party?" But the real question she posed to Stephan was "*Are you going to choose Anne Marie over me?*"

By comparison, Anne Marie was a pussycat, although she was no longer so easy to handle. She had grown in the process of dealing with her parents. She was more self-assured and more willing to confront herself, which made her much tougher to maneuver. Now Anne Marie could stand her ground with Stephan.

Anne Marie could be difficult when she regressed, but she was a corrective experience for Stephan as far as women were concerned. Her willingness to confront and work on herself was like night and day compared to his mother. Now that Stephan could finally see his mother, he first began to appreciate Anne Marie.

Ugly Fish don't belong in the Bahamas

Stephan's mother's eyes bulged when Stephan told her he wasn't paying for her annual trip to the Bahamas anymore. "Partly my decision is because I'm angry for you

for encouraging me to sell myself out by acting like I'm grateful for my father treating me like I'm a patsy. Partly it's in response to you dragging Anne Marie into conflicts in which she's not involved. The tipping point was when I specifically asked you not to mention her name in our discussion. You did it again—in spades. I can't keep my self-respect when I picture sending you to the Bahamas so that you can have a good time.”

Stephan's mother launched into a tirade about his worthlessness as a son. But before she really got going, Stephan stood up and walked out of the room, leaving her speechless and sputtering with anger.

Not surprisingly, Anne Marie loved Stephan functioning on this level. She and Stephan began to approach their relationship with new respect and appreciation. They still had marital issues to resolve as most couples do, but they were able to approach them from a higher functioning brain state.

Stephan's recourse was to keep things as simple as possible with his parents. No more business dealings. They were welcome to keep the house they lived in, on which Stephan paid the mortgage. They could have the house free and clear. They had enough monthly income to pay their own expenses. No more trips to the Bahamas on Stephan's credit card.

To Stephan, it wasn't about the money. It was the issues behind it. But it turned out, Stephan's mother felt the same way! Only she was coming from an entirely different perspective! She was incensed by the *mindset* behind Stephan's new financial stance. He didn't want to give her any more than he had to! This positively sent her into a tizzy!

Stephan's mother believed in "*Mi casa es su casa!*" She thought *Stephan* was supposed to say this to *her*. How could her son not want to be generous with her?! Not want to share his bounty with his own mother?! Stephen's mother was on a world-class deep dive into the Mariana Trench!

Stephan's father always kept his eye on the money. Once it was clear the gravy train was over, he didn't have much to say to Stephan. This confronted Stephan with what he knew but wouldn't accept until now: His father had no real investment in him or a relationship with him.

Stephan's mother was much the same, although it looked different. She very much wanted a relationship with Stephan: It just involved his subjugation, unconditional surrender and apology. He was to show her the proper respect a mother deserved. She was invested in having a dutiful—if not adoring—son, and that was it. None of this reflected any investment in Stephan.

Stephan's resolution with his parents was as good as they would allow. It was far from ideal, but it was realistic. Stephan's father left him little room to preserve his integrity and maintain their relationship at the same time. Stephan's mother was similarly unrepentant and unrelenting.

It's hard to bond with Ugly Fish unless you are super-glued

Anne Marie established a more workable alliance with her mother, although it wasn't what her mother wanted. Her "check in" phone calls to her mother became less frequent and she adopted a more mature and nuanced stance. Her mother wanted an

idealized mother-daughter relationship, where the daughter comes to the mother for advice. To do this, Anne Marie had to suppress her functioning, because in many ways she was operating at a higher level than her mother. At best, woman-to-woman was the more appropriate way for Anne Marie to interact with her.

Anne Marie finally talked with her mother about lingering issues from the past. When she tried to bring up her mother's refusal to deal with her father's drinking and her brother's drug abuse, her mother sidetracked the conversation with tangential questions. Then she grabbed the moral high ground and accused Anne Marie of being malicious. This was followed by a tidal wave of anger and viciousness, dressed up as religious piety and prayers for Anne Marie's salvation. Pointing out her mother's refusal to face what she was saying brought forth gushes of "talking in tongues."

Anne Marie finally accepted that her mother was a seriously disturbed woman living in a profound steady-state regression, tenuously held together by religious fundamentalism. Anne Marie had occasionally thought her mother was crazy, but she never took this seriously until now. She concluded she could enjoy her mother's company when her mother's company was enjoyable. But "working on their relationship" in the conventional sense was a lost cause.

Anne Marie's resolution with her father and brother was much the same: Not what she'd want in a perfect world, but acceptable considering who she was dealing with. Her father and brother had more in common than problems with drugs: Occasionally, they "double-dated" where they each had a woman and traded partners. Their disgusting

behavior was just too much for Anne Marie. They didn't have much interest in a relationship with her, and under the circumstances, she could live with this.

Anne Marie was able to resolve her steady-state regression, as evidenced by changes in her appearance, and her improved ability to think straight and control her emotions. She also was able to deal more effectively with the important people in her life. I said from the outset that Anne Marie was smart, and she turned out to be very much Stephan's equal.

