

# introduction

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Entering the world of mental health treatment has been confusing and scary for many individuals I have served. Providers can drown you in information that either is filled with confusing words or completely out of sync with the way you see the world. Worst of all, any disagreements you have can be interpreted (by the system) as further evidence of your being unwell and therefore labeled. Infuriating! You might feel that every choice you make is wrong and you are sinking further into a swamp of no control. Worse, the reason you entered the mental health world might feel threatening and you might feel helpless. The first step in living well again—what we could also call *recovery*—is for you to take back control. It's your life. You should be the boss.

Taking back control! Does that sound crazy to suggest? Why?

Who knows better what you're experiencing? Who knows what matters to you? Who knows where you're going? Who more than you? There can be only one captain of a ship, and the best person for the job is the one who knows where we're going. The rest of us—family members, doctors, friends, partners, book authors—are simply good navigators.

In this we are a great team\*—a meeting of two experts. You are the expert in your own life, and the rest of us are experts in how many people have recovered.

## The Captain's Responsibility

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Being a captain is a tough gig. You will be in charge of steering your recovery, choosing the important aspirations to drive toward. To be successful, you need to understand your ship:

- What makes you stressed
- How you respond
- When things are not working
- What you do to right the ship when feeling unwell
- When you employ or deploy your navigators

Further, a captain is a leader, and good leaders make use of their talented employees. In your case, the team might include a psychotherapist, a medication provider, other professionals, and family members. Steve Jobs said, “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” A good captain relies on navigators for information and guidance. As the captain you provide them with feedback and evaluate whether they are acting in line with your goals. If a navigator isn’t working out, you will coach the navigator to allow an opportunity for improvement. If you don’t see improvement, you might need to find a new navigator. To be effective as a captain, you need the following knowledge:

- The treatment landscape
- What is going on for you
- How to express what you need

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\*Throughout this volume, we will use the word *team* to describe the group of individuals you’ve collected to help you move toward recovery, returning to living the life of your choosing and living well. This team might include family members, friends, therapist, prescriber, peers, spiritual advisors, coworkers, and others.

This book is divided into three sections to empower you and harness your innate leader. The first section is about preparation and getting all the important pieces in place to be successful. The second section helps you rethink many of the common obstacles to recovery. Each chapter focuses on providing an understanding of the obstacle, normalizing your reaction to it, and suggesting ways to keep your focus laser sharp on living well. The final section is what this whole book is all about: living well. But even when we get everything we want, there are common obstacles that can muddy living well. We talk about the common ones and how to make adjustments so you can persevere.

*A note about language.* If you ask five people with the same exceptional experiences to give them a name, you'd probably get six answers. For the purpose of this book, we need a name for these exceptional experiences. *Psychosis* is the word I chose as the umbrella term because it is frequently used and is not related to a specific diagnosis. (When referring to specific exceptional experiences, I use specific descriptions.) I use the term as a catch-all and not as a judgment of the veracity of the experience. I recognize that some readers will shudder at the use of this and other terms and see their use as an attempt to exert power over them by a system (which has not always used that power responsibly). I wish we could have the book change for your specific, preferred terminology, but the technology does not match that wish. My hope is that parts of this book will be helpful to each reader and seen through my true intention, for you to return to your chosen life and tap into your true leader.

## Charting the Waters

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Let's start to get an understanding of this experience, psychosis, that brought you to this book. In Chapter 1, I will review the gazillion labels employed to diagnose these experiences. I must acknowledge that I could have a large book signing for this volume made solely of individuals with psychosis, and none of their experiences would be identical. Large groups of attendees wouldn't share even one cluster of experiences. The word *heterogeneous* (meaning different in content)

does the really heavy lifting in the case of describing psychosis. Yet common themes emerge, and cycles of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors bind the experiences in commonality.

### **Problems with Connection and Motivation**

Many people feel early in this journey like their batteries are sapped and it can be hard to get going. This experience extends to the desire to connect with others. Trying to recover can feel like walking through mud. Feeling uncomfortable or scared around friends, being sent to treatment or subjected to compulsory treatment can make pursuing desires and connecting with others seem pointless. This cycle leads to more sapping of energy and motivation. Like sinking into quicksand, it's a depressing cycle. Worse, this reduced motivation and withdrawal from others can unintentionally leave you feeling more unsafe.

