

Letting Go

How to Accept Change, Free up your thought patterns and Start Living
Life to the Fullest

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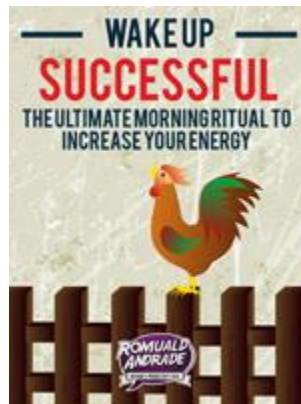
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Section I

How will this book help me?

You are probably reading this book because:

- You find it difficult to stay in the present because you are living in the past.
- You have tried to use willpower — and failed...multiple times. Sooner or later, you end up worrying about the future or feeling like a victim or dwelling on past regrets.
- You want to move forward in your life.
- You find it difficult to change your thought patterns.
- You need practical steps to free up your energy and focus on the present.

A lot of the elements in this book are intuitive, and you may already know some or all of them. The methods I suggest in this book are gathered from people much smarter than me. All I have done is try each one out and test it to examine what works and what does not.

The easy-to-understand system that came about due to my efforts is something I am proud of, but I am not writing this book to be “preachy”. You’re smart enough to know that there are no “secrets” in life. Most people intuitively know that “exercising is good!” but what they don’t realize is that exercising affects other areas of life and causes a chain reaction.

Creating positive change in your life is not really about willpower. I will show you how you can use triggers that are part of your daily life to help you make massive changes in your life and take you from “knowing” to “doing.”

When I began to write this book, I simply wrote out the S.T.O.P.P. method with a few examples and thought I was done. However, after reading the draft a few times, I realized that I had made some critical assumptions about you. The reason these assumptions are critical is because if they happen to be wrong, then this whole book would be rendered useless. I have listed out my assumptions below to ensure that we are on the same page:

#1. I assume you are reading this book because there is an element in your life that seems to be out of control which you can’t seem to let go of. It maybe your emotional state, your frustration with the way things are, or it could just be your lack of motivation.

#2. I assume that you have identified the problem and that you are willing to do whatever it takes to rectify the problem.

#3. I assume that you can take the framework suggested and run with it; that is, you are able to customize the framework to fit your life.

#4. While outlining the system, I will also assume that you are willing to suspend judgment and give this system a chance.

I would like to believe that I can help you solve your problem, but I struggle with the fact that I don’t know you and I don’t know the exact problems you face. I also don’t know if my

method will fit your life. But you can rest assured for two reasons:

1. You won't have to start this journey alone. I have created a website - www.7bigrocks.com - where you have access to additional information, templates, and free downloads to help to help you apply this system.

2. You can always reach out to me via email. My email address is: 7bigrocks@gmail.com.

Chapter 1

“We received a complaint about your attitude today, Mara.”

Mara Acone adjusted the blue collar of her nurse uniform and shifted in her chair. Her boss’s office was a bit intimidating. But her boss, Leo, had always been caring and understanding. He always wanted to help her excel and reach her professional dreams; but sometimes, she didn’t understand where he was coming from. Like right now.

“Your patient, Ms. Martinez, said you were ‘snippy’ with her and that you made her visit to the hospital very unpleasant.” Leo said.

Mara sighed.

“I was trying to draw her blood and she was constantly squirming. It was impossible. Even the second nurse had to reinsert the needle a number of times to finally succeed.”

“Well – drawing her blood wasn’t the problem. Your attitude was. We can’t have this. Regions Hospital has a reputation for providing the utmost care and compassion. If we had all come in to work with poor attitudes like yours, we never would’ve become an award-winning facility, let alone get off the ground.”

Mara couldn’t believe this. Her work shift had just ended and the day had been long. But nothing could prepare her for her patient’s complaint about her attitude. *Her* attitude?

Mara was baffled. She didn’t have an attitude! Some woman was just upset about getting her blood drawn and was simply using her as a scapegoat to complain about everything else that was going wrong in her life. Mara wouldn’t stand for it. And she would tell Leo so! But Leo spoke first.

“Ms. Martinez is a very important patient and has been coming here for years. It doesn’t matter what she says or what she does – she is to be treated with respect and care. I never want to hear of this kind of thing happening again. Do you understand?”

Mara wasn’t as upset about Leo explaining that her attitude was unacceptable as she was of his defense on behalf of Ms. Martinez. How could he defend Ms. Martinez over *her*? She had done nothing wrong! If the old woman hadn’t moved so much, she would have found her vein. She had to keep reinserting the needle because the woman constantly squirmed. The second nurse had the same problem. But she didn’t hear any complaints about the second nurse, now, did she? This conversation was getting ridiculous!

She rolled her eyes. What was wrong with Leo today? And Ms. Martinez? Ms. Martinez was just too sensitive for her own good and Mara knew it.

She looked at Leo and gave a half-hearted apology, making a lame attempt to smooth over the issue.

“I’m sorry, Leo. It won’t happen again.”

Leo just stared at her, so she quickly tried to change the subject. Perhaps reminding him of bigger issues at hand – like her application to the pediatric wing – would deter him from thinking about that woman.

“I wanted to ask you about the status of my pediatric nursing application. I submitted it about two weeks ago and I haven’t heard anything, so I wanted to reach out and follow up with you.” Mara said.

Leo averted his gaze as he twirled his pen on his notebook.

“Thanks for asking, Mara. We haven’t filled the position as of yet, and I haven’t given any feedback to the management about who I believe would be a good fit. But, quite honestly, I think your performance and attitude need to be considerably adjusted before you’re transferred. If you can’t do well in one spot, how are you going to do well in another? I don’t think you’d be a good fit for the pediatric nursing team right now. But I’ll get back to you.”

She couldn’t believe this! She had always been a good worker – dependable, punctual, never called in sick. Now, when one tiny complaint surfaced, all of the sudden she was not a good fit for the pediatric nursing team! That made no sense! Leo was just being unreasonable. Ms. Martinez had no reason to complain. And her attitude was just fine despite what Leo or anyone else said. What was wrong with these people?

Sabrina Waite, Mara’s best friend and co-worker sat next to her in the locker room as they loaded up their bags to go home. Sabrina lived just a few blocks away from her so they sometimes carpooled to work. They had met in high school and were educated in the same nursing program in college. Then, just three months after graduation, they landed jobs at the same hospital. As Mara placed her backpack in the backseat of her car, her cell phone vibrated in her purse.

Mara retrieved her phone and read the caller ID.

Mom.

She groaned, rolled her eyes, and put the phone back in her purse.

Sabrina, who was just behind her, watched the silent interaction between Mara and the device; she noticed the caller’s identity on the screen and her irritated expression that followed.

What was going on with her?

Sabrina didn’t know.

It was good to vent and tell Sabrina about all the nonsense that was happening to her at work. The drive back home was mostly uneventful except for Mara venting and Sabrina listening.

After dropping Sabrina off, Mara watched the sun set over the Mississippi River. St. Paul was certainly breathtaking during the spring.

She had lived in Minnesota all her life and had never wanted to leave. She knew Minnesota – St. Paul especially – would be her home forever.

St. Paul was known for its parks and entertainment venues. From the Ordway Theater to the Science Museum and from Como Park to the Capital building, St. Paul offered the excitement and fun Mara adored.

Today, she did not feel like going straight home.

After parking her car, she walked a block from her apartment to the river and stood on the Robert Street bridge – just thinking. The fountains were springing to life and the gentle sound of flowing water soothed Mara’s nerves. The hunter green trees embraced the sidewalk as she walked through the park to the bridge. She could see the bridge in the distance. A train chugged along the tracks beneath it. It was a perfect evening.

Except for her thoughts.

The crisp spring breeze swept over her face as she crossed her arms and stood looking over the railing of the bridge. Work had been hectic and she was glad for a moment’s peace. She closed her eyes and let the wind and the warmth of the sun embrace her. The sun was just setting below the horizon and the tree limbs danced in the breeze as they prepared to go to sleep for the night.

Mara shrugged and decided to head back home. Soon she reached her apartment building. As she adjusted the bag on her shoulder and pulled out her keys, she heard a quiet snuffle come from down the hall.

She looked up and noticed that Taylor Jackson, the six-year-old girl who lived across the hall with her mother, was crying.

Mara approached her cautiously, not wishing to frighten her.

“Taylor?”

“I’m locked out, Mara. And mama isn’t here.” The child said. She began to cry harder, and Mara reached out to the little girl and offered her comfort.

She listened patiently and compassionately as Taylor explained that her mother was gone again, and didn’t know where she was.

Mara knew what she had to do.

“Honey. I’ll tell you what – why don’t you come stay with me until your mama gets home? We can have dinner and spend time together? Would you like that?”

Taylor nodded, wiped her tears away with the back of her hand and picked up her backpack.

Mara smiled at Taylor as she brought her across the hall to her apartment. Taylor sat in the large, tan recliner and immediately asked where Doogie was. Doogie was Mara's cat – a love bug, if she did say so herself.

Mara put her bag and keys on the kitchen counter and asked Taylor if she liked macaroni and cheese. Taylor's face lit up and Mara knew she had found a winner for dinner. Pulling out a pot from beneath the counter, she filled it with water and put it on the stove.

She realized she should probably leave a note for Tameeka, Taylor's mom. How would she know where Taylor was if she didn't? Mara quickly wrote a note and ran to tape it on the door across the hall.

As she got back in, she saw that Taylor had already pulled out her schoolwork from her backpack.

"Mara. Do you have any crayons?" The child asked.

Mara smiled as she pulled out a heavy freezer bag full of loose drawing sheets, markers, crayons, colored pencils, and any other drawing utensil one could imagine. Taylor clapped excitedly.

"I want to color Doogie!" She said. She went to Mara to retrieve the art bag and spread the drawing sheets all across the kitchen table. Mara gently collected all the drawing sheets and took Taylor by the hand as she gently guided her to the table across the hall.

Doogie was sprawled out in front of the fireplace, purring. His eyes fluttered open and close as he tried to stay awake.

Taylor began to carefully draw Doogie's outline but missed his whiskers completely.

Mara watched as Taylor attempted to draw the cat and saw her pound on the paper, silently expressing her disgust with her attempt.

She patted Taylor's shoulder and smiled at her, explaining that her attempt was wonderful – she just forgot his whiskers. Mara took Taylor's hand in hers and, together, they added Doogie's whiskers.

Taylor smiled.

She had drawn a cat.

Mara smiled, too.

As they finished their dinner, they heard a knock on the door. Mara approached the door,

opened it, and there was Tameeka Jackson, slumped against the door, obviously under the influence of something.

“Hello Tameeka. You got my note, I see. Taylor is fine. She just finished dinner.” Mara said. Tameeka glared at Mara with bloodshot eyes before looking over her shoulder to glance at Taylor. Ignoring Mara completely, Tameeka yelled for her daughter to collect her things and get home.

How could she let Taylor go with this woman? It wouldn't be safe! Tameeka Jackson was obviously high on something! Mara didn't know what to do.

Taylor scrambled to obey, collecting her backpack and papers. She held on to her drawing and ran to the door. She said goodbye to Mara sadly and in such a disappointed tone that Mara wished she could pick up the little girl and never let her go.

Taylor turned and went out the door with her mother who couldn't even walk in a straight line while approaching her front door.

She was about to close the door when she heard Taylor tell her mother about her drawing.

“Mama. Mara and I drew her cat Doogie. See?” She smiled and held up her drawing to show her mother.