As her functioning came up, Anne Marie was less willing to maintain the status quo with Stephan. She was clearer about what she *didn't* have in her life. She wanted to share an unshakable collaborative alliance with someone. She resolved that her relationship with Stephan would fill this void, or they would separate and she would look elsewhere.

The nearer your destination, the more you're slip slidin' away

As these pieces came together, Stephan and Anne Marie stopped fighting over their in-laws. Their arguments became less frequent and severe, mainly because they were more willing to face themselves. They still quarreled from time to time, but no more than you'd expect from two bright competitive people who both liked being right. Their sex improved and not merely in frequency. Their sexual relationship changed altogether in ways I've seen many times:

Anne Marie turned out to be the higher desire partner—she wanted sex more frequently than Stephan when their relationship was good. Stephan wasn't used to this,

and predictably, it triggered his urge to push her away. Paul Simon was talking about people like Stephan when he sang, “*Slip sliding away! Slip sliding away! The nearer your destination, the more you’re slip-sliding away!*”⁵⁹

Anne Marie watched Stephan struggle with this impulse. She made it clear she was watching him, and she wasn’t going to tolerate being batted away anymore. She wasn’t putting up with that from her parents, and she wasn’t going to accept that from Stephan either. If he didn’t want to love her and be in love with her, she would find someone who would. She had no doubt she was loveable and worth loving. Now she was watching Stephan to see what he would do. As “now” moments of meeting go, Anne Marie created a winner!

Faced with the prospect of losing the first woman he ever respected in his life, Stephan settled down and confronted himself. He’d been co-creating a woman he could handle by doing things that killed Anne Marie’s ardor. Stephan wasn’t always successful controlling his impulse to “do something stupid.” But his earnest attempts to be a better partner and a more considerate person touched Anne Marie heart. The development they both achieved in handling their respective parents allowed them to come together at a higher level of functioning than ever before.

When I first told you about Stephan and Anne Marie, I said they illustrated Albert Einstein’s famous quote: “*Problems can’t be resolved by the same level of intelligence that created them.*” I don’t know if Einstein would have been impressed with Stephan and Anne Marie because he didn’t apply this wisdom to his personal life.

But I was plenty impressed with what Stephan and Anne Marie accomplished. Their relationship flourished in ways neither would have predicted. When you finally deal with dysfunctional parents, the positive impact on your long-term regression is often amazing, even if they don't get better. That's what happens when the best in you stands up, takes the hit and lets your life move on.

Post-Traumatic Growth

I've been describing how Stephan and Anne Marie came alive. Last chapter we saw the same thing with Elizabeth. All three experienced *post-traumatic growth*.

Post-traumatic growth occurs when your world views are destroyed and replaced by new "sadder-but-wiser" schemas that permit better functioning. This is the essence of "waking up in the middle of a nightmare." It provides a pivot point for radical shifts in perspective, and ushers in a new era of living based on realistically seeing and accepting what's possible and what is not.⁶⁰

Post-traumatic growth results from struggling with life crises and manifesting the courage to make sense of what happened to you. This includes cognitively and emotionally processing your destroyed mental maps and world views. Fortitude, forbearance, and optimism can turn destabilizing situations into growth opportunities.

This leads you to reassess yourself more positively. This reevaluation can simply be, "I am a survivor." However, it works much better to appreciate what

you've gone through and what you've accomplished despite this. Resolving traumatic mind mapping further develops your sense of self-efficacy.

Post-traumatic growth may sound odd at first, but it's not unusual. A systematic review of thirty-nine studies found *thirty to seventy percent of trauma survivors report positive changes*.⁶¹ Resolving traumatic mind mapping develops your sense of self-efficacy and encourages an optimistic outlook on the future. Post-traumatic growth is a valuable potential you shouldn't pass up.

Post-traumatic growth is a common outcome of dealing with traumatic mind mapping and resolving steady-state regressions.

Different situations can produce different types of growth. How emotionally important are the issues and circumstances? Do the people involved have special significance to you? How far-reaching are the ramifications? The greater the challenges involved, the more the potential for post-traumatic growth.

Stephan's interactions with Anne Marie and his parents pushed him to maintain a higher level of functioning than he typically did. He used these opportunities to:

1. Resolve the gaps in his mind-mapping radar regarding his parents.
2. Repair the holes in his autobiographical memory and developing a more accurate picture of his life and the people who populate it.
3. Reduce the emotional fusion with his mother and father.

4. End the borrowed functioning that suppressed his functioning and maintained his steady-state regression.

Post-traumatic growth shows up in a clearer sense of yourself, revamping or reinvesting in your philosophy of life, and making constructive changes in relationships. It looks like leaps in personal development, and higher levels of psychological sophistication and emotional functioning, otherwise known as differentiation. This increased cognitive complexity and sophisticated self-organization can bolster your resilience to stress. ⁶²

Post-traumatic growth is an ongoing process rather than a static outcome. It doesn't occur automatically following tough experiences. You actively have to work at it. Much of it boils down to how you see things, and the meanings you assign to them, rather than specific things you do.

