THINK FORWARD TO THRIVE
How to Use the Mind's Power of Anticipation to Transcend Your Past and Transform Your Life

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HOW TO USE THE MIND'S POWER OF ANTICIPATION TO TRANSCEND YOUR PAST AND TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

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An Introduction to

**FUTURE DIRECTED THERAPY**

> It is far more important for man to know who he wants to become than who he is now.
> — Joseph Nuttin, PhD

Everyone wants to feel good and everyone wants to thrive in life, yet many people don’t know how to make this happen. **Future Directed Therapy (FDT)** is a whole new approach to improving how humans function, based on the idea that because humans can only move forward in time, we can only truly be understood as beings continuously in the process of becoming. The “Future” in Future Directed Therapy is not necessarily something that is far away; it can refer to any point in time beyond the present moment, near or far. Rather, it is about understanding that because we can only move forward in time, most of our thinking and behavior is anticipatory or future-oriented in nature. We constantly speculate about what will happen, whether it be what will happen in the very next moment, tomorrow, or five years from now, and that has a huge impact on how we process information, feel about any situation, interact in our environment, and ultimately create our lives.

Although we often think it is the past that is dictating our behavior, the future is what motivates most of our actions in life. Whether you are motivated to get off the couch and walk into the kitchen because you anticipate there is something tasty to eat in there, or you are motivated to save money to buy a new home, or any other action you could possibly imagine taking, you act because you expect a certain desired result. The past is relevant only to the extent that we use it to predict the future. A primary premise of Future Directed Therapy is that what people want (any desired future state) in life is the fundamental motivating force that drives human behavior. Often we act to avoid something undesirable, but it is our desire (want) to avoid the unwanted that is driving our behavior. For example, if you stay home and don’t go to an anxiety-provoking party, it is because you want to avoid an uncomfortable situation. Because we believe that things we want will bring about some desired future state, subsequently, when we focus our thinking on what we want, we experience positive emotions. When you think about having a positive experience in the future or getting something you want
in life, you feel great; when you think about taking actions to avoid an uncomfortable situation, you feel relief. However, when we focus on what we don’t want in life, we experience emotional distress and suffering. If you, instead, think about missing out on an opportunity to see your friends or disappointing the person who invited you to the party, you may feel guilt or sadness. On any given subject, we can have thoughts about both the wanted aspects of a situation and the unwanted aspects of a situation. If you want to lose weight, you can think about how great it will feel when you do (wanted) or how lousy it is to give up your favorite foods (unwanted). For most of us, our minds tend to jump between wanted and unwanted situations all day long without ever even realizing that we are doing it.

The key to being able to thrive more in life is learning how to harness the mind’s natural tendency to anticipate the future in such a way that most of your attention is focused on the wanted states you would like to achieve. This not only brings you positive emotions, it activates a series of mental functions that actually increase your ability to obtain what it is you are wanting. When you are motivated to obtain something you want, the brain has several solution-generating, problem-solving mechanisms that kick into gear whenever you think about your desired future state, whereas when you focus on what you don’t want and you experience the negative emotions that result, it actually inhibits these areas of the brain from working. The longer you think about what you want, the harder these mechanisms work, often leading to ideas and solutions that never would have occurred to you if you had not focused your attention on the desired future you were trying to obtain. Think Forward to Thrive is a step-by-step guide that will help you learn how to experience more positive emotions and thrive more in life by focusing on what you want; it will teach you the skills you need to begin creating your future by choice. While FDT comes from the field of psychology, it is far more than a form of therapy. It is a way to live life that maximizes the full potential of all human beings to create the experiences they want to have.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

My idea for FDT came from years of working as a psychologist, listening to people talk about their past but rarely seeing them make substantial and significant life changes. I felt a deep sense of guilt and frustration because I always felt as if what I had to offer to my patients wasn’t enough. I had been trained to believe that understanding one’s past and working through unresolved conflicts was the key to feeling better. My desire to help my patients make more rapid changes and develop better ways to cope with the difficult real-life circumstances many of them were faced with led me to the world of cognitive behavioral therapy, in which I learned that people could make changes by modifying their thoughts and behaviors in the present moment. While I found cognitive therapy to be substantially more practical and tangible for clients, it still left many unanswered questions about what motivated change, and clients often found that labeling their thinking as irrational (one of the common tools of cognitive therapy) seemed to invalidate their experiences.

One day I was listening to a particularly depressed client, whom I had been seeing for about six months, once again tell me about his daunting life circumstances. In the time we had worked together, he had made little progress shifting his negative thinking on these issues. I asked him from a place of both frustration and pure instinct, “So where is the light at the end of the tunnel?” He looked at me with a completely blank stare and then admitted that there wasn’t one. “Well, no wonder you are depressed,” I said. “Your life is awful, and you can’t see any way it is going to get better. You need a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“But I don’t know how to change my life,” he replied.

“Well, from now on, the focus of our work together is going to be creating a light at the end of the tunnel.”

One year later, my client had radically transformed his life: he had gone from working in a dead-end job that he hated to owning his own successful business, something he had never dared to dream about before.

After that session, I began to ask all the clients I worked with about their light at the end of the tunnel. I was startled to realize that most of my clients didn’t feel they had one. Either they felt that life would never change or they worried it would only get worse. Most of them didn’t know how to change their future, and many of them didn’t even believe it was possible. As my work with clients began to focus almost exclusively on helping them to create better pictures of their futures, I noticed without exception that those who were able not only to develop a more positive outlook on their future, but also to take action, began to feel better. The transformations I saw people making were awe-inspiring.

At the same time, wanting to help clients develop more skills for creating their future, I began to search the psychology literature for information on future thinking. I discovered a body of scientific work that had yet to be translated into any type of practical intervention — work providing valid support for the ideas that being able to anticipate a positive future and feeling able to act on that future were the keys to emotional well-being. I knew the challenge to translate this information into something useful would be daunting, but I kept my focus on what I wanted, which was to get this information into the hands of my clients who I knew needed it most. It is to each of my clients whom I have had the privilege of working with that I dedicate this work.