### **Problems with Unfounded or Unrealistic Beliefs**

The more alone time you have, the more chances to reinforce these beliefs. We all need supportive people to bounce ideas off if we're going to be able to update these overpowering beliefs. Some beliefs can be scary (about being targeted or odd things happening), leading to extra mind energy being allocated to preparing for the danger. Others are about exceptionalism (like having special powers or roles), providing you with purpose and a reasonable explanation for the current state of your life. These beliefs can take up immense time in behavior or thinking, however. They can take a toll on the way you see yourself, exacerbating motivation problems and reducing your access to new information for updating these beliefs. The reduced motivation makes sense. Efforts to manage these unusual beliefs leave you conserving your energy to prepare for action or interpreting your efforts as futile—both reducing motivation.

### **Problems with Voices**

Many people find voice hearing and visions to be helpful, positive experiences, and others find they don't interfere in living their best life.

For some, however, the voices or other noises are bothersome and frustrating. They can dogpile on the fears or remind you of the exceptional work you need to be doing. For some, they become a major obstacle to living well or act as lighter fluid on the fire of another obstacle. Many people think the voices are uncontrollable and might isolate from others, but this can make the hearing more frequent and make motivation harder to access.

### **Problems with Communication**

For some people the stress and discomfort with others becomes so intense that they struggle with getting words out of their mouth in a way that matches what is in their mind. They might try to explain something but find it going around in circles, start on one topic and find themselves on another, barely able to get words out that sound like their own language. The more they try, the more stressed they feel and the harder it feels to express themselves. Trying to speak can feel like drowning in their own words. This experience can feel profoundly isolating and demoralizing. Worse, it can leave you feeling more vulnerable to bad things because you do not have a way to draw in help from allies.

### **Problems When the World Is Cruel**

Many people have experienced terrible events in their life, scary events. For many of us, those events are filed away in our brains. They are never pleasant to revisit, but they don't occupy a huge amount of headspace. For some, the memories stick around. The memory can haunt you and feel vivid. Those experiences may make you more wary of others. Regardless of your reaction, some voices use the traumatic memory to scare you. Wanting to avoid the memory and reminders of the memory makes sense. Sadly, this can drain more of your motivation, increase time for the voices, and increase the intensity of the threatening beliefs. Worst of all, the more you try to avoid the memory, the more it comes back.

## Activity Scheduling

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Do any of the experiences just described feel familiar? Are you surprised to see how they work together seamlessly? If you're not surprised, did it feel good to have others get a sense of your experience?

What if you could take charge of that experience?

Let's start with basics. Living well involves *living*. And living is about being active. That's why all of this book's solutions jump off from one foundational skill: activity scheduling.

Can you look back over your week?

Was there a day when not much was going on? You might have spent the whole day in your room or on the couch.

Was there another day when you were busy? You might have been involved in fun things, like going out to eat or getting to see something exciting. Or your day might have been kinda boring, like going to an appointment, a shift at work, or helping someone out with something mundane. If you can't think of a busy day this week, think of the last busy day (a day with a doctor's appointment, a day you had to help a relative with chores, a day your team came over) you had.

Can you list what you did on each of those two days in the form on the facing page? On which day were you bothered more by low motivation, voices, fears of others, or bad memories?

If the busy day was better, is that weird? On the day you went out and did more, did you feel better? Shouldn't you have felt worse (more exhausted, more fearful)? Even if you felt the same from day to day, that says something. You got all those things done and felt the same as on the day nothing got done. Or even on a day when your activities were boring, you felt better. This finding might fly in the face of everything you noticed before.

*Lesson: The more you do, the better you feel.*

This experiment might seem obscenely simple. Almost too simple. And I totally agree. But wait. Think of the best meals you've had (pizza, hamburgers, barbecue, fine dining). The meal isn't made better through being complex. It involved taking something simple and cooking it perfectly. For example, pizza is three simple ingredients:

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## ACTIVITY SCHEDULE: COLLECTING DATA

Time of day	Day 1	Day 2
8 A.M.		
10 A.M.		
12 P.M.		
2 P.M.		
4 P.M.		
6 P.M.		
8 P.M.		
10 P.M.		
12 A.M.		
Which day was better?		

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dough, sauce, and cheese. Yet we've all had a perfect slice that we remember forever, and we've all had a slice we couldn't eat after the first bite. It's how the simple ingredients are employed. More isn't better; better is better.

So how do you figure out what's *better* for you, the captain of your ship?

