

# 1

## Committing to Learn and Change

It is in changing that things find repose.

—Heraclitus

Any journey toward lasting well-being and genuine contentment necessitates a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. Unless we start to understand what we profoundly need and why we need it, the journey cannot begin. This chapter describes the three complementary ways of learning about ourselves and acquiring such knowledge: through others' views (beliefs and faith), through our own views (intellectual evaluation), and through our own observation (direct experience). It also engages you in the process of change and guides you through the process of downloading the free audio instructions in order to start your practice of mindfulness as soon as possible.

### Beliefs and Faith

If I told you that you could genuinely achieve a sense of well-being, a lasting experience of joy, peace, and contentment, would you believe it? Why would you or wouldn't you believe it? What would the basis of your belief be? As children, we learn about ourselves and life in a broader sense by observing and listening to others. As we grow, our need for knowledge, often characterized by an increasing need to ask questions, is satisfied by our parents' and teachers' explanations. To learn about ourselves and the rest of the world, we initially rely heavily on others' understanding and views – others' wisdom. We form beliefs and rely on these to shape our sense of reality. We are limited in the way we are engaged in the learning experience.

Through repetition, others' views eventually become ours by a subconscious process of internalization. Our sustained identification with our acquired views progressively shapes the neural configuration of brain pathways. Repeatedly identifying with the world as it is presented to us also shapes the person we become. As we later discover, a good deal of information we receive from our parents and others happens to be incorrect. Even basic beliefs, like the existence of the tooth fairy and Santa Claus (which children can hold so dear), will have to be dropped, disappointingly, so that a more mature understanding can be achieved.

Nevertheless, belief in others' views remains an important means of learning in adult life. For example, believing in what is being said by a doctor, psychologist, lawyer, politician, priest, or renowned scientist is part of adult life. Our views are far more shaped by our faith in others' views than we would like to admit.

Although a belief is necessary and useful when the proffered information is accurate and valuable, it is also extremely limiting on its own. Without questioning our beliefs, we delay or prevent the development of rational thinking, unable to reassure ourselves through logic or to question extreme views that we may have learned to endorse. We become unable to grow into an independent thinker and, like little children, can be left feeling vulnerable. Accordingly, a beneficial way of learning about ourselves requires the ability to question, investigate, and evaluate the information at hand.

## Intellectual Evaluation

Critical thinking, or exercising our intellect to verify the validity of our beliefs or those of others, is the result of intellectual maturation. When we engage in critical thinking, we become more actively engaged in the learning experience. As we grow from children into young adolescents, our brain physiology produces rapid changes that concurrently enable the growth of intellectual independence. Although this may take the form of a rebellious attitude at times, it also reflects the ability to question, disagree, and recreate a more independent reality, as we see it. As teenagers, we often portray our re-evaluation and reconstruction of ourselves in the form of change of style and physical appearance. Our sense of identity begins to change as puberty takes place, leaving behind many of our childhood self-beliefs – those beliefs we held so dear.

As we mature, we acquire the ability to question established values and test hypotheses. Our evaluative ability gives us a chance to put what we believe to the test, whether through simple logic, philosophical thinking, or scientific experiments. However, one of the limitations of overreliance on this approach is that most scientific findings change. A phenomenon that the scientific community was certain of 50 years ago may now be found to be erroneous. For example, up until 20 or so years ago, the scientific community

asserted that our brain cells could grow only until about 24 years of age and could not continue growing once the brain had reached maturity. This was supported by observations that aging caused nerve cells to decay, resulting in a reduction of brain volume. However, the advent of sophisticated brain imaging technology, and recent studies in stroke rehabilitation, phantom limb pain, and mindfulness meditation, demonstrate that we can grow brain cells at just about any age.

In addition, an intellectual truth for your best friend may not apply to you. Since things change all the time (as we will discuss in the next chapter), even if a research finding applies to you, will it apply to you in every situation? In science, we tend to propose theories based on our interpretation of data, but we are very cautious about asserting facts. The history of science demonstrates the need for such caution, with statements of fact continually challenged by new findings.

The increased ability to examine and question information about ourselves and the world we live in may be an important stepping-stone to self-knowledge but this aspect of learning never seems to bring us tranquility and joy. Being a philosopher or scientist, even with great ability for critical thinking, does not translate to being happier than other people. Our faith in our own and others' views can also be a trap.

