

CHAPTER TWO

Why Do We Attack Ourselves?

Lucy was outwardly a successful buyer for an international clothing chain. She was also stuck: she sat staring out of the window at three in the afternoon, stressed out, exhausted and thoroughly miserable:

Why can't I get on with this project? she wondered. I can usually do these figures in no time. Why can't I just come to a decision? What's wrong with me? I'm so tired—I can't even think straight . . .

Lucy had been punishing herself with such self-critical thoughts for over an hour. Before that, she'd had a long, anxious chat with the kindergarten teacher about her daughter, Emily, who'd been crying when she'd left her earlier that morning. Then, in a bit of a rush, she'd phoned the plumber to find out why he hadn't been to look at the broken toilet in her house. Now she was staring at

a spreadsheet, feeling drained of energy and munching on a chocolate muffin in lieu of lunch.

The demands and strains in Lucy's life had been growing steadily worse for months. Work was becoming ever more stressful and had started to drag on, way past her normal finishing time. Nights had become sleepless, days more drowsy. Her limbs had started to ache. Life had begun to lose its joy. It had become a struggle to keep going. She'd felt like this for brief periods before, when at college with exams looming, but those had been temporary. She'd never have guessed that they could become such a permanent feature of her life.

She kept asking herself repeatedly: *What's become of my life? Why do I feel so burned out? I should be happy. I used to be happy. Where did it all go?*

Lucy exists in a netherworld of overwork, general low-level unhappiness, dissatisfaction and stress. She's been sapped of her mental and physical energy and has begun to feel increasingly rudderless. She desperately wants to be happy and at peace with herself, but has no idea how to get there. Her unhappiness and dissatisfaction aren't severe enough to warrant a trip to the doctor, but enough to sap many of life's joys. She *exists*, rather than truly *lives*.

Lucy's story is hardly unique. She is one of countless millions who are neither depressed nor anxious in a medical sense—yet who are not truly happy either. We all go through life with rises and falls in mood and energy. Often these changes in mood come out of the blue. One moment we're happily bumbling through life, daydreaming, feeling content and unfussed, but then something subtle happens. Before we know it, we're

Unhappiness, stress and depression

Depression is taking a staggering toll on the modern world. Around 10 percent of the population can expect to become clinically depressed over the coming year. And things are likely to become worse. The World Health Organization¹ estimates that depression will impose the second-biggest health burden globally by 2020. Think about that for a moment. Depression will impose a bigger burden than heart disease, arthritis and many forms of cancer on both individuals and society in less than a decade.

Depression used to be an illness of the late middle-aged; now it strikes most people first when they are in their mid-twenties, and a substantial number of people suffer their first bout in their teens.² It can also persist, with around 15–39 percent of sufferers still depressed after one year. Around one-fifth remain depressed for two or more years—the definition of “chronic” depression.³ But the scariest thing of all is that depression tends to return. If you’ve been depressed once, there is a 50 percent chance of a recurrence—even if you’ve made a full recovery.

Depression may be exacting a staggering toll, but its cousin—chronic anxiety—is becoming disturbingly common too, with *average* levels of anxiety in children and young people now at a point that would have been judged to be “clinical” in the 1950s.⁴ It’s not a great stretch of the imagination to assume that in a few decades unhappiness, depression and anxiety will have become the normal human condition, rather than happiness and contentment.

starting to feel a little stressed: there's too much to do and not enough time, and the pace of demands seems ever more relentless. We feel tired, but find that even after a good night's sleep we don't feel refreshed. And then we stop and ask ourselves: How did that happen? There may have been no big changes in life, we haven't lost any friends nor have our debts suddenly spiraled out of control. Nothing's changed, but the joy has somehow gone out of life and been replaced with a sort of generalized distress and listlessness.

Most people, most of the time, do snap out of these downward spirals. Such periods *do* generally pass. But sometimes they can tip us into a tailspin that persists for days. Or, as in the case of Lucy, they can persist for weeks and months with no apparent rhyme or reason. In severe cases, people can be tipped into a full-blown episode of clinical anxiety or depression (see box on the preceding page).

Although persistent periods of distress and exhaustion often seem to arrive from nowhere, there are underlying processes going on in the background of the mind that were only unraveled in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. And with this understanding has come the realization that we can "step outside" of our troubles and liberate ourselves from unhappiness, anxiety, stress, exhaustion and even depression.

