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YOUR BRAIN



Unboxing Your Brain

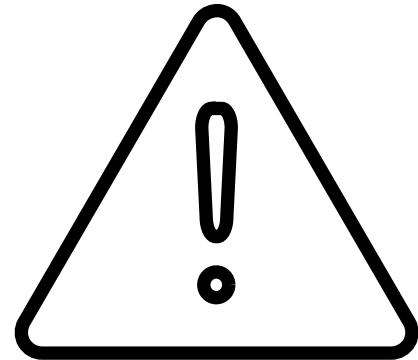
Do not. Do not attempt to modify your squishy urge blob. Blowing on it and sticking it back in will not improve the quality of the images you see. Unboxing a brain without supervision will void the warranty.



Powering On

Your brain should arrive with the power already set to ON.

If your brain seems low on power, eat a donut.



Using This Guide

This guide is for entertainment and educational purposes only. It's not clinical advice of any kind. It does not replace the support of a skilled professional.

Contact Us

If you want to learn pro skills for using your brain or you're experiencing some technical issues, contact our technicians or pick up some supplies and classes at our shop:

www.thetoolkitstore.com

Sharing is Caring

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LUXURY FEATURES



LUXURY FEATURES: THOUGHTS

As a ripe durian in a broken down elevator emits a stench, so too do brains naturally emit thoughts. You may have noticed some of your thoughts.

How do I know if a thought is intrusive?

It is very easy to know if a thought is an “intrusive thought”: if you judge it and label it as an intrusive thought, then it is an intrusive thought. Similarly, to know if you’re having luxury thoughts, attach that label to the thought and it will be a “luxury thought”.

However, we caution against sticking additional labels onto thoughts. Do you really want to spend life sticking labels on brain indigestion? Like: this is a good burp, that’s an intrusive fart, here’s a rational stomach ache. So exhausting! Thoughts are thoughts. Besides, adding extra labels to brain stuff can create a fire hazard up there and doing so will void your brain’s warranty.

How should we approach intrusive thoughts?

As thoughts! The problems arise from what users do to them—all of the judgments, meanings, and reactions you attach to thoughts, negative AND positive.

If you want to start working on cutting out compulsions around thoughts, try starting with thoughts you see as “normal”. If you eagerly believe thoughts you like and put them in charge of your life, you’ll make your brain want to do that with any thought, especially the ones that are scary and distressing.

If you believe your critics when they say you’re right, how can you not believe them when they say you’re wrong?!

So make changes around the thoughts you like if you want to get better at changes around the thoughts you don’t like.

LUXURY FEATURES: THOUGHTS

Why do I have thoughts about harming people I love?

Your brain appliance is here to help you avoid things you judge as bad. So if you're afraid of being judged and hated by people, your very helpful, very logical brain will think of all the things you could do that would make people hate you. The more you try to solve and get rid of those thoughts, the more your brain will happily find new ways you could do something for which people would judge you. The brain is only trying to help. Such a helpful appliance! Each time you "solve" an uncertainty and feel good about it, that teaches the brain that you want more uncertainties so you can get that feeling of relief you crave. And the brain eagerly complies by coming up with an ever more complex and distressing uncertainty to solve and fix.

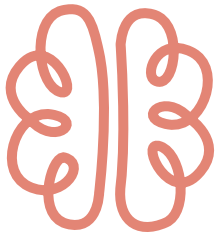
If you would like to turn off this feature, it's important to recognize that chasing "relief" from thoughts is actually the on-switch that keeps the feature running.

What if an intrusive thought feels real (but you know it's not)?

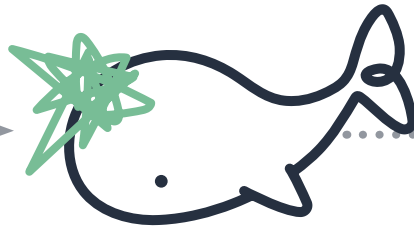
It's so useful that it feels real! But that second part where you said you know it's not real, well, that won't be so helpful. What you're trying to do there is give yourself reassurance. Pouring reassurance on your brain is like dumping a rainbow slushie on your computer: It might sound like a fun idea, and you'll really be certain you want to do it, but it won't turn out well!

At TOOLKIT, if somebody believes their fears will really come true, we're fine with that. It can be a useful support for showing your brain that you can handle that fear. A lack of insight need not be viewed as a barrier. We can use that to get in contact with the things we're afraid of and be with them, not as abstract concepts, but challenges we're actually facing in life and learning how to handle in a healthy way while we do the things we value.

HOW TO CREATE MORE THOUGHTS YOU HATE



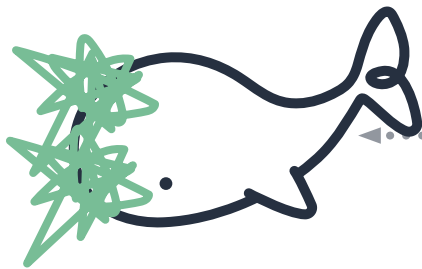
Have a brain. It will give you stuff to experience.



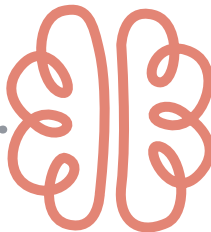
Use your unhelpful beliefs to judge the brain stuff. You shouldn't feel that way! These images must mean something! This is ruining life! Etc...



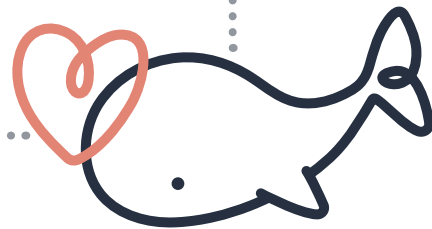
Burn those thoughts in a hot hot fire of rumination and control.



Check for reassurance about that new stuff. Judge it as more real and different than before.



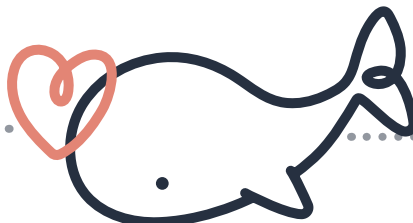
To help you get more of that relief, your brain will give you more stuff for to control.



Love it when you get that sweet relief from experiences you hate.



Level-up your controlling behaviors. More extreme brain stuff calls for more extreme compulsions!

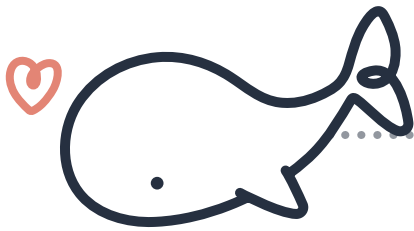


Feel good about managing them. But it's not quite the relief you got last time.



Brain to the rescue with even more challenging experiences to fix! Surely solving these will give you the relief you're craving.

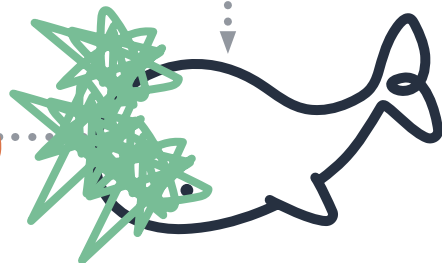
HOW TO CREATE MORE THOUGHTS YOU HATE



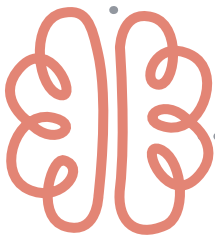
Remember a time when all of this controlling and avoiding seemed to actually work.



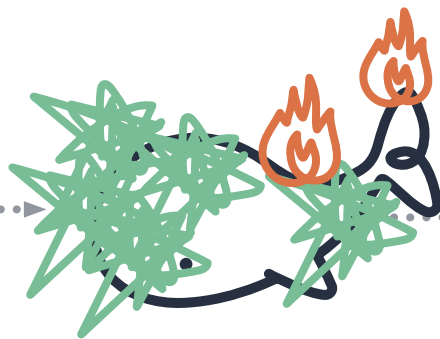
Spend your day "managing" stuff in your head and trying to cover it up.



Ugh. Again.



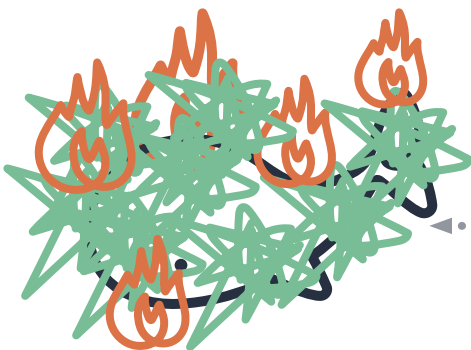
Your brain desperately wants to entertain you because you give it all your time and energy.



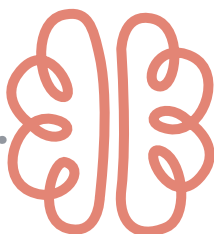
View every thought, emotion, physical sensation, task, food, relationship, sound, and image through the lens of your fears.