The Basics of FDT

In Future Directed Therapy, a fundamental premise is that all human beings desire to thrive. Thriving is defined as a dynamic state of growth and moving forward toward
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improved life circumstances from wherever one is in one’s present-moment experience. Everyone wants to thrive, though everyone has a different idea of what thriving is, based on his or her own circumstances. For some people, thriving might be the opportunity to eat regular meals; for some, it might be buying a yacht; for others, it might be attaining spiritual enlightenment. Thriving is about constantly feeling you can grow, move forward, and improve your life circumstances.

It is well documented that no matter what people achieve, no one is ever satisfied for very long 1. While there have been many explanations offered for this phenomenon, such as the idea that our ability to experience happiness is limited or the idea that discontent is a moral deficiency, in FDT the constant desire to thrive and move forward is viewed as a psychological drive with a biological basis. New technological advances that allow us to study brain functioning have revealed the critical importance that the area of the brain responsible for reward processing plays in our daily lives. Rewards are things we look forward to in the future. Looking forward to rewards is essential to our emotional well-being. It is the rewarding things in life that make us feel like we are thriving, and the absence of those things leads to negative emotions, which is why the onset of many psychiatric conditions is often linked to losing the things in life people find rewarding, such as a relationship or a job 3. Unfortunately, people with a wide variety of emotional problems have impairments in their brains’ ability to identify or process rewards 4, 5. This may explain why, even if there are many positive things in someone’s life, when that person is feeling down, it is much easier to focus on all the negative things. Someone with an impaired reward system might have a great job but only focus on the long commute there, or easily recall a critical comment about a work project but seem unable to hear the 20 compliments that were also given.

When the reward processing system in the brain doesn’t operate properly, not only can people develop a depressed mood, they can lose the desire to pursue the things they want in life 4. Even things that may have felt exciting and rewarding before, like going to a fun concert or a new movie on a Saturday night, seem like too much effort. This is because low levels of certain neurotransmitters in the brain’s reward processing center, particularly dopamine, can lead to overestimating the costs associated with pursuing things that would be rewarding. This, in turn, leads to feeling like it isn’t worth it to exert the effort to obtain something wanted 5, 6. Not surprisingly, when the reward center of someone’s brain is underactive, he or she actually ends up participating in fewer activities that would provide stimulation to this brain region 6. Going to the concert or the movie, whether you felt like it or not, would activate this part of the brain, and you would feel better.

In FDT, we hypothesize that the desire to pursue rewards and to thrive promotes the evolutionary progression of humankind. Every human invention, from the first stone tool to the supercomputers we use today, has been driven by the desire to improve our circumstances. In order for forward movement and thriving to continue, there must always be a difference between where we are in life and where we want to be. In FDT, we believe that our desire to close this gap creates what is referred to as the need to want. What we want is always in the future.

We cannot move forward in time without exerting a want, intent, or desire. If you finish reading this page, it is because you want to do so. Each time a future-oriented want is realized, a new want will emerge. When you finish reading this page, you will want to keep reading more, or you will want to put the book down and go do something else. Every action is a choice that requires intent or “want” in order for it to manifest as a physical experience. In FDT, we believe that when people feel they have the power to obtain what they want, they experience a sense of well-being. However, when they feel they are unable to move into their desired future state, they experience distress. If you decided you wanted to go outside for a walk and buy ice cream, and then someone told you that you had no choice but to sit in a chair and read this book until the very end whether you wanted to or not, you would probably find this upsetting (even though it is a really good book!).

Thinking is what we use to generate ideas about what we want in the future, develop plans to obtain what we want, and initiate the actions needed to make our plans become reality. If you decide you want ice cream, your brain immediately starts to think of ways to make this occur: where to buy the ice cream, what kind to buy, and so forth. This creative thought flow results in planning and problem solving that increases the likelihood of turning what you want into a real experience. FDT teaches people the skills to keep thought focused on what they want in order to engage this creative problem-solving process.

In FDT, emotional suffering is believed to be caused by spending time thinking about what is not wanted in life. Not having what you want is something you don’t want. For example, if you want a relationship but don’t have one, not having one is something unwanted. Pretty much anything you can think of that makes you feel bad is something you don’t want in life. If you decide you want ice cream but then start thinking about the ice cream making you fat, which is something you don’t want, you start to feel anxious. FDT teaches people to recognize that their emotions are indicators of what they’ve been thinking about. This means that, if you are experiencing any negative emotion, it is because you are thinking about something in your life that you do not want. It is, specifically, this focus on the unwanted that moves you away from a state of thriving and leads to emotional distress. If you think long enough about what is unwanted in your life, psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety can occur. In FDT, people are taught to observe their feelings and shift the focus of their thinking toward what is wanted.

A considerable effort is made in FDT to help people learn to identify the actual process by which they create their future. People learn how future thought is often projected from existing limiting belief systems and how to create new, more positive expectations about what the future holds. People also learn how to better allocate the valuable resources we all have in life, such as thought, behavior, and time, toward
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obtaining more of what is wanted. Another major goal of FDT is to help people learn to clarify and prioritize their wants based on what they value. FDT teaches people to understand that there may be many different ways in which they can lead a life filled with goals consistent with their values.

FDT helps people define realistic goals that lead to the feeling of thriving but are within their scope to accomplish through their thoughts and behaviors. FDT also teaches people to deal effectively with those aspects of a situation that are beyond their control. FDT puts forth the idea that humans grow and expand through experience, and people are taught to use times when they do not get what they want as opportunities for growth and self-awareness.

FDT teaches people the necessary skills to significantly increase the chances of successfully creating a more rewarding life. Many of the techniques in FDT are based on what psychologists refer to as a neurobehavioral approach, which looks at how your brain and your behavior work together. A good deal of research has shown that you can activate parts of your brain at will, with your attention and behavior. While this can be challenging at first, over time it can actually change your brain’s structures and how it functions. The brain is a lot like a high-tech computer: it can do wonderful things if you know how to use it, but if you don’t, not only do you miss out on its benefits, it can cause a lot of frustration. Once you know how your brain works, you can make it work for you. Many of the practice exercises in this book will help you learn not only the process by which you can create more satisfying future experiences, but the skills to maximize your brain’s ability to generate the mental activity, and eventually the behaviors, that can turn what you want into an experience you actually live.