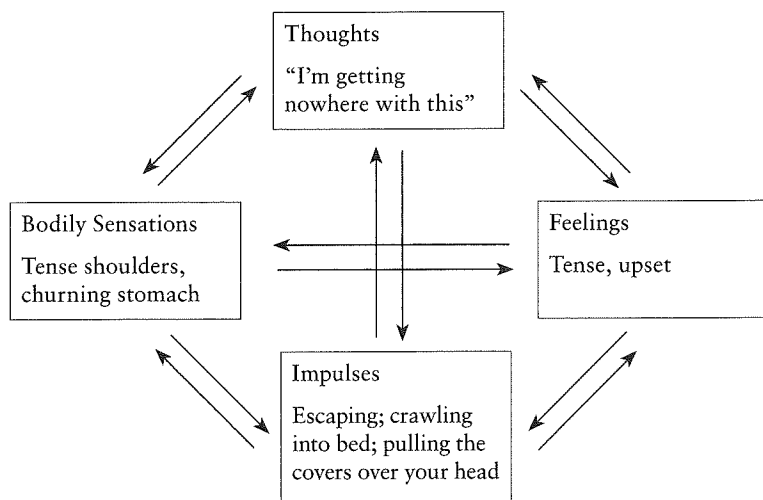
Our troubled minds

If you'd asked Lucy how she felt when she was staring at her computer, she'd have said "exhausted" or "tense." At first glance these feelings seem like clear-cut statements of fact, but

if she'd looked inside herself a little more closely she'd have realized that there wasn't one single thing that you could label as "exhaustion" or "tension." Both of these emotions were actually "bundles" of thoughts, raw feelings, bodily sensations and impulses (such as the desire to scream or storm out of the room). This is what emotions are; they're like a background color that's created when your mind fuses together all of your thoughts, feelings, impulses and bodily sensations to conjure up an overall guiding theme or state of mind (see diagram, "What makes an emotion?" p. 20). All of these different elements that make up an emotion play off each other and can end up enhancing (or tempering) overall mood. It's a phenomenally intricate dance full of subtle interactions that we're only now beginning to understand.

Take thoughts as an example. Several decades ago, it became apparent that thoughts could drive our moods and emotions, but it's only since the 1980s that it's become clear that the process can also run in reverse: moods can drive our thoughts. Think about that for a moment. Your moods can drive your thoughts. In practice, this means that even a few fleeting moments of sadness can end up feeding off themselves to create more unhappy thoughts by coloring how you see and interpret the world. Just as gloomy skies can make you feel, well, gloomy, momentary sadness can dredge up unsettling thoughts and memories, further deepening the mood. The same goes for other moods and emotions too. If you feel stressed, then this stress can feed off itself to create more stress. Likewise with anxiety, fear, anger and such "positive" emotions as love, happiness, compassion and empathy.

What makes an emotion?



Emotions are "bundles" of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and impulses to act. Next time you experience pleasant or unpleasant emotions, you might check in with what's going on, and notice the interplay of the different aspects of the bundle.

But it's not just thoughts and moods that feed off each other and end up wrecking well-being—the body also gets involved. This is because the mind does not exist in isolation; it's a fundamental part of the body and they both continuously share emotional information with each other. In fact, much of what the body feels is colored by our thoughts and emotions, and everything that we think is informed by what's going on in the body. It's a phenomenally complex process full of feedbacks, but research is showing us that our whole outlook on life can be shifted by tiny changes in the body. Something as subtle as frowning, smiling or altering posture can have a dramatic impact on mood and the types of

Depressed mood, depressed body

Have you noticed how low mood affects the body, such as the way you move?

Psychologist Johannes Michalak⁵ and colleagues at the Ruhr-University at Bochum used an optical motion capture system to see how depressed people differ from non-depressed people as they walk: they invited depressed and non-depressed people to their lab and asked them to walk, choosing freely how to walk and at what speed. They tracked the walkers' three-dimensional movements using over forty small reflective markers attached to their bodies as they walked up and down.

They found that the depressed volunteers walked more slowly, swinging their arms less; the upper body did not move up and down very much when they walked, but was more likely to swing from side to side instead. Finally, they found that the depressed people walked with a slumped, forward-leaning posture.

It is not just that such slumped posture is the result of being depressed. If you try the experiment of sitting for a minute with your shoulders slumped forward and head down, notice how you feel at the end of it. If you feel your mood has worsened, perhaps finish the experiment by shifting to a posture in which you are sitting upright, with your head and neck balanced on your shoulders.

thoughts flickering across the mind (see box above).