Taylor's voice was filled with such excitement and joy that it made Mara want to hug her.

But what Tameeka said next made Mara's heart shatter.

“Put those drawings in the trash. They aren't even good enough to sell for the price of a single train ticket. Now get out of my way and get to bed.”

Mara watched Taylor's shoulders slump and her head go down.

It was the last thing Mara saw before she closed her door and locked it.

Chapter 2

Mara heard the front door open and close and she knew Jeremy was finally home.

She got up, put her robe and slippers on and went to the living room.

After six months of dating, hundreds of conversations, and slight living adjustments, they had decided to move in together. Now, six months later, they were still together and happy. At least Mara thought so.

Mara smiled as Jeremy looked up from his bag.

“You would not believe the day I had!” She said.

Mara immediately began to vent.

Mara complained about what Leo had done and how that stupid old woman had complained about Mara’s *attitude*, of all things.

And then, Jeremy wouldn’t believe what Taylor’s mother had said! How could a mother say that to her little girl? What in the world is wrong with people? This world is so screwed up. (That’s what Mara thought anyway.)

Jeremy listened patiently, nodding and giving her his attention as well as he could.

He was exhausted.

As a doctor in Emergency, he was on call more often than he would have liked to be and today had been rough. Mara had never asked about *his* day. And he noticed it.

But, he listened to her and gave her his attention nonetheless, and offered his support.

He knew she was going through a lot, but sometimes, he couldn’t stand her negativity. If she would just say something positive for once, he’d be shocked and pleasantly surprised.

Mara knew she loved Jeremy.

But then again – she just wished he wouldn’t get so frustrated and irritated with her. Who she was was who she was – she couldn’t change that. He was never around and Mara, really felt that too many things were going wrong lately.

Why was everything just going wrong?

The next morning, the alarm clock went off, but Mara was not ready to get out of bed. Six o’clock came too early and too fast. She hit snooze for the third time before dragging herself out of bed. Jeremy had already left for the hospital since he had an earlier shift.

Grudgingly moving to the bathroom, she adjusted the temperature to be as cold as she could tolerate.

After stepping into the shower, she winced from the shock to her body's system. She quickly lathered her hair, rinsed, and stepped out. She shivered as she dried off and dressed.

Doogie was meowing, begging for his breakfast.

Her phone buzzed and she quickly picked it up. It was a message from Sabrina saying that she was carpooling with another co-worker. She also noticed the time!

6:45.

Damn. She was going to be late again.

She quickly fed Doogie, applied mascara, and went out the door, fully armed with her thermos, bags, and keys.

The morning was foggy and damp as she headed out to her car. The humidity was high and the dew point must have been higher. It was sticky and muggy and she felt her clothes sticking to her body. Thank God her car had air conditioning.

She decided to drive to work in silence and leave the radio off. She was in no mood to listen to the latest celebrity scandal.

The commute was a nightmare. Bumper to bumper, Mara trudged along and was grateful that at least she had an honest excuse for her tardiness.

"Traffic was a nightmare," she'd say. Never mind she might have been on time had she got up when her alarm first went off. (A slight detail that would make no one the wiser).

Mara arrived at 7:20 – twenty minutes after her scheduled shift was supposed to start.

After punching in, she saw Sabrina approach her from across the hall.

"Hey. You're late. Are you ok?" Sabrina asked.

"Traffic was a nightmare," Mara said, proud of her rehearsed excuse.

"Oh, I know. I was dealing with the traffic, too." Sabrina replied. "Want to grab lunch?"

"Sure. I'll meet you in the cafeteria at noon."

The morning had gone by quickly. Lunchtime came around faster than Mara realized and she made her way to the cafeteria.

She spotted Sabrina sitting next to the window with a tray in front of her. Mara went through

the line and got her sandwich before making her way over to Sabrina.

“I can’t stand this job,” Mara complained as she sat down.

“What now?” Sabrina asked reluctantly, taking a bite of her taco. “I’m not working with kids the way I want to. I do the same thing day after day. My co-workers are unnecessarily critical. They are too judgmental. I don’t make good money and I hate my hours. I just feel like I’m at a ‘dead-end’.”

Sabrina listened patiently and nodded.

“I understand, Mara. Don’t give up. You’re going to get to pediatrics eventually.”

“Yeah? But when? I’m sick of waiting and doing the same thing day after day.” Said Mara as she looked around the room.

Sabrina ignored the complaint.

“Well – I have some news! I met someone.” Sabrina said, excitedly. She wiped her hands on her napkin, as she continued

“His name is ..”

“Damn, I forgot a napkin. I’ll be right back.” Mara interrupted. She left the table before Sabrina could register what had happened. She watched Mara walk away, and scoffed as her hands fell to her lap in disbelief.

Mara came back moments later and began again, oblivious to Sabrina’s desire to share her exciting news (news that Mara obviously didn’t hear her mention).

“Do you know why I want to work in pediatrics, anyway? Because I’ll be able to work with the kids. I would have the opportunity to make them smile and give them love. I would make much better money and have better hours. And, to top it off, I would have a chance to grow professionally and to advance.”

Sabrina stared at her and said nothing.

Moments passed before Mara noticed the silence; she looked at her friend.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, taking a bite of her sandwich.

Sabrina shook her head in disbelief.

“I can’t believe you, Mara.” Sabrina said.

Mara’s eyebrows came together in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“You need to stop this negativity! It’s getting ridiculous! I can hardly stand being around you anymore!” Sabrina said.

“What are you talking about? I’m not *negative*.” Mara replied, shocked at the accusation.

“C’mon. You’re the most negative person I know. And I’ve had enough of it. Yes, I see that there are some things that are not going your way, but you’re the only one who can change that!”

Mara shook her head in disagreement.

“I’m powerless to change it. It’s all up to Leo and the management.”

“That’s a cop-out.”

“A cop-out? A cop-out for what?”

“A cop-out for this stupid laziness you have a tendency to embrace just so you don’t have to confront yourself and so as to avoid even trying to prove your own beliefs about the world and the people in it wrong. You’d rather make excuses and avoid dealing with life all together then pull yourself up by the bootstraps, put your big girl panties on, and give yourself a chance to not only be alive, but to actually live!”

“That’s harsh Sabrina.”

“That’s the truth, Mara!”

She stared at Sabrina, dumbfounded.

Great! So now she wasn’t just negative, she was lazy, too. Boy, she was on a roll! What an attitude *I have*, Mara thought.

The women sat in silence.

After a few moments, Mara began to think that perhaps Sabrina had a point. Mara sighed and finally collected enough courage to speak again.

“I don’t know where to begin, Sabrina.” Mara said quietly, staring at her plate. “I know I need to find a solution - but, there are too many things going wrong and I just don’t know what to do!”

“That’s ok. I never told you this, but I went through the same thing you’re going through.”

Mara looked up. “You did?”

“Yes. I had an awful time trying to find myself and trying to figure things out. It was just

after we finished the Nursing Program and I didn't know which way to turn."

"So what happened?" Mara asked, genuinely interested in Sabrina's response.

"Well, I met with a psychologist. She specialized in thought processing and a special therapy called CBT. CBT stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. This doctor was a lifesaver. I saw her for just over a year and I was a new woman after that."

Mara nodded and thought about what Sabrina was saying. She couldn't believe that Sabrina had never told her she went to a shrink! Why didn't she tell her?

"Mara. I want you to take her card." Sabrina finally said. "I think she could help you out and I really think you could benefit from seeing her."

Sabrina opened her wallet and pulled out a white, square business card and handed it to Mara.

Mara eyed the name on the card.

Dr. Maxine Samuels, Psychologist.

Mara chuckled inwardly; she didn't need a psychologist. She just needed time to figure things out. Everything would be okay. Things have a way of working themselves out.

But, she didn't want to upset Sabrina. She looked at her friend and smiled.

"Thank you, Sabrina. I'll give her a call."

Not likely, Mara thought as she put the card into the pocket of her uniform.

Chapter 3

Mara knocked on Leo's door and poked her head inside.

"Hi Leo. Do you have a minute?" She asked politely.

Leo set his cup down and swallowed his last gulp of coffee.

"Sure. Come on in!" He greeted her warmly and gestured to the available chair across from his desk. He stood as she entered and sat after she did.

"What can I do for you?" He asked, smiling.

"I wanted to come in and inquire about the status of the pediatric nursing position. It's been a few days and I wanted to get back to you to let you know I was still interested. I'd hoped that I could answer any questions or address any concerns that you may have had about my application."

Leo nodded pensively and tapped his paper with the top of his pen. His lips curved inward as he thought a moment.

"I appreciate you reaching out to me, Mara. I really do. That shows enthusiasm and initiative – two great qualities I have always liked about you."

Mara smiled as her confidence built. She had the job. She knew it.

"But, unfortunately..." Leo began, looking her in the eyes. "We have chosen another candidate for the position."

Mara's heart fell to the bottom of her stomach.

What? Had she heard him right? She didn't get the job?

"I...I don't understand..." she replied.

"You see – it wasn't that your skills that were lacking. You have the skills! There were some other concerns that I took into consideration when making my decision."

"What...um...what other concerns?" Mara choked out. She couldn't believe this was happening.

"Your attitude, number one. And number two, you've been tardy various times in the recent weeks and your attempt at correcting your behavior has been lacking. I haven't seen or heard of any evidence proving that you cared about your punctuality. I'll need to see improvement in many areas before I can consider any future applications to the pediatric nursing team."

Mara felt as if she could burst into tears.

But she wasn't going to let Leo see that.

No. Not today.

She wouldn't cry.

Mara nodded at Leo and stood. She made her way to the door before Leo spoke again.

“Mara...” He began.

She turned to look at him then, making sure that her expression was free of any emotion.

“I know how much you wanted this. I wanted this for you, too and still do. So if there's anything I can do to help you make the changes we've talked about, don't hesitate to let me know. I want to see you do all that you want to do. And so if I can help in any way, I'd be happy to. All you have to do is ask. Okay?”

Mara smiled and nodded a second time, leaving Leo feeling helpless in his office. But what could he do? She just wasn't ready for the transition and she needed to improve. Mara never would've made it in that job position in her current state with her current tendencies and Leo knew it. He had to do what was best for the hospital – even if that meant denying Mara her dream.

While driving home, Mara let the tears fall. She couldn't believe that she didn't get the job. How could this be happening to her? After all the attempts she had made to prove that she was a good nurse, to show that she cared, to reveal that she knew her skills, and yet they *still* denied her?

Mara had a lead foot on the way home and she was lucky that she didn't get a ticket. But she didn't care. She just wanted to be behind closed doors, in the privacy of her own home, so she could cry and scream into a pillow if she wanted to. And she wanted to.

This just wasn't fair. That job was supposed to be hers. Who knows when another opening would become available? It could be months!

Mara's depression suppressed her appetite and she didn't feel like eating. She could use a drink, though.

She grabbed a beer from the fridge and flopped down on the sofa. She just couldn't believe it. She couldn't go to Sabrina with her woes because all Mara would be doing then would be complaining. See! – she told Sabrina she didn't have the power to change anything! This proved it! How was some psychologist going to help her get a job when the power was in the hands of the hospital's management? She was a victim and helpless and hopeless and – oh, this was not right, Mara thought.

She took another gulp of beer and heard keys jiggle in the front door lock.

Jeremy was home.

She watched her boyfriend come through the front door and close the door slowly behind him.