Previously I told you “giving your dilemma meaning” is humankind’s most effective form of self-soothing. Turning traumatic mind mapping into psychological resilience requires developing new meanings for traumatic events and understanding how they’ve shaped your life.

Post-traumatic growth increases your sense of personal agency and purpose and reshapes your life narrative. You may experience beneficial changes in priorities, a

Post-traumatic growth is a closely associated with clean pain.

broader perspective of your place in the world, a more vibrant spiritual life, and an increased appreciation for life in general. You might even develop wisdom!

Realistic outcomes

Stephan and Anne Marie were able to establish a closer and more satisfying relationship. Stephan was able to get over his urge to push her away. Together they were able to produce the kinds of positive hyperplastic states that allowed him to unwire an automatic “batting away” response that had completely escaped Stephan’s awareness. Remember, Stephan thought he adored his mother when he and Anne Marie first came to see me. That’s how out of touch Stephan was with how he was put together.

How did they do this together? I’ll give you a brief glimpse of the kind of “now” moments of meeting Anne Marie and Stephan created. One evening, Stephan was in the shower after a long day at work. Anne Marie was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Stephan closed his eyes, put his head under the water, and entered his private inner mental world. For several minutes, Stephan was centered in his own mind.

From behind him, Stephan heard the muffled sound of the shower door opening and closing. As his head came out of the water, Anne Marie’s arms closed around him. “*This is a moment of meeting!*” she proclaimed! The sudden shift from his solitary inner focus stunned Stephan. The contrast couldn’t have been greater. He was acutely aware of Anne Marie.

“*A moment of meeting, indeed!*” Stephan’s tone said he was happy to see her.

Anne Marie was bubbly and playful. She started to soap his chest. “*But did you know this is a NOW moment of meeting?!*”

Stephan wasn’t sure. “A NOW moment of meeting? How is this a NOW moment of meeting?”

Anne Marie looked at him and smiled. “*I want you to fuck me NOW, Stephan! NOW!*”

Stephan smiled back! The rest I’m hoping you can figure out on your own! (If not, read *Passionate Marriage* or *Intimacy & Desire*.)

Like I said, it wasn’t just that they were able to work through their issues. Anne Marie was a corrective experience for Stephan. Stephan learned that women can be a source of communion and partnership rather than more vulnerability and insatiable needs. Had he shown the slightest hesitation towards Anne Marie sexual overture, things would have turned out completely differently. They would have gotten over it, but the point was they had nothing to get over. Instead, Stephan and Anne Marie had a memorable shower experience that brought them closer together mind-to-mind, brain-to-brain, and body-to-body.

For her part, Anne Marie learned that *not* all the people she loved were disappointments. She was no longer hoping her father or brother would clean up their acts and get themselves together. And the odds of her glossolalia-speaking mother pulling herself together were slim to none. But what she really needed was seeing at least *one*

person she loved turn out to be someone she could respect. And that is what she got with Stephan.

Stephan and Anne Marie were able to work things out because: they were willing and able to get the best in them to stand up and take the hit (face reality) when developments required this. They were willing to wake up in the middle of their nightmares.

So, what about you? Are you going to wake up?

Are you just reading this, or is this having an impact on you? Do you have the urge to change your life? Are you going to kill that urge or give life to yourself? It's spooky giving birth to yourself. It's a huge responsibility. What if you create Frankenstein's monster?! What if you wake up and find out you're the son or daughter of Frankenstein?! What if *you are* Frankenstein's monster?!

What about you? Are you going to wake up?

Ever since I first told you about the basic tenets of collaborative alliances, I've said that how you're feeling isn't the most important thing. It is about living up to your responsibilities. I've also been saying that the first person you always confront in any situation is *you*. When you put these two things into practice, your desire for a collaborative alliance drives the best in you to stand up. If you want to wake up, it doesn't matter how bad you're going to feel or how scared you are, *do the right thing!*

Is this asking too much of you? I don't think so. I've seen many people do it. And I've seen those who don't.

Perhaps you wish Stephan, Anne Marie and Elizabeth achieved more satisfying resolution with their parents. I wish I could tell you that it usually happens. Sometimes it does. But it's not the norm for parents whose children are living in steady-state regressions. These parents often have life-long patterns of doing disgusting things. It continues when their children try to repair the traumatic mind mapping from growing up with them.

It's disappointing but not surprising when parents refuse to wake up in the middle of their co-created nightmares. Unsatisfying resolutions with parents often stem from the same reason their children live in steady-state regressions: They're not willing to wake up to who they are and who they've been. That's because of who they are, rather than how much this asks of them. All my clients who get better do this very thing. *You* will have to do this too if your kids (or partner) have been watching you patrol the Marianna Trench.

