

FOREWORD BY LARRY KING

CODE

TO JOY



The Four-Step Solution to  
Unlocking Your Natural  
State of Happiness

George Pratt, Ph.D., and Peter Lambrou, Ph.D.  
with John David Mann

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## FOREWORD

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAD its share of medical miracles. I should know. When you've survived a heart attack, had quintuple bypass surgery, and you're still going strong a quarter-century later, it gives you a pretty healthy appreciation for modern medicine.

Still, there are some aspects of the human condition medicine can't touch. Or at least it couldn't until now. Modern medicine has made us a lot healthier—but what about *happier*? That may be where the frontier of medicine lies in this still young century. And one of the undisputed masters of that new frontier is a clinical psychologist named George Pratt.

The first time I met Dr. Pratt he was a guest on *Larry King Live*, talking about a fascinating approach to healing our emotions and creating lasting improvements in our productivity and sense of fulfillment.

“Whether it's an unresolved hurt, persistent low self-esteem, or vague sense of anxious unease,” said Dr. Pratt, “most of us struggle with some version of what we call *the fog of distress*. It clouds our lives, interfering with our relationships, our careers, even our health. And no matter how many hours you spend on the couch, talking it through just doesn't always do it.”

Why not?

“Because there's typically a disconnect,” he explained, “between what we logically know about ourselves and the place in the brain where our emotions live. Sometimes you just can't get there from here. You have to find alternative ways to get that information to click.”

Alternative ways like what? Like *energy psychology*.

If you've never heard the term before, you're not alone. Neither had I, before that show. But in the years to come, you and I will be hearing about it plenty. It refers to innovative techniques that affect the body's energy systems, almost like a 60,000-mile tune-up of the thoughts and emotions. Using these techniques, as my distinguished guest explained it, you can clear out the past traumas and events that created those disconnects in the first place. The result? It's something like what happens when a fresh wind blows away the clouds: *the sun comes out*.

"Actually," he added, "it's a pretty easy thing to do. And it works."

Dr. Pratt has helped pro golfers and ball players improve their game, jilted young men and women get over heartbreak, estranged couples get their groove back. He has helped people get past the trauma of terrible accidents, restart faltering careers, recover lost self-confidence, and move past irrational fears.

He has even helped one talk show host I know—me.

Even before we had him on the show that first time, I knew a little bit about the good doctor. He had worked with two people on the *Larry King Live* staff, and they had gotten fabulous results from those sessions. Soon I had him on as a guest again, and this time he talked about "creating your own joy."

Now I was *really* intrigued.

We set up a time when he could give me a private demonstration of the approach you're about to explore in this book. So we'd have something to work with, I described an emotional issue in my own life. What he did with it in the fifteen minutes we spent together blew my mind. To say it was impressive would be a crime of understatement. It was *remarkable*. When he says it's a simple and easy process, he's not kidding. When he says *it works*, he's not kidding there either.

George Pratt is a true modern-day healer, and what he and his colleague, Dr. Peter Lambrou, have created in the pages you're about to read is a brilliant formula for tapping into our highest potential. I predict it will change many people's lives for the better.

Including yours.

Whatever is going on in your life, whatever is keeping you from being as successful, as productive, as flat-out *joyful* as you'd like to be, there's a path that will take you there. I know, because I've experienced it firsthand.

*Larry King*

## INTRODUCTION

# Stefanie's Question

Something is not right.

—Miss Clavel, in the middle of the night, in *Madeline*

A FEW YEARS AGO a woman named Stefanie came to our office seeking treatment. In the course of our first visit, she asked us a question she had been trying to answer for decades. It's a question millions of people have asked throughout history. Maybe you have asked it yourself.

Stefanie's history, we soon learned, was a rags-to-riches success story. Growing up in a poor family, she took a job in her teens as an office assistant for an advertising company. Working her way up through the ranks, she eventually reached the top, so that by her mid-forties she had become CEO and majority owner of the firm. Stefanie also had a rich personal life. A kind and generous woman, she was active in the community where she lived with her husband, proud parents of two healthy, thriving kids.

In fact, Stefanie appeared to have been living a charmed life in every way—except for one thing: she was deeply unhappy.

Stefanie's unhappiness was practically tangible. When she entered the room, it was as if a dark cloud entered with her. As she began describing her situation, it became clear that this dark cloud followed her into every corner of her life.



By all accounts she was a great mother, but she didn't *feel* like a great mother. She also felt deeply guilty about the collapse of a previous marriage many years earlier, and that guilt hovered over her like the gloom of an overcast sky. Her health was affected, too: now in her fifties, Stefanie was having severe stomach and digestive problems and had recently undergone back surgery for a bad disc. Despite all her successes, that dark cloud had also cast its shadow over her professional world. After a series of management mishaps, Stefanie's advertising company had recently slipped into bankruptcy.

For no apparent reason, Stefanie's life was unraveling.

"I've seen psychiatrists here in California," she said, "and in New York, and in London. I've been on every antidepressant. I've read all the books and articles about mood issues. I've read everything and tried everything, but that unhappiness still persists—and I don't know why. Everyone tells me I have nothing to complain about and everything to be grateful for. And I know they're right. But knowing that doesn't make it better."

And then Stefanie asked The Question:

*"Why aren't I happy?"*

Over the course of our sixty years of combined clinical practice, we have heard thousands of variations of Stefanie's question, from thousands of people:

*Why am I anxious? nervous? insecure? always worried? Why can't I seem to find or sustain a fulfilling relationship? find work I enjoy? relax when I am at home with my family? Why do I have this irrational fear of crowds . . . of men . . . of women . . . of elevators . . . of food . . . of closed spaces . . . of open spaces . . . of being alone . . . of being with others? Why can't I get over that breakup? my compulsive behavior? my challenges with money? my feeling that I'm a fraud?*

In a million different versions, Stefanie's question echoes throughout our society and within virtually everyone we know. You probably have your own version.