She needed him to hold her. Maybe he would make her feel better. If someone would just understand where she was coming from and validate her opinion on this whole, screwed up mess, maybe she would feel better.

She set her beer down and stood up.

She approached Jeremy and wrapped her arms around him.

She closed her eyes and sighed, happy to finally be in his arms.

But she really wasn't in his arms.

Jeremy gave her a half-pat, half-embrace with one arm as he sat down to take off his shoes.

Mara felt the tears behind her eyes start to build when he still didn't try to hold her.

Why wasn't he holding her? Why wasn't he talking? Didn't he care?

Mara stood back and looked at him as the tears started to fall.

"Why aren't you holding me, Jeremy? I've had a day from hell and I could really use you right now!" She didn't mean to yell, but her emotions were so overwhelming that they took control.

Jeremy looked at her and sighed.

"Mara. Not now. I've had a really bad day, and I can't deal with any more pressure."

"So holding me is 'pressure' for you now? I guess it's too much to ask your boyfriend to hold you after a hard day. I must have missed the memo." She said sarcastically with a biting tone in her voice.

"I can't take this right now, Mara. Stop it! Just stop talking for a minute." He said, as he rubbed his forehead while closing his eyes. He didn't look well, but Mara didn't notice.

"*You* can't take *this* right now? What is *this*? *You* can't take *me*? Well, I have news for you. *I* can't take the fact that you are hardly around and even when you are, you don't talk to me, or spend time with me. *I* can't take *that*!"

"Your attitude is repulsive, Mara. I can't stand being around negative people all day only to

come home to more negativity. Don't you understand?" He asked.

Mara glared at him with an open mouth.

"You really don't understand, do you? You're so blind to your own flaws, you can't even see other people except yourself. You *never* ask *me* how *my* day was. You immediately go into your so called ordeals and make the conversation all about you and what your 24-hour woes were. I can't stand that! It shows me that you don't give a shit about me or anything I do because it's all about you!"

"It's not all about me." Mara rebutted at last.

"Yes, it is. You're negative, selfish, and self-centered. If I knew I was getting into a relationship with that kind of person, I would've stayed single."

"Oh, really?" Mara said, placing her hands on her hips. "Well, if being mean with me proves the single life is better, maybe you better be single then."

"Perhaps." Jeremy put his shoes back on and stormed out the front door, leaving an echoing and vibrating "bang" behind him.

Mara couldn't move for a few moments.

What had just happened? They had never fought like this before. Mara tried to recall the fight but already it was a foggy memory. The only elements that she could recall were her emotions: anger, hurt, sadness, disappointment, and...regret.

Regret? What did she have to regret? She hadn't done anything wrong. All she had done was ask Jeremy to hold her. There was nothing wrong with that, was there?

And she did ask him how his day was! Didn't she?

No. No, she hadn't.

Mara sat on the sofa and replayed his words in her mind – the only words that she *could* remember. *You're negative, selfish, and self-centered.*

Was she really all those things?

Mara shook her head in confusion. She didn't know what to think.

She heard her phone vibrate and picked it up from the coffee table.

Suddenly, a white, square business card fell on the floor next to Mara's foot. Mara picked it up and examined the name on the card.

Dr. Maxine Samuels, Psychologist.

Mara realized what she had to do. She had the business card in one hand and her phone in the other.

She would call and make an appointment.

Chapter 4

Mara's appointment was scheduled for a Monday afternoon at 4:00. She was asked to arrive at the clinic a half hour early to complete paperwork. The lobby was warm and inviting and not too crowded for a Monday.

The receptionist greeted her warmly as Mara handed over her insurance card and ID. Mara collected the documents that were pinned to a clipboard and took a seat next to the window.

She filled out her name, address, date of birth, and the other pertinent information that they needed. She returned the clipboard to the receptionist's counter and went back to her seat.

"Mara?"

A tall woman with blonde hair and a beautiful face asked for her next patient.

Mara stood in response to her name and approached the woman.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Maxine Samuels. It's nice to meet you. You can follow me." The woman said kindly as she extended her hand.

Mara returned the gesture and followed the doctor down the hallway.

Her office was large and spacious and not intimidating as most offices of Mara's experiences had tended to be.

"Welcome. Have a seat." The doctor said.

Mara handed her paperwork to Dr. Samuels and sat down in one of the three chairs that sat across from her desk. She felt as if all she had been doing of late was going in and out of offices. Hopefully this experience would be a positive one.

Dr. Samuels looked over Mara's paperwork briefly, observing the content slowly and carefully while nodding. She set Mara's papers in a file and closed it before turning to look at her.

"Well, thank you for coming in, Ms. Acone. What brings you in to see me today?"

"Please. Call me Mara."

The doctor smiled and nodded in acknowledgement.

"Well," Mara began. "I really don't know how to answer that."

"What's been going on in your life that you maybe think I can help you with?" Dr. Samuels replied.

Mara thought a moment and sighed.

“Well, nothing in my life is going my way. People in my life – my boyfriend, employer, and best friend especially – have been telling me that I’m negative and that I have a bad attitude; but I just don’t see it that way. I’m not negative. They are just failing to realize where I’m coming from. But, I still know something is wrong. I just don’t feel right. I don’t know what I feel or why I feel it, but I’m afraid of losing people in my life because of it. Whatever *it* is.”

Dr. Samuels listened intently, nodding and giving Mara eye contact. She never once looked away from Mara as she explained her situation.

“I see,” the doctor replied. “What kind of attitude issues are these individuals telling you that you have?” The doctor asked.

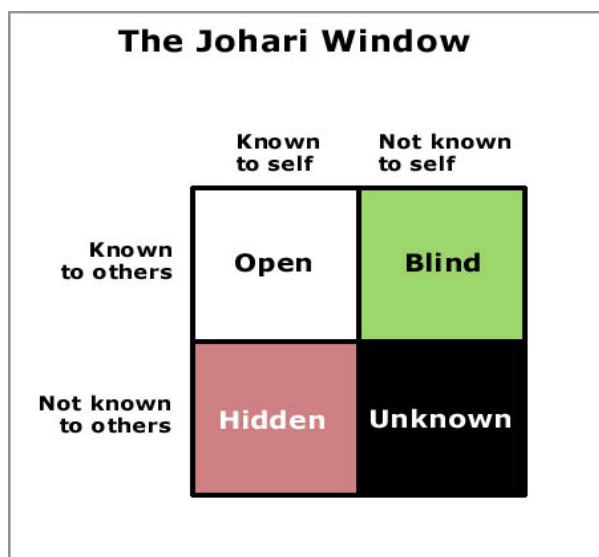
“That I’m negative, mostly. My boyfriend told me a few days ago that I was ‘negative, selfish, and self-centered’.”

“That must have been painful to hear.”

“It was. Very much so. But I don’t think I’m those things. Am I? I mean – how do you know when you’re one way versus another unless you’re on the outside looking in?” Mara said, justifying the possibility that she may have been blind to her own flaws as Jeremy accused her of being.

“That’s a great question. Let me show you something”

Mara watched closely as Dr. Samuels drew a diagram on a sheet of paper.



“This is called the Johari Window. Have you ever heard of it?”

Mara shook her head.

“It’s a character model with 4 boxes. The first box depicts what is known by the person about him/herself and is also known by others – It is also known as the open area. The second box covers what is unknown by the person about him/herself but which others know – It is known as the blindspot. The third box depicts what the person knows about him/herself that others do not know – which is called the hidden area while the 4th box covers what is unknown by the person about him/herself and is also unknown by others – also called the unknown area”

“All in that little box?” Mara asked.

“Correct. Does this make sense so far?”

Mara nodded.

“Good. Here’s how it works.” Dr. Samuels pulled out an envelope filled with fifty-seven index cards. On each card was an adjective to describe a person’s character.

“Pick a card.” Dr. Samuels said.

Mara picked a card from the envelope and read it out-loud.

“*Clever.*”

“Good. Now – if you were to place that card anywhere on this grid so as to represent your cleverness and how it appears to you and others, where would you put it?”

Mara looked at the four rooms of The Johari Window and thought out-loud.

“Well – Jeremy always did say I was good at solving puzzles, answering riddles, and asking good questions. But I always felt like I was one step behind everybody else and not comprehending things as fast as other people could. So I’m going to say ‘clever’ goes in room two – blind.”

“Excellent.”

“But what do you do with this information? Once all these adjectives are placed in the window, what do you do?”

“You learn skills to help you use feedback to your advantage – certain behaviors are obvious to others but we seem blind to them because we do them unconsciously. The only way for you to correct these behaviors is by being open to and actively asking for feedback”

“But how do you take care of relationships in your life until you master these skills? You could lose people while you’re trying to improve.”

“That’s true. That’s where communication comes in. When you explain to people in your life that you’re on a new journey and that you’re working on yourself by practicing some new skills,

most healthy people in our lives will be understanding and give us the patience, time, and understanding that we need. But, we have to be sure to communicate with them first or they will never know that we are trying to make improvements so as to improve the quality of our relationships with them.”

“That makes sense.” Mara said.

“I also heard you say that they thought you were ‘negative’”? Dr. Samuels observed.

“Yes. That’s the part I don’t understand. I don’t think I’m negative. I applied for a job, but was brutally denied because a patient complained about me for no reason. Every night, I try to tell my boyfriend about my day when he gets home from work and he doesn’t want to hear it because he doesn’t want to be around me. I feel like everywhere I go, people are either rejecting me for no reason or telling me to change something that I just can’t change.”

“Like what?”

“Like who I am.”

“You don’t believe you can change who you are?” Dr. Samuels asked.

Mara didn’t know how to answer that.

“I never thought that was possible. I just assumed that who you are was who you are and that was it.”

The doctor nodded and smiled.

“A lot of people believe that. But I have good news for you. If you can change your thought patterns - you can change your life.”

“How?”

“The first way you can begin to change your life for the better is to start thinking about it differently.”

Mara thought about what the doctor was saying for a moment before continuing with her questions.

“Well, how do you start thinking about it differently? How do you know what to think about and in what ways to think about it differently?”

“That’s where I can help you.” Dr. Samuels replied. “I have a list of exercises that we can do and that you can process through with me. The first exercise that I want you to start is keeping a gratitude journal. Every day – morning or night, it doesn’t matter – I want you to record those people, places, and things in your life that your grateful for. I don’t want it to be a list; I want it to be an actual journal entry where you really dig deep and discover why you’re grateful for the

things you are.”

Mara nodded.

“I can do that,” she said.

“But before we end the session today, tell me one person, place or thing that you’re grateful for and why. This will give you some practice before writing your first entry.”

Mara stopped to think. She had never thought about what she was grateful for before.

She supposed she was grateful for Doogie and Jeremy. She was grateful for her job (even though she didn’t like it). She was grateful for her apartment, her car, and St. Paul. But she knew what answer she would give Dr. Samuels.

“I’m grateful for Taylor.” Mara said at last.

“And who is Taylor?” Dr. Samuels replied.

“Taylor is a six-year-old girl who lives across the hall from me in my apartment building. She is such a joy and has a special place in my heart. She is so kind and funny and loving. She loves life to the fullest and I just want to see her loved and cared for. She’s quite special.”

Dr. Samuels smiled and nodded her acknowledgement.

“Excellent, Mara. That’s perfect! Now just do that in a journal and we’ll be on our way. Be sure to bring the journal in next week and we can go over your entries.”