Mary’s Story

Mary was a 27-year-old singer and songwriter struggling with depression. She had recently moved from Canada to Los Angeles with her boyfriend of almost four years so that he could pursue his interest in screenwriting and she could pursue her singing career. By most musicians’ standards, Mary had already experienced a fair amount of success. Several years earlier she had been signed to a major record label and produced an album, but because the album wasn’t promoted well, the sales hadn’t been high, and the label had chosen not to renew her contract. Even though Mary had been singing since she was a child, she no longer got any pleasure from working on her music, and she was feeling at a loss for what to do with her life. In the meantime, Mary was supporting herself by waiting tables in a small restaurant, a job that she found very unsatisfying, given that she had a bachelor’s degree in art history from a top college.

In addition to feeling unhappy with her professional life, Mary was also unhappy with her personal life. She hadn’t made any new friends since her move, and she felt that her life outside of work was empty. She didn’t want to talk to new people because she feared they would see her as a failure. She was also frustrated with her boyfriend, whom she had lived with for over three years, because he had not yet proposed and she felt that he avoided the subject of marriage every time she tried to bring it up. Mary did not have much of a relationship with her family, either; she felt her parents were disappointed in her because they had worked hard to put her through college and she wasn’t working in a real job. Her fear of disapproval and criticism often made her irritable, and she could be short-tempered with her parents, which made her feel guilty, so she often avoided talking to them at all.

Mary spent a good deal of her day thinking about all the unhappy areas of her life. She had very little energy and had difficulty getting out of bed because she dreaded facing each day. When she opened her eyes in the morning, she would start to list all the areas of her life in which she was unhappy. She felt like a failure at music and believed maybe it was time to give in to the pressure of her family to “get a real job,” but she didn’t know what other kind of career she might pursue because nothing felt interesting to her. She also worried that, because of her depression, her boyfriend would leave her and she would be completely alone. She felt trapped and unmotivated, and she had a hard time seeing any way that things could improve.

Mary’s first task was to learn about her own thought process so that she could understand how her thinking was keeping her feeling stuck and unhappy. She learned, first, to understand that her thinking was a valuable resource that contributed directly to the life she was creating. She also learned to identify how she was using this resource by paying attention to her emotions. She learned that, when she was feeling bad, it was a direct result of focusing her thoughts on the areas of her life where she was unhappy, and she learned to recognize that, as long as she kept doing so, she would not generate any new ideas about how to get the things that she wanted in her life. She then learned the skill of redirecting her thought process in ways that made her feel better. She created a list of things that she could focus on to generate positive feelings, and she kept the list with her so that she could pull it out when she needed it. This list helped stop her thoughts when they started a downward spiral, so that she could regain some perspective and improve her mood.

Next, Mary learned to understand how her thinking was directly affecting the choices that she made. She saw that she was creating negative future projections based on experiences which had occurred in her past, then engaging in behavior consistent with what she was expecting, thereby creating self-fulfilling prophecies. She was able to see that she was fearful of failing at her music career because she felt that her first album had been unsuccessful; therefore, she wasn’t putting any effort into her career, guaranteeing future failure. She also learned that, because she feared criticism and rejection from others, she was withdrawing and acting in a way that was actually making her boyfriend and her family more likely to criticize and reject her.

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Chapter 1

A NEW BEGINNING

Live out your imagination, not your history.
— Stephen R. Covey

Imagine that you’re traveling through the journey of life in a car and you are the driver. Most people are unclear what direction they are heading much of the time, and many get through life never even learning how to really drive. They manage to operate their car in a default mode that allows them to zigzag through life with very little control. Many people get stuck and stalled, while others hit dead ends or go in circles, feeling like they never get anywhere. The goal of Future Directed Therapy (FDT) is to teach people how to drive the car, then give them a road map for how to get where they want to go in life and, most importantly, stay on course.

THE ROAD TO WELL-BEING

What most people don’t realize is that the journey of life has only two directions: toward well-being and away from it. Your thoughts and your actions power your car. Your emotions indicate where you are going. If you are feeling bad in some way, it means you’re thinking thoughts that are taking you away from well-being and moving you toward distress. Because we don’t control time and our life keeps progressing, you can never completely stop and stand still. You are always moving, whether it be toward thriving or toward not thriving. Allowing a negative stream of thought to flow through your mind does not just prevent you from moving toward what you want; it takes you further away from it. The longer you let your thoughts carry you in that direction, the further away you get from where you want to be going.

By the time you are feeling very painful emotions, such as anxiety or depression, your thoughts have been flowing as though your car were going a hundred miles an hour headed in the wrong direction. You can’t just shift your car into reverse when you
are going that fast. You need to slow it down until you are ready to turn it around. The same thing is true of your thought process. In FDT, you will learn how to turn yourself around by redirecting your thinking and reaching for improvements in thought rather than trying to make large leaps that often lead to a crash and burn or, at the very least, get you no closer to your desired destination.

While all human beings are in a constant state of creating their futures, most are not very aware of how the process is actually occurring, and as a result, they have limited control over what they experience. Learning to break free from creating your future by default and instead learning to create your future by choice starts with gaining awareness of your thought process and then developing skills that will give you greater ability to choose the life you want to live.

Everything you want is in the future, whether that future is just moments or years away. You want things that promote your ability to thrive and lead to feeling good, and you don’t want things that move you away from that. The problem for many people is that when they focus on what they want and start to think about implementing plans to get there, they often confront real-world challenges. These challenges can pull them away from focusing on what is wanted and cause them to focus instead on the unwanted obstacles, which in turn lead to negative emotions such as discouragement and disappointment. If you stay focused on unwanted things for long enough, you will start to experience even more serious psychological distress.

In order to create your future by choice, you will need to learn not only how to identify what it is you want, but how to use your very powerful thought and behavioral resources to help you get past barriers in your life. FDT was developed to teach the skills that will help you allocate your thoughts and behavior most effectively toward what you want, which, if done consistently, can lead to greater thriving, improved emotional well-being, and more of the future experiences you desire.