We are the healthiest, best nourished, and longest-living generation in history. By all rights, we ought to be the happiest, most purposeful, productive, and fulfilled generation in history, too. But for some reason, we're not.

Why not?

It's a puzzle we've been pursuing for decades—and the answer turns out to have something to do with how water turns into fog.

IMAGINE YOU ARE STANDING just outside your home, surrounded by a dense fog, so thick you can't see the other side of the street in front of you. You look to the right, then to the left, but you cannot see more than fifty feet in any direction. You are surrounded.

How much water do you suppose it takes to create that blanket of fog that has completely isolated you from your world?

Before you read on, think about this for a moment. Don't worry if you're not good at math or have no background in physics. Just take a commonsense guess. How much water do you think it took to create this fog that surrounds you?

Now, are you ready for the answer? *A few ounces*. The total volume of water in a blanket of fog one acre around and one meter deep would not quite fill an ordinary drinking glass.

How is this possible? First the water evaporates, and the resulting vapor then condenses into minuscule droplets that permeate the air. In that one-acre block of fog, one drinking glass's worth of water disperses as some *400 billion tiny droplets* suspended in the air, creating an impenetrable cloak that shuts out light and makes you shiver.

This is exactly what happens with certain painful or difficult experiences.

Human beings are remarkably adaptable. Most of the time, when negative events occur, we are able to learn from them, shrug them off, and go on with our lives. The experience simply evaporates, leaving us

a bit older and wiser. But not always. Sometimes, especially when we are very young, we have experiences that we cannot shake. Even if they seem insignificant, no more substantial than a glass of water, when these upsetting experiences evaporate, they then condense into billions of droplets of anger, fear, self-doubt, guilt, and other negative feelings, surrounding us with a suffocating blanket that suffuses every aspect of our lives for years to come.

We call this *the fog of distress*.

Typically, this vague sense of unease parks itself in the background, like the annoying hum of a refrigerator or air conditioner we have learned to block out from our conscious awareness. But whether we are aware of it or not, it pervades our existence like an insistent headache, interfering with our ability to have healthy relationships, to perform to our potential at work, or to have lives that are anywhere near as fulfilling as they could be. Over the years, that background hum can sabotage our careers, friendships, marriages. Sometimes, as with Stefanie, even our physical health starts to suffer.

What is this fog made of? It is part feelings and part beliefs, partly subconscious and partly bioelectrical. You can think of it as an interference pattern, like radio static, typically set up in the early years of childhood, when our defenses were still fairly unformed and we hadn't yet developed our adult, logical ways of thinking. In other words, it lies outside the domain of our conscious, logical, verbal thought process. It is like a computer program running in the background, shading our thoughts and feelings, reactions and behaviors, our view of ourselves and of our world—all largely without our conscious awareness that it is even there.

For some, this fog of distress shows up in very distinct and specific ways, such as an unshakable fear or irrational anxiety, a problem in one particular area of life. For others, like Stefanie, it is more vague and generalized. That is, it's not that any one specific thing is so terribly wrong. It's more that *nothing is quite right*.

This is why Stefanie's efforts hadn't given her any relief. Psychothera-

peutic drugs, like antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications, cannot disperse that fog; at best, they can somewhat blunt its impact. Talking it over, whether with friends, counselors, or therapists, won't disperse it either, because it doesn't yield to reason and logical analysis. Trying to "talk it through" is like trying to reach an underwater cave by driving around the city streets. No matter how long you drive or which route you take, you won't get there. We have to get out of the car, get off the streets and into the water, and swim a different route altogether.

Fortunately, such a path exists. That's what this book is about.

THE WORST THING ABOUT this fog of distress is that it can be so persistent that we come to think of it as "normal." Yet it is *not* normal. We are designed with extraordinary capacities for growth, self-regulation, and self-healing. Our innate blueprint is beautifully crafted to produce a life of productivity, creativity, fulfillment, and joy. *We are meant to be happy.* Instinctively, we all know this, somewhere deep inside. We all know what it's like to feel a burst of delight. Every one of us has at some point in our lives experienced a sense of ecstatic joy, of euphoria at the sheer sensation of being alive.

Have you ever wondered why that experience has to be so rare and fleeting?

The answer is, *It doesn't.*

Our clinical experiences over the past few decades have shown us that it *is* possible to regain that sense of childlike delight at living and to live our lives to the fullest. As a result of this work, we have come to believe that we are all here on this earth to be happy and healthy, to experience joy, love, connection, and contribution. You *can* become a better, smarter, calmer, more focused, more powerful, and more deeply joyful *you*.

For that to happen, we need to address this pervasive fog of distress, understand where it comes from and how to dissipate it.

We have spent the past several decades unraveling this puzzle, using the tools of conventional psychology along with new methods and insights from the latest findings at the cutting edge of a field of research and therapy called *energy psychology*. Since we began exploring this new frontier in the 1980s, in our practices, workshops, and public demonstrations, we have administered more than 45,000 individual treatments, with remarkable and consistently reliable results.

Over the past decade, we have adapted our approach into a simple protocol that you can administer yourself. It is powerfully simple and effective. We have seen thousands of people use it to clear away their own fogs of distress.

This is exactly what happened with Stefanie. In that first visit, we took her through the four steps of this simple protocol:

*Step 1: Identify.* First, looking back through her life, we helped Stefanie identify an early painful event whose impact had cast its long shadow into her world, along with the self-limiting beliefs her young mind had formed as a result of that experience.

In chapter 1, we take you through a simple, step-by-step process for doing the same thing. (We also reveal what the event was that had such an impact on Stefanie.) In chapter 2, we look at the most common self-limiting beliefs and how to identify them in yourself. In chapter 3, we explore where these beliefs reside and why they have such a firm grip on us and learn a fascinating method for flushing them to the surface where we can deal with them.