## Direct Experience

Having first-hand experience brings information in a way that is undeniable, for better or worse. It engages us fully in the learning experience and brings a sense of knowing that we can rely on and that no one can take away through philosophical argument. It marks the difference between intelligence and wisdom. Nonetheless, while direct experience is the most reliable way of learning, what we make of it depends heavily on the accuracy and depth of our understanding. For instance, having a direct experience of fright during a car accident can lead to a phobia of driving or walking on busy roads. Similarly, the direct experience of snakebite can lead to a phobia of snakes. In both these cases, the direct experience of panic symptoms associated with a lack of psychological education and rational thinking about the probability of being killed in an accident or being bitten by a snake will imprison the phobic person in lifelong avoidant behavior.

Although experiential learning is the most reliable means of acquiring more accurate self-knowledge, it needs to be balanced with the other two ways of learning: others' useful knowledge we are yet to learn (e.g., reading about what a phobia is); and our ability to make sense of the experience accurately (e.g., questioning if we would really die by walking or driving on this road). Though experiential learning is the way to liberate ourselves from confusion and misperception, it must be balanced with a degree of faith in our trusted teachers and a degree of healthy skepticism. A good way

of recognizing teachers whose knowledge we can rely upon is by considering their ability and willingness to put their beliefs to the test. This brings me to the strange way in which I was introduced to mindfulness meditation, years before my formal psychology training.

In February 1989, while living in Sydney, Australia, I got a phone call from Veronique, a friend whom I had met about 18 months earlier during my travels in northern Queensland. She had found out that I had done some training in rebirthing therapy combined with gestalt therapy and heard that it was beneficial, so she wanted to learn the method. Yes, this was the heyday of the New Age movement in the 1980s in Australia.

I suggested that she enquire about training in her local area, where it was available, but she insisted that she wanted to learn from me. I agreed and she travelled 2,600 kilometers by bus from Cairns, in the north of Australia, down to Sydney in the hope of finding the holy grail of alternative therapies.

Soon after her arrival, we discussed the principles of rebirthing techniques. As I explained that connecting the breath can bring up very deep, painful memories, she asked, “What do we do with the emotional aspect of the memories?” I was pleased with the specificity and technicality of her question; I replied that we just feel it and express whatever it is that we may have suppressed at the time in whichever way we can, provided it is not harmful. She continued, “But what do you think happens to this emotional energy, like fear and anger?” I replied, “I’m not sure, but as long as it’s out of our system, does it matter where it goes? We just feel calmer and sometimes insightful afterwards.” This didn’t go down well. She appeared surprised and somewhat disillusioned. As the conversation progressed, I started to feel a tension in my abdomen and a general discomfort. I felt some responsibility since she had travelled so far and had so much faith in my ability to contribute to her knowledge.

She then mentioned that S. N. Goenka, her teacher of mindfulness meditation in the Burmese *Vipassana* tradition, teaches that, “when we react emotionally, it increases the mind’s habit pattern of reacting in future similar situations; it conditions the mind.” By then, I was speechless, trying to understand and let go of my increasing abdominal discomfort as I spontaneously recalled an embarrassing event that had taken place a few months previously.

I’d arrived in Australia more than a year and a half earlier, and changing my international driving permit for an Australian one was well overdue. As I arrived a few minutes late for my driving test appointment, the man behind the counter shouted, “Are you Mr Cayoun? You’re late and you’re making everyone wait!” And the unexpected happened. I began to cry, just like a little child whose parent scolded him for having done the wrong thing. I am still not sure who was more embarrassed: me, crying like a little child at 26 years of age, or the angry man, who was just as bewildered and ended up trying to comfort me.

In a few seconds, while Veronique expanded on what is well known to psychologists as operant conditioning, it all made sense. I had attended a seven-day intensive rebirthing residential workshop as a participant and returned on the day prior to my driving test appointment. During the workshop, I had been indulging in daily catharsis over my painful childhood, hitting pillows and crying my eyes out over various memories. Basically, I had been training myself to react emotionally and cry like a child intermittently for seven whole days! I saw that my spontaneous reaction at the driving test office was a direct consequence of the way that I had trained myself to react emotionally. Veronique was right, and so was her teacher!