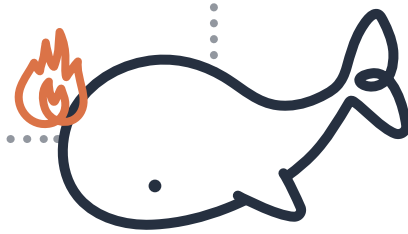
Devote yourself entirely to control and avoidance.



Success. You've created a feedback loop that keeps you in a constant state of judging, controlling, and fuelling the brain stuff you hate.



Your brain keeps doing the same things you've spent decades teaching it to do.



Not doing compulsions feels wrong. And not feeling anxious or depressed also feels wrong.

LUXURY FEATURES: THOUGHTS

Can intrusive thoughts be linked to physical symptoms?

Absolutely. And it can go the other way as well: physical symptoms can fuel intrusive thoughts. You might notice that when you're sick, injured, dealing with PMS, hungover, etc. We can recognize that our brains are just trying to find a way to deal with unwanted, uncontrollable experiences. We can give compassion and understanding.

If I succeed with recovery, will the intrusive thoughts stop?

At TOOLKIT, we approach intrusive thoughts as compulsions that people do. The issue isn't the thoughts, but the reaction to them. So if we cut out those compulsions around the thoughts, then we just have thoughts, and our brains don't have to check for those old ones anymore because we were not judging them as dangerous or chasing that desire to control them.

It's entirely possible to stop having intrusive thoughts but that's up to us to stop the compulsions that make those thoughts "intrusive". If they come back again, that would be totally fine, too, because they're thoughts, the same as any thoughts. And we know how to handle thoughts.

The thoughts are gone but I'm relapsing in fear of them coming back!

We're so sorry your brain is missing features. Contact customer service at the back of this guide and we'll ship you some new thoughts as quickly as possible.

We know you can trust yourself to handle thoughts because you've got the skills of a pro user. You'll stick to your values and invest your time and energy in actions you care about!

You've also now learned that the presence or absence of a particular thought or feeling is totally irrelevant. Mental fitness is about how you use your supercharged judgment blob. You can just as easily blow something up reacting to the fear of relapse as you can reacting to the fear of losing all your donuts. Your reactions are the thing to change, not the luxury features in your brain.

LUXURY FEATURES: THOUGHTS

But what if our thoughts are about truly terrible things?

This is why we love to make jokes about alpacas—because the topic never matters. You can swap the topic of any obsession with an alpaca. For instance, if you have thoughts about becoming psychotic, you can swap “psychotic” for “alpaca”. It’s the same! You’ll lose control of yourself! You’ll be something you’re not! You’ll be so cute and fluffy!

Instead of reacting to a random fear, it’s more useful to shift the focus to being you. It’s those actions that matter. The brain will throw up whatever gets you to engage in compulsions. It can be literally anything you can imagine. But the compulsions follow consistent patterns. So we work on accepting any stuff about alpacas or other things in our heads and we change our actions. We practice being ourselves instead of giving up our lives to chase the fear of not living our lives.

How can I stop being afraid of thoughts?

Be afraid of them! It’s ok to experience fear. That’s another one of the luxury features that comes standard and preloaded in your brain.

There is nothing wrong with fear. It’s much more useful to make space for fear as an experience that can be in our lives. You can be afraid of a thought and let that fear be there while you do things you value. Invite fear to sit down with you and join the exciting ride through your life! You can be afraid of so many things! All of those fears can have a seat beside you while you give whatever awesome gifts you want to give to the world.

LUXURY FEATURES: ANXIETY

Like wrapping a chain of fire alarms and jackhammers around our hearts and stomachs, anxiety is a welcome emotion that points at life and cries like a tired toddler waiting in line at an amusement park.

Is it normal to feel anxious after cutting out compulsions?

The presence or absence of a thought or emotion has nothing to do with mental health. All the brain cares about is getting you to do a compulsion. If it can get you to ask for reassurance by throwing anxiety at you, then you'll get some anxiety. If it can get you to do the compulsion by taking away anxiety, then you get no anxiety.

It really helps so so so so so much to shift the focus to actions. Checking on whether no anxiety is normal is exactly the same as checking on whether a tremendously huge amount of anxiety is normal. They're experiences. A feeling is there. A feeling is not there. Having these experiences is soooooo basic.

Is anxiety a disease? Will recovery free me from it?

Anxiety is a wonderful human emotion and if somebody was not experiencing it, that would definitely be a sign of a medical issue, like they're missing part of their brain. We would feel very bad and quickly ship that customer some of our best anxieties.

It can help to recognize that trying to be free of anxiety is the problem, not the solution. It's like asking if physical weakness is a disease. It's just natural. If you're sore and weak after walking up stairs, the solution is not to avoid stairs. The solution is to climb a lot of stairs and feel weak repeatedly, on purpose. When stairs become easy, then find even more fun ways to feel weak.

How to feel more relaxed when anxiety kicks in?

Trying to control and avoid emotions like anxiety is the best way to create more of them. If you're trying to replace anxiety with something else and chase a feeling like relaxation, then it's very natural that you would generate SO MUCH anxiety.

LUXURY FEATURES: ANXIETY

Can I lift weights if I'm struggling with anxiety?

Absolutely. We can do anything we want while enjoying our brain's luxurious features.

The thing I'd look at here is why you believe experiences like stress or anxiety could interfere with lifting. There's likely some unhelpful beliefs and compulsions to throw out.

Have fun lifting. Don't forget to grunt and drop the weights so you know they're heavy!

What to do about extreme, treatment-resistant anxiety?

We'd start by ditching the labels.

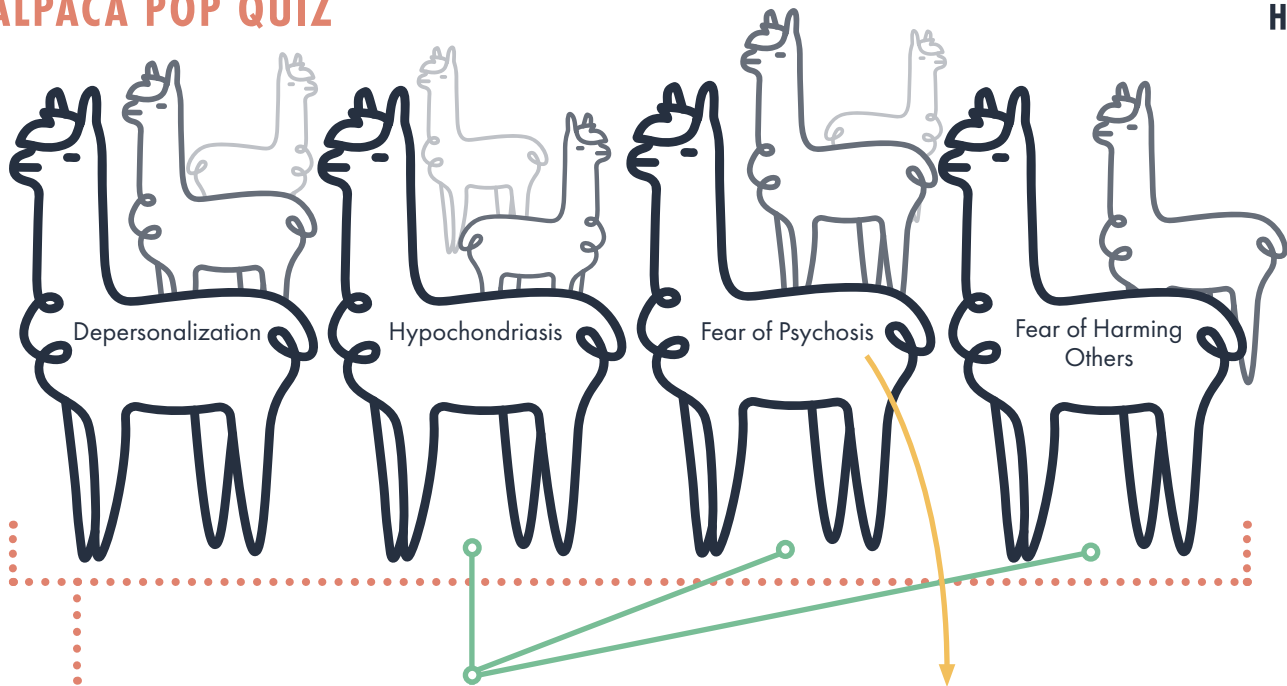
The language we use and the stories we tell ourselves quickly become barriers to getting over mental health challenges. We judge ourselves and our experiences, we distance ourselves from ourselves, isolate ourselves in a cage of a narrative. "I'm extreme. What works for others won't work for me. There are real reasons my problems are different. I could do the exercises to make changes if I didn't have such unusually severe issues. If only I didn't have these physical symptoms, too..."

And this just builds a cage of stories around us. Sometimes we've even received these stories from professionals struggling with their own anxieties and insecurities. So we can take back power over our stories. What if the story was different? What story would serve you better?

How do I know if it's health anxiety or a real medical issue?