### Recreating the Past

Most people create their future by recreating the past. The ability to recreate the past has a high degree of survival value for humans. If we find a good source of food or a safe place to sleep, we want to be able to find it again. If we have a pleasant encounter with someone, we want to have a similar experience again. Our memory is what gives us the ability to store information about our past and present experiences. We use this stored information to formulate expectations about our environment and to make predictions about what our future experiences will be like. Being able to predict or anticipate the future enables us to prepare for it by taking the actions we think are necessary to meet future events with success.

For example, if you are someone who has been lucky enough to go through life for the most part having positive experiences with other people, like loving parents, lots of friends, great teachers, and nice bosses, you probably enjoyed these experiences. Because you have had so many positive past experiences, you have probably developed the expectation that most people you meet in the future will treat you well. If you expect people to treat you well, you will likely act in a friendly, open way with new people you meet. Your friendly behavior will almost certainly bring out friendly behavior in others, recreating your past experiences and confirming your expectation that people treat you well.

This system works great if you have a past that you want to recreate. However, for those who would like to break free from the past and create a different future, this system can keep them trapped unknowingly. If you have had a lot of experiences in your past that you didn’t like, chances are you are expecting the future to bring similar experiences even if you don’t want them. And you are acting in ways consistent with what you expect, thereby recreating experiences similar to those past experiences you disliked. The good news is that, once you are aware of it, you can stop this process and do something different. Your past does not have to define who you are or where you are going.

While our past history is a major source of information that we use to predict the future, it is not the only means by which we can create the future. We have the ability to become aware of this process as it is happening in the present moment. Once we are aware of it, we can interrupt the process and consciously choose to think new thoughts that have the potential to grow into new anticipatory beliefs. These new expectations will lead to taking different actions that will create a different future. We can also use newly learned information about who we are today to help identify what we are capable of going forward.

**Most people create their future by recreating the past.**

The other good news is that learning to create a future experience is a skill-based activity that anyone can learn. Research has shown that people who successfully do things to create their future, such as setting goals, planning, and problem solving, consistently experience greater well-being, while people with fewer of these skills tend to experience more negative emotions, which can lead to serious conditions such as depression. If you keep reading, this book will teach you the skills you need to break out of old patterns and habits so that, with a little effort, you can stop recreating your past and improve your ability to make different choices and create more of the experiences you would like to have in your life.
Everyone knows how to lose weight: eat less and exercise more. But people struggle every day with this issue because of the many complex barriers that get in the way; hence, helping people lose weight is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Likewise, everyone knows to some degree how to create their future because they do it every day, all day. But very few people know how to actively direct this process in a way that regularly leads to successful outcomes or how to get around the many barriers that may come up. You will learn in the upcoming chapters how to approach life from a place of awareness and successfully complete the steps to creating a desired future experience, as well as how to overcome the roadblocks that can get in the way.

**What about the Present Moment?**

The power to alter the course of change in life lies in the present moment of awareness. However, we cannot hold on to the present moment. The present moment is what just passed; it just passed; it just passed; it is gone; it is gone. The future is always what is arriving; it just arrived; it just arrived; it just arrived; it is here; it is here; it is here; it is here. The new and the arrival of the future are one and the same, and you have tremendous power to influence what future will arrive to become the now you experience.

A good deal of emphasis has been placed on “being in the present moment” by psychologists, popular-culture authors, and spiritual leaders, so much so that thinking about the future has gotten a bad rap. While being aware of thoughts and feelings in the present moment is an important skill to have, keeping thoughts only in the present moment will not create a better future all by itself. If you want something different, you will need to think forward and plan for something different to arrive. While thinking about the future can cause fear and anxiety if you focus on things in the future that you don’t want, focusing on the negative is not an inherent component of future thinking. Learning how to think about the future in a positive, constructive way is essential to creating a life you desire. Being aware of the present moment gives you the opportunity to make conscious choices and is a necessary skill, but it isn’t sufficient by itself to help you improve your future and what arrives in your experience. There is much more you need to know if you want to create true change in your life, so keep reading!

**The Feeling of Thriving**

We achieve a sense of well-being when we know we are moving in the direction of continuous growth and improved life experiences. This movement toward growth and improved life experience is known as **thriving**. Every human being wants to thrive in life, and it is an ongoing process, meaning no one ever reaches a state where the desire

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**Creating a New Future Experience**

Creating a new future experience is not necessarily difficult. There are four basic steps. First, you have to initiate a thought about something you want that doesn’t yet exist. For example, I want a new job. Next, you need to imagine what that would look like. I would like to be a manager at a retail company, not in sales. Then you must anticipate the tasks necessary to make it happen. I need to create a resume that shows why I would be qualified to do this job; then I need to search the Internet for open positions; then I need to mail my resume, and so on. Finally, you will need to execute the tasks you have anticipated. While these four basic steps may sound relatively easy, there are many obstacles along the way that can trip people up. In a lot of ways, creating your future is like weight loss.
to thrive stops. Even those whose profoundly difficult life circumstances have caused them to become frustrated, or to believe that thriving is not possible, continue to desire improvement in their experience. Each time we reach what we believe is a wanted state of thriving, it gives us a new vantage point from which another new want is born. For example, when you first started high school, you wanted to graduate; as time went on and you anticipated that achievement, you formulated other wants, like getting a job or going to college. If you chose college, when you first showed up you probably just wanted to enjoy the experience; then, as time went by and you began to anticipate your college degree, you probably started to think about what other opportunities were now open to you, and you formulated new wants about what you planned to achieve next in life. Thriving is therefore not a destination where we arrive and are then permanently fulfilled, but rather an ongoing experience of personal growth and evolution.

Thriving is subjective and relative. What you perceive as thriving and moving forward in life is completely defined by your own set of circumstances, and it may be very different from someone else’s idea of thriving. Someone who is starving wants to obtain a source of food; someone with an adequate food supply turns his or her wants in the direction of other increased means of thriving, such as safe and comfortable shelter. Thriving can include almost any human activity, such as building strong relationships with others or improving our own psychological or spiritual insight. For someone like Bill Gates, who has all that money can buy, the desire to thrive can take the form of feeling gratification from helping mankind at large to thrive more through humanitarian efforts.