To get a flavor of how powerful this feedback can be, the psychologists Fritz Strack, Leonard Martin and Sabine Stepper⁶ asked a group of people to watch cartoons and then rate how funny they were. Some were asked to hold a pencil between their lips so that they were forced to purse them and mimic a

scowl. Others watched the cartoons with the pencil between their teeth, simulating a smile. The results were striking: those who were forced to smile found the cartoons significantly funnier than those compelled to frown. It's obvious that smiling shows you are happy but it is, admittedly, a bit strange to realize that the act of smiling can itself *make* you happy. It's a perfect illustration of just how close the links are between the mind and body. Smiling is infectious too. When you see someone grin, you almost invariably smile back. You can't help it. Think about that for a moment: just the act of smiling can make you happy (even if it's forced); and if you smile, others will smile back at you, reinforcing your own happiness. It's a virtuous circle.

But there's an equal and opposite vicious circle too: when we sense a threat we tense up, ready to fight or run away. This so-called "fight-or-flight" response isn't conscious—it's controlled by one of the most "primeval" parts of the brain, which means it's often a bit simplistic in the way it interprets danger. In fact, it makes no distinction between an external threat, such as a tiger, and an internal one, such as a troubling memory or a future worry. It treats both as threats that either need to be fought off or run away from. When a threat is sensed—whether real or imagined—the body tenses and braces for action. This may manifest as a frown, the churning of the stomach, tension in the shoulders or the draining of blood from the skin. The mind then senses the tension in the body and interprets it as a threat (remember how a frown can make you feel sad?), which then makes the body tense up even further . . . A vicious circle has begun.

In practice, this means that if you're feeling a little stressed or vulnerable, a minor emotional shift can end up ruining your whole day—or even tip you into a prolonged period of dissatis-

faction or worry. Such shifts often appear out of the blue, leaving you drained of energy and asking, Why am I so unhappy?

Oliver Burkeman recently discovered this for himself. He wrote in his column in the UK's *Guardian* newspaper about how minor bodily sensations sometimes seemed to feed back on themselves to tip him into an emotional spiral.

I think of myself as generally happy, but every so often I'm struck by a fleeting mood of unhappiness or anxiety that quickly escalates. On a really bad day, I may spend hours stuck in angst-ridden maunderings, wondering if I need to make major changes in my life. It's usually then that I realize I've forgotten to eat lunch. One tuna sandwich later, the mood is gone. And yet, 'Am I hungry?' is never my first response to feeling bad: my brain, apparently, would prefer to distress itself with reflections on the ultimate meaninglessness of human existence than to direct my body to a nearby branch of Pret A Manger.

Of course, and as Oliver Burkeman has repeatedly found out for himself, most of the time such "angst-ridden maunderings" soon blow over. Something catches our eye and makes us smile—a friend calls and cheers us up or perhaps we'll watch a movie and go to bed early with a cup of hot chocolate. Virtually every time we're buffeted by life's ill winds, something crops up to redress the balance. But it's not always this way. Sometimes the weight of our own history intervenes to whip up an emotional squall because our memories can have a powerful impact on our thoughts, feelings, drives and, ultimately, our bodies too.

Take the case of Lucy. Although she describes herself as being

“driven” and “mostly successful” she’s acutely aware that something fundamental is missing from her life. She’s achieved most of what she wanted, so finds it perplexing that she’s not happy, contented and at peace with herself. She constantly tells herself, “I should be happy,” as if saying this alone is enough to drive away unhappiness.

Lucy’s bouts of unhappiness began when she was a teenager. Her parents split up when she was seventeen and the family home was sold, forcing both parents to move into apartments that were barely adequate. Lucy surprised herself, and her family, by toughing it out. Sure, she was initially devastated by her parents’ divorce, but she soon learned to distract herself by working hard at school. This was her life-saver. She achieved good grades, went to college and got a decent diploma. She surprised herself again when she got her first job as a trainee buyer for an international clothing chain. She then spent most of her twenties climbing the promotion ladder until she was managing a small team of buyers.

Work gradually took over Lucy’s life, leaving her with less and less time for herself. It happened so slowly that she hardly realized that life had begun passing her by. There were high points too, of course, like her marriage to Tom and the birth of their two daughters. She loved them all to bits, but she still couldn’t quite shake the feeling that life was something that only happened to other people. She was walking “through slowly thickening syrup,” she told us.

This “thickening syrup” was her current busyness and stress, together with the older patterns of thoughts and feelings from the past. Even though Lucy was outwardly successful, her thoughts were often dogged—deep down—by fears of failure. This ensured that when an entirely normal low mood appeared,

her mind would spontaneously begin digging up memories of when she felt similarly in the past, while a harsh "inner critic" told her that it would be shameful to display any weaknesses. Vague feelings of fear or insecurity ended up triggering a cascade of painful feelings from the past that felt very real and visceral, and that quickly took on a life of their own, activating another wave of negative emotions. On the surface, these seemed to have little connection with each other; however, these emotions *were* connected because such feelings often come in constellations, with one part of a pattern triggering the rest.