We focus on having a practice that's about proactively caring for, improving, and sustaining great physical health and fitness. That practice isn't about reacting to all of the impossible-to-solve uncertainties and very real, very challenging physical sensations our brains can throw up. Take some of that time you invest in combing the internet for reassurance and put it towards developing proactive, practical plans for building better physical and mental health.

ALPACA POP QUIZ



A Pattern

People might experience these as different issues, they might say their symptoms are jumping around or evolving, but the reality is, these are all superficial ways the brain tries to control a single feared consequence. It's that consequence that will guide the mental fitness skills they need to work on.

What's the underlying pattern? There are a few likely answers here. What questions would you ask to figure out the uncertainty this person is actually trying to control?

Subtract the Self

Remove depersonalization. If a person has only struggled with fears about illness, fears of experiencing psychosis, and fears that they might harm others, what's the underlying pattern? What assumption could you test about their health anxieties in relation to other people?

What else?

There could be many other alpacas up there. When people try to control alpacas, they engage in many compulsions. Those compulsions teach their very logical brains to worry about similar uncertainties. What seemingly normal compulsions would lead to the brain throwing up uncertainties about psychosis?

Got answers? Send em over: support@thetoolkitstore.com

LUXURY FEATURES: ANXIETY

What to do if health anxiety is giving me real health issues?

It will. Placing health anxiety in charge of our lives is all about reacting to the possibility of harm by choosing to engage in compulsions that will certainly harm.

Should I avoid foods that cause anxiety? Like caffeine?

Only if you'd like to create more anxiety. Taking this approach is like asking if you should avoid weightlifting because weightlifting makes you sweat. It's much more useful to start building skills so you can handle lifting heavy things.

We're huge coffee fans at TOOLKIT HQ, but it wasn't always that way. We too believed that pouring caffeine on our brains created anxiety. It turned out that we were reacting to the physical experiences of caffeine by engaging in compulsions. It was useful to cut out those compulsions instead of cutting out caffeine (or any other food).

Generally, if you see somebody promoting a magical food solution to a natural human emotion, what they're actually selling you is an eating disorder.

Can cannabis make me relapse into anxiety?

We approach anxiety issues as a set of behaviors we engage in, inside and outside of our heads. There's nothing wrong with an emotion. It's what we do with it that creates the struggle. If somebody consumes something, like drugs, and then engages in compulsions around the experiences they have, that could precipitate a relapse. But they could also be going to high tea (no pun intended) to eat cucumber sandwiches and sip some Earl Grey (hot), and still choose to engage in compulsions around experiences that come up. That would also lead them down the relapse hole. Both scenarios are the same. It had nothing to do with what they were consuming and everything to do with how they interacted with the experience.

LUXURY FEATURES: ANXIETY

How do I overcome social anxiety?

There are many fun exercises you can do around this. First, it helps to look at what you want to build in your life. What do you want to do more of? What do you care about? What skills do you need to build to do the things you care about?

For example, if somebody wants to be a successful musician, they might recognize interacting with people is a big part of that. So if they were working with us, we'd setup a program of progressively challenging exercises to talk with people. It might begin with something easy, like starting conversations with store clerks, and level up to collecting as many new connections as possible at a networking event. The exercises create opportunities to notice stuff the brain throws up, welcome it, make space for it, and then do things they value instead of reacting with avoidance and controlling.

How do I get benefits from sleep if I'm too anxious to sleep?

Sleep is wonderful! If you're struggling with sleep, instead of focusing on sleep, it can help to look at what we're doing inside and outside of our heads during the day.

If we spend all day teaching our brains it's good to chase certainty and we need to avoid uncertainty and it's wonderful to solve problems, then our very skilled, obedient brains, will want to keep doing that (when we want to go to sleep). This is especially true if you don't practice doing nothing.

Look at how you act during the day. The moment you're bored, do you pull out your phone and shove it in your face? Do you fill every spare moment scrolling through social media hunting for amusement and indignation? Is every walk to the grocery store spent arguing in your head with your boss about something terrible that almost happened three weeks ago?

If that's how you act during the day, then of course your brain will keep you up at night. You're not doing anything just lying there. And you hate doing nothing. Your brain is only filling that empty space, like you spent all day teaching it to do.

The entire day is practice for falling asleep tonight. What will you practice today?

LUXURY FEATURES: MEMORIES

The bite of a dinosaur fang you can't shake even after the wound heals up and all of the dinosaurs get wiped out by cataclysmic climate change.

How do I handle false memories?

We approach them like any other experience. If you were walking down the street to attend a friend's birthday party, and a person on the street walked up to you and told you that you're an alligator, would you stop there and argue with that person? Would you skip your friend's birthday party so you could handle what that person said? How long would you be willing to put your life on hold to prove you're not an alligator?

Why not just hear what that person said on the street and continue on your way to celebrate your friend at their party?

How do you not let the memory of mental illness drag you down?

It's useful to take back the power here. A memory can't drag you down. It doesn't have tentacles or anything like that. There's nothing to drag you or trip you or choke you or hold you.

In any moment, we can have an experience and make a choice. So we can practice trusting ourselves and empowering ourselves. Brain indigestion isn't going to run our lives.

How can I identify a false memory?

Why would you want to engage in such an unhealthy practice as labeling and judging the artisanal wonders up there?! It's all 100% luxury brain stuff.

LUXURY FEATURES: MEMORIES

How can you accept the memory of something truly terrible?

Ah, that fuzzy memory of maybe unironically wearing socks with sandals? Like you had your socks on and you accidentally put your foot in the sandal. But does that count as wearing it? You didn't mean to!

Acceptance doesn't mean you believe wearing socks with sandals is good. Acceptance means you're having some stuff in your head. It's there. You probably walk past dog shit in the street every day and are very skilled at accepting it. You don't become dog shit because you saw it. Seeing it doesn't mean you like it. You don't have to pretend it's not there. You see it. You walk on. But if you stop your life to figure out what it means when you notice dog shit, if you go online chasing certainty about how to control the experience of seeing dog shit, then of course you struggle.

How do I work on past trauma if memories are brain fluff?

We're working on it, in this moment, whether we recognize it or not. And we can be working to make it worse or working to make it better. It's like having some scar tissue around a joint from a past injury. When we go into the gym and notice the pain and difficulty from that past injury, we can react to that by compensating in an unhealthy way that causes even more injuries, or we can recognize why that difficulty is there and practice exercises to bring mobility back into our lives as we adjust what we're doing in such a way that we reach our goals without causing more issues.

It's in the present where we can work on healing and mobility. It's in the present where we can make changes to tackle the effects of the trauma in our bodies. We don't time travel to work on that injury. It's not locked up in memories. It's here. We can look at our actions in the present and see how that trauma is shaping them. By changing those actions, we have opportunities to heal. We dig into the scar tissue. We take power away from the past and give it to ourselves in the present where we can use it.

Even as we bring mobility back into our lives where the trauma has restricted us, we don't need to put that scar tissue in charge of our lives. The injury is part of the context we consider as we take steps forward. But our actions are led by what we create, not by what we hate.

LUXURY FEATURES: MEMORIES

How do you resolve something you deeply regret you've done?

We don't know what any of this "resolving" or "coming to terms with" or "finding closure" stuff is all about. Are they types of donuts? Because they sound like donuts, like magical, perfect donuts you discover at a hidden basement shop down a series of inaccessible alleyways, where a master donut baker—once the personal donut baker to Huangdi—spends weeks preparing for and then meticulously crafting a solitary, perfect, immaculate, miracle donut, with pulverized rainbow unicorn hair mixed into the cream filling, carried through Doraemon's 4D pocket on a platter forged from dilithium crystal, presented with ceremony by triplet forest elves at the prophesized time, and you'll eat it. And you'll experience a complete resolution of total closure so you may now move on.

These donuts sound delicious. Good luck finding them.

How can you deal with the time lost to mental illness?

It's common that people run into this. We've heard different ideas over the years, like throwing a party to celebrate all the things you can do now, or holding a funeral to pay respects to the time lost, to let us be sad, bury it, and move on.

But maybe this is merely a way the ghost of mental illness tries to haunt us. We had to fight it, now we have to do an exorcism. It's more of the control tricks.

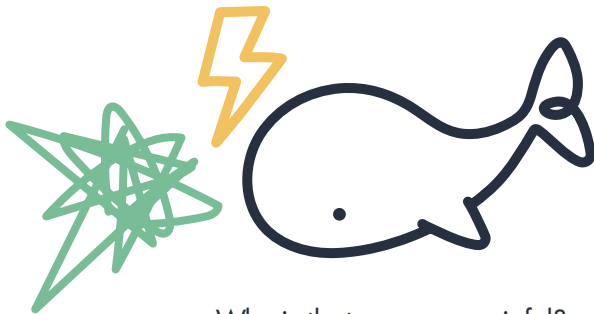
We were where we were and now we are where we are. At any point in your life you, you can put your life on hold to regret a million things you could've done in the past. But you're probably not a time traveller. We don't expect TOOLKIT will be shipping our time traveling brain model for several years yet. So what are you going to do?