So, if I told you most of these parents take the hit when their children finally try to wake up, what would you say? I'd destroy my credibility with you in our final pages, and I'm not going to do that. But I understand why the resolutions I'm describing are so unsatisfying: It's not just the lost opportunities for satisfying family relationships. *It impeaches our cherished picture of parents' innate investment in their offspring as something deeply human.*

As a marriage and family therapist, I initially felt badly when everyone didn't end up as one big happy family. But then I felt better when I stumbled across a program in the United Kingdom that supports people who can't resolve things with their parents. The existence of this unit legitimized this outcome for me, the same way it does for the people it serves.⁶³ However, their research was even more helpful:

Eight hundred people participated in an online survey. All were estranged from their whole family or key members such as parents, siblings or children. Eighty percent reported positive outcomes from their estrangements, such as greater freedom and independence. Sixty-eight percent felt there was a social stigma around estrangement. They described feeling judged for contradicting social expectations.

I now see this in ways that uplift my spirit instead of depressing me: I have undying respect for people like Elizabeth, Stephan and Anne Marie, who *do* wake up in the middle of their nightmare. They confront themselves, deal with their parents realistically, and go on to live satisfying lives. People can live happily without much contact with dysfunctional parents more easily than I would have predicted—if they resolve their steady-state regressions. Very often, they lead happier lives than they ever thought possible.

As I said earlier, part of post-traumatic growth comes from accepting what was, what is, what will be, and what won't happen. Giving up hope your parents will change is

You have to adjust to living under less anxiety and pressure.

not giving up on being happy, or having an extended family, or experiencing loyalty and commitment. You can't choose who you're born to, but you're not out of luck. Good friends who become your "family by choice"—providing the function rather than just wearing the title--are what you need.

Learning to enjoy the warmth and light

If you've been a cold fish much of your life, adapting to a warm clear sandy lagoon requires conscious effort. Relaxing, enjoying yourself, and luxuriating in the warm water can make you nervous. That's when people start experimenting with intimacy, romance, tenderness, carnality, and other stuff that only flourishes in the light and warmth of the shallows.

I don't know if that stuff appeals to you because it makes lots of cold fish nervous—especially doing it all with one person. But if you like profoundly tender and carnal "now" moments of meeting, you're in for a treat, because the beauty of Life explodes with unimaginable creativity in the shallows.

Making love in the shallows is different than having sex in the Challenger Deep. There's a reason why so many species come there to mate and create life. If you're interested in the love of your life, you've finally reached a level of functioning where this is possible. If you've been looking for love in all the wrong places and ending up with Ugly Fish, *try the shallows!*

I've repeatedly said the fish you catch is determined by the bait you use. That's how Elizabeth ended up with Phillippe. If you want to experience falling in love, swim for the surface as hard as you can. But truly loving another human being is an even better payoff! That's not a capacity you develop in the Mariana Trench—no matter how long you're in therapy there.

The shallows are a magic place, filled with life that speaks of love. Fairytales tell of mermaids leaving their water world behind to join a partner on dry land. And sailors have jumped overboard to meet their true love underwater. It's a place of transformation and rebirth. Lots of Ugly Fish have turned into beautiful human beings by doing what it takes to get there.

Welcome to a richer and more rewarding way of life!

Life on the surface

We've been talking about life and love in the shallows, versus living in the Challenger Deep. The idea of love in the Mariana Trench is an oxymoron. Perhaps there's love below the thermocline, but it's tepid at best and frosty at worst. Maybe the sequel to *Living at the Bottom of The Ocean* should be *Love Above the Thermocline!* But I'd prefer that this book be sufficient to get you up on dry land.

This brings us to the end of our journey together. I hope you've enjoyed exploring the Mariana Trench and everything in between. You now know more about regressions than you ever imagined. This can radically change your life. When you're not living at the bottom of the ocean, your life, the rest of the world and everyone in it looks different, including you. The kinds of people you attract—and are attracted to—changes. You and they are much less likely to be Ugly Fish.

As you get closer to the surface, you're not wasting time and energy coping with constant emotional crashes. Rewarding stable intimate relationships become possible because you're willing to be seen for who you are, and your functioning is less suppressed.

When we function at the level of our abilities, most of us are down-right smart, funny and creative. We're all a lot more loveable and loving when we're not regressed. Doing what you need to do for yourself helps everyone else: Our world is a more loving place when *you* stop living at the bottom of the ocean.

As you make your way to the surface, further metamorphosis becomes possible. You no longer need to be fishy, amphibian or reptilian. You could evolve into a warm-blooded air breather like your ancestors before you. You'd not only invest in the welfare of the oceans and climate and other inhabitants of our planet, you'd feel good about doing it. I strongly encourage you to give it a try.

However, I don't want to leave you with a false impression. All is not perfect on the surface. There are waves and storms. It's easy to lose your balance in the push and

pull of social, political, and economic currents. Oil slicks and chemicals shimmer on the surface in many places. Tons of garbage, toxic waste and non-biodegradable plastics bob up and down and litter the shore.