*Step 2: Clear.* Next, we worked with Stefanie using some breathing exercises and neuromuscular techniques to realign her body's natural electrical polarity and help disperse that pervasive fog.

In chapter 4, we explore the body's *biofield* and what happens when

our electrical polarities become reversed or disordered. We also learn a set of techniques for realigning our electrical polarity, incorporating cognitive psychology together with elements from age-old disciplines, including yogic breathing and acupressure.

*Step 3: Repattern.* Next, we helped Stefanie permanently release the self-limiting belief we identified in step 1 and then install an opposite, *empowering belief* into her being.

Chapter 5 explores the concept of *self-efficacy*, that is, the ability to step into the driver's seat and direct our own lives, together with fascinating new research findings on the power of mental imagery. In this chapter we also walk you through the *repattern* step, showing you how to create a new story for your life.

*Step 4: Anchor.* Finally, we showed Stefanie several powerful techniques for anchoring those new beliefs and thought patterns so they would become a permanent part of her and not simply a form of temporary relief.

In chapter 6 we show you how to complete this simple *anchoring* step and use it in the weeks and months ahead as a quick refresher, to ensure that the impact of the Four-Step Process stays with you. In chapter 7 we look at ways to use the Four-Step Process to unwrap further layers and tap into your full potential, and in chapter 8 we outline some additional simple, daily practices, drawn from our clinical experiences as well as the latest research, that will help you create the rich life you deserve.

These four steps—*identify, clear, repattern, anchor*—form the core of what you will learn in the pages of *Code to Joy*. In this book, we show you what this process is, how and why it works, and how you can make it work for you.

By the time Stefanie left our office that day, the dark cloud was gone. That was several years ago. It has not returned.

# CHAPTER ONE

## An Interview with Yourself

What do you do with the mad that you feel  
When you feel so mad you could bite?  
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong. . .  
And nothing you do seems very right?

—Fred Rogers, on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

YOU ARE WALKING THROUGH a field, munching absentmindedly on a snack. The sun is out, the air is balmy. A light breeze at your back. Life is good.

Suddenly you hear an earthshaking crash.

Startled, you look up at the horizon just in time to see a gigantic plume of ash and dust volcanoing up into the sky and spreading out to form a gigantic cloud that will persist for days, weeks, perhaps years. It will blot out the sun and completely change your world. Chances are, you will not live to see it dissipate.

Oh, one more detail: you are a dinosaur.

SCIENTISTS TELL US IT was an asteroid striking Earth millions of years ago that caused the death of the dinosaurs. The impact threw so

much debris into the atmosphere, they say, that it darkened the skies and transformed the climate into what is sometimes termed *nuclear winter*, so named because a similar effect would result from the explosion of a series of nuclear bombs.

The impact of traumatic personal events can have the same kind of effect, darkening the skies of our own outlook and causing a chilling effect that permeates every aspect of our lives.

To see how this happens, let's return for a moment to our first office visit with our client Stefanie, whom we met in the introduction.

### **Stefanie's First Quarter**

One clue to the source of Stefanie's unhappiness surfaced within our first few minutes of conversation, when she described the nagging guilt she felt over the collapse of her first marriage. Though it had been many years since this happened, her feelings were as strong now as they had been then. In fact, in many ways they were stronger. The old saying "Time heals all wounds" could not be further from the truth. Wounds like Stefanie's don't get milder with age. They get worse, often digging deeper and deeper grooves in the psyche.

To Stefanie, that divorce was an asteroid strike. It may have happened in the distant past, but the debris it threw into the atmosphere still darkened her skies several decades later.

This is not purely psychological. Stefanie, remember, was already experiencing very real physiological symptoms, too, along with the gradual breakdown of her personal and professional lives. The impact of traumatic events in our lives records itself onto our being on many levels at once. We are talking about something that is physiological, emotional, and energetic, as well as psychological.

Sometimes the traumatic event seems as obvious as an actual asteroid hitting the planet. After all, it didn't take long before we were hearing about Stefanie's divorce. She spoke about it within the first few minutes of our meeting.



Other times, it is not so obvious. Often significant events occur in our lives, especially when we are very young and impressionable, that nobody around us notices at the time they occur. In fact, these early events can be so subtle that we ourselves don't notice them or realize the impact they have had.

This was the case with Stefanie. As we said, that nagging sense of guilt she described was one clue—but only one. Stefanie's unhappiness did not start there; the divorce itself only added to a cloud of debris that already existed within her and had existed for many years before that.

In the course of our conversation, Stefanie mentioned a number of events throughout her life that had had an impact on her. As we asked about her childhood, she had a sudden thought.

"I don't know if this is significant," she began. "Probably not . . ."

This is worth noting, by the way: when people preface a recalled event by saying, "I don't know if this really means anything," it almost always *does*.

We encouraged her to go on.

"Well, this one time, when I was seven, I helped my aunt move some furniture around one afternoon. When we were finished, she thanked me and paid me a quarter. I hadn't expected to be paid, and I was thrilled. It was the first money I'd ever earned." She shook her head slowly. "You know, I haven't thought about this for, oh, probably *decades*." She paused, letting the distant memory replay itself. "I was so proud. I couldn't wait to tell my family. I bolted home, ran inside, told my folks about it and held up the quarter for them to see.

"They were shocked. 'What did you think you were doing?!' they hissed at me. 'You *never* take money from family!'

"I was crushed." She paused again, as if lost in the memory, then added, "I felt so humiliated."

Her parents no doubt meant well; they were only trying to pass on what they considered their good family values. But the message Stefanie took from the experience was fused into her being:

*It's wrong and shameful to make money.*

And now, a half a century later, Stefanie had lost a successful company and was rapidly on her way to losing her health—out of lingering shame over a quarter.