We can share gratitude that we're using our awareness to notice that we do not want to invest any more time and energy into making our mental health worse. That awareness is something to celebrate! Now, in this moment, with compassion towards yourself, with understanding of the consequences of your actions, what do you want to put your time and energy into?

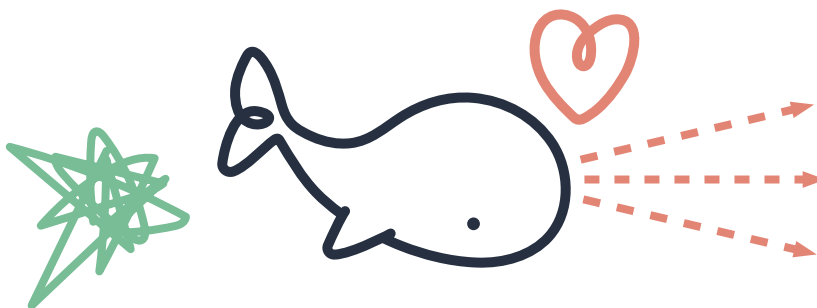
THE PIVOT



Notice the painful memory of something that happened in the past. It's there and it hurts. You can have that experience.



Why is that memory painful? Did you do something you don't value? What do you value? Did you feel unloved? How can you give yourself that recognition?



With awareness of why that's painful, what action can you take in the present to give the things you value, to yourself and others?

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPRESSION

Like you're forced to drag around an unwashed elephant with a penchant for slapping itself in its face with its trunk.

What to do if depression makes it impossible to work on recovery?

That's like saying your lack of swimming skills is preventing you from learning how to jump in the swimming pool.

We find it useful to approach the brain's luxury features as the same. This issue isn't the emotion or thought or voice or whatever. The issue is the reaction to it. The problems arise from the attempts to control it and avoid it. Instead of seeing depression as interfering with working on some other diagnosis, you might find it helps to approach them as the same thing. You only have one brain. Learning how to handle your brain while you do the things you value is a single skill, regardless of the brain stuff you're learning to handle.

How can I stop relapsing into depression?

We don't have to be afraid of relapse. That can quickly become like any other fear to which we react. It only puts fear in charge of our lives, which naturally leads to relapse. Letting fear run your life instead of your goals and values is very depressing.

We encourage people to approach happiness as a practice. It's about things we do. And those things we do, don't always feel good or easy. You can always think of rational reasons not to do the things that actually make you happy. So we need a consistent, diligent practice around happiness and enjoyment. It's a practice we invest in proactively, not reactively when we're already deep in the disaster hole. When you find yourself in your car upside down in a ditch, it is not the right time to decide you want to take driving lessons. We need to proactively drive our cars well on the journey of life. We need fuel. We need space. We need to understand the needs of the journey to the place we want to go. We need to pay attention to the road and those around us. Where are you going? How do you make that journey a practice in your daily life? How do you enjoy the difficult steps? How can you place your journey in charge instead of chasing random emotions and uncertainties?

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPRESSION

Is having depression a sign of weakness?

We find it useful to approach depression like a type pain. Feeling pain is a sign of being human.

Weakness isn't a bad thing. Research shows that one predictor of depression can be how judgmental a person is about themselves or others. Judging is about forcing the world into tiny boxes. We drag those gigantic garbage bags everywhere we go, unpacking and repacking it all, searching for a good spot to dispose of it but only collecting more junk to label and shove in the bags. It takes a lot of strength to carry around all of that garbage. Struggling with mental health is a lot of work. Maybe it's about trying to be too strong. We can drop all of the junk and walk away from it.

Can depression be cured?

It's entirely possible to get over mental illness diagnoses and leave them behind us. But here are two points to consider:

1) Mental health is about stuff we do inside and outside of our heads. Looking for a "cure" for mental illness would be like looking for a cure for drowning. Drowning is genetic, it's caused by a big chemical imbalance, and there are a variety of dynamic external factors that can cause us to drown. We could get upset that there's no pill yet to help us breathe underwater. But we do know how to help people swim. So perhaps are efforts are better spent making that skill more accessible.

2) Wanting to avoid and control thoughts and feelings is the problem, not the solution. Trying to avoid things like intrusive thoughts or depression is like trying to avoid sweat or lactic acid burn in your muscles at the gym. Those experiences are a natural result of pushing into challenges. Avoiding them isn't going to improve your physical fitness, it's going to make it worse. Same goes for mental fitness. Instead of chasing ways to avoid unwanted experiences, why not seek out challenges while learning skills to handle them in a healthier way?

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPRESSION

How can I begin to heal from depression?

Recovering from physical injuries is a useful guide here. First, it helps to see ourselves as whole, not holes. We are not problems to fix. Unreasonable high self-regard, a recognition of our value and strength, is a useful place to begin.

That doesn't mean we pretend we didn't experience something. Just like with a physical wound, there's scar tissue there. That experience restricts our movement in life. Now we want to get back that mobility. That will involve gradually improving emotional and psychological flexibility again—moving into experiences that might be painful. Healing might mean breaking down some things, like scar tissue, that we've automatically done to protect ourselves. Like with physiotherapy, it can help to work with a professional that can help us identify resistance and develop exercises to push into it. We can move through life in new ways, breaking down the scar tissue, bringing mobility back into our lives, and building capacity around the wound to handle similar experiences differently in the future.

What to do if I can't feel connected to others?

When we're struggling with mental illness, we'll often say we don't feel "connected" to others. We judge them, feel anxious about social situations, etc. But for long-term health and happiness, building community is very valuable to mental health and fitness. So we need to engage in the actions to build that community, recognizing our brains won't be sending useful messages when we get started.

For a fun exercise, you can just track how many new people you meet each week. It's not about chasing some feeling like "connection". Instead, it's about tracking an action that can help build community. You're not judging what you said or did. All you need to track is how many new people you introduce yourself to this week. You can have any thought or feeling while doing that. And the following week, you could look at another skill to practice, another action that's about social interaction but involves no checking or judging feelings. And keep on building your skills from there. What do you want to build community around? How can you create social opportunities that you want to see in the world? What actions do you need to practice to support building community?

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPRESSION

How can I know if it's depression and not just a rough patch?

Regardless of whether we're going through depression, a rough patch, a car wash, a panic attack, a breakup, a natural disaster, an entire cake, or last semester's notes, they all have one thing in common: we can go through them. The label is not going to change the things we can do in this moment, with whatever we're going through, to look at our context and our values and make a choice about how we want to act in line with our values, given the context in which we find ourselves. That's always going to be the task, with any experience.

Isn't it selfish to be happy? Shouldn't our world sadden everybody?

Taking care of our mental health is a great support for getting engaged in our communities and working to alleviate suffering.

Learning the skills to touch pain and suffering, whether our own or others, without engaging in all sorts of judgments and compulsions, gives us the opportunity to step into pain and hold space in it. We can move around and take steps in a direction that's more useful to ourselves and those around us. That's not about pretending suffering doesn't exist or trying to make it something else. We build skills to pick it up and move around instead of getting knocked on our rigid asses.

Is depression, instead of anxiety, normal when cutting compulsions?

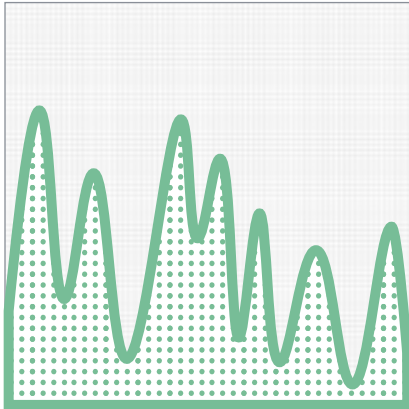
Brains love compulsions. They don't care about the topic. So if you cut out one, your brain will try to replace it to get the same hit.

Your brain generates exclusive luxury feelings. Checking feelings and asking for reassurance about them is a compulsion. So if your brain can get you to react to a feeling or a thought to check if it's "normal", then it'll just keep giving you weird stuff to seek reassurance about.

When cutting out compulsions, shrink the beast. You don't need to introduce new compulsions checking what's normal. Instead, we like to keep the focus on what we want to build and grow and create.

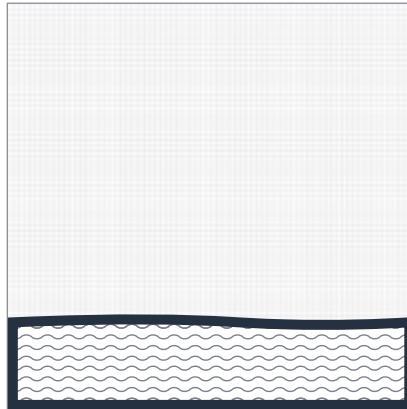
TYPES OF FEELINGS AND WHAT TO DO

Anxiety Spikes



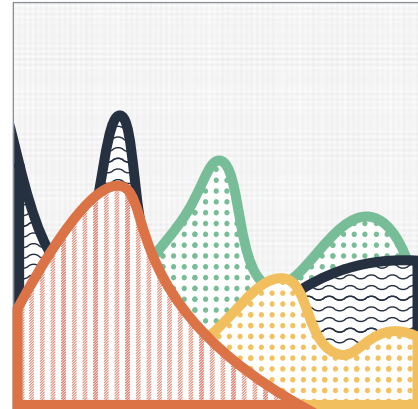
WTD? Stuff you value.