Accordingly, I asked, “What is this Vipassana (mindfulness) meditation and where can I try it out?” Veronique smiled and told me that there was a 10-day course nearby, starting in 2 weeks, and that I should enroll soon to secure a place. This I did. She had travelled 2,600 km to learn from me and it was I who ended up learning from her. I felt a combination of mild embarrassment and excitement about the prospect of a new direction and learning. I remain so grateful to Veronique, as she was the catalyst for what was to be the biggest change in my life.

With hindsight, the main aspect of what allowed me to open my mind to the unknown and go beyond my original philosophy was the unpleasant bodily experience in my stomach. Had I not openly and honestly experienced visceral anxiety and the co-emerging memory of the rebirthing workshop I attended, I would have continued to defend my views and I would have missed the point that Veronique was trying to make. I would have also missed what I now see as the greatest opportunity for personal growth towards a more lasting joy and life meaning. I was to learn that direct experience, rather than isolated faith or logical thinking, had been a major guiding principle in mindfulness training for the past 25 centuries.

This is in accord with current empirical findings. Erika Carlson’s recent review of the research literature bears out the idea that mindfulness practice serves as a path to self-knowledge [1]. This includes increasing self-knowledge of our personality, emotions, thoughts, behavior, and the way that others perceive themselves. As we will discuss more specifically in the following chapters, she also noted that experiencing our life more sensorily, rather than making judgments in reference to our sense of self, helps us overcome barriers to self-knowledge.

However, while the three ways of acquiring self-understanding are individually useful, they are more so when integrated. For instance, it is also true that the insight which I was able to derive from my conversation with Veronique would not have been accessible without a prior understanding that mind and body can interact to produce an experience that has some meaning. Accordingly, to achieve the best possible outcomes, this book is structured in a way that will allow you to combine these learning methods in an integrated way. Let’s start by developing a plan and see if we can make a commitment to follow it.

## Writing a “Change Contract”

The first thing to do is to write a “change contract,” which will serve as a guide for the direction and actions to take during this program. It is a very useful approach, since having a plan and agreeing to use it as a roadmap will keep you on track. In formal therapy, we call it a “therapy contract.” [2] It has three main parts: an agreement on the problems or situations we will target, an agreement on the indicators of success, and an agreement on the means by which we will achieve our goal, the path to our destination.

It may be of interest to you that we will be using problems *as tools*, rather than remaining passive victims of problems. We will learn to *invest* dissatisfaction, rather than waste it. We will make good use of it and try to benefit from the skills that we develop because of it. Using suffering to develop contentment is a skill that you will progressively acquire or further develop during this program. The rationale for using problems as tools to develop skills is that skills can only develop in a context where they are needed. Where skills are needed but absent, problems arise. If we see problems as mere expressions of the need for new skills, we feel less distressed, less identified with the problem, and maintain a level of faith in our abilities. Let’s begin our training plan step by step.

### *Targeted Problems and Situations*

You first need to think honestly about what you would like to change. Try to find at least three things that you are not happy with and list them with a pencil in the “Targeted Problems” section in Table 1.1. Write one thing you want to change per line. Targeted problems can be things such as being overweight and unable to lose weight, worrying too much, feeling unmotivated, not coping well with chronic pain, fighting with your partner, losing it with the kids, feeling worthless or like a failure, not having a partner, feeling lonely, etc.

Targeted problems are not things such as “my partner is aggressive with me” or “people at work are unfair,” because you cannot really change what they choose to be or do. You can reformulate these two issues by acknowledging *your* suffering, behavior, and limitations. For example, “I am scared of my partner” or “I am confused about what to do regarding my partner’s aggressiveness.” Similarly, you could say, “I feel guilty and powerless at work” or “I feel too anxious to complain about being bullied at work.” When formulated this way, change on your part becomes feasible.

### *Success Indicators*

Once this is done, try to find a “success indicator” for each targeted problem and write it with a pencil in the “Success Indicators” section in Table 1.1. You will need to be specific. “Lack of assertiveness”, for instance, is not a helpful targeted problem: it is a little too vague. You have to be more specific – you

**Table 1.1** List of targeted problems and corresponding success indicators.

<i>Targeted Problems or Situations</i>	<i>Success Indicators</i>

may be able to say most of the things you feel or think in one context but not in another. It may be easy to say “no” at home, but not as easy at work.