How could such a seemingly minor event have such a deeply felt and long-lasting impact? To answer this, we need to look at the nature of trauma.

### **Tiny Event, Big Impact**

Our modern word *trauma* is identical to the ancient Greek term for *wound*. When we speak of a trauma, we generally mean an event, either physical or psychological, that has wounded us severely, causing lasting harm or injury to our body and/or mind. Examples of trauma include such events as a car accident, serious injury, the death of someone close, a threat to our own life, an experience in a war zone, a major house fire. A traumatic event is one that wounds and leaves deep scars.

When a frightening or threatening event occurs, input from our sensory organs—the sights, sounds, and smells of danger—are transmitted directly to a pair of tiny, almond-shaped nerve clusters called *amygdalae*. The amygdalae immediately send alert messages to other parts of the brain that trigger the release of *glucocorticoids*, the fight-or-flight stress hormones such as cortisol and norepinephrine. (Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., perhaps the world's leading authority on trauma, describes the amygdalae as “the smoke detector of the brain.”) Flooding the system, these hormones provide the muscles with an immediate burst of energy and at the same time shut down all nonessential processes, such as digestion and immune response. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex—the front part of the brain, where logic and rationality are based—goes dark, that is, it essentially shuts down.

Severe trauma can have profound and lasting damage, crippling one's ability to trust others and creating a deeply embedded array of

symptoms known as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. These symptoms can include persistent and intrusive memories; nightmares or disturbed sleep; sudden and seemingly unprovoked outbursts of anger or other emotions; hypervigilance; and a degree of emotional numbness.

“But wait,” you might be thinking. “Post-traumatic stress—from a scolding over a quarter? That seems a little extreme!”

Fair enough. From outward appearances, Stefanie’s encounter with her parents’ disapproval hardly seems to qualify as a bona fide trauma on a par with life-threatening violence or serious bodily injury. It’s not as if she were beaten and thrown out of the house, or even punished. She suffered no physical harm. Even all these years later, sitting in our office and talking about it, Stefanie herself had a hard time crediting it as a very significant thing.

But it was. Whether or not anyone saw it happen, whether she herself was even consciously aware of it, an asteroid had slammed into young Stefanie’s world, and the debris it threw into her atmosphere had never gone away. Even now, at the distance of a half-century, it still blocked the sun from shining in her sky.

We’ve used the Four-Step Process thousands of times with people who have experienced full-blown, major traumas, not just from childhood but also in their adult lives, and we share some of these remarkable stories of crisis and recovery in this book. But a precipitating event doesn’t have to be dramatic or obviously traumatic to have a deep and lasting impact.

Remember, under the right circumstances, all it takes to create a blanket of impenetrable fog is a glassful of water. Stefanie’s event does not qualify as what we would think of as a clinical trauma. Instead, it was something more insidious: a *microtrauma*.

A microtrauma is an event or experience that would seem from all outward appearances to be not a very big deal, and certainly not devastating. In fact, it may be so mild that you think you’ve completely put it

behind you. But you haven't. It stays with you, just as Stefanie's memory had stayed with her so vividly that she was able to pull it up within minutes of our first meeting her, even though, by her own admission, she had not thought about it for decades.

This is why we say these microtraumatic events can be even more insidious than full-blown traumas: precisely *because* they hide behind the veneer of innocent insignificance. These are often the kinds of experiences that seem so trite, so harmless, that, looking back, we have a hard time seeing them as being significant turning points in our lives.

What's more, other people in our lives, especially those we look to as authorities, often dismiss such "insignificant" events as well, reinforcing our own sense that they should not have any real impact on us.

"Get over it," they say. "Don't be a baby. It's no big deal." And we believe them. "They're right," we tell ourselves. "It was nothing. Sure it happened, and so what? I got over that ages ago."

But it was *not* nothing. To us, it was an asteroid strike. And for most of us, it's not something you "get over." It's something that casts a suffocating blanket over the climate of your life—until you learn the simple tools it takes to identify it and clear it.

There is a reason we often don't realize the full impact of our own microtrauma. There is a natural tendency to dismiss it, to do our best to put it behind us and just get on with living. To an extent, this is a healthy, protective mechanism. We minimize the impact of what has happened in order to cope and go on. But sometimes, especially when we are young, we cannot simply "put it behind us." Instead, we can only drive it deeper inside, and the short-term gain in composure comes at the expense of long-term suffering.

"What do you do with the mad that you feel?" asked Fred Rogers in his popular children's television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. It's a great question. What *do* we do with the mad that we feel—the shame, the embarrassment, the fear, the panic, or the sadness?

The answer, typically, is that we don't do *anything* with it. It just stays

there, like that choking dust cloud of debris that blocked out the sun and killed off the dinosaurs.

## A Single Wave

As part of our annual seminar, we take the entire group into the ocean to swim with dolphins. One day, we were preparing to go into the water when one of the participants, a young woman named Alex, approached us and said, “I have a little problem. I can’t go in with you—I’m afraid.”

We assured her that the water would be calm, shallow, and not at all dangerous. There were no sharks anywhere in this vicinity.

“No, you don’t understand,” she said. “I’m not afraid of sharks, I’m afraid of the water. I mean, *severely* afraid.”

All her life, she explained, she had been afraid of water—*so* afraid that she was unable to drink straight from a glass. If she wanted a drink of water, she would have to use a straw. She could take brief showers with some difficulty. But the only baths she could take were sponge baths, because she was unable to sit down in a tub of water.

Alex was there at the seminar with her dad, and as we briefly explained how early events can trigger deeply held limiting beliefs, he spoke up.

“If you’re talking early events, I think I know exactly what it was for Alex.”

They had been at the beach once when Alex was three years old. As they stepped carefully out into the surf, a small wave came up and surged over little Alex’s head.

“I grabbed her and picked her up,” he explained. “It was over in moments, and she was never in any danger. But she never wanted to go swimming after that.”