While thriving is a subjective state, in FDT one premise is that what people really seek in life is the process of growth, including psychological, mental, and physical expansion. When something is too easy and doesn’t challenge us, the reward we get from achieving it is low. When we achieve something that we work toward, we appreciate and value it much more. For example, if you set a goal to improve your health by walking half a block a day, you may be able to achieve it with relative ease; however, your sense of personal gratification and accomplishment, as well as your body’s physical improvement, will probably be significantly lower than if you had set the goal to run a 10K, trained for weeks, and then crossed the finish line in under your targeted time. Now you are on your way to reaching for your next target, which might be to run a marathon. Constantly reaching for increased states of thriving causes us to continue to grow and evolve as people.

When humans perceive that their survival or ability to thrive is being threatened in some way, they experience psychological distress and negative emotions. Your emotions act as an internal guidance system that knows when you are moving in the direction of thriving or away from it, as when the GPS tracking system in your car tells you that you are getting closer to or farther away from your intended destination. When humans are in a state of thriving, they have a natural sense of psychological well-being, and they experience positive emotions. Here are a few examples.

Example 1. Social relationships are vital to humans’ survival and thriving. When we have positive, strong relationships with people in our lives, such as our parents, partners, children, or coworkers, we generally feel good and happy about those relationships. When we are in conflict with others and our relationships with them are threatened in some way, we generally feel upset and experience negative emotions.

Example 2. Money buys us many things that promote survival and thriving. When people feel they don’t have “enough” money, they generally start to feel anxious and distressed. How much is enough is a matter of individual perception, but when there is a perceived shortage or a belief that there is not enough, it can generate negative emotion.

Example 3. Safety is essential to human survival and thriving. If you don’t feel safe in the world because you believe bad things will happen and you don’t feel able to stop them, you are likely to experience distress and negative emotions.

If you are experiencing psychological distress that is causing negative emotions, it is an indicator that you do not feel you are thriving in some area or areas of your life. More importantly, you are most likely feeling uncertain or unhopeful about your ability to increase your level of thriving or improve the situation in the future. As you continue reading this book, you will learn to identify thoughts and beliefs that you may be holding about your future that are keeping you from thriving, and, very importantly, you will learn how you can more effectively use your thoughts about the future to promote a sense of greater well-being and generate more positive emotions.

How Can You Thrive More and Feel Better?

Feeling better in life and experiencing a better future doesn’t just happen because you want it to. It will require that you do some work that may, at times, seem quite difficult. There are, however, certain things that you can do as you read this book to set the stage for your success. Read the following concepts carefully and try to absorb their meaning before moving on, because they are preconditions for successfully making a lasting change in your life.

Be Willing to Change

Without a willingness to change, there can be no better future. Change is difficult; the thought alone can inspire fear and anxiety. You may have had many experiences in the past that cause you to doubt that your life can ever be different or that change is even possible. These past experiences may have caused you to close yourself off from things that you really want. You may fear failure. You may believe that it is other people who
Imagine what your life would be like if you reversed the pattern and, instead, spent most of your thought process thinking about how to improve your future and achieve the things you want. This is what successful, happy people do — people who get what they want out of life. They use their thought process wisely and spend it thinking about how to make what they want happen. Thoughts keep flowing through your mind all day long. It is important that you make the effort to have them flow in the direction that brings you the most benefit.

We Spend Thought with Our Attention

When we are purchasing something with the limited resource of money, we are generally making transactions with cash, checks, or credit cards, but the way we spend thought is with our attention. Attention is the level of conscious awareness that we have the ability to direct in order to notice or focus on something in our environment. We think about whatever we are focused on, and subsequently, attention is the gateway to what we experience in life.

Our attentional processing has a limited capacity 26, meaning we can only process a limited number of things at one time. Because there is much, much more that goes on in our environment around us than we could ever possibly pay attention to, the limited capacity of our attention creates the illusion of awareness 27. In other words, while we think we see and are aware of what is happening around us, the reality is that we are only aware of a small amount of what is going on in our environment, and we are missing lots of other things without even realizing it. It is almost like watching TV. There are way more channels than you could ever watch at one time. Just because you aren’t watching all of them doesn’t mean they aren’t there.

In order to maximize the use of the limited amount of attention we have, our brains generate selective filters through a process called priming, which increases the brain’s sensitivity to detecting certain things in our environment. Priming can occur intentionally or unintentionally, but in either case it tells the brain what to selectively pay attention to 28, 29. You can think of the process of priming as a mechanism similar to a TV that allows you to selectively “tune in” to what it is you want to see. For example, you may have had the experience of purchasing a new car and then suddenly noticing that lots of people on the road seem to be driving your car as well. The reality is that all those people you are seeing didn’t go out and buy the same car just because you did. Those people were there, driving those same cars, all along. You just weren’t noticing them until you primed yourself to notice them by purchasing the car yourself. Here’s another example: if you ask someone how many people he or she sees wearing red T-shirts every day, the average person will probably give a random guess of a fairly low number, like two or three. If you ask people to count every day for a week how many people they see wearing red T-shirts, at the end of the week they will almost always say they can’t believe how many people wear red T-shirts. Without being primed, they simply weren’t noticing, and consequently the color of people’s T-shirts was not entering their conscious level of experience.

Attention to one element in the environment not only activates brain processing of that element, but it also inhibits processing of competing elements by shutting down competing neural networks 30-32. Not only will someone looking for red T-shirts see more people wearing red T-shirts; he or she will give less attention to what other people (without red T-shirts) are wearing. Attention actually determines the activity of the brain 10. If we don’t give attention to something, even if it is present in our
environment, it doesn’t activate much brain functioning and we don’t have much, if any, experience of it. Thus, “we are not passive recipients . . . but active participants in our own process of perception” 33. Therefore, how we use or direct our attention and spend our thought is critical to our actual experience of any given situation.