So, for example, if the targeted problem is feeling guilty and powerless at work, a possible success indicator may be becoming able to say “no” to a colleague at work, or saying what you think, in an appropriate way, to your employer. Using success indicators to measure progress works best when the indicators are specific. Using a different example, if the targeted problem is a fear of heights, then success indicators could be being able to drive on a hill or walk across a bridge without being distressed. Now, take a moment to fill in Table 1.1 before we continue.

### *Readiness for Change*

Now that your goals are clear and have been made practical, and we have means of measuring the extent of your progress in a very pragmatic way, an important question emerges: Are you ready for change? Are you prepared to engage in change towards a more peaceful, harmonious, and fulfilling life? If your answer is yes, then you will need to make time for it. Plainly speaking, are you prepared to commit time and effort to achieving these success indicators? To gain the benefits listed in your success indicators list, are you prepared to commit half an hour of your time in the morning and half an hour of your time in the evening to make it possible? How much is your well-being worth? Is it worth at least one twenty-fourth of your day?

We may do a lot of activities or own a lot of things, but the more things we own, the more time-poor we tend to be. In our modern society, time seems to be so difficult to acquire. Time has become so scarce that even the promise of well-being can be insufficient to spend precious time on it. This is simple to understand. It takes time to earn a living and it takes time to satisfy the expectations of our family and social network. However, our not-so-useful habits also take time – those unproductive and time-consuming habits that we are so attached to. You may also have noticed that much of your time is directed outwards, toward serving or attending to others. Though it may make us feel generous and responsible, we tend to neglect our own needs in the process.


Admittedly, if you are like most people, you probably don't *have* time. The reason for this is that when we have time, we proceed to occupy ourselves with some activity or another. This gives us the impression that we never have time, except for very rewarding novel activities. Since you have no evidence at this early stage that mindfulness training will be that rewarding, you are not likely to think that you have an hour a day to practice it. Accordingly, you will need to *make* time.

Making time for yourself is a necessity for both self-care and the enhancement of your well-being, and is also a gift to others on the basis that our well-being will benefit them. Indeed, we share what we feel with others. As much as we share our unhappiness and frustrations, we also share our joy and contentment. Aware of this, many parents whom I see in therapy make a firm decision to commit to the program on the basis that they fear that they will pass on their difficulties to their children. They say, "I don't want them to learn from me to be depressed and anxious," or "I can see that my daughter is starting to behave like me; it's horrible!"

With a little bit of creativity and effort, you will find it relatively easy to make some time for self-care and building up your happiness capital just by getting up 30 minutes earlier in the morning and freeing 30 minutes in the afternoon or evening. The returns from your investment will be exponential. From my experience of implementing this integrated approach regularly in clinical practice for the past 13 years, I can promise that there will be very few of your targeted problems that you will not be able to address successfully. Keep in mind that "indecision is the thief of opportunity." [3]

Research has clearly shown that keeping your goals private does not produce as good results as making them public [4]. Confiding in someone what you are about to do, and then telling them how you are progressing, greatly enhances your chances of getting results. I would be delighted if I were the first person with whom you share your intentions. So, if you genuinely decide to engage in the program, let's make it a formal contractual agreement. Let's sign the contract in Table 1.2 to show that we both

**Table 1.2** Commitment agreement.

<b>You</b>	
SIGNATURE _____	DATE _____
<b>Me</b>	
SIGNATURE  _____	DATE January 27, 2015 _____

commit: me to teach you the best I can, and you to do your very best to learn the skills on a daily basis.

Now let's have a look at the means by which we will progress towards these goals.

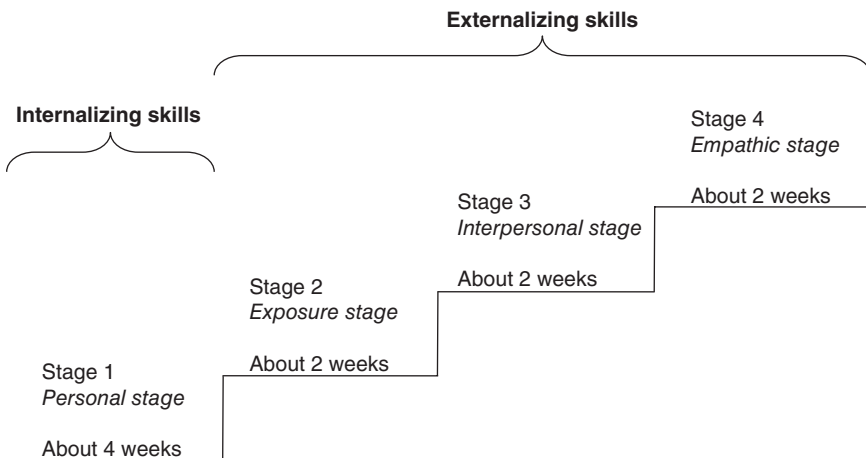
## The Four Stages of the MiCBT Program

Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behavior Therapy, or MiCBT, requires you to learn and apply two sets of skills, as shown in Figure 1.1. The first set of skills involves paying attention to our inner experiences – internalizing attention – so that we can develop important personal skills.