Bad things still happen to good people on the surface. Systemic racism, social injustice, and unequal opportunity prevail in many places. Living awake is no safe harbor from unhappiness and suffering. You must still take care of yourself. You must not be naïve, because two-legged land sharks inhabit the surface too.

But here's what I can assure you from my professional and personal experience. It's one of the few guarantees you can count on:

Life on the surface is a breeze compared to swimming with the Ugly Fish in the Mariana Trench!

The End

End Notes

¹ Sigmund Freud described one of his patients (Wolf Man) as discontented, irritable and violent, taking offence on every possible occasion, flying into rages and screaming like a savage. Freud thought tantrums arose from an unconscious need for punishment. Other therapists contend tantrums are narcissistic rages caused by blows to someone's inflated self-image and grandiosity, like when their wishes are refused, because it strikes at their feeling of omnipotence.

² My reference to regressions differs from how psychoanalysts define it. For instance, in his 1968 book *Therapeutische Aspekte der Regression*, Michael Balint distinguishes two forms of regressions. One is a *maligne regression*, in which a developmental step is skipped or delayed by the regression. The other is a *benign regression*, which allows remembering past feeling states in therapy. Balint believed, people return to a state where they are being taken care of in highly stressful times.

I'm also not referring to "age regressions" wherein people supposedly return to previous points in their lives. Nor am I advocating Alan Shore's notion of positive mutual regressions between therapists and clients in therapy. I believe it's the therapist's *resilience* to regressions, rather than the therapist's regressed state, that help clients resolve their frequent regressions.

³ Survival mechanisms are the basis of human resilience. Regressions interfere with survival mechanisms like mind mapping, prosocial empathy and hard-wired brain reactions like disgust. That's why I view regressions as negative.

⁴ My view is consistent with how Gestalt therapists see regressions as restrictions in what you are capable of at that moment.

⁵ When I use the term "marriage" I'm referring to all emotionally committed relationships, regardless of legal status. I'm including all lesbian and gay couples who are not permitted to legally marry, as well as couples who form long-term bonds without formally registering their union with local civil authorities.

⁶ The United States is struggling through years of Trump Trauma caused by incessant Twitter feeds giving direct access to Donald Trump's regressed mind (read: repetitive traumatic mind mapping and involuntary disgust reactions). Notice how millions of Americans now accept the President of the United State's incessant lying and racist misogynistic behavior as "that's just the way he is." It's a large-scale working model of what happens in many homes.

⁷ René Descartes *Discourse on Method* (1637).

⁸ Here's a more complex view of emotions that can take time to understand: To manage unpleasant feelings and real-world dysfunctional relationships, people engage in personal and interpersonal behaviors that regulate their inner mental world and

dysfunctional relationships. Often this is at the expense of their own emotional and cognitive functioning. So, uncontrollable emotions don't simply reflect the intensity of subjective experience or the degree of pent up emotion. Overwhelming emotions (impaired self-regulation) often result from unhealthy relationships.

^{ix} How about bi-polar disorder? Beats me. I've never been enamored with this diagnosis, although I know many clinicians who are. My clients don't display manic symptoms so I'm not referring to the "high" part of the bi-polar diagnostic pattern. My guess is that many people who have the emotional and cognitive "up and down" pattern of acute regressions get shuffled into the DSM/ICDM "BPD" diagnosis because there's no other good diagnosis to use.

¹⁰ The limbic and prefrontal portions of your brain assign meanings to things.

¹¹ Antisocial empathy is a common empathy variant in which the person is able to intuit, understand and have "embodied knowing" of other peoples' emotions. The person is also able to anticipate the impact of their actions on others. However, someone operating on antisocial empathy either doesn't care about his impact, or is using his ability to "feel" other people to deliberately manipulate or hurt them. You can read a lot more about antisocial empathy in *Brain Talk*.

¹² Mind mapping is known in the scientific literature as Theory of Mind.

¹³ Mind mapping starts almost from birth. Infants display *implicit* mind-mapping by the time they are 6 months old. Two-year-olds can tell if caregivers are positively or negatively disposed towards them. Around age four, children display *explicit* mind-mapping ability, which shows up in the form of intentional lying. Scientists take children's initial attempts to implant false beliefs in their parents' minds as proof of mind-mapping ability.

These huge leaps in mind-mapping ability continue throughout childhood. A six-year-old can tell the difference between a parent lying and playing make-believe (pretending). Around age 11, children's mind-mapping ability reorganizes into adult form, which allows them to understand complex relationship dynamics and sexual motivations. Their ability become increasingly sophisticated throughout adulthood, but the core of it develops shockingly early—as many parents find out when their angry child confronts them.