On the way home, Mara was pleasantly surprised at how good she felt. Finally, she could do something to try to improve the way she had been feeling. Just by talking about Taylor during her session, Mara was starting to feel better already.

She parked her car in the lot and saw Taylor playing outside with some of the other kids from the building.

“Mara!” Taylor ran and greeted her with a big hug.

“Hiya, Taylor.” Mara said, embracing the little girl.

“Mara, Mara! Can we go to the park and look at the trains?” Taylor asked excitedly.

Mara smiled at the child and grabbed her hand.

“Let’s go.” She said.

They walked up the hill and crossed the street before entering the park. It was almost sunset. Dark clouds were moving in from the west and the river was flowing more rapidly. The wind

was slightly heavier than usual, as well, and Mara had an inkling.

“It feels like a thunderstorm might be coming!” Mara observed.

“I love lightning!” The child exclaimed, picking up a rock and throwing it over the railing of the bridge.

“So do I!” Mara agreed, joining the little girl in her rock throwing.

After bringing Taylor home and getting settled in for the night, Mara thought she would begin her gratitude journal. She decided she would write her entries before going to bed. If she thought of what she was grateful for before sleep instead of all the problems of the day, she might sleep better. That was reasonable, she thought.

But she had no idea how to start.

The date. The date was always a good place to start a diary entry.

June 16, 2016

Now what? A title?

My Gratitude Journal: What I'm Grateful For
By Mara Acone

Now came the hard part – to actually write an entry about one thing that she was grateful for.

Well, here goes nothing, she thought.

This is my gratitude journal and my new psychologist told me to write an entry every day about the people, places, and things in my life that I'm grateful for. Well – today being my first entry – I'll write about Jeremy and Doogie. Jeremy is my boyfriend and I'm grateful for him. He's a hard worker, kind, responsible, funny, and intelligent. I know I love him, but I think I need to tell him that I love him more than I do. I'm also grateful for Doogie. Doogie is my cat and I'm grateful for the joy, fun, and unconditional love that he brings to my life.

Mara set her pen down and smiled as she examined her handiwork.

Perfect.

Chapter 5

“How has your week been, Mara?” Dr. Samuels asked, crossing her legs and taking a sip of coffee.

“It was wonderful. Pretty non-eventful – just the way I like it.” Mara replied.

“Great! And how has writing in your gratitude journal been for you?”

“I really enjoy it. I find that it gets me thinking more positively. I’m so much more appreciative.”

“Wonderful. Would you like to share some of the things that you wrote down?”

Mara flipped to the front of her journal and read her the first entry. The doctor nodded and smiled.

“That sounds fantastic. Tell me more about Jeremy. How long have you two been together?” Dr. Samuels asked.

“We’ve been together for about a year and we’ve been living together for about six months. He’s a good man.” Mara responded.

“And is he your first serious relationship?” The doctor asked.

“No. He’s my second. My first relationship was with a man named Tony. Thank heavens that relationship is over with.” Mara replied.

“That bad, huh?” The doctor asked.

“Yeah. It was a pretty stressful relationship. He never told me that he loved me. He was always too busy to spend time with me. But, he was a lawyer so I guess that’s understandable. But, I didn’t know why he didn’t understand me. I guess maybe, in the end, it was because I didn’t understand myself.”

“That’s a very discerning insight.” Dr. Samuels noticed. “Tell me more about that relationship.”

“Well, there’s really nothing much to tell,” Mara replied. “He was very negative. One time, I remember trying to tell him some things about my mother and he dismissed it – like it wasn’t a big deal. I asked him if he loved me and he said ‘I guess’. Can you believe that? He couldn’t even say it!” Mara could feel her blood pressure go up as she recalled the memory.

“It sounds like there’s a lot to tell about that relationship, Mara. And it seems you’re discovering that.”

Mara thought for a moment.

“I suppose so,” she said. “He always told me that even though he never said those exact words – ‘I love you’ – there were other things that he said that conveyed the same message. I asked him ‘like what’? He couldn’t answer me. He just assumed that I knew. It really hurt to never hear it.”

“I’m sure it did. Is it hard for you to say those words?” Dr. Samuels asked.

Mara stared at her, deciding how best to answer that personal inquiry.

“Sometimes,” she finally said. “Especially to Jeremy.”

“It’s hard to say it to Jeremy?” The doctor asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Well, I suppose I’m afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Getting hurt, or that he won’t say it back, or that I’ll feel stupid for some reason.”

“That makes sense to me,” Dr. Samuels replied. “We always go out on a limb and make ourselves vulnerable when we express our love for someone. But then, in the end, we have to decide – is the risk worth it?”

Was the risk worth it? Mara didn’t know. She didn’t know if she liked to be vulnerable for love or not – even if it was with Jeremy. She trusted Jeremy, didn’t she? She knew that he would never intentionally hurt her, didn’t she?

“You’ve never mentioned your mother or father, Mara. What is your relationship like with them?” Dr. Samuels inquired, taking another sip of her coffee.

“My father died before I was born in a snow mobile accident. My mother, on the other hand, is living, but she and I have a difficult relationship.”

“What do you mean by ‘difficult’?”

“We fight a lot. We don’t talk much. When we do talk, we’re arguing. It’s frustrating. I’m not sure why she is the way she is, but it’s hard to get along with her.”

“Do you know how she feels about you?”

“She tells me that she loves me, but I second guess that a lot. She doesn’t seem to love me, but she says it.” Mara responded.

“Hmmm – it sounds like ‘love’ is a complicated issue for you. Would you agree with that?” Dr. Samuels asked.

Mara nodded.

“Absolutely! It’s always been complicated for me. I don’t really know why. But, there it is.”

Mara didn’t know why love had always made the bile in her stomach fester, but it did. She wasn’t fond of the topic, nor the expressions that went along with ‘love’. Unless it was to show Doogie she loved him; he couldn’t hurt her.

So was that the issue? She was afraid of being hurt? Mara didn’t understand herself. On one hand, she was wondering why no one told her they loved her – like Tony and Jeremy – and then when she did hear it – like from her mom – she second guessed it. How complicated, confusing, and convoluted was that? Mara didn’t even know where to start trying to figure that one out; she was just glad that she was finally getting some help.

“I want to try another exercise this week,” Dr. Samuels said after a moment while writing on the papers attached to her clipboard. “You have one of two options. The first option is to try a daily run before work. The second option is clean up your work space before work. You can choose between one of those two options. Which one do you want to try?”

Mara considered the options. Well, she enjoyed running, but she knew she wouldn’t have time to go for a jog before work, but she supposed she could get into work a little early to clean up her work space and the nurses’ station.

“I’ll go in early to straighten up my work space,” Mara answered.

“Great. The reasons for those two options is this: exercise is a great way to release endorphins which can help you think clearly and feel happiness. The act of cleaning up your workspace helps to not only declutter your environment, but to declutter your mind. Does that make sense?”

“Perfectly.”

“Great! I want you to do this daily and record how it makes you feel in your gratitude journal, as well. Let’s record the positive changes that you are making and the way they are affecting your overall quality of life. Does that sound like a plan?” Dr. Samuels asked.

On the way home, Mara imagined the way a clean work environment would make her feel. It was always messy; papers were always everywhere, notes were never in their appropriate mailboxes, stethoscopes were never hanging in their appropriate places. Mara hated the clutter; but that’s what it was like and no one had ever taken the initiative to organize or clean it.

But Mara would start and she was looking forward to doing something positive for a change.

When she arrived home, Jeremy was watching football on the couch. She hadn't mentioned their fight to Dr. Samuels. It wasn't that she forgot – it just hadn't come up.

Jeremy channel surfed during a commercial and greeted her when she closed the door.

“Hey.” He said.

“Hey.”

She knew she had to apologize. She felt horrible about the words that they said to one another.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” She asked. He shook his head.

“I just want you to know I'm sorry.” She stated matter-of-factly. He turned off the T.V. and looked at her.

“I should never have said the things I said to you. I'm very sorry and I wanted you to know that.” She continued, looking him in the eyes.

He gave her a gentle smile and nodded.

“I'm very sorry, too,” he replied. “I shouldn't have stormed out. That doesn't solve anything. Just know I love you very much.”

Mara stopped.

Did she hear him correctly? Did he say he loved her? She couldn't remember the last time she had heard him say it.

“You love me?” She asked.

“Of course I love you. And don't you ever doubt it.” He kissed her gently on the lips before telling her that he would take her out to dinner.

Mara smiled. “Ok. I am going to let you choose the place!”

He returned her smile and gave her a gentle wink.

That evening, Mara got back from the restaurant happy and satisfied and full. Dinner had been delicious and she sat down to write in her gratitude journal.

Jeremy had given her a kiss on the cheek and went into the bedroom to get ready for bed. Mara sat in the living room, her gratitude journal sprawled across her lap.

Today, I am grateful for Italian food and the wind. There is something about the wind that makes me feel so refreshed and energized. I don't know what causes me to feel that way, but I'm

grateful for whatever power the wind holds that captures me in those moments when I feel nothing but utter peace. And I'm grateful for Italian food – just because...

Mara smiled and placed her pen down. It was time for bed.

The next morning, Mara arrived at work a half hour early and saw the nurses' station in the same state she always did: messy, cluttered, and in complete disarray.

For organizing and cleaning, she decided the best place to start would be with the paperwork. She gathered up all the papers and separated them into three piles: mailboxes, inbox, and outbox. She knew the inbox papers needed to go in the inbox mail slot, the outbox papers need to in the outbox mail slot, and the papers addressed to specific individuals needed to go in their appropriate assigned mail slot.

Mara finished the paperwork and proceeded to grab the disinfectant and a paper towel and wipe down the counter space. She grabbed the miscellaneous medical supplies and placed them in their appropriate compartments before going to the maintenance closet and retrieving the vacuum cleaner to vacuum the carpet and rug in and around the station.

It was looking much better and Mara began to feel much better doing it.

She plugged the vacuum cleaner in and pushed the power button. She moved the vacuum cleaner back and forth across the carpet, making sure to pick up the crumbs, dirt, and any other debris she saw with the naked eye laying beneath the counter and desks.

Mara continued her work, oblivious to Leo leaning against a wall and watching her. He couldn't believe it! He had never seen the nurses' station look as organized and tidy as it did that morning and Mara was responsible.

He smiled. He was proud of her. That was taking initiative! He knew that she was now taking steps to prove that she would do whatever it took to get the advancement that she so desperately wanted. And she wanted it!

But she decided that she wanted a positive change in her heart, mind, and soul more than she did the pediatric nursing position. She never thought in a million years that she would ever think that, but it was true, and Mara was happy.

"What in the world is this?" A nurse asked as she came in for her morning shift. "The place looks great!"

"Wow! It sure does!" Another nurse commented as she came in close behind the first.

Mara smiled. She was satisfied and it felt wonderful!

That evening, Mara came home exhausted but happy. She knew she had done well that day; she had a lot to be grateful for and would say so in her gratitude journal that evening. She was grateful for the ability to accomplish and complete hard work and the feeling that came with it.

She was grateful for the appreciation she received – even though she wasn't doing it for the acknowledgement. She was doing it to clear her head because Dr. Samuels recommended it.

Yes.

She was grateful for Dr. Samuels, too.

She found her keys in her purse and unlocked her apartment door.

Suddenly, Mara felt strange; something wasn't right.

She quickly opened her door to find Taylor sitting on the couch, holding Doogie, and crying.

“Mara. Something's happened.” Jeremy said quickly as Taylor rushed towards her.