In Stage 1, the *personal stage*, we will learn mindfulness skills to manage attention and emotions through four modes of experience: bodily activities, body sensations, mental states, and mental contents (such as thoughts and images). We will learn, first, to pay attention to our body's posture, movements, and actions in the present moment and to relax potential muscle tension. As a general rule, this will take about a week.

In the following week (or two if you are too distressed) we will learn skills to prevent ruminative, obsessive, catastrophic, and otherwise unhelpful ways of thinking. In the week after that, we will begin learning to feel body sensations that continually interact with our thoughts, so that we can put a stop to our habit of reacting emotionally. This will be explained in detail in the rest of this book. We will learn the skills that make it easy to let go of unhelpful thoughts and destructive emotional reactions. This constitutes Stage 1 of MiCBT.

Once these valuable skills have been developed, which takes approximately 4 weeks for most people, we are less distracted, our attention is more focused



**Figure 1.1** The four stages of Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behavior Therapy.

in the present, we are less likely to nurture unhelpful thoughts, sleep is generally improved, and we are markedly less emotionally reactive. We can then invest these personal skills into the second part of the program, which involves three more stages. During those three stages, we will address the targeted problems that you listed in Table 1.1

In Stage 2, we will learn to overcome the anxiety that leads us to establish an unproductive or destructive avoidance of distressing situations and actions. For example, over time we may have learned to avoid anxiety-provoking situations such as socializing, driving in the city center, meeting colleagues for coffee at work, speaking to family members, or looking for a job. Of course, we may also be experiencing pronounced avoidant behavior if we have a psychological condition, such as a specific phobia or posttraumatic stress disorder. The act of overcoming such avoidant habits instills a huge amount of self-confidence, allowing us to enjoy situations that we may have avoided.

By the end of Stage 2, we have acquired sufficient skills to begin Stage 3, where we will apply mindful exposure skills to address difficult interpersonal situations. In Stage 1 we learned not to react to our own thoughts and emotions; in Stage 3 we will learn not to react to others' reactivity. We'll learn proficient interpersonal skills, such as assertive communication and interpersonal insight, which increase our patience and tolerance in difficult interactions. We will begin to understand on a deeper level the reasons why people react emotionally and in the ways that they do, paving the way for compassion. Learning these interpersonal skills enhances the genuineness and friendliness in our relationships.

Finally, in Stage 4, we will externalize attention further outward toward others and learn to remain objective about the true nature of their reactivity and their suffering. We will develop compassion instead of reacting to their reactivity. At this stage, the problems we targeted before starting the program seem so small and we see what is truly important in our life. Warmth and kindness are developed sufficiently to make us feel connected to others and to ourselves. Our choice of action is increasingly mindful. We think twice about performing an action that may be harmful to ourselves or to someone else. Being kind to ourselves and others is central to this stage. We effortlessly make important decisions that are capable of changing existing relationships or initiating new ones, or even starting a new kind of life.

These four steps can be truly miraculous, regardless of your situation, education, profession, religion, or cultural background. My colleagues and I often receive cards and notes from past clients expressing their gratitude for having learned such skills. I recently received a letter from a lovely lady whom I saw two years ago in therapy for about two and a half months for a condition called generalized anxiety disorder. She had been experiencing intense symptoms of anxiety since early childhood, suffering from constant worry, periods of depression, chronic fatigue, and a crippling fear of being

harmful at night. She knew I was writing this book and, as a writer herself, kindly wrote this lighthearted letter for you to read.

Driving to my first appointment with Dr. Bruno Cayoun, I was prey to my habitual worrying. Would I find the place easily? Where would I find a parking space? Would I be on time? Did my clothes make me look like a loser, or someone trying too hard? Were the appointments I'd made really necessary and would this man, about whom I knew almost nothing, see me as wasting his time with trivial problems? Would I find it easy to talk to him? Would I dislike him? ... And so on.