The original event that generated Alex’s sense of trauma had lasted all of ten seconds. Its impact had lasted two decades.

We took her through the Four-Step Process, right then and there. Once we’d finished she said, “Huh. That’s weird.”

What was weird? we asked.

“I feel different.”

She asked her dad to get her a glass of water—and right in front of the entire group, she did something she had not done once in twenty years: she drank water from a glass. Later that day, she walked out into the surf and *waded in* up to her waist. It was an amazing thing to watch.

The next day, as we went out onto the open ocean, Alex followed along in a boat, nervous but excited. As the dolphins came close, we all began swimming alongside them. Suddenly there was a small splash: Alex, wearing a flotation device, had dived off the back of the boat.

She took to the water as if she had been a swimmer all her life. Removing the flotation device and tossing it back into the boat, she swam over and joined us with the dolphins. A little later, swimming with an assistant, she went snorkeling for twenty minutes. She was a natural.

What happened? Once we were able to clear the impact of that initial asteroid strike, the entire cloud of dust and debris associated with it dissipated and disappeared.

## **A Death by a Thousand Cuts**

Sometimes the “event” is not a single occurrence on a given hour and day, but a series of experiences spread out over time.

Caitlyn was twenty-six years old when her car broke down one day on the freeway. After nearly an hour of waiting, the tow truck arrived. In a space of twenty minutes, the driver fixed her car and had it back on the road. Caitlyn paid the man and was safely on her way.

But while her car was fine, Caitlyn was not.

Within a few days, Caitlyn realized that the event had triggered a genuine phobia of being on that freeway. Soon she was afraid to drive on *any* freeways, then on city streets. Before long, she could barely make herself get in the car to drive anywhere at all, other than the very short distance to her neighborhood store.

Getting rides from friends helped, but not enough. One day, while a

friend was driving her to work, she became nearly paralyzed with fear as they drove over a bridge—the same bridge she had gone over hundreds of times before without giving it a second thought.

By the time Caitlyn came to see us, she had become severely handicapped. Not being able to drive is tough anywhere; in southern California, the freeway capital of the world, it was positively crippling. She could barely get to work and back, and her social life had slowed to a rush-hour crawl.

After Caitlyn told us what was going on, we began looking into what precipitating events might have happened in her childhood.

We soon learned that Caitlyn grew up in a family of perfectionists. In her childhood home, a premium was placed on being orderly and spotless. Her parents were very exacting, and she received a lot of criticism. “You didn’t make your bed properly! You left a mess behind! Look, you spilled some food!” Each one, taken by itself, was a minor thing and hardly traumatic. But piled up one on top of the other, day after day, year after year, they had the cumulative impact of an asteroid strike. Like the death by a thousand cuts, Caitlyn’s sense of self gradually bled out until she became thoroughly imprinted with the message, *Can’t you do anything right?*

Of course, she had long since managed to put these constant criticisms “behind her” and had grown up to become a healthy, fully capable adult. But then something happened. The day her car broke down on that freeway, her familiar, helpless feeling of *having messed up once again* triggered an entire backlog of childhood emotions, and that old message rose up within her like a dragon awakened from slumber.

It’s important to realize that at no point did Caitlyn have the conscious thought, “Oh, look at this, I got myself stranded on the freeway—I guess my parents were right all along. I *can’t* do anything right.” That was the message, but it was so well established and deeply entrenched that, like the annoying refrigerator hum we learn to ignore, she was not even aware of it.

And even if she had been aware of it, she likely would have dismissed the thought as silly. That message would scarcely have seemed justified by the circumstances. Hey, her car broke down: it could happen to anyone, right?

But the fog of distress acts beyond the province of logical, conscious thought. Caitlyn *knew* she was a bright, resourceful, capable, grown woman. Alex *knew* that neither a glass of water nor a stroll in the surf would hurt her. Stefanie *knew* she was not a bad, selfish person.

But knowing these things was not enough to make the critical difference. Conscious, logical thought cannot disperse that cloud of debris.

### **Traumatic Resonance**

Why, if Caitlyn had been able to function normally for all these years, did a chance freeway breakdown affect her so strongly? Most of us have had to change a flat tire or call a tow truck at least once in our lives, and we have done so without falling apart. So why was this event different for her?

Because of a phenomenon called *traumatic resonance*.

If you pluck the low E-string on a guitar, you'll see the high E-string vibrate along with it, thrumming as if it had been plucked by a phantom finger. This happens because the specific vibration rate of the high E (660 Hz) is an even multiple of the E two octaves lower (165 Hz). In other words, they are not identical, but they sound closely *similar*. The same thing happens if you hold a tuning fork next to a piano and strike the key for A above middle C: the tuning fork will vibrate, too.

This is called *resonance*, a word that literally means "sounds again." When the vibrations of two different phenomena have a similar shape or frequency, we say they "resonate with each other." Another term for this phenomenon is *sympathetic vibration*.

Musical notes are not the only things composed of vibrations: so are thoughts and feelings, events and circumstances—and the same principle applies. If you hear an idea or opinion that you are in *sympathy* with, you might say it *resonates* with you.



We often find that an early childhood experience will leave its mark and then be reinforced or reactivated by events later in life that resonate with the early event, much as the sound of a car backfiring can trigger the traumatic memories of combat.

This is what happened with Caitlyn. Because it resonated strongly with a deeply held belief that she had formed very early in life, her freeway breakdown plucked the strings of her early childhood experiences, setting them into sympathetic vibration—and like a sudden cold triggering a dormant infection, or a strong wind stoking a pile of long-standing embers into a fresh blaze, that negative belief reared its ugly head.

The same thing was true for Stefanie. That original event at the age of seven left her with a deep, inarticulate sense that she was *bad and selfish*. As a grown woman, the impact of her painful divorce resonated with that same message. The *I am bad and selfish* of her divorce was such a clear echo of the *I am bad and selfish* of her childhood event that Stefanie experienced it as an asteroid strike all over again.