“Dear God, what happened?” She picked Taylor up and held her close to her as Jeremy continued talking. Taylor continued sobbing.

“The police were just here. Someone found Taylor's mom outside the building. She overdosed on something. They took her to the hospital. She's not expected to live.” He mouthed the last part with his lips so as to not upset Taylor further.

“Oh, my God!” Mara said as she brought a hand to her mouth.

“Mama!” Taylor sobbed.

“Honey, listen to me. Listen to Mara now.” Mara said to the little girl in her arms. “You are going to be okay. I'm going to be with you every step of the way. Do you understand?”

Taylor wiped tears from her face as she shuddered, trying to keep more sobs from escaping.

“It's okay to cry. It's okay to be scared. But you're not alone. Jeremy and I are with you. We love you. And we're not going to let anything bad happen to you. Okay, honey? We'll pray for your mama and send positive energy her way. We'll just hope she gets better real soon.”

“What if she doesn't get better?” The little girl asked as silent tears fell down her cheeks.

“If she doesn't get better, I'll be with you every step of the way. Every...single...step.”

“Okay, Mara. Okay...”

Chapter 6

“How was your week, Mara?” Dr. Samuels asked.

“It went really well. I’ve been able to get into work every day and make sure that the nurses’ station is clutter-free. The other nurses are loving the environment, too!” Mara said enthusiastically.

“That’s outstanding. I’m so glad to hear that. Well, today I’m introducing some new therapy into our sessions. Have you ever heard of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or as it’s more popularly known, CBT?”

Mara shook her head.

“CBT focuses on helping you learn the way your thought-processes impact your behavior. CBT helps you to develop different ways to change your behavior by altering the way you think about different circumstances. Does that make sense?”

“That sounds like just the thing I need!” Mara replied.

“There are many benefits to CBT. One is that it helps you identify thoughts or beliefs that cause your behaviors. Another is that it helps you to learn different ways to cope with stress, anxiety or negative feelings. You will set goals, take measures to change your actions, and develop a plan to prevent relapse of specific emotional responses, like depression and anxiety.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mara said.

“While you can’t always control every aspect of the world around you, you can take control of how you interpret and deal with the things in your environment. Now, what I want you to do is this: ask yourself – ‘Do I make assumptions?’”

“Do I make assumptions?” Mara repeated.

“That’s right. Do you make assumptions?”

Mara pondered the question. She had never thought about it before.

“I suppose I do. I mean, I guess everybody has probably assumed something at one point or another throughout their lives. But yeah, I guess I assume things a lot.” Mara answered.

“Okay. Good. I want you to start questioning your assumptions.” The doctor said simply.

“Question them?” Mara asked.

Dr. Samuels nodded.

“Do you mean question if they are right or wrong?” Mara asked for clarification.

“That’s a good point you bring up, Mara. It’s necessary that you start asking the right questions. *Better* questions. If you ask the wrong questions, you will always get the wrong answers.”

Mara drove home thinking and pondering the material that she went over with Dr. Samuels in her session.

If you ask the wrong questions, you will always get the wrong answers.

Mara was intrigued. The statement was thought-provoking (to say the least).

But Mara was excited about the CBT and all that the therapy would entail. She was curious about how her feelings and actions were connected and what she could do with one to alter the other.

She already realized that the action of cleaning the work station was making her feel good – positive even. She also realized that when she felt negative and depressed, she fought with Jeremy. *Interesting.*

When Mara arrived home, Taylor was sleeping in her bed with Doogie curled up next to her.

“Hey, hon.” Jeremy said as he approached her. He embraced her in a tight hug that Mara always loved to receive. It felt good to be in his embrace and feel his strength and warmth.

He sighed deeply and pulled away.

“Taylor’s mom passed away this afternoon, hon.” Jeremy said gently.

Mara gasped and dropped her purse, bringing both hands to her mouth.

“Oh, my god! What...How...?”

“I know. I’m in disbelief too, babe. She went into a coma and passed away a few hours later. They couldn’t save her.”

“Well, does Taylor know?”

“No. I just found out. She’s been sleeping in the bed for the last few hours.” Jeremy replied.

“Should I wake her?” Mara asked.

“No. Let’s let her sleep. We’ll decide what...”

“Mara?”

Jeremy and Mara turned to see Taylor standing in the hallway, rubbing her eyes.

“Hey honey!” Mara said, going to the little girl and embracing her. “How’s my girl?”

“I’m thirsty.” Taylor said.

Jeremy went to the cabinet and pulled out a cup and filled it with cold water for the child, looking at Mara and shaking his head.

He didn’t know how they were going to tell Taylor about her mother either.

Mara brought the little girl by the hand to the couch and set her down as she sipped her water.

“Taylor.” Mara began.

Taylor drank slowly and set her cup down on the coffee table.

“Honey. I have something I need to tell you.” Mara said gently. A few moments passed.

“Mama is dead, isn’t she?” Taylor asked suddenly.

Mara stared at her and then looked at Jeremy and then looked back at Taylor. She took a heavy breath in and let it out while closing her eyes. She opened her eyes and spoke.

“Yes, honey. Your mama died a little while ago.” She said quietly.

Taylor looked at her lap and sighed. She didn’t cry and that concerned Mara. Mara looked at Jeremy, who gave a confused, yet concerned shrug.

“Honey? What are you thinking?” Mara asked, brushing the girl’s hair back behind her ear.

“Who’s going to take care of me?” Taylor asked.

Mara looked at Jeremy for reassurance and he smiled. He then nodded.

Mara smiled and nodded back.

“We will.” She pulled the little girl into her arms as the child then started to cry.

At her next therapy session, Mara told Dr. Samuels the story about Taylor and her mom. She tried to control her emotions, but she couldn’t help but *feel* – and feel intensely.

“Has social services gotten involved?” Dr. Samuels asked.

“Yes. Jeremy and I have already taken the steps to adopt Taylor and we are in constant communication with social services. She’s doing very well despite everything.” Mara said.

“That’s wonderful. I’m so glad to hear that. How are you feeling about pursuing adoption? What are your thoughts or concerns about it?”

Mara looked at her hands folded calmly in her lap and sighed deeply.

“I’m content. I feel a lot of peace. I know this is the right step to take. Jeremy and I did a lot of talking and he and I have never been so excited about anything since the start of our relationship.”

“Do you plan on adopting her jointly?”

“We haven’t gotten that far in our planning yet. But, yes, we’ve discussed that possibility.”

Dr. Samuels nodded and thought a moment.

“Mara. What do you believe about yourself, the world, and those around you?”

Mara smiled nervously.

“Those are *a lot* of beliefs.” Mara said, chuckling.

Dr. Samuels joined in her laughter.

“Yes. There’s a lot to choose from when we think about our belief systems. Just share the first few you think of. Give me two beliefs you have of yourself, the world, and those in it.”

Mara couldn’t think of anything that she really believed about herself. She wanted to do the right things, improve, and be the best person that she could be. But, what beliefs did she have?

“I guess I believe I’m a good person.” Mara finally said.

“That’s a good start. We’ll eventually be able to go deeper than that. And what’s a second belief you have about yourself?”

“I believe that I can improve and be better.” Mara said, almost with a questioning tone in her voice as if she was unsure she gave the right answer.

“Excellent! As we practice this exercise more, you’ll discover that we’ll be able to go deeper and deeper. It will be as if we’re pulling away layers to get to the core of our belief systems. You believe you’re a good person. But, you have a deeper belief about yourself that tells you *why* you believe you’re a good person. And we’ll get there.”

Mara nodded in acknowledgement, but still had questions.

“But why don’t other people see that?”

“See what?”

“That I’m a good person. Other people seem to be blind to my contributions. It’s almost as if other people have unrealistic expectations of me and then don’t take the time to listen to what I have to say.”

“Has your gratitude journal helped with those feelings and thoughts?”

Mara pondered her question.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I’m learning to see the beauty in the world and in the smallest things – the parks, the river, the fountains, the breeze, food, but most of all – Jeremy and Taylor.”

“And that brings us to your next set of beliefs – what beliefs do you have about the world?”

Mara didn’t even hesitate.

“I believe the world is evil and going to hell in a hand basket.”

The doctor unfolded her hands from her lap and held them, palms up.

“You see. It didn’t take you long at all to reveal what you believed about the world. Two beliefs – just like that.” The doctor snapped her fingers.

“So what’s the difference between not being able to think of beliefs about myself and quickly thinking of beliefs about the world?”

“One set of beliefs are about external things. The other set is about internal; thus, making them much more intimate and personal for our true sense of self to acknowledge and face.”

“What were the last set of beliefs you asked me to think about?”

“What do you believe about those around you?”

Mara bit her lip and looked out the window.

“If I may quote Anne Frank – I suppose my belief is that the majority of people are ‘really good at heart.’ But...”

A silent moment passed.

“But what?” The doctor encouraged.

“My second belief would be that I’m destined to be surrounded by people that hurt me.”

The doctor nodded.

“Who hurts you, Mara?” She finally asked.

Mara didn't even know. She just felt pain. She must be being hurt by someone if she felt pain, right? But she couldn't think of a single person that was currently and consistently hurting her.

No. No one was hurting Mara.

Then it occurred to her.

It was just Mara hurting herself.

Chapter 7

“There’s an exercise that I want you to do every day,” Dr. Samuels said. “Human beings are apt to process their own words when speaking out loud more effectively than when they hear the voice of others. That is why this exercise is so efficient at helping people help themselves.”

Dr. Samuels pulled a hand held mirror from her desk drawer and handed it to Mara.

“Look at yourself in the mirror and say these words: ‘I can only change myself – I can’t change other people.’”

Could she only change herself? *Could* she do it?

Mara took the mirror, looked at herself and spoke.

“‘I can only change myself – I can’t change other people.’ Give it a try and see how it feels.”

“I...I can only change myself – I can’t change other...other people.” She said awkwardly.

“Good. It will take practice, but the more you do it, the more confident you will be saying it. This affirmation is true and you should say it to yourself daily. It will become a part of your true sense of self.”

Mara nodded and smiled.

On her way home, her phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Mara?”

Mara froze.

It was her mom.

“Hi...mom.” She said at last.

The other end of the phone remained silent for a few moments before her mother spoke.

“I haven’t talked to you for quite some time, dear. How are you?” She asked.

It was strange talking to her mom. The conversation never felt natural; it always felt... forced.

“I’m okay. How are you?” Mara replied.

“I’m doing well.” Her mother said at last.

Another awkward moment of silence.

“Listen Mara. I wanted to know – could we get together? Maybe have coffee or dinner. Would you like that?”

Mara suddenly felt uplifted. See her mom? She smiled.

“I *would* like that. I’m available most nights this week because I’m working the day shift at the hospital. Does that work for you?”

She could hear the smile in her mother’s voice as she responded.

“That sounds lovely. How about Tuesday at six? Nothing exciting ever happens on Tuesdays, so let’s spice it up. How about a spicy Mexican supper?”

Mara couldn’t help but chuckle.

That was her mom; she was always eating Mexican food. Ever since Mara was young, when they went out for Mexican food, they always went to the same place.

“That sounds great mom! Same place?”

“Same place.”

The rest of Mara’s week had been simple and fairly peaceful. On the way to her next therapy appointment, Mara drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she drove, humming along to the tunes on the radio.

She looked forward to her session and curiously pondered what would transpire.

“Today, we’re going to go over two therapy techniques that we are going to start.” Dr. Samuels said twenty minutes later.