Constant Low Depression



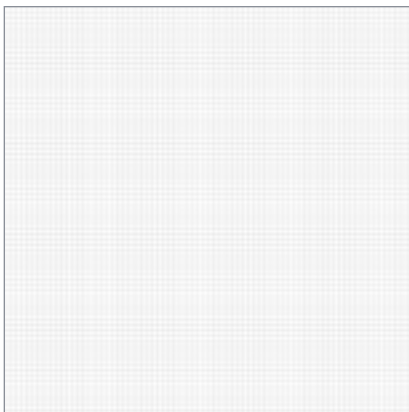
WTD? Valued actions.

Emotional Rollercoaster



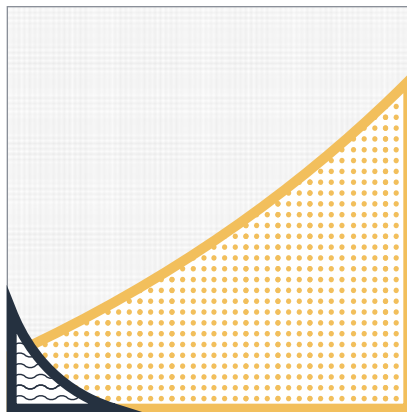
WTD? Stuff that matters to you.

No Feelings



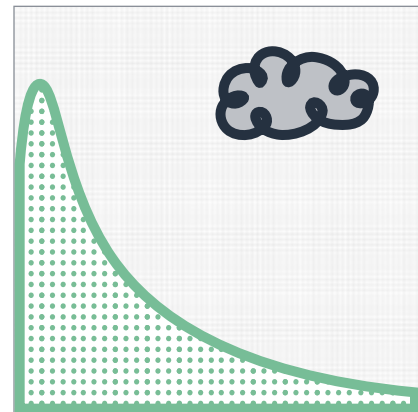
WTD? Actions you value.

Very Happy



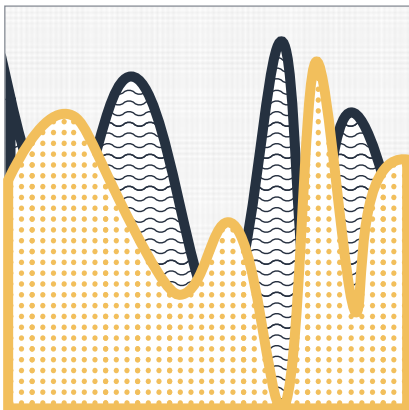
WTD? Things you value.

Bad Thoughts, No Anxiety



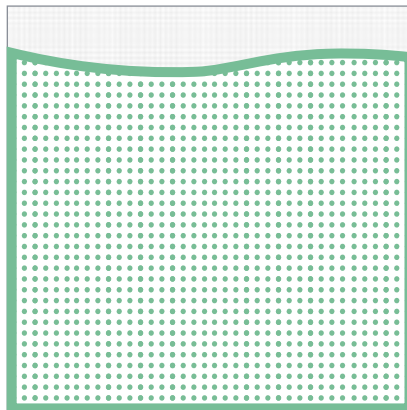
WTD? Things you care about.

Happy Sad Cycling



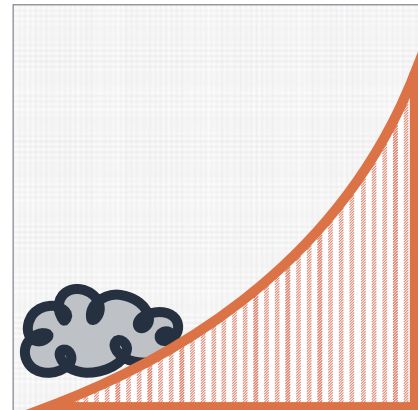
WTD? Actions valuable to you.

Constant High Anxiety



WTD? Stuff you care about.

Thoughts Down, Pain Up



WTD? Value-aligned actions.

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPERSONALIZATION

This feature feels like you're not you, if "you" is even a real thing in a real world, not merely an echo of a simulation of a simulation of what a human self would maybe seem like in a bad computer game from another dimension.

What if you just can't get that feeling of being you?

That's to be expected if you're trying to get that feeling! People engage in a lot of checking around that. They might notice they're checking online sites about psychosis, so they cut that out, but then they're trying to remember how they felt last Tuesday and suddenly they can't remember! What if they had temporary psychosis?! This feels different! So then they check for reassurance from friends. That seems to resolve itself but lately they've been thinking that they don't really feel like themselves at work. Maybe this job isn't really for them. So they start checking how they feel in the office. It just doesn't feel "right". In fact, they don't even feel totally real sometimes. Are they real? They pull out their ID and just can't feel like the person in the picture is really them. They have succeeded in creating depersonalization!

Is recovery different if your depersonalization was caused by drugs?

No. And something that can be useful to look at is how we perceive and tell the story of our symptoms to ourselves. It can have a big impact on taking care of our mental health.

At TOOLKIT, we approach depersonalization as a practice in the present: it's a set of checking and judging and controlling compulsions around feelings and uncertainty. It's not the feeling. It's the actions we do around feelings. That's great because we can change our actions.

But if you see it only as a feeling that happens passively to you, as caused by something external in the past, what can you do?

We can give ourselves much more power by recognizing depersonalization as a set of actions. Those actions happen in the present, not in the past, not caused by anything. It's what we do in this moment that matters.

LUXURY FEATURES: DEPERSONALIZATION

How can you do exposures for depersonalization?

You're already "exposed"! You're already aware of this feature. Now you have an opportunity to cut out the compulsions around it. Unless you want to experience this luxury feature even more, in which case, keep on trying to find ways to judge it and hate it and check on it and control it.

Now that you're a pro at the exposure part, it's time to cut out the compulsions—the checking feelings, judging feelings, checking pictures, reflections, physical sensations, the controlling compulsions to get things feeling "right", avoiding potentially triggering situations, checking online, etc.

How do you feel normal again after beating existential uncertainty?

Normal is what gets people into this mess. At TOOLKIT, we're not fans of normal. We don't recommend normal to anybody. It's very likely that what you perceived as "normal" was full of the compulsions that set up the logical framework for questioning reality and existence. Going back to normal would then only lead back to the same struggling.

It's like getting out of rehab and wanting to go back to the hardcore drinking and drug binges that were normal in the past. Maybe that felt good and comfortable for you, but that was the problem.

COGNITIVE FUSION VS DEFUSION



LUXURY FEATURES: PANIC ATTACKS

OMG OMG OMG OMG OMG OMG OMG
OMG OMGOMGOMGOMGOMG... Oh no, it's
still there. Argh, it's getting worse... OMG... Am I
dying?

Can I heal from panic attacks or do I have to learn to live with them?

Panic attacks are a nasty feedback loop created by judging, checking, and controlling compulsions we practice on our sensations in our bodies. So judging these exquisitely manufactured experiences, and trying to avoid them and control them, is precisely the way you can create more of them.

If there is some strange reason you don't want to your own handcrafted panic attacks, it's useful to cut out the compulsions that create them. We can welcome physical experiences. We can practice trusting ourselves to make choices with any brain weather. We can create and build instead of checking and comparing our feelings. We can practice mindfulness instead of rumination. We can want challenges.

What if the physical pain of panic attacks is a barrier to recovery?

At TOOLKIT, we believe it's best to approach mental fitness like physical fitness. Challenging experiences, physical or mental, are not barriers. They're the things we want to seek out. That's where the useful work happens.

Seeing physical experiences as a barrier to improving mental fitness would be like saying that sweat is a barrier to physical fitness and then seeking out ways you can exercise that won't make you break a sweat.

So your approach is to go around just being cool with panic attacks?

No. We'd cut out the compulsions that fuel the panic attacks. But if one happens, it happens. We can want that experience. It's an opportunity to practice being ourselves while having any thought or feeling. Afterwards, we can look at how we tricked ourselves into those compulsions again. We can make changes that help us practice different actions in the future.

LUXURY FEATURES: PANIC ATTACKS

How can you not panic when your worst fears are coming true?

One of our favorite techniques around HQ is to agree that the worst possible consequences of our fears have already come true. Those consequences have happened. We can't change them. So how will we spend our time and energy in the present in a way that matters to us?

This is an opportunity to teach the brain new ways to handle fears and the consequences that truly terrify us. The consequences are a key piece to this. Don't get caught up in the superficial topic of a fear. It's whatever that fear will lead to that we're actually afraid of. This technique can be a bit tricky to get a handle on, and it creates a lot of anxiety, so try it out with a professional or a good book.

How to work with random panic attacks that are very physical?