¹⁴ This is my understanding of what happens, based on clinical observations of my clients and integrating a vast amount of brain research (summarized in *Brain Talk*). Brain scan studies have been conducted on people who report childhood or adult emotional and physical traumatic experiences. Results suggest a definite connection between trauma and brain health. No one has brought a portable brain scanner home and watched what

happens in real time during traumatic mind mapping events. No doubt one day some smart scientist will find a way to do this research.

¹⁵ Situationally accessible memory (SAM) and verbally accessible memory (VAM).

¹⁶ I started studying disgust when I discovered all my fail-to-thrive clients reported their parents doing patently disgusting things. Most people (including therapists) are uncomfortable talking about this. It shoots down our fantasy that parents have intrinsic good will, best wishes, and do their best towards their offspring. Giving this up is an important step in getting over traumatic mind mapping.

¹⁷ Disgust is one of six hard-wired primary emotions. It has its own facial expression and felt experience that transcends culture. Like mind mapping, disgust is a survival mechanism designed to keep you alive. It responds to both physically dangerous threats (putrid foods, blood, gore, dead bodies, etc.) and moral disgust (violations of conventional standards of moral decency). In addition to creating major changes in your brain, disgust triggers an overwhelming urge to remove yourself from the offending object or person. Picture yourself bending over to kiss a rotting corpse and you'll experience what I'm talking about.

¹⁸ People who grow up with parents who do disgusting things often engage in self-harm (cutting, burning) for the purpose of "feeling something."

¹⁹ Heart rate variability(HRV) is the time between heartbeats, measured in milliseconds. The combined action of the hypothalamus, pituitary and adrenal glands control the fight-or-flight priming response. HRV is a good indication of the health of “hypothalamic/pituitary/adrenal axis” functioning.

²⁰ The Crucible® Four Points of Balance are described at length in *Intimacy & Desire*.

²¹ A collusive alliance is an agreement that allows both parties to avoid their responsibilities and not confront their shortcomings. In practice, a collusive alliance sounds like *“I’ll look the other way about what you’re doing (or not doing) if you do the same for me.”*

²² Neal Agarwal developed a wonderfully-detailed interactive visualization of the fish populating the ocean from the surface all the way down to the Mariana Trench. <https://neal.fun/deep-sea>.

²³ This is not the same as self-criticism or “inner critic” or self-talk. See *Brain Talk* for about cruel mental voice.

²⁴ In case it isn’t clear, borrowed functioning is an interpersonal process in which one person’s functioning is artificially enhanced while the other person’s functioning is diminished or suppressed. One person propping up the functioning of another person by

subjugating herself or allowing herself to be abused is a classic example of borrowed function.

²⁵ A highly plastic brain state means a state in which the brain is particularly impressionable or subject to change.

²⁶ Psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson developed the Yerkes-Dodson “window of tolerance” theory. Their theory says performance increases with physiological and mental arousal—but only up to a point. When arousal is too high or too low, performance decreases.

²⁷ I’m referring to interoceptive cues, mind-mapping information, and emotional contagion remnants. This is discussed further in Chapter Nine.

²⁸ The full list of characteristics of a collaborative alliance are detailed in *Intimacy & Desire*.

²⁹ Daniel Stern developed the concept of “moments of meeting” with parent-baby and therapist-client relationships in mind. Stern focuses on two dynamic interpersonal experiences, the “now moment” and the “moment of meeting.” The now moment emerges out of unpredictable interpersonal processes. These conjointly created momentary interactions set up an interpersonal crisis that begs for resolution.

“Now” moments suddenly arise in a therapy session as an emergent property of the unfolding process. This affectively charged moment puts the nature of the patient-

therapist relationship into question. This usually arises from breaking the habitual framework of therapy or how they interact. The client's and therapist's anxiety levels rise. Both are forcefully pulled into the present. A crisis has been created that needs resolution. This is the "now" moment.

³⁰ Stern says you "read in the behavior of the other [as] a reflection of [your] own experience" (p. 220-221).

³¹ In Chapter 11 I mention Lucid Masturbation as a powerful treatment method. I consider the likelihood of successfully treating psychotic-level regressions without utilizing Lucid Masturbation to be small to none.

³² More accurately, maybe you *should* be on the defensive. Some people have an amazing ability to be holier-than-thou and commandeer the moral high ground while they are swimming in The Trench.

³³ The reason why partners are usually at the same level of differentiation is explained at length in *Passionate Marriage* and *Intimacy & Desire*.

³⁴ *Passionate Marriage* and *Intimacy & Desire* cover critical mass in depth.

³⁵ In *Wake Up*, Jack Kerouac recounts the story of Prince Siddhartha's (Buddha) early life: leaving his father's palace, taking up the homeless life, attaining enlightenment, and delaying his own entry into nirvana to free all sentient beings from suffering.

³⁶ Toltec native Mexican American teachings describe people living in a dream state while they are awake. They say a voice in your head talks to you, telling you lies about yourself and other people, and at times tormenting and criticizing you. See Don Miguel Ruiz with Janel Mills. *The Voice of Knowledge: A practical guide to inner peace*. Amber-Allen Publishing Inc. San Rafael California, 2004.