Mara situated herself in her chair.

“The first is called cognitive restructuring.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a form of therapy that refers to recognizing and altering inaccurate negative thoughts that contribute to depression. Automatic thoughts are often in response to certain situations. They’re automatic in that they’re impulsive, negative, and are not a result of thoughtful, rational thinking or reason. Automatic thoughts are often reinforced by negative or dysfunctional assumptions that are guiding the way you view yourself, your situation, or the world around you.”

“Hmm. What’s the second one?” Mara asked, interested.

“The second one is behavioral activation. This is another goal that will be geared to help you participate more often in pleasurable activities and also to build or improve your problem-solving skills. Part of this technique is looking at hindrances that prevent you from taking part in the experience and deciding how to overcome the hindrances by breaking the process down into smaller steps.”

“What are these techniques supposed to be able to help me do?” Mara asked.

“The idea of cognitive behavioral therapy is to learn to distinguish negative thinking and find a healthier way to see the situation. The ultimate goal is to identify the primary assumptions out of which those thoughts ascend and assess them. Once the impreciseness of the assumption becomes clear, you can replace that perspective with a healthier accurate one.”

Mara nodded and thought for a moment. She knew that these techniques were going to be able to help her in the long run. She was looking forward to how she would feel after she began implementing the tactics that she was learning from Dr. Samuels.

“There is one more affirmation that I want you to add for your daily exercises.” Dr. Samuels said. “This one is just as important as the first one that you have been doing.”

“What is it?”

“I will focus on finding solutions to problems. I will stop focusing on the problem and I will begin to focus on the solution.”

Dr. Samuels pulled out her hand held mirror for Mara to practice.

Mara took the mirror, stared at her reflection and repeated the affirmation.

“Good. That’s very good, Mara.” Dr. Samuels said. “How are you feeling about meeting your mom tonight?”

Mara sighed deeply.

“In a way, I’m very, very nervous. But I also feel excited, too. If you would have told me four months ago that I would have eventually felt excitement about seeing my mom, I would’ve told you that you were crazy.”

“It shows that you’re making progress.” Dr. Samuels said.

“Hearing you say that really encourages me.” Mara replied.

“You should be very proud. You’ve done a lot of work and you’ve made a lot of headway.”

Mara had made a lot of headway. She loved to think that she was succeeding and going in the

right direction.

While driving to the restaurant that night, Mara had butterflies in her stomach. She didn't realize what it was that was causing her to be so nervous and excited all at the same time. She was anxious to see her mom but terrified at the exact same time.

She entered the restaurant and saw her mom right away.

She was seated in a booth next to the window and stood when Mara approached.

They stared at each other for a moment, but Mara could feel the love she had for her mom and her mom for her.

"Hello, dear." Her mother said.

"Hi mom..." Mara replied, trying to hold back the tears. She hadn't seen her mom in years.

Without a word, she went into her mother's waiting arms and held her, breathing in her scent.

Yes. This was going to be a special night.

Chapter 8

Mara was excited to get to her therapy session. She couldn't wait to tell Dr. Samuels about the wonderful and successful time that she spent with her mother.

Their get-together went better than Mara could have ever dreamed it would. They didn't argue or talk about painful memories; instead, they got along and had a normal conversation. Mara didn't want to give herself too much credit, but at the same time, she had changed. Hadn't she?

After all, she had gotten to work every morning for the last few weeks and had maintained the cleanliness and organization of the nurses' work station. She had even added jogging into the mix as Dr. Samuels had mentioned. She wrote in her gratitude journal daily and consistently did her self-affirmations. And she hadn't missed one therapy appointment.

She supposed that she was working hard, but surely her mom had changed, too. She didn't know what would've caused her mom to change unless she was doing a similar therapy regiment as Mara was doing. But, whatever the reason, Mara was thrilled that she had a visit with her mother that went as well as it did.

Mara arrived at therapy ten minutes early. The day was cool, beautiful and sunny and Mara was happy. After turning off the main road and into the lot, Mara didn't see the pothole that was right in front of her and drove right into it. The car popped up on the other side of it as a high pitched screech and low sounding crack come from her bumper.

"Oh, no!" Mara said as she continued driving, looking in her rearview mirror. She pulled into a parking spot and quickly got out to assess the damage to her car.

Sure enough, there was a large dent in her car.

Mara's irritation was overwhelming.

"Why don't they fix the road?" Mara said out loud. She grabbed her purse from the passenger seat, closed her door and locked it. This was the last thing she needed!

Mara went into Dr. Samuel's office ten minutes later, more agitated then she had been in ages.

"Hi, Mara. How are you doing today?" Dr. Samuels asked as Mara sat across from her.

"I'm sorry, but I'm really irritated."

"What about?"

"I drove my car through a pothole in the parking lot and now there's damage to my car."

"Oh, no. I hope it's not serious."

“So do I.”

“Well, what we’re going over today should help with your irritation.” Dr. Samuels said.

“What are we going over?”

“This session we are going to talk about how to change any emotional state you’re in – like right now, you’re irritated – to solution oriented.”

Mara was so irritated that she became annoyed. This was going to be a long session.

But, once the thought entered her mind, she rebuked herself. She should know better than to be thinking like that. She had made tremendous progress. She shouldn’t revert back to her old ways now! Not after how far she’d come.

“Thoughts feed our feelings and to defuse our thoughts, we have to acknowledge the thought as just that – a thought – and not react automatically. We need to choose to put our focus of attention on something else. We have to learn to be mindful and learn to just observe the words, images, or sensations that feed our thoughts instead of investing in them or engaging ourselves with them.”

“How can I be mindful and learn to observe when my thoughts do happen so automatically? I don’t even have time to slow my thought processes down because they happen as fast as they do.”

“That’s a good question, Mara. It takes practice. The more you practice mindfulness now and make a habit of it now – when things aren’t so bad – you’ll automatically do it when things are hard because you have practiced and trained your mind to think in a healthier and more productive way. The more you practice, the more effective it will be.”

“So, what’s the first step?”

“We’re going to go over the acronym ‘STOPP’. Each letter stands for a step you’ll take.”

Dr. Samuels pulled out a whiteboard marker and began to write on a handheld whiteboard.

“The first step,” she said, “is stop – just that. Pause. The second step is ‘take a breath’. Notice how you’re breathing. The third step is ‘observe’. Ask yourself some questions. ‘What thoughts are going through my mind right now?’ ‘Where is my focus of attention?’ ‘What am I reacting to?’ ‘What sensations do I notice in my body?’ ‘What thoughts do I need to defuse?’ The fourth step is ‘Pull back and put in some perspective.’ Ask yourself what the bigger picture is. What is another way of looking at the situation? What advice would you give a friend? What would a safe and trusted friend say about the situation? Ask yourself how important it is. How important will it be in six months? And to remind yourself the situation and experience will pass. The last step is ‘Practice what works and proceed.’ What is the best thing to do right now? What is best for me, for others, and for the situation? What can you do that fits with your values? And only do

what will be effective and appropriate.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

“And it’s effective. The key thing is to practice the first two steps for a few days, many times a day so as to become accustomed to being in the habit of practicing the skill. Read through the steps often and remind yourself of them. Start to use this skill for just the little things that upset you so when more distressing situations arise, you’ll be automatic approaching it with these tendencies.”

“So, if I had used this skill a half hour ago when I drove my car over that pothole, I might not have become so irritated?”

“Exactly. This skill is to help you hone in your emotional response so as to make sure you’re responding appropriately and in a healthy way so as to be a productive person.”

“You mentioned ‘defusing your thoughts’. How do you do that?”

“Well, using ‘STOPP’ is one way. Another way is identifying the emotion you’re feeling and label the unhelpful thoughts. ‘That’s an evaluation’ or ‘that’s a memory’. Learning more mindfulness techniques is certainly important so that you can learn to stay ‘grounded’ and not be ‘in your head’. Using metaphors is certainly effective, too. For example, your thoughts are like items flowing down a river – instead of going down the river with it and trying to keep it afloat, we can stand on the bank and watch it all go by. Another metaphor would be to think of our distressing thoughts or feelings as a tunnel that we’re in. We’re driving through the tunnel and there is an end to it. We’ll pass it through it. The best thing to do is keep going instead of trying to escape.”

“I like the tunnel metaphor. That makes a lot of sense. You’ll probably make yourself stay in the tunnel a lot longer by trying to get out of it then just to keep going.”

“Exactly. The harder your try to ‘make’ feelings or thoughts go away without effective technique and coping mechanisms, the longer they’ll be present and the stronger they’ll become.”

Chapter 9

Mara gave a lot of thought to her therapy session as she drove to work the next morning. She certainly had a lot of studying to do regarding the techniques that she learned about, but she was excited to implement them nonetheless.

“Good morning, Mara.”

It was Leo.

“Hi Leo! Good morning to you as well.” Mara said cheerfully.

“And what puts you in such a chipper mood?” Leo asked with a smile.

“Nothing in particular. I just know today is going to be a good day.”

Leo walked away continuing to smile as Mara gathered her materials for her first patient.

It was going to be Ms. Martinez.

“Oh great,” Mara said to herself. But as soon as the words escaped her mouth, Mara rebuked herself.

No, she thought. I'm not going to going to revert back to my old behavior. I know what I need to do to stay away from negative emotions. If there's a problem, I'll find the solution. It will be just fine.

Mara went to the patient's waiting room and called for Ms. Martinez.

As soon as Ms. Martinez saw her, she stopped.

“Oh, no. I won't see that young woman again. I demand another nurse.” She told the receptionist who looked shocked and uncomfortable.

Mara didn't miss the opportunity.

“Ms. Martinez. I'm happy to help you this morning. And if you'd like, I'll make this quick and easy for you. I'll do whatever needs to be done to make this a comfortable experience for you.”

Ms. Martinez eyed her carefully and took a few steps toward her.

“Fine. Just watch your attitude today, missy, because I'll not have it.” She growled.

Mara felt the signs of a defensive comeback come into her mouth, but she held her tongue.

“How are you this morning, Ms. Martinez?” She asked genuinely, realizing that she had

never asked Ms. Martinez that question before because she had never cared. Today – she did.

“I’m sore, but otherwise, I’m doing ok.” The old woman said as she limped to the chair Mara pulled out for her.

“Well, we’ll get you taken care of today and see if we can’t relieve some of that soreness.”

Mara removed her needles and tubes and prayed that Ms. Martinez had drunk water so that her veins would not be as thin as they had been in the past.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing this time?” Ms. Martinez said as she held back her arm, preventing Mara from starting to draw her blood.

Mara began having thoughts of irritation and anger.

Give me a break. I didn’t do anything wrong last time – I just couldn’t find your veins. I always knew what I was doing. What’s the matter with you?

Mara closed her eyes for a brief second.

Mara. Last time doesn’t matter. Focus on right here, right now. Ms. Martinez is an old woman who needs your help. You can help her. Just be patient. This will pass.

“I will help you, Ms. Martinez. If you’d like to place your arm here, I’ll make this quick and easy for you.”

The old woman extended her arm and Mara prepared the needle and tube.

She looked at the woman’s arm and knew that her veins would still be hard to find. She inserted the needle as precisely as she could and the old woman winced in discomfort. Mara carefully rotated and moved the needle to find the woman’s veins. It wasn’t going to work!

Mara withdrew the needle and started again. Ms. Martinez groaned and was about to say something, but didn’t.

Mara, again, rotated and moved the needle to find a vein in the woman’s arm. This wasn’t going to be easy.