That's how panic attacks work! If you're thinking that physical sensations or randomness shouldn't be part of panic attacks or that makes them unusual in some way, it could help to toss that belief. Remember that this is about changing actions and cutting out compulsions. If physical sensations are the thing that tricks you into compulsions because you judge them as more important or different or more "real" in some way, expect to get a lot of unexpected physical sensations.

Working on wanting the physical sensations and welcoming them without checking or controlling can be a big help, as is welcoming the randomness, like wanting an unexpected hippo to show up at any moment, in any situation. You can handle the hippo!

LUXURY FEATURES: GUILT

Showing up at a party with a drunk mime for your date and hoping nobody notices that the mime is performing the baby alpaca massacre you committed last night.

How do you get over guilt?

Guilt is like any feeling we don't like—the more we try to avoid and control it, the more we struggle with it. Wanting to get rid of guilt before living our lives is identical to other compulsions like trying to get rid of anxiety about abandonment before building a healthy relationship.

Feelings are not things we need to get over. Feelings are wonderful! Instead of judging guilt and seeing it as this thing you need to put life on hold for, it can help to make space for it. You can have any feeling while you do the things you care about. If you feel guilty about something you did, ok. How are you going to do something you value in this moment?

But what if the guilt is about something terrible you really did?

It's a feeling. You might be judging something you did in the past and that can generate guilt in the present, but whether the guilt is about something you really did or something you only worry you might've done, the guilt is still the same emotion. Accepting guilt is always real because the guilt is here, right now. It's an emotion you're accepting or an emotion you're engaging in more compulsions around. The reality of the event you're judging is irrelevant to the presence of the guilt.

USING YOUR BRAIN



USING YOUR BRAIN: MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS

In this moment, your brain beside you, together giving your attention where you want to give it, without judgment, simply being.

Tips on stopping all of the ruminating?

Meditate. There are other ways you can operate your brain and building a meditation practice is a great way to learn about them. At first, it's shocking to learn you don't need to spend every moment arguing, debating, and problem solving in your head. There's nothing in the rule book that says you need to do be spinning that rat wheel constantly.

It's possible to think differently. If that sounds absurd and makes no sense to you right now, sit down and shut up.

What's the right amount of time to meditate?

Meditation is a thing you can do with your brain. It's no different than an exercise you do with your body. You can meditate for 10 minutes one day and 30 minutes the next in the same way you can run 10 minutes one day and 30 minutes the next. So look at why you'd even think there's a "right amount". Might be some beliefs there to toss out.

Of course, there could be a limit to how much you can meditate. Maybe nine years non-stop? Ten years? There is only one way to find out!

What if you don't have the attention span for meditation?

If you've never run before, and you're forced to run, you'll likely discover that you don't have the endurance for running. That's very natural. It doesn't mean you have an Endurance Disorder. You shouldn't have the endurance or strength or mobility for running if that's something you've avoided for years. Likewise, if you've never meditated and you have a poor attention span, well, that's totally natural, too. Why would you have a capacity you've never practiced developing? You might also be shocked to learn that people who have never practiced singing before, are really quite terrible opera singers.

USING YOUR BRAIN: MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS

Been meditating for awhile and want to up my skills. Tips?

There's so much to explore with meditation! Here are some ideas for advancing your practice:

- Can you meditate for an hour without adjusting your hands or legs?
- Where's your Loving Kindness Meditation practice at? Giving love and compassion to ourselves, to our regrets and mistakes, to our pain and trauma, can be one of the most challenging exercises.
- Do you meditate without an audio guide? Learning to meditate without an app talking to you is an important skill to pick up. Throw off the training wheels!
- Can you meditate in noisy places?
- Have you done a silent meditation retreat? Start with a week and then try for longer.

How long does it take to start feeling the effects of mindfulness?

Mindfulness should take effect within 30 minutes but if you don't notice a change, do not take more than the recommended daily dose. If effects last longer than 4 hours, consult a physician as this can cause damage to the tissue of your... oh wait, that's something else.

Mindfulness isn't cheap bootleg Viagra you bought off some sketchy dude scamming tourists on Las Ramblas!

If you're trying to use mindfulness to control and avoid human experiences, you're not practicing mindfulness. That's more of the same old compulsions and will create more of the same old unwanted experiences you're trying to avoid and control.

Practicing mindfulness is the goal. If you can practice mindfulness, what else do you need to get from it?

USING YOUR BRAIN: MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS

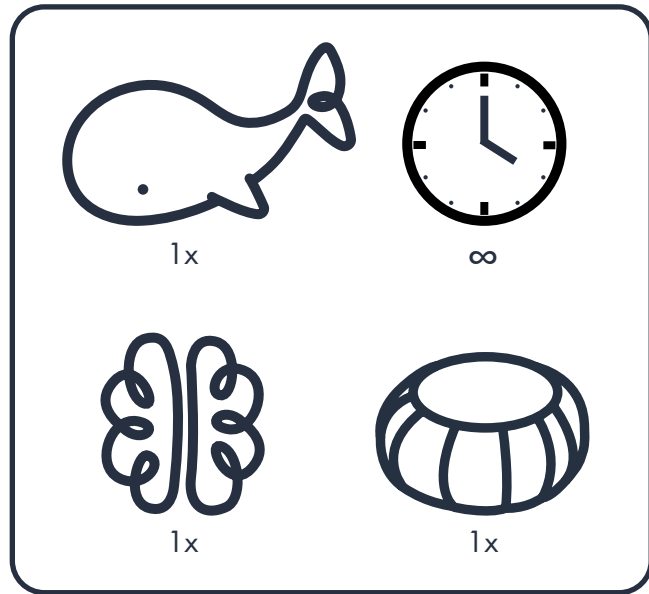
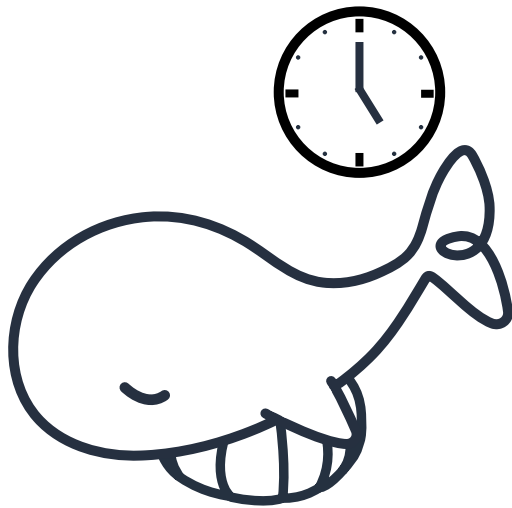
Will this make me disconnect from and ignore the world's problems?

No. Mindfulness is the opposite of ignorance and disconnection. It's about being fully engaged in the world. When we wash our hands, it's about recognizing that water only comes to us through a complex system that relies on the health of our planet. Each time we wash our hands or take a drink of water, we're connected to climate change. That's mindfulness. It's an awareness of the way things are.

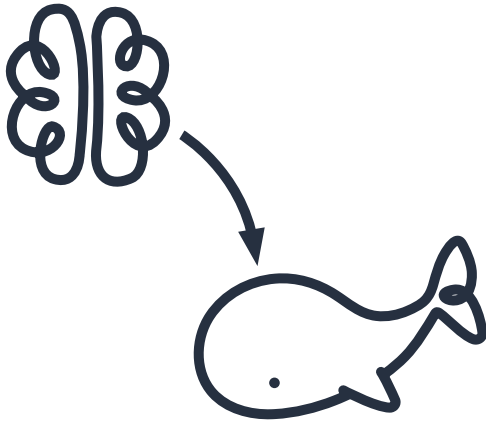
Mindfulness is about speaking with people and touching their past and our own in how it affects that conversation here and now. It's about understanding centuries of oppression present in the conditions of this moment. It's about experiencing an emotion and, instead of judging it and trying to control it, understanding how it's a very natural reaction the body is having to things happening around us. It's about celebrating a seemingly mundane activity in this moment, aware of how the chore contributes to the future while enjoying it for its own sake, with no desperate craving for that future which may never come. It's about touching a piece of raw meat and recognizing that was a living being like you. It's about making purchasing and travel decisions aware of the impact those choices have on the lives and happiness of others. It's about contacting, as we eat, the work and struggles of the people who picked the vegetables we're eating. How do we support them through the decisions we make? If we like red peppers, it would be very strange to not support the health of people that pick red peppers. That's mindfulness.

This is why mindfulness is such a powerful practice for creating effective change in our personal lives, our communities, and the world. It's about contacting fully the experience, the pain, and the joy of our context. It's about seeing the whole system in this moment, as it is, without flinching or turning away. And when we can do that, then we can take new steps in a direction that's useful to ourselves and those around us, not reacting to fear and anxiety, but proactively fueled by purpose and values.