As Lucy will testify, we rarely experience tension or sadness on their own—anger, irritability, bitterness, jealousy and hatred can all be bound up with them in an uncomfortable, spiky knot of pain. These feelings may be directed at others but, more often than not, they are aimed at ourselves, even if we're not consciously aware of it. Over a lifetime, these emotional constellations can become ever more closely coupled to thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and even behavior. This is how the past can have an all-pervading effect in the present; if we trip one emotional switch, the others can follow behind (and likewise with bodily sensations such as an ache or a pain). All of these can trigger habitual patterns of thinking, behaving and feeling that we know are counterproductive, but somehow just can't seem to stop. And between them, they can create a very large net that will catch any slight emotional turbulence and whip it into a storm.

Gradually, the repeated triggering of negative thoughts and moods can begin wearing grooves in the mind; over time, these become deeper and deeper, making it easier to set off negative, self-critical thoughts and low or panicky moods—and more difficult to shake them off. After a while, prolonged periods of fragility can be triggered by the most innocuous of things, such

as a momentary dip in mood or the slightest flux in energy levels. These triggers can be so small that you might not even be aware of them. To make matters worse, negative thoughts often come in the guise of harsh questions that beg answers. They nag. Grind away at your soul. Demand an immediate response: *Why am I unhappy? What's up with me today? Where have I gone wrong? Where will it end?*

The close links between the different aspects of emotion, stretching back into the past, can explain why a small trigger can have a significant effect on mood. Sometimes these moods come and go just as quickly as they arrive, like a squall blowing over; but at other times, the stress and fatigue, or the low mood, seem adhesive—they stick around and nothing seems to get rid of them. It's almost as if certain parts of the mind switch on, then get stuck and refuse to turn off again. As it turns out, this is what seems to be happening: sometimes the mind automatically switches to full alert, but then *does not switch off* again as it's meant to do.

A good way of illustrating this is to observe the ways in which many animals deal with danger as compared to humans. Cast your mind back to the last nature documentary you saw on TV. Perhaps it contained scenes of a herd of gazelles being chased by a leopard on the African savannah. Terrified, the animals ran like crazy until the leopard had either caught one or gave up the chase for the day. Once the danger had passed, the herd quickly settled back into grazing. Something in the gazelles' brains that gave the alarm when the leopard was noticed, switched off once the danger was past.

But the human mind is different, especially when it comes to the "intangible" threats that can trigger anxiety, stress, worry or irritability. When there is something to be scared or stressed

about—whether real or imagined—our ancient “fight-or-flight” reactions kick in as they should. But then something else happens: the mind begins to trawl through memories to try and find something that will explain *why* we are feeling like this. So if we feel stressed or in danger, our minds dig up memories of when we felt threatened in the past, and then create scenarios of what might happen in the future if we cannot explain what is going on now. The result is that the brain’s alarm signals start to be triggered not only by the *current* scare, but by *past* threats and *future* worries. This happens in an instant, before we’re even aware of it. New evidence from brain scans confirms this: people who spend their days rushing around mindlessly, who find it difficult to stay present and get so focused on goals that they lose touch with the outside world, have an *amygdala* (the primeval part of the brain involved in fight-or-flight) that is on “high alert” all the time.⁷ So when we humans bring to mind other threats and losses, as well as the current scenario, our bodies’ fight-or-flight systems do not switch off when the danger is past. Unlike the gazelles, we don’t stop running.

And so the way we react can transform temporary and non-problematic emotions into persistent and troublesome ones. In short, the mind can end up making things far worse. This holds true for many other everyday feelings as well—take tiredness, for example:

As you sit here reading, see if you can tune in to any feelings of tiredness in your body right now. Spend a moment noticing how tired you are feeling. Once you have this tiredness in mind, ask yourself some questions about it. *Why am I feeling tired? What’s gone wrong? What does this say about me that I’m feeling like this? What will happen if I can’t shrug this off?*

Think about all these questions for a moment. Allow them to

swirl around in your mind: *Why? What's wrong? What does this tiredness mean? What will the consequences be? Why?*

Now how do you feel? You probably feel worse; virtually everyone does. This is because underlying these questions there is a desire to get rid of the tiredness, and to do so by trying to work out the reasons for it, its meaning and the possible consequences if you don't.⁸ The understandable impulse to explain or banish the tiredness has made you feel more tired.