After a few more attempts, Mara finally found a vein that would work. Blood began coming down the tube and into the vile.

“Well, it certainly took you long enough. Do you enjoy causing me discomfort or are you just that bad at your job?” Ms. Martinez said as she glared at Mara.

Mara sighed and closed her eyes, but quickly opened them.

“I’m very sorry that was as uncomfortable for you as it was, Ms. Martinez. May I offer you

an ice pack to ease the pain?”

The old woman stared at Mara and then nodded.

After Mara returned with the ice pack, the old woman spoke up again.

“I’m sorry, girl. I’m just an old lady who hates going to the doctor. I know you’re doing your best at your job. Thank you for being so kind.”

Mara smiled at Ms. Martinez.

“You’re very welcome, Ms. Martinez. I’m very happy to be here to help you and do all that I can.”

Ms. Martinez returned Mara’s smile as she took the ice pack and applied it to her bandaged arm.

A half hour later after Mara was finished with her next few patients, she was called to Leo’s office.

“You wanted to see me Leo?” She asked after knocking on Leo’s door.

“Yeah! Come on in, Mara.”

Mara entered Leo’s office and sat opposite his desk.

“How’s your day going?” He asked.

She smiled and nodded.

“Good. Really good. I told you today was going to be a good day.”

“Well, after I saw you with Ms. Martinez, I’ll admit – I had my doubts.”

“She was a pleasure to work with.” Mara replied.

“I saw that. I was at the nurses’ station and saw your exchange with her. The ice pack was a very thoughtful gesture, Mara.”

Mara looked at her lap and back at her boss.

“Thank you, Leo. I was happy to help.”

“By the way,” he said, “we have another opening in the pediatric wing. I thought, perhaps, that you’d like to apply.”

Mara stared at Leo before a large smile appeared on her face.

“Thank you, Leo. I think I shall.”

Yes. Today had been a good day.

Chapter 10

“That’s wonderful, Mara! I am so pleased to hear that you have finally submitted the paperwork and that adopting Taylor is close to a reality for you.” Dr. Samuels said as she clapped her hands together a single time and smiled at Mara.

Mara breathed a sigh and smiled back.

“I am so thrilled Dr. Samuels. Jeremy and I couldn’t be happier. I adore and love that little girl more than she’ll ever know. I doubt I could love a child more than I birthed myself – Taylor means that much to me.”

Dr. Samuels nodded.

“I like that, Mara. In my profession, I see a lot of people who have experienced childhood trauma, and it’s a powerful thing when healthy, safe people want to raise and rear a child – especially an older child who comes from a broken, dysfunctional home as Taylor has. The positive, life-changing experience that her adoption will be for her will give her the opportunity to thrive – which is something that a lot of people are missing nowadays. So many people are not born into homes where there’s a springboard that catapults them into adulthood with healthy thought patterns and a secure sense of self because the way they were raised was so toxic and unhealthy. You and Jeremy have a chance to undo any damage that has been done and give Taylor opportunities that she would not have otherwise had.”

Mara felt tears come to her eyes.

That’s all she wanted for Taylor – a loving, safe, and accepting home where she could be nurtured and reared to become the woman that she was meant to be. Mara couldn’t wait to be Taylor’s mom so that she could be a part of that special journey.

“So what are we going over today?” Mara asked.

Dr. Samuels looked at Mara, smiled, and turned to set her cup of coffee on her desk.

“Nothing, Mara. Your work with me is done.”

Mara made an audible gasp.

“Done? What do you mean?”

“Mara. The work that you needed to complete with me is completed and the skills that you needed to learn have not only been learned, but they’ve been applied – consistently and habitually. You’ve conquered your negativity and you have not only stopped your wrong thinking processes, but you’ve replaced them with positive and healthy ones. You don’t need me or our sessions anymore. It’s time to spread your wings and soar.”

Mara couldn’t believe it. She didn’t know what to think. Had she really done it? Had she

really made it through all the necessary sessions to progress and move on?

“How do I know I won’t go back-wards? I mean – how do I know I won’t go back to the person I used to be?”

“That’s up to you, Mara. The difference is that you now have the tools and the education that you need so as not to revert back to your old ways of thinking and behaving. If you do find yourself slipping, you are able to draw on what we have gone over in our sessions to remedy any backsliding.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“I’ll always be here if you need to come back to strengthen or sharpen your skills. But you’re a very smart, strong, and self-reliant woman, Mara. You can do this. I know you can. I have faith in you. Just keep using your skills – continue making them a part of your daily life – and the only place you can go, as you grow, is up.”

Mara left Dr. Samuel’s office for the last time that day feeling empowered, independent, and resilient. She could do this and she would do this. She smiled to herself as she drove.

Taylor was playing a game with Jeremy when she got home and she gave them both a kiss and a hug before retiring to the privacy of her bedroom to write in her gratitude journal.

Today, this beautiful day, I am grateful for my life – the woman I was, the woman I am, and the woman I one-day hope to become.

Mara smiled, closed her gratitude journal, and closed her eyes. with a feeling of utter contentment and peace as she had never known before.

With feelings of contentment and peace as she had never known before, Mara stood up, walked through her bedroom door and joined her family for their nightly game.

Epilogue

As Mara adjusted her veil, she watched her seven-year-old daughter Taylor walk down the aisle before her. She smiled as she saw the child turn around, in front of a church-full of guests, motioning for her mom to follow her. Mara couldn't help but laugh with the crowd.

Mara looked past her daughter and saw Jeremy standing at the altar with tears in his eyes. This was indeed a special day for their family. Mara was about to become Pediatric Nursing Supervisor, Mrs. Jeremy Austin.

Mara smiled and began walking down the aisle as Taylor took her seat next to Mara's mom, her grandma. Susan Acone cuddled the little girl in close as Taylor giggled contentedly.

Mara knew that Taylor had felt left out lately because of all the attention that she and Jeremy were getting about their upcoming nuptials.

But Mara knew how to fix that.

She just hadn't decided yet on how to tell Taylor that she was going to be a big sister.

Section II

Chapter 10

Mara had quite a journey, didn't she! With every step she took, she was able to come out on the other side of her problems a stronger and a more effectively balanced person. Here is a summarized list of the steps Mara took.

1. She acknowledged there was a problem.
2. She agreed that the problem needed to be remedied.
3. She reached out for help.
4. She processed her current circumstances.
5. She asked questions.
6. She learned to believe that she had the power to change herself and her life.
7. She learned about skills and techniques to use such as:
 - a. The Gratitude journal
 - b. Exercising
 - c. Cleaning/organizing
 - d. Engaging in positive activities
 - e. The S.T.O.P.P. method.
 - f. Mindfulness
8. She acknowledged and accepted her past, her mistakes, her fears, her feelings, and her vulnerabilities and made the decision to change what she could.
9. She made an effort to reconcile hurt and broken relationships.
10. She set goals, took measures to change actions, and developed a plan to prevent emotional relapse.
11. She identified thoughts/beliefs that caused her behavior.
12. She applied what she learned to her life consistently and habitually.
13. She never gave up, believed in herself, and began to chase her dreams so as to make them come true.

Why is it sometimes hard to let go of something?

The short answer is “instant gratification”

- **You get to keep feeling like you are right.** And the other person is wrong. And that can be a pleasant feeling and way to look at the situation at hand.
- **You don't have to go out into the scary unknown.** You can cling to what you know instead, to what is familiar and safe.
- **You get to assume the role of the victim.** And get attention, support and comfort from other people.

Once you recognize what your behaviors are (by actively asking for feedback) and start to identify the triggers that set these behaviors off, the next step is to work out why they became your behaviors. We form behaviors for a reason, and understanding these reasons is the key to getting rid of the behaviors.

Behaviors can be good or bad, but what you need to understand is *what* triggers these behaviors. Only after identifying your behaviors and what makes you act in a certain manner will you have the ability to let go of the behavior.

Below is a detailed analysis of some of the causes of these behaviors and how they affect your life.

Comfort: Different people find comfort in different activities, and you might be amazed by the unusual behaviors in which people find comfort. Sometimes, behaviors emerge from unaddressed, psychological issues that stem from childhood, resulting in nostalgia that affects people later in life. Some people feel like victims, worry incessantly about the future, or hold on to resentment. Despite how hard they try, it's impossible to let go once they have reached a certain point.

Social Influence: Regardless of age, our peers greatly influence us. Whether at school, home, or work, we all try to impress others or try to fit in by looking cool so that we do not get left out of social activities. As a result, kids and even adults engage in heavy drinking, drug abuse, or other activities that eventually become habits. Making independent decisions does not mean that you will automatically quit the habit, but it is a crucial first step.

Inherited Habits: In most cases, people tend to hold on to habits they've acquired - through learning and imitation. Both children and adults have role models they respect and admire. When we are young, our parents and other people around us had a great impact on shaping our future behavior. Children learn by imitating behavior, and if you grew up observing certain behaviors from your role models, there is a high probability that you will find it difficult to let go of those behaviors.

Avoidance: We are all human, and we face day-to-day challenges that take a toll on us. Anxiety and depression may lead you to make certain decisions that provide immediate gratification so as to escape reality. Similarly, life challenges may make you start doing habitual things, slowly and gradually. Maybe you have low confidence, but with a little alcohol, you feel a false sense of high esteem or when high, you feel invincible. In the end, you may find that you cannot undertake any demanding or challenging activity without first having a glass of wine; thus, a habit is made.

Poor Lifestyle Choices: We have to address the consequences that stem from some of our life choices. In trying to cope with the effects of a certain behavior, you may end up holding on to a certain habit to over-compensate for your actions. For example, if you used to party a lot in college, you may have had to consume an energy drink every morning before attending classes so you had the energy to get through the day. As this became a repeated behavior, you found yourself in a position where you could not stop drinking an energy drink every morning. Although you may not have been entirely dependent on the drink, the fact you were used to it means that – without it – you felt incomplete.

Whatever your situation, finding the root cause of the problem can be as simple as thinking it through or as complex as actively asking for feedback. This can be an emotional process.

To help you get to the root cause of a habit, ask yourself the following questions:

How does it make me feel? If you feel comforted, happy, or reassured by the habit, ask yourself: is this happiness long-lasting and free of a downside? For example, it feels great to eat cake, but the pleasure is usually only momentary, while the health impact is negative, and the feeling afterward (especially after sabotaging a healthy eating plan) is usually really horrible. Ask yourself why you need that specific sense of comfort in your life, and look at when the habit started to represent comfort and happiness to you. Was there a particular time when you felt like you had to engage in this habit to “treat” yourself or avoid negative feelings? Why did this pattern continue? Do you still need to hold on to this comfort, or could you let it go now that it is no longer needed?”

You might find that the habit doesn’t make you feel good anymore. This is a fantastic realization; it means that you can free yourself from feeling that you *need* the habit because you are able to move past it, knowing that the habit is no longer necessary.

Is it really my habit? Ask yourself if this habit developed just because of you, or if it developed in response to another person or group of people. You might feel surprised to discover that your habit is one you share with a parent, teacher, friend, or other influential person. If you see someone engage in a habit often, you may find yourself copying their behavior without realizing it; you may also feel that by imitating this person, it helps you feel like them in some way. That’s why you are more likely to discover that you inherited a habit from someone you respected. Figure out what attribute of theirs you most admired or desired to have and you may realize that you have moved on, no longer seeing them as a role model. At the very least, you may understand that their habits (like yours) are just that – habits – and have nothing to do with what you respect or admire them for.