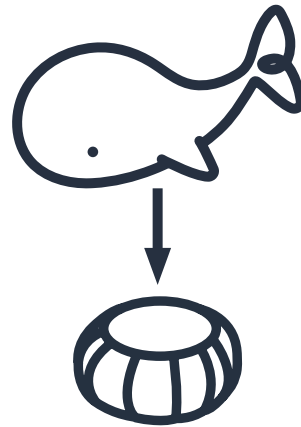
THE MEDITATÖR



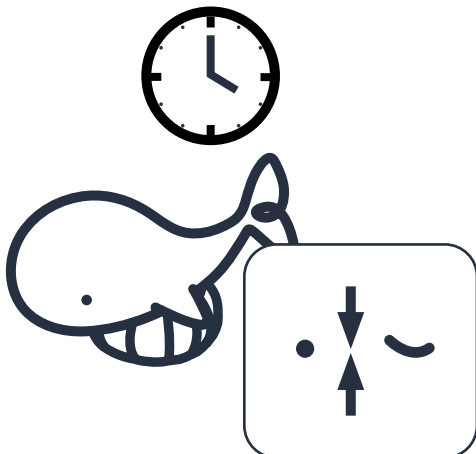
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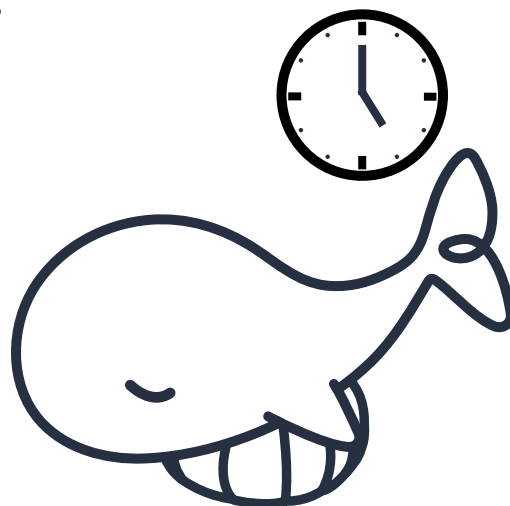
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USING YOUR BRAIN: GRATITUDE

A warmth, a kindness extended from inside of us out into the world, with compassion to our own pasts, to the suffering of others, in support of a self and community we want to build.

How can I practice gratitude?

Let's practice right now.

Pick a random body part on you and appreciate it. Maybe an elbow or a cheek, a thigh or a ticklish side. It needn't be a useful body part. It is wonderful to practice gratitude for no reason, simply because these things are. We can be grateful they're there.

Bring up the feeling of seeing an old friend. Bring up a smile, a yearning to hug, a comfort, and give those feelings to that random body part. Thank it for being there. It's been with you through so much. Today we will nourish that body part and care for it and recognize its awesomeness and all of the being it does so diligently. Maybe it's a part of you that you typically ignore but it's along for the ride through this present moment.

After you've had some time appreciating that body part. Thank it for the opportunity to be with it. Ask it to continue working with you today. And then bring your attention to something you can do together, or maybe enjoy giving gratitude to another body part. There's so much of your body that's working so hard for you in this moment!

This is a practice you can take into any area of your life, with parts of your self, other people, objects around you, the food you eat, the nature that cares for you. Practice gratitude and see what's difficult. Let that guide you in some sweaty exercises.

Can you give gratitude to yourself if you've done terrible things?

Yup.

USING YOUR BRAIN: GRATITUDE

What are your thoughts on gratitude journaling?

We often spend hours each day engaged in fear and anger journaling, inside our heads and out loud with those around us. We walk into work telling everybody how much we hate other drivers, we spend all day on social media telling people why they're wrong, stay up all night anxious about bad things that maybe could possibly happen.

So perhaps gratitude journaling is a way to balance that out a tiny bit. But don't forget to cut out all of that hatred and anxiety practice. Don't spend all day scooping shit into a wheelbarrow and then spritz it with some gratitude perfume at the end of the day and get upset because you're still pushing around a pile of shit.

When you're building up your gratitude practice, try giving gratitude unreasonably. We can give gratitude to anything, anywhere, while having any thought or feeling. Gratitude is not a transaction. It's not about getting something and then sharing some gratitude as payment. The practice is the giving.

What if you can't practice gratitude because you're depressed?

It's useful to recognize we can make space for a range of emotions and actions. When we're struggling with mental health, we might take an all-or-nothing approach to our experiences and conflate our identities with experiences. If we're in pain, we can't be happy. If we're having intrusive thoughts, it can't be a good day. If we're depressed, we can't give gratitude. And so on...

This is an awesome thing to explore through our meditation and mindfulness practice. Meditation is a useful way to notice experiences we're having, like pain in our knees, the sound of a car driving by outside, gut-wrenching despair, an image in our heads of a traumatic experience—those are all experiences we can have—and then make a choice about how we want to spend our time and energy in life. Do we want to give awareness to the sounds, curiosity to the pain and despair, gratitude to our cold cheeks? There is no conflict there. Depression is something we can experience. Gratitude is something we can give. Those don't exclude each other.

USING YOUR BRAIN: VALUES

Like smart compass directions that adapt to our context and show us where to go when we're lost in the wilderness of life.

What if you're addicted to something you value, like the internet?

We wouldn't build values around objects. It's more useful to keep values focused on actions. For example, At TOOLKIT, we value making mental fitness tools accessible, so the internet is merely a medium. Understanding the actions you value online helps expose ways to use the internet as a support. Then you can see the actions online to cut out because they're not aligned with how you want to spend your time and energy.

You'll likely spend a lot of time during your life interacting with the internet. That's part of your life. How do you want to spend that part of your life? What do you want to give to yourself and those around you?

How can I set values if mental illness makes things meaningless?

When we start building mental health and fitness, we're usually in a place where we don't know who we are or what we like. Everything sucks. And we're probably starting to realize that things we believed were our values, that we thought we liked, have only dug the mental illness hole deeper.

There are many exercises you can do to explore values, but something very simple can be to borrow values. They're not hiding deep within us, behind our spleens. Values are compass directions. You don't go into the wilderness and try to feel out the "right" direction. Of course that would get you lost! Instead, we can ask people who have gone places we may want to go. What steps did they take to get there? We can try those steps. We'll take that step and see if we might want to take another step in that direction.

On the way, we'll look at data. We like to look at data on functioning, not feelings or thoughts. The weather overhead doesn't mean the path we're on is the right path or the wrong path. We want to look at the data: What are we doing? What are the outcomes? Are we giving what we want to give to the world?

USING YOUR BRAIN: VALUES

No more time wasted not being me! How can I do recovery fast?

Great! Do it right now. Like, really. It's not this big crystal piss pot you carve with a toothpick over many years, hoping to finish it at some far off magical special place. It's the step you take in this moment. In this moment, you can make a choice that's aligned with your values, that's accepting whatever is going on in your head, that's not about reacting with coping and checking and controlling.

You can be yourself in this moment.

And after this moment, there'll be another moment, and again, you'll have choices. Again you'll get to decide if you put fear and brain indigestion in charge of your actions, or if you want to put your values and goals in charge of your actions.

Can I value getting rid of mental illness?

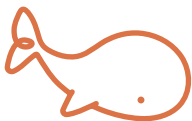
What about valuing something you want to keep in your life?

Take swimming as an example: If you nearly drown (like mental illness), you might want to avoid drowning. But how are you going to do that? Are you going to focus your time and energy on avoiding drowning? Ok, that's simple: just avoid going near water. Problem solved. It might be limiting for your life. There are many beautiful places near water. But you won't drown! Maybe. Watch out for bathtubs and bridges!

Or do you want to learn how to swim? Do you want to build skills? Do you want to turn the things you once feared into vehicles that can take you places in life? Do you want to see yourself as a drowner that needs to avoid puddles, or as a swimmer with skills to handle an ocean?

The focus of our work at TOOLKIT is on learning how to swim through the seas inside of us. It's not about having a problem. It's about building skills. When we focus on building mental health and fitness skills, everything we do is giving more time and energy to health, to skills we'll keep in our life forever. Mental illness doesn't need more of our time and energy. It's had enough.

TWO PATHS



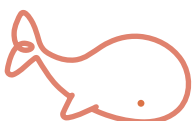
The water makes me anxious so I need to avoid the water.

Work gives me intrusive thoughts about mistakes harming people so I'm taking a mental health break.

A pretty human on TV said bad thoughts go away if I do affirmations to a magic crystal. I bought two.

I've 75% solved my panic attacks but want to be at 100% before going back to work.

I tried meditation but it doesn't work. I don't have the attention span for it, anyway.



The water scares me because I don't know how to swim, so I'm going to take swimming lessons!

I had to learn how to rest when I thought I should do more, and do more when I wanted to procrastinate.

I had to change many unhelpful beliefs about death that were getting in the way of living.

To practice being myself, I took on more responsibility in my pod and started sharing my singing on social media.

I put more time into changing environmental factors that were pushing me into old compulsions.

USING YOUR BRAIN: JUDGMENTS

A true superpower of your brain, but one to be used with care and discipline, because it can easily destroy everything you hold dear.

How can you see anxiety as an experience if it shouldn't be there?