The basic ingredients of activity scheduling are simple, as for pizza, but you're going to use them well:

1. *Action*. Systematically monitoring, increasing, and evaluating your activity level.

2. *Learning*. Using these experiences to learn new lessons about the benefit of activity in getting back to living and in targeting the obstacles that stand in your way of living well (problems with motivation, connection, unfounded or unrealistic beliefs, voices, or other obstacles listed in the second section of the book). You are like a detective or scientist going out to discover more truthful or helpful ways of acting and living well.

What you just read about is an *experiment*, and the term is being used here in its true sense. When you collect data (the number of activities you participate in on different days) and analyze them (figuring out whether you felt better or worse), you're conducting a small experiment. Later, if you manipulate your activity level (a variable), you're getting better data to analyze. You notice first that activity might have a benefit and then how different activities benefit you. Throughout this volume we use this basic framework for living well.

## Steps for Activity Scheduling

1. Start by charting out your week. Keep it simple if you want, or get super detailed, but do it. You can find lots of examples of activity schedules online, or use a blank version of the form on the facing page, which has been filled out as an example. A blank version of the form is available to download at [www.guilford.com/brinen-materials](http://www.guilford.com/brinen-materials). Write what activities you are doing throughout the day. Add all types of activities:

## EXAMPLE OF A WEEKLY ACTIVITY SCHEDULE

Time of day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8 a.m.		Take Mom to drop car; get coffee					
10 a.m.		Food shop; go to doctor					
12 p.m.	wake up	Lunch; pick up car	wake up; breakfast	wake up	wake up; babysit niece	wake up	wake up
2 p.m.	Scroll social media	Video games with friend	Pickleball	Scroll social media	Babysit niece	Scroll social media	Scroll social media
4 p.m.	Have dinner with parents	Dinner with parents	Dinner with parents	Eat dinner in my room	Ice cream with niece	Eat dinner in my room	Eat dinner in my room
6 p.m.	Go to bedroom	Watch TV show; Facetime with niece	Help dad with moving boxes		Drive niece to sister's house; help brother-in-law with garage		
8 p.m.	Take medicines	Take medicine; sleep	Watch show; scroll internet	Take medicines	Dinner on the way home	Take medicines	Take medicines
10 p.m.	Scroll videos		Sleep	Scroll videos	Video games with friends	Scroll videos	Scroll videos
12 a.m.	Sleep			Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep
Obstacle: motivation (0–10)	2	7	4	0	8	0	0

- *Fun.* Games, shows, music, hobbies
- *Purposeful.* Work, helping people, chores
- *Social.* Time with others

2. On each day, rate the intensity of the specific obstacle that is usually the biggest block to living well for you. Again, keep it simple! Rate it as 0–10, or low, medium, bad. Just rate it. For example, if you have trouble with energy and motivation, rate your motivation for the whole day (see a sample form filled out on the previous page). The ratings differ for each obstacle. For example, a 10 on motivation means your energy batteries were full all day, but a 10 on voices means they were loud and intrusive all day. Stay consistent in what the rating means. This tool is for your learning.

3. Evaluate. Be a scientist and evaluate the following:

- What happens on the days when you are more engaged? What happens on the days you are not engaged?
- What activities are duds? Are there activities that have no real benefit? Are there activities that seem like they'd be good but end up being like empty calories . . . take up time with no benefit? Feel good in the short run, maintain the problem in the long run?
- Collect those data and plan accordingly. Change the activity schedule. Add activities in empty spots and upgrade to better activities when you find duds. Be kind to yourself, don't beat yourself up for the duds, just swap them out.
- Learn the lesson. There are two important lessons we draw from activity:
  - a. The more you do, the better you feel, *or* busy hands are happy hands. There is a relationship between activity/motivation and activity/scary obstacles.
  - b. Idle hands are unhappy hands. Lack of activity is related to increased fears, increased voice hearing, and decreased motivation.

4. Increase. Once you get a baseline (listing the activities you usually do now), start looking at spots to add in new activities. Activity

is like ice cream: If a little is good, a lot is better. If you are unsure whether activity level has an impact on obstacles, repeat the current activity schedule and see if you get the same outcome related to the obstacle. In upcoming chapters, we tailor activities to specific obstacles.

We use the framework of activity scheduling across this book. Many chapters use activity scheduling as the first line of attack against the bullies that are blocking you from living well.

So, Captain, my Captain . . . are you ready to get started? Are you ready to live well with psychosis?

Let's do this!

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