Where does the pressure come from? If you feel pressure to continue a habit, find out where it is coming from. Added pressure can come from people around you who engage in the same habit (e.g. smoking cigarettes). Other pressure can come from stressful situations; many habits are a response to anxiety. Additional pressure can come from a busy lifestyle — you may feel you don’t have time to devote to quitting the habit. At times, your habit provides you with an excuse to step outside your routine and have a few moments to yourself; for example, you might end up drinking too much caffeine because a coffee means a short break from work. Knowing where the pressure to continue a habit comes from can be one of the crucial keys to letting go of your habit. Feeling free from this pressure will always make you feel better than the habit did.

Final Analysis

Whatever your habit is, you need to ask yourself the following questions: Does it make you feel good? If it does, does it have long-term benefits? Is it a habit that you actually love? Where does this habit come from? If it does not make you feel good, can you make a decision to let go of it once and for all?

Once you make this decision, you will realize that the solution to letting go of this habit could be as simple as self-analysis, meditation or talking to someone close to you.

Chapter 11

Here are some simple steps to help you let go of unwanted thought patterns or behaviors.

Step 1: Grab a pen and paper and note down your challenges in each of the following areas

1. Your health, food, and exercise
2. How you start and end your workday
3. Your reactions to different situations
4. Your unproductive activities
5. How you manage your relationships
6. How you spend your money
7. Things you procrastinate on that you know you really should be doing

Step 2: Select one bad habit *from each* of the 7 areas mentioned above. Identify and write down the *trigger event* that leads to the bad habit for each of the 7 bad habits you have identified.

Step 3: Identify a suitable replacement behavior / replacement thought pattern for the trigger event in each of the 7 areas.

Step 4: Write down the replacement behavior (habit swap) for each of the trigger events using the following format (a “when-then” plan)

WHEN _____ happens, THEN I will _____

For example:

WHEN:

- I end my workday

THEN I will:

- Review what I accomplished during the day, and write down a short, bulleted summary of each accomplishment. **THEN, I will:**
- Plan tomorrow’s tasks. **THEN, I will:**
- Place my planned tasks where I will see them first thing tomorrow.

I admit that this “when-then” plan does seem overly simplistic; a common objection I hear while helping people is that they have a problem getting started with it because their lives are overly complicated, they just don’t think a simple solution to nurture their good habits will work.

The first step is to simplify your life by trying one of the following:

- Watch less TV, and read more.
- Drive less, and walk more.
- Shop less, and spend more time outdoors.
- Focus on the present, and not so much on the past or the future.
- Avoid noise, and choose solitude and quiet.
- Play more, and work less.

Don't forget to breathe – slowly and consciously.

Chapter 12

In his book, *The Success Principles*, Jack Canfield outlines the following formula:

$$E + R = O$$

$$E \text{ (Event / Trigger)} + R \text{ (Response)} = O \text{ (Outcome)}$$

When it comes to how you react to triggers, you essentially have two very different guiding forces to choose from:

You can either allow your responses to life's triggers to be driven by:

- **Impulse**
- **Old/bad habits**
- **Doing what's easiest**
- **Instant gratification**

Or

- **Purpose**
- **Intention**
- **Thought**

Not all behavior is good or bad. Some of it is simply *neutral* - neither good nor bad. What makes a behavior bad is generally our response to the trigger. If we change our response to a better response or no response, we have a better chance to change the outcome in our favor.

Here are a few examples of bad behavioral habits:

- 1 . Having a short temper
- 2 . Making destructive comments about other people
- 3 . Refusing to Receive Feedback

Example 1: Having a *short temper*

Let's say you're known to have a short fuse, but you want to change that perception, so you decide: "I need to control my anger."

What do you do?

Many people don't know where to start. Tactics like counting to 10 before speaking, trying to control the anger, treating other people with respect, etc., seems akin to a complete personality change. When you get angry, you are generally out of control. And when you have lost control, you have generally lost the friendship with the other person.

Fortunately, there is a simpler way to get around this problem. Instead of trying to come up with ways to control your anger as a whole, simply try to control *what you say* when you are angry. Don't speak or react when you're angry. You don't have to change your personality,

placate people who make you angry, or try to get all mystical by converting your negative energy into positive energy. Choose to walk away, or if that is not an option, simply walk away from the conversation mentally.

The trigger stays the same, but you are training yourself to react differently.
All you have to do is: nothing.

- When your wife tries to be a “backseat driver” while you are driving, say nothing.
- When someone openly contradicts you in a meeting, quietly consider their point and say nothing.
- When your son sneaks your car out for a drive, say nothing (but hide the keys in a better spot.) :)

Example 2: *Making destructive comments about other people*

If you have a habit of mouthing off or making destructive comments about other people, you can apply a similar principle to control yourself.

Before making a comment, ask yourself:

- #1. Will this comment help the person I’m talking to?
- #2. Will this comment help the person I’m talking about?

If the answer is “no”, don’t make that comment! This is easier said than done, but in my own experience, it’s totally worth it!

Example 3: *Refusing to Receive Feedback*

A lot of us do very well in life, and when we take up a challenge, we see it through; but when it comes to ~~our~~ self-improvement, we are sometimes blindsided by problems that we ~~ourselves~~ were not aware of, but that were obvious to other people.

Some of these problems occur because:

- 1 . We do not know how to recognize the problem;
- 2 . We have not been told about the problem; or
- 3 . We are aware of the problem, but refuse to change.

Don’t hide from the truth you need to hear. If you are aware of the problem and refuse to change, then there is nothing much this book can do for you. But if you are open to feedback, you can enhance your relationships, improve your interpersonal skills, and take control of your life. Being open to feedback is the first step before you can identify the trigger that causes a

behavioral habit.

Tips about asking for feedback:

1 . **Ask the right people.** You would not ask your barber for stock market advice, right? The strange thing about this is that people will often look for feedback from people who they know will *agree* with them! This is counterproductive. If you don't ask the right people, you will always get information that is biased or irrelevant.

2 . **Ask the right questions.** Often, we get the wrong answer because we ask the wrong question. If you take the time to figure out what the right question is rather than thinking out aloud, you will notice the quality of answers will improve – simply because you ask better questions. “A problem well stated is a problem half-solved.”

3 . **Interpret the answers properly.** Our lives are colored with the lens of our own perceptions and feelings. This fact is not easy to accept, because it requires us to consider other perspectives; it is up to us to interpret the meaning of feedback we receive from other people.

4 . **Accept the feedback as accurate.** If you asked the right people, if you asked the right questions, and there is a recurring theme in feedback, there is no escaping it — don't discredit the messenger, shoot the messenger, or get defensive.

Chapter 13

Handling Setbacks

It is wise to perceive setbacks as “unavoidable circumstances”, because with such a perception, you can come up with an emergency plan for how to handle them. Described below is a five-step plan for dealing with setbacks in case they occur during the process of quitting a habit.

Admit You Slid Back

Sometimes, it’s easy to fall back into an old habit when you try to start a new one. If it happens, do not deny it. Admit it happened as soon as it does and immediately stop it. This way, you will reverse the effects of your mistake and reduce the amount of harm the setback could do to your determination and confidence to quit.

For instance, you could be a habitual sugar eater who has decided to quit the habit, and yet somehow find yourself eating a sugar-laden bar of chocolate. Once you realize your mistake, stop eating the bar immediately. Record why you slipped, as this will help you to identify the trigger – hence, avoid future setbacks.

Avoid Beating Yourself Up

Setbacks don’t necessarily mean that you have failed. It just means you are human. It’s a process to stop a bad habit, which means it might not be smooth the whole way. Do not be too hard on yourself. To curb future setbacks, record why you slipped and how you intend to avoid repeating the habitual behavior.

In some cases, the setback might be as a result of an unplanned or unexpected situation, and so you can forgive yourself for running to the unwanted habit for comfort or consolation. However, after going through the situation, make a plan for how to deal with related potential risks and get rid of the bad habit.

Start Anew

After a setback, you will likely feel less confident and less motivated to change your habit. Try to pick yourself up, renew your commitment, and decide to start anew with fresh energy. For instance, you may sign up for a new exercise class to replace a bad habit or find new recipes in case you want to replace a bad eating habit with a healthy one. These new changes will excite you and inspire you to continue making the necessary habitual changes. In other words, find new ideas and methods to help you get motivated to achieve your goal.

When starting a new habit, adopt a positive attitude, because it will help you to Forge a way onward even when things seem tough. Every setback reminds you of your weaknesses and therefore, teaches you who you are and how you can avoid them in future.

The “one step at a time” approach will make it easier for you to change your habit. The change may seem like a big burden or responsibility when you look at it in its entirety, but when you perceive it as a single step at a time, you are better off.

To grasp the “one-step-at-a-time” approach, here is a breakdown:

1st Step: Awareness. Aspire to maintain alertness of whatever it is you are doing. Bad decisions are made when you are unaware of your habits.

2nd Step: Always think of an option or a Plan B. When you are aware or alert, you will not forget that you have an option to behave otherwise. How you behave is your choice.

3rd Step: Trust the option you go with. The knowledge that you have the power to choose your habits should help you trust yourself to make the right decision.

4th Step: Whatever decision you make, own it! Accepting and owning your choices – whether good or bad – is a big step in admitting that you are human. If there is something you can do about a setback so as to change your habit – do it; but if you can’t do anything, learn your lesson and focus on your future decisions regarding your habit.

5th Step: Focus on the future. When one moment passes, another one begins. Such is life. You should therefore make a constant decision to move forward. Live the present moment and continue to focus on the future.

As an action plan – in the next two days – practice the “one-step-at-a-time” approach and write in a journal about the decisions you made concerning your habit.

Read on for a quick three-step plan to help you get started right away.

Chapter 14

Conclusion

“We can't be afraid of change. You may feel very secure in the pond that you are in, but if you never venture out of it, you will never know that there is such a thing as an ocean, a sea. Holding onto something that is good for you now, may be the very reason why you don't have something better.”

– C. JoyBell

Incredible change can happen in your life when you decide to take control of what you do have power over and let go of what you don't have power over.

You've now learned the entire system — what it is, why it works, and how it works. Now, it's time to put it to use in your own life and business.

To help get you up and running quickly, here's a simple three-step action plan:

Step 1: Grab a pen and paper and write down your bad habits for each of the following areas.

1. Your health, food, and exercise
2. How you start and end your workday
3. Your urges
4. Your thought patterns
5. How you manage your emotional responses
6. How you spend your money
7. Things you procrastinate on that you know you really should be doing

Step 2: Identify and write down the triggers for each of these bad habits. Also, write down the replacement habit you will swap the bad habit with, while ensuring that the trigger stays the same. If you are unable to come up with ideas for replacement habits, a quick Internet search will help you get additional ideas so as to come up with strategies to counter your bad habits.

Step 3: Every week, choose one bad habit that you want to change. By the end of the year, you will have eliminated 52 bad habits from your life!

Now, you are equipped with all the tools you need to swap out your bad habits with good ones. Modify any of the methods as you see fit. Just remember that the overall goal is to keep things moving so the process does not get too monotonous.

There may be setbacks, but there are also solutions to the problems that arise. With some dedication, motivation and having a good understanding of what habits are and why they happen, any positive behavior that enables you to take control of your life can replace an unwanted habit.

I wish you all the best in your life journey. Don't forget to collect your free gift on the next page.
:)

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