It would be amazing if the sky were the golden doughy color of donuts. That nasty blue sky only gets in the way of accomplishing our goals in life. It's impossible to do important things under a blue sky! It ruins everything. The day is going so good and then bam! You catch a glimpse of that gross blue sky and the entire day is ruined. What if the whole week gets ruined because it's impossible to stop ruminating about the blue sky?!

But is the sky the problem? Or does the struggle arise from our judgments and our beliefs about how things should be? If somebody believes that blue skies are wrong, and they invest in judging and hating them, then it's only natural that they would suffer a great deal.

If I recover, will I still be bothered by my fears?

Only one: the fear of not having enough donuts. But that'll only happen if you keep engaging in compulsions to chase certainty about getting donuts. If you try to avoid the possibility of not having donuts, if you choose to judge thoughts about losing donuts, if you react to the emotions created by those judgments, then your brain will keep checking to make sure you're not losing your donuts. Your brain is only trying to be helpful.

Being troubled by something is a set of compulsions you do to thoughts. You can also choose to use your brain in other ways. Instead, you can welcome those creative, artisanal thoughts, trusting yourself to handle the loss of your donuts. You can use your brain to build and create wonderful things in the world that you value (like donuts).

USING YOUR BRAIN: JUDGMENTS

Non-judgment sounds great but how do you pretend despair is ok?

Non-judgment doesn't mean judging anything as wonderful or even a mediocre ok. Nothing need be any way it's not. This isn't about trying to change reality. Non-judgment means we don't need to spend time and energy sticking labels on experiences. If there's a stain on the hotel carpet, we don't need to spend our vacation hating it, sticking labels on it, putting it in charge of our actions, holding up our lives to figure out where it came from. It's there. A stain, a thought, a voice, a cloud. That's enough. We can make space for it. But what will we give our time and energy to?

When we make space for experiences and no longer put them in charge of our lives, it opens up the possibility to be ourselves with any thought or feeling. Maybe you feel despair. That's something you can feel. It doesn't control your actions or mean anything about anything else.

But what if you're judging compulsions? Aren't they bad?

This might sound weird at first, but it can be a big help to make compulsions totally fine. They're actions you can choose to do. However, now that you understand the consequences of those actions, would you like to choose a different action? You don't need to make things worse by engaging in compulsions about compulsions.

But what if you've already wrecked your day with judgments?

Sometimes we have days when things are just going terribly and we're so deep in the hole that we're getting nothing done except digging the hole deeper. Mark, our Head Coach, likes to call these "write-off days". When he would run into a day like that, he'd accept that day wasn't going anywhere, that he would feel terrible that day. Instead of trying to change that, he'd focus on making the next day easier. That's about finding ways to make the choices we want to make, or spending time and energy today on setting up supports to help us tomorrow.

Maybe this pain will be there tomorrow as well. That's ok. It can come along for the ride. It's there. We can make space for it. But we don't need to let it puppet us around.

USING YOUR BRAIN: LOVING YOURSELF

A most beautiful activity you can do with your brain. If you want to get skilled at it, though, you need to practice as least as much as you practice hating yourself.

How do you find self love?

You don't. It's not something to search for. It's something to do.

Trying to find self love can turn it into a calculation, judging positives and negatives, hunting for things to feel grateful for, reasons to give ourselves humanitarian awards. But loving ourselves isn't a profit and loss statement to rationalize. Self love is not something to find in your brain appliance. Self love is not about reasons. It is something we must do unreasonably.

Love yourself because you exist. Consider the actions you want to engage in as an expression of loving yourself. That love is something you give to yourself. How will you do that today?

Is a lack of self love the source of mental health problems?

No, but we can certainly all benefit from giving love and compassion and gratitude and kindness towards ourselves each day, no matter where we are on our journeys through life. So please give generously.

What if you can't love yourself because of bad things you've done?

Love is an action that you do in the present. Because it's an action, there's no thing in the past that could prevent you from loving yourself. You can choose to use your brain to invent excuses which you can then pile up like bricks across your path, but that's entirely up to you. Self love has nothing to do with things in the past you're busily incinerating with your judgment superpowers in the present.

You can always choose to rest those judgment superpowers and give yourself some love instead.

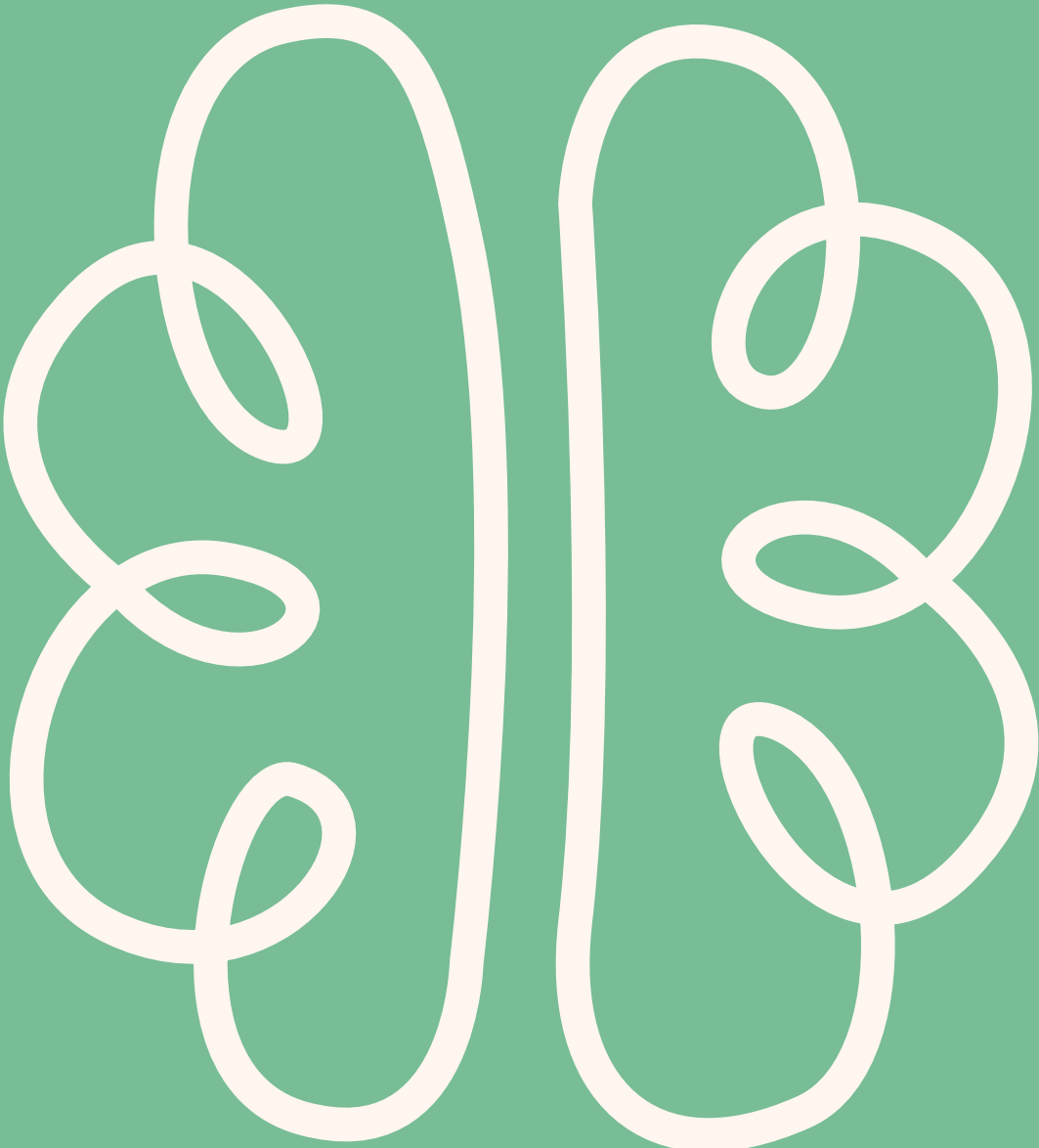
USING YOUR BRAIN: LOVING YOURSELF

Can you achieve full acceptance without feeling self love first?

We love to invent imaginary concepts and then put our lives on hold while we chase success somewhere off in an unreachable place over the horizon that we can surely get to very soon if we just do a few more compulsions, and then some more, and a few more, we're almost there, just one more and we'll finally have peace...

Acceptance is a practice we can enjoy in this moment. Self love is a practice we can enjoy in this moment. If we practice them, we're doing them. We do them as best as we can and learn skills to do them better. They don't come in "full" versions, just like there is no such thing as full swimming. If you're trying to swim, you're swimming.

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SERVICE REQUEST FORM

Whether you're working with one of our coaches or you're going to see a professional somewhere else, you can use this form to collect data in advance. It helps to shift the focus away from a problem and towards the skills you want to build.

What are three things you want to do more of in life?

What would you do tomorrow if brain stuff was no barrier?

What skills do you want to build?

What environmental factors affect you??

What are three things you want to spend less time and energy on?

What supports would help you do more of the things you value?

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