The two sets of events may have had no rational connection. But that didn't matter: they had resonance.

## Your Story

The first step in the Four-Step Process is to identify the nature of *your* personal fog of distress, and that starts with finding the asteroid strikes in your own past.

Let's start by just relaxing for a moment, and letting your mind amble back through your earliest memories.

When we see a client for the first time, one of the first things we typically do is take his or her history. People often feel an urge to talk things out, and sometimes this can take up the entire first session. Early in our practice, we noticed that we could go through an entire appointment, hearing a good deal of personal history, without having gotten to anything critical that we could really put our finger on. Often we would find ourselves at the end of a session saying something like this:

“In the next few days, before our next visit, we’d like you to write down the three or four most significant events in your life that you can remember, from as early as you can recall.”

We soon found that we could help new clients more effectively by cutting right to the chase and giving them that homework right at the outset.

So let’s have you do that now.

Take a moment to think back and reflect on the earliest events you can remember. Big or small, major or trivial, it doesn’t matter. What is the earliest experience you can recall?

You don’t need to think too hard about this. Just fish for a moment in your pool of early memories, and pull up the first event that nibbles on the line.

Go ahead: put the book down for a moment, and see what memory comes to mind.

HAVE YOU DONE THAT? Good; now take another moment to do the same thing a second time, and recall another early memory from your childhood.

NOW, ONE LAST TIME, throw the line out and fish for a third childhood memory you can bring to mind.

AS YOU CONSIDER EACH of these three memories in turn, ask yourself, *Is this overall a more positive memory or a more negative memory?*

You might have brought up images of happy times, thawing by the fire after an afternoon of sledding, the smell of Grandma’s cookies baking . . . but the chances are better than even that the first events you thought of were *not* so happy.

Why? Because there is a natural tendency to remember the more painful events of our lives. Our minds are wired to imprint in our memory stronger emotional experiences over milder ones, and negative or painful emotional events tend to imprint longer than positive ones. Because of this, it is likely that at least two of your three memories were of more unpleasant experiences.

To a degree, this tendency is healthy: it aims to provide for our survival. It's good to remember exactly where in the forest you found those nice berries and that delicious honey—but it's more important to remember where you narrowly escaped being eaten by that hungry tiger. It is often through a bad scare or painful encounter that we learn some of our earliest and most valuable lessons. Once you've touched a hot stove, "Don't touch that!" becomes more than mere words.

The fact that an event has stuck in your mind as a clear memory does not necessarily mean it has had a lasting impact. Often childhood experiences with difficult or uncomfortable aspects to them truly *are* innocent events that cause no long-term damage. Negative experiences are, to a considerable extent, how we learn. Sometimes a glass of water is just a glass of water.

However, as we've seen, sometimes certain negative events can continue to exert their grip on us long after it serves any useful purpose for them to do so. Those are the memories we're looking for here.

## The Investigation

The three memories you pulled up in the previous exercise may include one or more of these key events we're looking for, but then again, they may not. Let's take a few moments now to investigate the situation more systematically.

Ask yourself:

What painful or unpleasant events or experiences do I remember from my childhood that had a strong or deep impact on me?

Quite often people will key in on these significant experiences right away. Often they will be events that they haven't given much thought to for years, as happened with Stefanie.

"Now that you mention it," we'll hear clients say, "yes, something peculiar did happen when I was little. I haven't thought about this for ages. . . ."

We often hear, "It's probably nothing, but . . ."—and typically the event that follows that *but* turns out to be quite significant indeed.

Another comment people frequently make is, "Well, I don't remember very much . . ."—and then, once they start exploring one memory, it leads to another, and then another, and they soon find that they actually remember *a lot*. It can be like finding a half-inch bit of thread sticking out at the end of your sweater sleeve. You give it an innocent little tug—and before you know it, the whole sleeve has come unraveled.

Here are some examples of common traumas and microtraumas that may help jog your memories or help you identify early events that have left their mark. As you read through this list, check off those that apply to you:

- I was very sick.
- A family member was sick.
- I was hospitalized.
- My parents divorced or separated.
- I lost a parent, grandparent, other family member, or someone else I was close to.
- My pet died.
- My parents left me with someone else (even if this was for a short time).
- I was left alone (in a supermarket, at my grandparents' house, and so on).
- I lost a friend (they moved away, went to another school, and so on).
- We moved.

- I was in a car accident.
- I was not chosen for a team.
- I was teased.
- I was criticized or scolded by someone I respected.
- There was a lack of contact or affection in my home.
- I suffered a major disappointment or letdown (experienced as betrayal, even if it was innocuous or with good reason).
- I was hit or punished.
- I remember my parents yelling or arguing.
- I had a frightening experience with a dog (or other animal).
- Someone I trusted or looked up to betrayed my trust.
- My dad or mom remarried and suddenly there was someone else (stepparent, stepsiblings) in my family.
- I was bullied.
- I felt different from my peers (in physical development, abilities, ethnicity, and the like).
- I went through physical changes (a growth spurt, puberty, developed a physical handicap, or other change).
- I was humiliated or ashamed.

As you scan through this list, there are probably at least two or three statements that jump out at you and may trigger memories of your own.

If any additional memories occur to you, in just a moment we're going to ask you to jot them down. You don't need to write a detailed description, just a phrase or even one or two words to identify each one.

And by the way, once you've identified a few events in your past, we're not going to ask you to get down on your knees and muck around in them. The point is not to *re-experience* the feelings or emotions of the past event, but simply to *identify* the event so you know clearly what it is and can refer back to it quickly and easily.

Often the best way to do this is to come up with a short phrase, even a single word or two, that will serve as a reference to the event.