³⁷ If you think a “blind” surgeon performing operations while he’s “asleep” is worrisome, think about the people running nuclear power plants. Seriously impaired people occupy critical positions we all depend on. Just look at examples of commercial airplane pilots deliberately crashing their planes. But if you want to contemplate something *really* scary, think about what would happen if the President of the United States was in a steady-state regression while the country battles a coronavirus pandemic! (It’s happening!)

³⁸ Crystal balls have been objects of magic, power and mystery in Eastern and Western cultures. They were supposedly first used by the Druids, who lived in England and France during the Iron Age. In the 1st century AD, Pliny the Elder described crystal ball soothsayers. By the 5th century, scrying was widespread within the Roman Empire. One of Queen Elizabeth I’s chief advisers used crystal balls to predict auspicious times for the Government of England to make plans.

³⁹ See *Brain Talk* for an example.

⁴⁰ Notice the repetitive reference to the anterior parts of these brain structures (insula and cerebral cortex). Turns out the anterior (front) portions of many brain areas are interconnected and perform different functions than posterior (rear) segments of those same brain parts.

⁴¹ Your insula is a very complex brain area. It can be divided into thirteen distinct subdivisions serving a wide variety of functions ranging from sensory and affective processing to high-level cognition. Your insula activates during a wide array of events including pain, love, emotions, cravings, addiction, and enjoying music or tasting wine.

Your insula is the cornerstone of your overall self-awareness, constantly receiving information about the location and condition of your body, your subjective emotions, and key features of your environment. It incorporates all this information into “global emotional moments,” creating your perception of the present moment (present-moment awareness).

Your anterior insula and a small adjacent area (collectively known as the IFO) regulate reflective and cognitive brain processes involved in maintaining your emotional equilibrium. Your IFO activates when you personally have an emotional experience, when you revisualize this happening, and when you observe other people’s experiences. Your brain starts with visceral interoceptive (body) information sent from your IFO and integrates information from your medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) involving visualized

memories, imagined experiences, observing other people, and witnessing their experiences. See, Nitschke, J. B., Dixon, G. E., Sarinopoulos, I., Short, S. J., Cohen, J. D., Smith, E. E., Kosslyn, S. M., et al. (2006). Altering expectancy dampens neural response to aversive taste in primary taste cortex. *Nature Neuroscience*, 9, 435–442.

⁴² The authors of the study wrote: “Humans can achieve vivid emotional feeling states in the absence of actual emotional encounters in a myriad of ways, including the recall of past experiences, the imagination of hypothetical experiences, reading a good book, watching a good movie or witnessing a friend’s experience.... The IFO is a convergence zone where bodily feeling states relevant for the emotion of disgust are coded according to a common code regardless of stimulus modality.

“Our findings of IFO involvement in all three modalities supports the idea that simulation through both pre-reflective (viewing someone else’s disgust) as well as reflective (deliberate mental imagery and language) routes may therefore be complementary rather than independent of each other.” See, Jabbi, M., Bastiaansen, J., & Keysers, C. (2008). A common anterior insula representation of disgust observation, experience and imagination shows divergent functional connectivity pathways. *PLoS ONE*, 3(8) e2939.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Researchers are adding virtual reality to prolonged exposure therapy, whereby participants experience 3-D imagery, sounds, and smells corresponding to traumatic events. One study with Iraq War veterans gives participants a virtual reality that simulates combat conditions.

⁴⁵ Experiments indicate that unattended objects or details not consciously seen are nevertheless encoded and analyzed in detail by the brain and can unconsciously effect responses on explicit memory tests. See Mack, A., & Rock, I. (1998). *Inattention blindness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁴⁶ “Dual-representation theory” captures the dynamic relationship between these two memory systems. It also explains “flashbacks.” When the SAM and VAM systems contain different information, you may visually reexperience things encoded only in SAM memory as flashbacks if you unexpectedly encounter reminders of the trauma. Long-duration traumatic events increase your likelihood of flashbacks because lots of information in SAM is not processed into VAM. See Brewin, C. R., (2001). A cognitive neuroscience account of posttraumatic stress disorder and its treatment. *Behaviour Research Therapy*, 39, 373–393. Brewin, C. R., (2003). *Posttraumatic stress disorder: Malady or myth?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Brewin, C. R., Dalgleish, T., & Joseph, S. (1996). A dual representation theory of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychology Review*, 103(4), 670–686.

⁴⁷ This is restricted because of the effects of high arousal and anxiety and the activities of the amygdala and hippocampus during and after trauma. Explicit memory (driven by the cortex and hippocampus) becomes overwhelmed by dysregulated emotions and anxiety (controlled by the amygdala).