I knew how fortunate my life was. I had a wonderfully happy marriage, good health, loving and friendly relationships with my adult children, grandchild, close family members. Admittedly, as a child I'd suffered the terrors of a very strict Catholic upbringing. My dear, well-meaning parents and the nuns who taught me, had tried to save my soul by scaring me silly. By the time I was seven or eight I firmly believed I was a worthless sinner, that my wickedness had caused Jesus to suffer a terrible death and that already I'd committed mortal sins so terrible I'd burn in hell for all eternity.

However, that was all in the past. I'd turned my back on the church in my teens and was free of it. My problems, whatever they were, were in the present. In the last few years I'd been to hospital twice with chest pains that turned out to be anxiety-related. I'd been suffering from inexplicable tiredness so overwhelming I couldn't work and there were times I couldn't finish eating a meal but had to leave the table and head for bed. I wondered how I could endure the rest of my life if these problems persisted.

During our first session, not knowing what to expect, I was surprised but pleased that Bruno didn't start to delve into my past. Instead, after an initial conversation, he explained the MiCBT program to me and told me hard work on my part would be necessary if I wanted to improve my situation. This seemed perfectly reasonable and I undertook to co-operate fully. Very quickly my life started to change and the changes are ongoing.

The practice of mindfulness, the half hours spent meditating in a quiet room daily, the awareness of sensations and emotions as they arise and how to deal with them, have helped me become calmer and more relaxed than I've ever been. The old negative, worrying, anxious thoughts no longer have control of my mind. Where once I would've become angry, now I laugh. I'm more confident, able to concentrate longer and work effectively when I need to. I no longer sense the presence of the devil lurking under my bed at night waiting to drag me down to hell – a hangover from my childhood I could never completely banish. There are often times when my whole being is suffused with a sense of peace and joy that would've been unimaginable two years ago. Things aren't always perfect, but I have every expectation that if I continue my daily practice I'll live happily ever after, thanks to Bruno's exceptionally skilled teaching and to the wise and intelligent medical doctor who referred me to him.

This is what we often hear from clients from all walks of life undertaking this program. However, it relies heavily on three conditions to succeed: the

frequency, duration, and accuracy of your mindfulness practice. These are important conditions for brain changes to occur, and to occur in the chosen pathways [5]. The frequency is twice daily. The duration is 30 minutes per session. The accuracy is expressed in the audio instructions that you will need to download, as outlined below. Let us begin!

**Table 1.3** List of MP3 tracks for audio instructions.

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**List of MP3 audio files**

1. General Introduction (01:13)
2. Rationale for Mindfulness Training (07:28)
3. Introduction to PMR (00:55)
4. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (17:18)
5. Introduction to Mindfulness of Breath (01:57)
6. Mindfulness of Breath (18:14)
7. Introduction to Body Scan (01:43)
8. Body Scan (basic) (28:15)
9. Introduction to Advanced Scanning (01:52)
10. Symmetrical Scanning (16:09)
11. Introduction to Partial Sweeping (01:18)
12. Partial Sweeping (14:34)
13. Introduction to Sweeping *en Masse* (01:53)
14. Sweeping *en Masse* (15:04)
15. Introduction to Transversal Scanning (01:40)
16. Transversal Scanning (16:13)
17. Introduction to Stage 4 (02:08)
18. Stage 4 (Loving-Kindness) (08:30)

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## Accessing the Tools

### *Worksheets*

Worksheets are included throughout the book to assist in recording important information during the program. You can write on these worksheets directly. Alternatively, download and print the full-page format version by following this link: <http://www.micbtforwellbeing.com/forms>

### *Audio instructions*

Let us now begin. To access the MP3 files of the audio instructions accompanying this book, open your Internet browser and type in this link: <http://www.micbtforwellbeing.com/audio>. You may listen to these audio tracks either directly online or download them to your computer or other MP3-playing devices, such as a smartphone, tablet, or hi-fi system. Table 1.3 is a list of the tracks and a copyright statement. I would be grateful if you could read it carefully.

The following chapters describe how to practice the four stages of MiCBT and provide a clear rationale for each stage. I invite you to experience each of these as I guide you through the entire process in a way that will create a sense of accompaniment and support. The benefits will be proportional to the amount of your commitment and balanced effort.

## References

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