“Seventh birthday”

“Hurt in the playground”

“Grandma died”

“Moved away”

“Car accident”

“Fell out of the tree out back”

“Hospital in second grade”

For Stefanie, it was, “My first quarter.” For Caitlyn, it was, “Being criticized.” For Alex, it was, “That wave.”

As you identify these early memories, you’ll want to write them down because you’ll refer back to them later as you go through the steps of the Four-Step Process.

If you aren’t sure yet whether a particular memory is really significant or not, don’t worry: we’ll explore that question further in a moment. For now, let’s just go with whatever experiences you’ve come up with so far.

Go ahead, take a moment now to identify these early memories and write them down.

## **Adult Experiences Count, Too**

Not all asteroid strikes take place when we are children. Sometimes painful events happen in our teenage or adult years that continue to exert a powerful impact on us long after we think we have gotten over them.

Identifying these more recent events is helpful for two reasons. First, traumatic events from your adult past may be significant sources of current issues in and of themselves. And second, they may serve as clues or pointers to much earlier events, like Stefanie’s divorce.

As you scan through the following list, think about any painful experiences that may have occurred in your teenage or adult years, and jot those down briefly as well. Again, check off those that apply to you.

- I had an accident or bodily injury.
- I experienced a health crisis.
- I developed a chronic health problem.
- I went through a divorce.
- I went through a painful breakup or dysfunctional relationship.
- I experienced a bankruptcy, business failure, loss of investment, or other financial reversal.
- I experienced a theft or break-in.
- I lost my job.
- I lost my home.
- A family member died.
- I experienced the loss of eyesight, hearing, or other mental or physical function.
- I lost someone close to me (through death, miscarriage, abortion, estrangement, or other experience).

### More Clues to the Past

If nothing has come to mind, or you feel you haven't yet hit on anything that is very significant, that's okay. Give this time. Often these memories take a little time and patience to bring up from the pool of the past—especially from the earliest years of our lives.

We have very little capacity to remember consciously our experiences before the age of three or four (for reasons we explore in chapter 5). And even later, throughout childhood, the character of our memories can be quite different from our adult memories.

Here are some pointers that can help the process along.

### Ask Others

Ask a relative or family member, someone who knew you from early childhood, if anything significant happened to you that you might not remember.

We had a client who had a terror of hospitals. It turned out, when he was three years old he was whisked to a hospital in an ambulance by himself, with no parent or other family member present. He did not come up with that bit of his own biography; he himself had absolutely no recollection of it. In fact, he had no idea it had happened. It was not until he was in conversation with his mother one day that she said, “Hey, do you remember when you were three . . . ?” and she told him what had occurred.

Remember the event that gave Alex her deathly fear of water? It was her father who told us about this event, not Alex herself. In fact, she did not even have a clear memory of that day or of what had happened as she and her dad walked out into the surf.

Just because you don’t consciously remember an event doesn’t mean it hasn’t had—and doesn’t *still* have—a powerful impact on you. If it’s something that you don’t remember yourself, but it’s a story you’ve heard from someone who knew you when you were young, put that down, too.

### Cumulative Trauma

Again, as with Caitlyn’s childhood, sometimes it is not the impact of a single event but the cumulative effect of many events. Not an asteroid strike causing nuclear winter, but the gradual effects of an overall climate shift. The slights at school day after day, the repeated taunts, being embarrassed by a parent over and over for making simple mistakes—spilling the milk one day, buttoning your shirt wrong another day, and so forth.

We’ll see more examples of this kind of cumulative traumatization in the stories in these pages. It’s a very common scenario.

### Vicarious Trauma

Sometimes we are deeply affected by events that we do not go through ourselves but that happen to people we are close to, or even people we hardly know. For example:



- My brother or sister was hurt.
- My dad lost his job.
- My friend's parents divorced.
- A neighbor's house was vandalized.
- A student in my school fell ill and died.

Events we experience vicariously can have a far more profound impact on us than we realize.

### **Weighing the Impact**

Sometimes, at this point in the process, people say, "I've got at least a half-dozen events on my list. How do I know which events really count? How do I know which one has had the most impact?"

In chapter 3, we'll explore a fascinating method for confirming which events have had the most impact on us and, more important, which ones are still having the most impact today. But making this distinction is mostly a matter of gut sense, and it is surprisingly easy once you get into it. After all, nobody knows you better than you.

For starters, look at the first memory on your list.

Take a few deep breaths and reflect back on that event or experience for a moment. As you do, notice whether or not you feel any emotional charge, any twinge of feelings about the event. Don't try to analyze it or figure out what it means. For now, we're just trying to determine if the experience has had a lasting impact that still exerts a force in your life.

Again, just because you *remember* a painful event does not necessarily mean it has had a lasting negative impact. Many people have been teased (who hasn't?), have moved, have lost a friendship, or have been harshly criticized without it having had any long-term effect. If a memory is simply a piece of your biographical information, an event from the past that you recall without any strong feelings attached to it, it probably does not play a significant role in your life today.

But if you have a memory that is uncomfortable to think about even

now, this could be a source of negative belief. And if you feel resistant to exploring it, that too could be a sign that there is something meaningful about the experience.

By the way, this is not a question of whether you consider yourself as having had an overall happy childhood, or an overall unhappy childhood. We've seen thousands of people who describe their childhoods in generally positive terms, but that doesn't mean there weren't still individual events and experiences that caused them lasting pain.

By the same token, we've seen thousands of people whose early histories seem like Dickensian novels, full of incredible difficulties and harsh circumstances, yet who emerged from these tough beginnings as relatively healthy, whole, and happy people.

### Write It Down

You may wish to write out a description of the remembered experience in some detail to bring it more clearly to mind. Close your eyes and recall, as best you can, exactly what happened, and then open your eyes and write.

Or, you may prefer just to recall the general feeling of it, without getting into it in detail. That's fine, too. There is no wrong way to do this. Connect with that past event in whatever way feels easiest or most natural.