**Example:** Karen was a retired schoolteacher who had encountered a number of difficult circumstances over the past few years. She and her husband had divorced, and her adult son had developed a serious drug addiction and lost his job as a result. She had spent the last three years getting into bitter arguments with her son when he asked for money, while at the same time feeling overwhelmed with guilt as she watched him bounce in and out of rehab. Recently, her health had begun to deteriorate and she had developed symptoms of chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia. When Karen first came to treatment, she was spending almost all day every day ruminating on the troubles in her life, wondering where she had gone wrong. Her view of the world was quite bleak; if she wasn’t discussing her own problems, she would often describe negative things she had seen on the news or relate bad things happening to people she knew. Because Karen had a number of very real difficult situations in her life, it was hard for her to buy into the idea that she was participating in the experience she was having because of where she was focusing her attention. So we started small. Karen’s first assignment was to wake up every morning and count as many people smiling as she could in a day. She kept track in a little notebook. After three weeks, Karen came in to a session beaming. Not only had the number of people she noticed smiling increased steadily, but she had started to take notice of what all these people were smiling about. She told several very funny stories, then mentioned that she had shared them with others during the week and had good laughs with some of her friends. She said she had never noticed how many happy people were around her and how many things there were to smile about. Nothing in Karen’s life had changed — she still had the same problems — but because she was giving less attention to them and was intentionally focusing on looking for something more pleasant in her life, she was seeing an improvement in her emotional experience. This improvement led her to feel more optimistic that therapy could work for her, and she began to tackle the lessons with enthusiasm and dedication. Karen had to do a lot of hard work to find solutions to improve some of the situations in her life; however, her willingness led to action, which raised Karen’s sense of well-being and the quality of her life.

**Thinking about What You Do Want**

What we want and what we don’t want always exist simultaneously in any situation. The wanted and unwanted in life exist together to provide contrast so that each can be known. To know that something is unwanted in life, we must know that something else is wanted instead. One serves as the reference point for the other. For example, we could not identify the wanted experience of happiness if we didn’t know what it was like to experience the unwanted state of lacking happiness. If you know you don’t want something, it is because you know there is something else, some other state that exists, that is preferable to you. If you decide you don’t want a turkey sandwich, it might be because you want something else, or because you know that not having it just seems preferable to you at that moment, perhaps because you aren’t hungry.

Given that the wanted and unwanted both exist together, where you focus your attention and your thoughts determines the experience you will have. Many people who experience negative emotions by default are focusing their attention on what they don’t want in life. For example, if you are invited to a party, you can focus on the aspects of the party you want, like having a great time with friends, meeting new people, enjoying good food, and having an opportunity to relax, or you can focus on what you don’t want, like feeling uncomfortable with strangers, looking foolish if you decide to dance, not having anything to wear, or running into an ex-lover. You are the one who gets to choose what aspects you focus on. Even in situations that might seem universally unwanted, like getting a speeding ticket, you can focus on how lousy it is to get the ticket, or you can think that you are lucky to have gotten a warning to slow down before something even more unwanted happened, such as an accident. You are the one who chooses which experience you have. Priming makes this process more automatic. The more often you tell yourself to look for the wanted aspect of a situation, the more your brain will start to selectively filter for what is wanted, which will increase your ability to see the wanted aspects and inhibit you from seeing the unwanted things.

When you notice you are having a negative emotion about anything, realize you are focusing on the unwanted aspects of the situation and, if you want to feel better, simply start looking for any wanted aspect. They always exist together; which one you are seeing depends on where you are looking.

The goal is not to think positively all the time or to focus only on the wanted things in life. That would be impossible. Thinking about the unwanted things in life can help you give birth to new ideas, wants, and desires that you never had before. For example, focusing on the unwanted event of global warming is inspiring scientists around the world to come up with new types of fuel sources that don’t cause environmental pollution. Unwanted things are a part of life. When, however, we are able to redirect our thoughts toward wanted solutions and spend thought on how to obtain them, then we continue to thrive. The emotional experience you have in any situation depends upon
because this promotes our ability to survive in the world. For this reason, the brain has a creative problem-solving function, called the executive network that generates solutions. This solution generating part of the brain is turned on when there is an identified destination with a reasonable expectation that it is possible to get there. Chapters 3 and 4 will explain much more about the very important role of expectation but for now what you want to know is that what you give your attention to will grow a thought process around it. If you focus on an unwanted problem it will grow more thoughts about the problem and the problem will seem bigger. If you instead redirect your attention towards wanted solutions, your brain will generate thoughts to grow the solutions. Things you never thought of before will begin to occur to you. To get this process to work for you when you need it to, you must be aware of where your attention is being focused, on something that is unwanted or wanted, and consciously choose to direct as much of your attention as you can toward the wanted things in life.

**Ask Yourself**

*What new thoughts does my present thought generate?*
Try moving from point A to point B with your own thinking:

First, write down any problem or unwanted situation in your life. Really focus on the problem, what you don’t like about it, and why it makes you feel so lousy. Write down the thoughts that come to mind. Then ask yourself, where would I like to be with the situation instead? Come up with something that feels like a realistic improvement or a resolution to you. It doesn’t have to be anything big or grand. Something like I want to feel calmer in this situation could be a great place to start with point B. Then ask yourself, how can I get there? Focus on that for a few minutes and write down what thoughts come to mind. If there are resistant thoughts like I can’t do this, it will never happen, don’t worry — we will discuss how to get past that type of thinking in chapter 5 on overcoming resistance.

Point A ---------->---------->-------> Point B
(Where I am)                                             (Where I want to be)

Thoughts generated by focusing attention on point A
Thoughts generated by focusing attention on point B and asking: How can I get there?

1. Increase your awareness of what you are thinking. This week, place Post-Its in your bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, on your television, and in your car with the words: What am I thinking now? Every time you see one of the Post-Its, pause and take a breath, then check in with yourself and observe your thoughts. When you do this, ask yourself:

   Is this what I want to be spending my thought process on?

2. Complete the worksheet “My List of Positive Ways to Redirect My Thinking” on page 42. Simply follow the example and list a few things that make you feel good, then write a sentence or two about why each one makes you feel good. Make sure to place the list where it is easily accessible so that you can take a look at it when you start to feel yourself generating negative thinking. Your refrigerator or your purse or wallet would be a great place.