And this holds true for a panoply of human feelings and emotions including unhappiness, anxiety and stress. When we're unhappy, for example, it's natural to try to figure out why we're feeling this way and to find a way of solving the *problem* of unhappiness. But tension, unhappiness or exhaustion aren't "problems" that can be solved. They are emotions. They reflect states of mind and body. As such, they cannot be *solved*—only *felt*. Once you've felt them—that is, acknowledged their existence—and let go of the tendency to explain or get rid of them, they are much more likely to vanish naturally, like the mist on a spring morning.

Allow us to explain this seemingly heretical idea. Why do your best efforts to get rid of unpleasant feelings backfire so tragically?

When you try to solve the "problem" of unhappiness (or any other "negative" emotion) you deploy one of the mind's most powerful tools: rational critical thinking. It works like this: you see yourself in a place (unhappy) and know where you want to be (happy). Your mind then analyzes the gap between the two and tries to work out the best way of bridging it. To do so, it uses its "Doing" mode (so called because it performs well in solving problems and getting things done). The Doing mode works by progressively narrowing the gap between where you are and where you want to be. It does so by subconsciously breaking down the problem into pieces, each of which is solved in your

mind's eye and the solution reanalyzed to see whether it's got you closer to your goal. It often happens in an instant and we're frequently not even aware of the process. It's a tremendously powerful way of solving problems. It's how we find our way across cities, drive cars and arrange hectic work schedules. In a more refined form, it's how the ancients built the pyramids and navigated the world in primitive sailing ships, and it is helping humanity to solve many of our most pressing problems.

It's perfectly natural, then, to apply this approach to solving the "problem" of unhappiness. But it's often the worst thing you can do because it requires you to focus on the gap between how you are and how you'd like to be: in doing so, you ask such critical questions as, *What's wrong with me? Where did I go wrong? Why do I always make these mistakes?* Such questions are not only harsh and self-destructive, but they also demand that the mind furnishes the evidence to explain its discontent. And the mind is truly brilliant at providing such evidence.

Imagine walking through a beautiful park on a spring day. You're happy, but then for some unknown reason a flicker of sadness ripples across your mind. It may be the result of hunger because you skipped lunch or perhaps you unwittingly triggered a troubling memory. After a few minutes you might start to feel a little down. As soon as you notice your lowered spirits you begin to probe yourself: *It's a lovely day. It's a beautiful park. I wish I were feeling happier than I am now.*

Think about that for a moment: *I wish I were feeling happier.*

How do you feel now? You probably feel worse. This is because you focused on the gap between how you feel and how you *want* to feel. And focusing on the gap *highlighted* it. The mind sees the gap as a problem to be solved. This approach is disastrous when it comes to your emotions because of the intricate interconnection

between your thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. They all feed into each other and, left unchecked, can drive your thinking in very distressing directions. Very quickly, you can become trapped inside your own thoughts. You begin to overthink; you begin to brood. You start to ask yourself endlessly the same pointed questions that demand immediate answers: *What's up with me today? I should be happy—why can't I just get a grip?*

Your spirits sink a little deeper. Your body may tense up, your mouth may frown and you may feel downhearted. A few aches and pains might appear. These sensations then feed back into your mind, which then feels even more threatened and a little more downbeat. If your spirits sink far enough, you'll start to become really preoccupied and miss the small, but beautiful things that would normally cheer you up: you might fail to notice daffodils beginning to bloom, the ducks playing on the lake, the innocent smiles of children.

Of course, nobody broods over problems because they believe it's a toxic way of thinking. People genuinely believe that if they worry enough over their unhappiness they will eventually find a solution. They just need to make one last heave—think a little more about the problem . . . But research shows the opposite: in fact, brooding reduces our ability to solve problems; and it's absolutely hopeless for dealing with emotional difficulties.

*The evidence is clear: brooding is the problem,
not the solution.*

Escaping the vicious circle

You can't stop the triggering of unhappy memories, negative self-talk and judgmental ways of thinking—but what you *can* stop is what happens next. You can stop the vicious circle from

feeding off itself and triggering the next spiral of negative thoughts. And you can do this by harnessing an alternative way of relating to yourself and the world. The mind can do so much more than simply analyze problems with its Doing mode. The problem is that we use the Doing mode so much, we can't see that there is an alternative. Yet there is another way. If you stop and reflect for a moment, the mind doesn't just think. It can also be *aware* that it is thinking. This form of pure awareness allows you to experience the world directly. It's bigger than thinking. It's unclouded by your thoughts, feelings and emotions. It's like a high mountain—a vantage point—from which you can see everything for many miles around.

Pure awareness transcends thinking. It allows you to step outside the chattering negative self-talk and your reactive impulses and emotions. It allows you to look at the world once again with open eyes. And when you do so, a sense of wonder and quiet contentment begins to reappear in your life.