### Speak It Out Loud

Saying it out loud can be helpful. When clients tell us their discoveries, it's often the fact that they're speaking them out loud, and not that it happens to be us they're telling, that lets them feel the impact those memories have.

You can do the same thing, even on your own. As you identify an event from your past that has had an impact, simply describe it out loud as if you were telling someone. Speaking this into a recorder can be helpful, too.

## Look for Resonance

Sometimes you'll notice right away that an event from the past has clear echoes in the issues you are dealing with today.

A friend of ours broke his arm falling out of a tree when he was young. As an adult, he was extremely uncomfortable going to doctors' offices; in fact, the mere smell of antiseptic was enough to make his palms sweaty. He never knew why—until we had a conversation about it and he matter-of-factly pointed out that the first time he remembered setting foot in a doctor's office was when he had his broken arm set.

A client was terrified of a big dog in her neighbor's yard when she was six. She was never bitten, but the dog would bark like crazy whenever she went by. As an adult, she had a strong apprehension about going into unfamiliar places or situations.

You see the connection? That's *traumatic resonance*.

As you consider each memory on your list, ask yourself, *Is there a connection between the substance of that experience and whatever issues are going on in my life today?*

## When in Doubt, Write It Down

Do your best to identify events that have had a strong negative impact on your life. You might not remember all the specifics, but if you experience discomfort merely when reading any of the statements on the preceding lists, you most likely have either forgotten the situation or have shut it out from your conscious awareness years ago. Consider that statement as if it applies to you.

If you don't see any obvious resonance, don't worry. Even if you don't find any correlation between an early memory and whatever issues are going on for you now, the sheer fact that you remember this experience, the fact that it came up for you in the course of your interview with yourself, suggests that it may be significant.

Write it down.

If you're curious about it, if it doesn't feel entirely resolved, or even if it simply sticks out in your mind for no apparent reason—write it down.

## Your Inherent Code to Joy

If you now have a list of several early events but are not 100 percent sure which is *the* most significant one, don't worry: you've got plenty enough to work with.

This is the beauty of the Four-Step Process: it's extremely forgiving. In other words, you don't have to worry about whether you are "getting this right." Even if you have no more than just a little information to go on, the process will still go to work and start dissipating that fog of distress.

Why? Because human beings are designed to self-correct.

The human organism is built to self-calibrate through what science calls *homeostasis*, which simply means we have a strong tendency to return to equilibrium, no matter how out of balance we become. This is why our body temperature so consistently gravitates to 98.6° and the pH level of our blood normally stays very close to 7.35. The same thing is true of our emotional state. There is an emotional balance built into us that our organism strongly wants to maintain and to which it will return if given half a chance. Remove the blockages that life's more painful circumstances have put in its way, and it will. It is like a gravitational pull—an inherent *code to joy*.

To illustrate just how strongly this innate tendency wants to bring us back into emotional balance, and how readily the Four-Step Process facilitates this happening, here is one more story before going on to the next chapter.

## David's Breakthrough

A few years ago a journalist named David came to interview us for a story. As we described our work, we asked him to think of something that was nagging at him, something we could perhaps help him clear up, by way of demonstration. He thought for a moment, then said, "Well, okay, I guess I've got something." And he told us about a lingering resentment he had concerning a previous marriage.

We took him through the steps of the Four-Step Process and then asked him how he felt. He shrugged. “Not much different, really. A little lighter, I guess, but nothing dramatic. But then, this thing wasn’t nagging at me that badly before, anyway.”

We continued with the interview and then parted ways.

Late the next day we got a call from David. His voice practically burst through the telephone with excitement. “You will not *believe* what happened!” he said, and he told us what had occurred earlier that day.

That morning (the morning *after* we had met), David was scheduled to drive to a nearby hotel for an interview with a local author. At the last minute, something had come up requiring his interview subject to return home, and the man had left a message at the hotel asking David if he would mind driving out to his home to conduct the interview there instead.

David’s heart had leapt into his throat. He was not from this area, he was driving a rental car that had no GPS, and he didn’t know his way around. His subject lived out in Rancho Santa Fe, a half-hour away and at the end of a long route of twists and turns out in the country.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. As it turned out, unknown or unfamiliar road directions happened to be David’s psychological Achilles’ heel.

“All my life,” David explained to us, “I have had an absolute panic about road directions. If I have to drive somewhere I’ve never been before, alone, with no one to be my navigator, I get paralyzed with anxiety. It doesn’t matter if I have a good map and great directions. The moment someone starts to explain how to get there, my mind shuts down. I don’t hear it, can’t retain it.”

Worse yet, the person at the hotel had been able to give him only vague directions. David had set out for his interview with no clear map or directions, quite sure that he would be hopelessly lost within minutes.

“And get this,” he said. “Not only did I *not* get lost, I never had a single moment of anxiety. I rolled down the window, enjoyed the scen-

ery, and casually just *drove*, way out in the middle of nowhere. I never panicked, not even for a moment—and I found my way there with no problem whatsoever. I know this sounds nuts, but this has never happened to me before!”

Remember, we had not intended to treat David for this issue. In fact, we were not aware that he *had* this issue. He had not said a word to us about it. We thought we were treating him for one thing, and given that slight opening, David’s innate sense of emotional homeostasis leapt at the opportunity to heal an entirely different problem—one we didn’t even know existed.

That’s how versatile the Four-Step Process is—and how powerful.

## **Where to Go from Here**

At this point, you should have one or more memories singled out to focus on. In chapter 3, we’ll return to this self-investigation and learn a fascinating technique for evaluating the impact these past events have had in your life. But first we need to look at the second piece of this picture.

Up until now, we’ve been focusing on the asteroid strike itself. Now it’s time to turn our attention to that dust cloud of negative beliefs and see exactly what it looks like.