3. Try the exercise on moving from point A to point B with your thinking on page 46.

4. To further practice what you’ve learned and increase your awareness of what you are thinking, complete the “What Am I Thinking?” worksheet at the end of the chapter on page 48.
Chapter 4

Creating New Expectations

Worksheet 4.1

Identifying Future Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/Situation</th>
<th>Past/Present/Future</th>
<th>Want/Don’t Want</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Future Expectation</th>
<th>What am I expecting will happen?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: My boss yelled at me.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Don’t want</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Which Expectations about My Future Should I Hold On To?

The purpose of identifying your future expectations is to have greater awareness of the thoughts that are creating your future so that you can choose to create experiences that increase your ability to thrive, are enjoyable, and help you feel good.

Once you start to identify your expectations on any subject, it may at times seem very obvious which ones aren’t taking you in a positive direction or helping you create a better future. Future expectations such as I will never be good enough or No one will ever love me should certainly be replaced. But other times it might not be so clear. When you are in doubt about whether a belief you hold about the future is one you should keep or replace, here is a question that can help you decide:

Ask Yourself

Will what I believe about the future help me get what I want?

If the answer to this question is NO, you will have a choice to make: either you will need to give up what you want, or you will need to give up your limiting belief about the future and replace it with a more effective one, which you can do using the “How to Create a New Expectation” process detailed later in this chapter. Remember, we act on what we believe to be true. You can’t achieve what you want if you don’t believe it is possible.

What If My Negative Beliefs about the Future Are True?

Nothing about the future is guaranteed to be true, because it hasn’t yet occurred. There is only what we think will likely occur based on what we know about the present and past.

Truth is often a more subjective state than people realize. People often think that, if they can find “evidence” for something, it must be true. However, much of the time, we create supporting evidence for our beliefs through self-fulfilling prophecies. When we believe something strongly, we engage in actions that lead to confirmation of our beliefs. We also tend to filter the information in our environment so that we pay attention only to the information that confirms what we believe and disregard evidence to the contrary. As we create our future, it is important to remember that what is true of the past does not have to be true of the future.

While there may be certain facts that you must contend with when you want to accomplish something, those facts may or may not limit you, depending on how you think about the situation. For example, someone with no legs might think it impossible to participate in a marathon, and many people might agree. However, people in wheelchairs complete marathons all the time. When desire is strong enough and the focus is on “finding a way,” the brain’s creative problem-solving function goes to work to come
up with solutions that may not have existed before. If you believe that you are limited by what is “true,” then you are. If, instead, you would like to learn how to create new beliefs and expectations about your future that open up possibilities to achieve more of what you want in life, then keep reading!

**How to Create New Expectations about the Future**

Your future is like a canvas that you paint on, and your existing belief system is the paint palette. If the only colors on your palette are shades of dismal gray, it is very hard to paint a brighter picture. In essence, you need new paint, or new beliefs about your future, in order to create a more positive picture. As we saw in chapter 3, expectations are the beliefs you hold about future events that have not yet occurred. Because, as we learned earlier in this chapter, we act based on what we expect, if your expectations about the future don’t paint a picture you are looking forward to, you will need to learn how to change your expectations.

There are three steps to creating a new expectation.

1. **Initiate a new thought about the future.**
2. **Detail what that thought might look like in your life until you begin to feel it is real or possible.**
3. **Take action consistent with the details of your thought.**

**Initiate a New Thought**

A belief of any type starts with a single thought. The first step to creating a new expectation about the future is to come up with a new thought that is different and more consistent with what you want than what you are currently expecting. Remember, thoughts and beliefs are not the same thing. We are all capable of having thoughts we don’t believe. Because a thought is not a belief until it has been repeated many times and reinforced through action, you will probably not fully believe the new thought. It may even feel strange or awkward at first. Keep in mind that, when you start trying to come up with new ways of thinking about a situation, it is important that the thoughts and behaviors you try to alter are your own. While you may not like someone else’s behavior, you only have control over yourself and how you think and feel.

Once you have formed the thought you would like to turn into a new future expectation, write it down in a present-tense form, as though it is already true. For example, if you have low self-esteem and your future expectation is that you will never deserve a good life, you might want to start with something like **I am a valued and worthy human being.**

The reason it should be phrased in the present is because your mind is always projecting into the future from the thoughts you have stored in your head that you believe are presently true. When you are criticizing yourself, you don’t say, **I will become stupid so I might not get the job;** you say **I am stupid so I might not get the job.** It is also far more powerful psychologically to say **I am than I will.** There is more commitment to the statement, and as you say it, you conjure in your mind an image of that person already existing.

Another extremely important thing to keep in mind as you begin to create new thoughts is that all thoughts are not equal. Every subject can be viewed from two perspectives: the presence of or the absence of. You always want to initiate thoughts that imply the presence of what you want. When you make a statement like **I want a boss who doesn’t abuse me,** you are making a statement that implies the absence of abuse but not the presence of anything else. When you think of things from the absence-of perspective, you generally use words that include **no or not, such as won’t, can’t, will not, doesn’t.** You may very well be trying to get rid of a thought you don’t want; however, by replacing a thought like **I am afraid with I won’t be afraid,** you don’t imply the presence of anything other than being afraid. Instead, you want to make a statement that implies the presence of something else, such as **I am brave.** Another example would be **I want a partner who doesn’t lie, as opposed to, I want a partner who tells the truth.** The first statement implies only the absence of lying, while the second statement implies the presence of truth. Because, as we learned in chapter 2, thoughts activate similar thoughts, you want to initiate thoughts from the perspective of what you want in your life so that other thoughts associated with what you want become activated as well. As you will learn in chapter 9, your brain only has the ability to visualize the presence of things, and being able to “see” what you want in your mind’s eye is a very important step toward achieving anything.