⁴⁸ The emotions accompanying SAM memories, which are experienced during trauma or moments of intense arousal, are *primary emotions*. They are automatic emotional and visceral responses generated during the experience that require no cognitive processing. This includes disgust reactions during traumatic mind mapping. Childhood disgust reactions are stored in SAM, remaining outside conscious awareness or recall, and yet influencing your life.

In contrast, VAM memories are accompanied by “social emotions” like embarrassment, shame, and guilt, which are generated during retrospective evaluation of the event. VAM memories are subject to modification and subsequent changes in meaning. When you use revisualizations to put the mind mapping information back into your picture, the ensuing change in meaning occurs in VAM.

⁴⁹ Scientists attribute this to changes in the hippocampus.

⁵⁰ Research indicates reactivating traumatic memories through exposure therapy, and reincorporating them into more accurate pictures, makes them less distressing and

more easily managed. See, Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M. (2000). Cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *Behavior Research & Therapy*, 38, 319–345.

⁵¹ Results indicate experienced meditators have thicker brain regions associated with interoception, sensory processing, and attention, including the right anterior insula and PFC cortex. The largest difference for meditators was the thickness of their right AI. Van der Kolk, B. A. (2006). Clinical implications of neuroscience research in PTSD. *Annals New York Academy Sciences*, 1071, 277–293.

⁵² Crucible® Neurobiological Therapy attempts to activate your anterior insula (AI), anterior cingulate (ACC) and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) by focusing your attention on your internal experience. This happens when you revisualize traumatic mind-mapping events and interweave the cognitive, emotional, and sensorimotor elements to make them as vivid as possible.

Focusing on your emotions, feelings, and reactions while visualizing powerful pictures stimulates your anterior insula. This particularly happens when you view other people's faces. Reporting your inner bodily states activates your mPFC. Doing this while revisualizing traumatic mind-mapping experiences integrates SAM interoceptive cues with your prefrontal cortical processes.

In revisualizations and written mental dialogs, reflecting on your antagonist's inner experience uses pathways normally used by your brain for your own bodily

representations to simulate his or her bodily states. Mapping out what your antagonist thinks, feels, and desires triggers empathic transformation of your antagonist's bodily states into representations in your own brain of similar self-states, which you experience in your own body. This provides intuitive understanding of what's going on in your antagonist's body and mind.

⁵³ Research indicates your left temporal lobe is involved when you use third-person perspectives, especially in emotional contexts. Your somatosensory cortex handles emotional processing when you adopt first-person perspectives. See, Ruby, P., & Decety, J. (2004). How would you feel versus how do you think she would feel? A neuroimaging study of perspective-taking with social emotions. *J. Cognitive Neuroscience*, 16(6), 988–999.

⁵⁴ I use the phrase “the father in her head” to distinguish Elizabeth's map of her father in the dialogue from her real world father.

⁵⁵ *Brain Talk* shows examples of extended email exchanges with an antagonist.

⁵⁶ It's not good for kids to write mental dialogues for their parents to analyze and comment on--even if their parents are therapists.

⁵⁷ Bonfirm. E. (2015). “Glossolalia and linguistic alterity: The ontology of ineffable speech.” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 6: 75-89.

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⁵⁸ Glossolalia exploits the ritual value of incomprehensible words. Even in the time of the Greeks, it was described as “incomprehensible, incoherent, and utterly obscure utterances, the meaning of which no intelligent person could discover: for they are meaningless and nonsensical, and give a chance for any fool or sorcerer to take the words in whatever sense he likes.” Page 90. Martin, D. B. (1995). *The Corinthian Body*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, ISBN 978-0300081725.

⁵⁹ Simon, P. “Slip Slidin’ Away” 1977. “*Greatest Hits*,” Columbia Recording Company

⁶⁰ Calhoun, L.G., & Tedeschi, R.G. (2006). *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*. New York: Psychology Press.

⁶¹ A systematic review of 39 studies found positive changes reported by 30 to 70 percent of survivors of traumatic events, including transportation accidents, natural disasters, medical problems, and interpersonal experiences like combat, rape, sexual assault, child abuse, relationship breakdown, parental divorce, bereavement, and immigration. (See, Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (2004). Positive change following trauma and adversity: A review. *J. Traumatic Stress*, 17(1), 11–21). Heart attack patients who experience personal benefits immediately after their first attack have reduced reoccurrence and morbidity eight years later. (See, Affleck, G., Tennen, H., Croog, S., & Levine, S.

(1987). Causal attribution, perceived benefits, and morbidity after a heart attack: An 8-year study. *J. Consulting Clinical Psychology*, 55(1), 29–35.)

⁶² Tennen, H., & Affleck, G. (1998). Personality and transformation in the face of adversity. In R. G. Tedeschi, C. L. Park, & L. G. Calhoun (Eds.), *Posttraumatic growth: Positive changes in the aftermath of crisis* (pp. 65–98). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

⁶³ “*Hidden Voices: Family Estrangement in Adulthood.*” University of Cambridge Stand Alone Project and Center for Family Research. <https://www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/HiddenVoices.FinalReport.pdf>.