As you are choosing a new thought to turn into a future belief, the easiest way to succeed is to reach for a new thought that feels like an improvement over your old thought but is not so far away that the leap seems very large. As you will see in the next chapter, when you try to make very big changes in your belief system all at once, you end up creating a lot of internal resistance. For example, trying to go from **I am a loser to I am a winner** is a big leap and will elicit a lot of internal resistance. Try reaching for a new thought that feels like an improvement but not a huge leap, such as **Sometimes when I try, I do succeed.** Some phrases that may help you choose improved thoughts without leaping too far include:

- I am capable of . . .
- I can learn to . . .
- I am working on . . .
- I can start . . .
- I can be aware . . .
- I am trying . . .
- I’ve done it before so I can do it again . . .
Creating New Expectations

Chapter 4

Create Detail

Now that you have a few new thoughts you want to work with, you will need to learn to grow the thoughts so that they become the basis of future experiences you want to have. Remember, the more you think about something, the more similar thoughts you will start to generate, and the more real and possible your new thought will begin to seem. Working with just one thought at a time, you will now begin the process of growing your thought into a new future belief by creating as many details around your thought as possible. The process of creating details around a new thought causes you to spend your valuable cognitive resources on that thought and starts it on the way to becoming a new belief.

To begin, close your eyes and use your imagination to formulate a visual image of your new thought, using as many details as possible to envision what it would look like if your thought were already a present reality. You can create an image of almost any future experience as long as you've followed the guidelines in the section on initiating new thoughts (for more about visualization see chapter 9). Even if your new thought is about a feeling you want to have, such as I feel calm, you can still create a visual image for yourself of what it would be like if you were feeling calm. Perhaps you would see yourself sitting quietly in a peaceful setting.

Then, building from your visual image, create a list of five details about your new thought every day for the next week. After seven days, you should have 35 descriptive points about your new thought. The main objective here is to begin to grow your thinking around your new thought, using as many details as possible to envision what it would look like if your thought were already a present reality. You can create an image of almost any future experience as long as you've followed the guidelines in the section on initiating new thoughts (for more about visualization see chapter 9). Even if your new thought is about a feeling you want to have, such as I feel calm, you can still create a visual image for yourself of what it would be like if you were feeling calm. Perhaps you would see yourself sitting quietly in a peaceful setting.

Then, building from your visual image, create a list of five details about your new thought every day for the next week. After seven days, you should have 35 descriptive points about your new thought. Once you have this list, your new thought should feel much more tangible to you, and you will be on your way to creating a new belief about your future. The main objective here is to begin to grow your thinking around your new thought, to make the possibility of it more real, and to provide the means for it to become a new belief.

Using the thought we initiated in the above section — I am a valued and worthy human being — begin to imagine what being a valued and worthy human being would really look like.

1. What does a valued and worthy human being do?
2. What does a valued and worthy human being feel?
3. What does a valued and worthy human being wear?
4. What does a valued and worthy human being eat for breakfast?
5. What does a valued and worthy human being do for leisure?
6. What does a valued and worthy human being read?
7. How much time does a valued and worthy human being spend taking care of himself or herself?
8. How much time does a valued and worthy human being spend exercising?
9. What kind of internal dialogue does a valued and worthy human being have?
10. What kind of dreams does a valued and worthy human being have?
11. What kind of friends does a valued and worthy human being have?
12. What kind of friend is a valued and worthy human being?
13. How does a valued and worthy person communicate?
14. What kind of music does a valued and worthy human being listen to?
15. How does a valued and worthy person manage his or her money?

Take Action

What you tell yourself programs your actions. Our minds are making decisions about what actions we are going to take before we are even consciously aware of them. Some studies have shown that our brains are using whatever is stored there to make predictions and decisions several seconds before we are even aware of our decisions. Whatever is stored in our brain as part of our belief system is being used as though it were present-moment truth: I am smart; I am likeable; I am stupid; I am a loser; I always fail. If you want to begin to change things in your life, you have to consciously reprogram your brain with new present-moment statements and then take action to reinforce those statements.

Once you take action, it is very hard to dispute your ability to do whatever it is you've just done, and your belief that you can do it again will grow. Action also stores memory at many levels throughout your body that are more difficult to reach with thought alone, such as your muscles. As you will read more about in chapter 9, language-based thought is only a small part of the way our mind communicates with the rest of our body. Action, on the other hand, incorporates a number of sensory-based processes that integrate our mind and body with the rest of the world, so it is a very powerful way to facilitate the belief-change process.

Choose behaviors that reinforce the thought. Plan a set of actions that are consistent with the new future belief you are trying to create. Start by looking at your list of details about your thought. Remember, you won't take action unless you believe it is
Chapter 12

ALLOWING THE FUTURE TO ARRIVE

*For time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life.*
— John F. Kennedy

The essence of our life is change. With every moment that flows by, we gradually become something different, and we can never return to being the same. The process of change is evidence that you are growing and evolving. The only reason you can ever look back in life is because of how far you have come. The present is where the power to change your life lies, but you cannot hold on to the present moment; it continually gives way to the future. The future will arrive whether you are ready for it or not, but you do have a choice in how you greet the future. You can resist it and fight what it brings, or you can allow the future to come in without resistance, giving your full attention to embracing its arrival.

When you embrace the arrival of the future you choose to view everything that you encounter as an opportunity for growth. As you begin to consciously engage in the process of change, you will come across challenges along the way; if you embrace them, the challenges can teach you who you are and how to identify what you want, make you more aware of what you need to do, and help you develop the strength to build the life you desire. Consider the arrival of the future to be a constant stream of gifts coming into your life, giving you the chance to learn what you need to know to in order to thrive.

When things enter your experience that you don’t like, view them as opportunities to clarify even more strongly what you do want and renew your commitment to work toward it. When you start to feel upset, view it as an opportunity to adjust your thinking and gain greater control over your mind. When things go wrong, use it as an opportunity to be thankful for all the things that go right and focus appreciatively on those things. If you embrace these opportunities, you embrace changing for the better.

Many of us want things that we don’t realize we can’t attain without the challenges that prepare us along the way. We all want to have good relationships, but sometimes we need to have difficult relationships to show us what areas we still need to grow in. When butterflies emerge from their cocoons, they struggle sometimes


