

The feeling will pass without help

A short book about reaching for food, drink, a screen or a purchase the moment you feel uncomfortable

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, and the habit has many faces. Something in you goes slightly wrong. Bored, flat, tense, awkward, sad, restless. And before you've named it, your hand has moved. Towards the biscuit drawer, the phone, the wine, the basket on a website. The thing you reach for changes with the hour and the room. The move is the same every time.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. The feelings are unpleasant, the reach does seem to end them, and each reach is small. The second is that the feelings you reach away from have a shape of their own. They rise, they peak, and they fall, on a clock set by what caused them, and most of the ones you reach from are small enough that the whole thing would have been over in minutes. The remedy arrives at the point where the feeling was about to fall, and takes the credit for a fall that was coming anyway. The third is practical. You catch the flicker, you name the feeling, and you give it ten minutes before you give it anything. Chapters 18 to 21 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to give up biscuits, wine, your phone or shopping. It asks you to stop using them as a remedy for feelings that don't need one, and to find out, for the first time, what those feelings do when nothing is done about them.

Four cautions, and I'd ask you to read them even if you're sure they don't apply.

If you drink every day and you feel shaky, sweaty or sick when you don't, don't cut down suddenly on the strength of a book. Stopping heavy daily drinking without medical advice can be dangerous. See a GP first, and let them help you plan it.

If the reach is for food in large amounts, with a feeling of being unable to stop, that's not what this book is about. The eating disorder charity Beat and your GP are the right places, and they're used to being asked.

If the feeling you're reaching from has been there most of the day for a fortnight, or nothing has felt good for that long, that's a change in your health. See a GP. In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without going through a GP if you're eighteen or over.

And if the discomfort is panic, or you've had thoughts of harming yourself, that's urgent and not a habit. Talk to a GP or call 111, and call 999 if you're in immediate danger. Samaritans are on 116 123 at any hour.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Twenty past three

It's twenty past three on a Wednesday and you're at your desk. The morning went fine. Now there's a stretch of something that isn't quite a task, and something in your chest has gone slightly slack, and your hand is in the biscuit drawer before you've decided anything. You eat one at the desk and it's fine. The slack thing is still there.

At half past five you're in the queue at the post office, and the queue is not moving, and the phone is in your hand and you're looking at something you've already seen today. On the way home you think about the evening, and the first half hour of the evening is the flat part, the part before dinner where nothing is happening, and the glass of wine is poured for that half hour and not for dinner. On Sunday afternoon a friend cancels, and the afternoon opens up in front of you like a field, and by four there's a jacket in a basket on a website and you're looking at the delivery options.

This is an invented day, but I'd be surprised if you didn't recognise most of it. The thing to notice is that it's one habit and not four. Biscuit, phone, wine, jacket. Different rooms, different hours, different items. The same move. A feeling arrives, and the hand goes towards something, and the feeling is covered for a while, and then it's back, sometimes with a second feeling on top of it about the biscuit or the jacket.

You'd probably say the remedy works. It does seem to. The flatness at twenty past three is different after the biscuit, and the queue is more bearable with the phone, and the flat half hour with the wine

isn't flat. What I'd like you to consider is whether it was the remedy that changed the feeling, or whether the feeling was changing anyway and the remedy was standing next to it when it did.

Some words. I'll call the first sign of discomfort **the flicker**. It's the moment the chest goes slack or the jaw sets, before you've named anything. I'll call the feeling itself **the discomfort**, or by its plain name, bored, flat, awkward, tense, sad, restless, lonely, when the name is clear. Whatever you reach for I'll call **the remedy**, and the four this book is mostly about are food, drink, a screen and a purchase, though the list is longer. The way a feeling rises, peaks and falls I'll call **the wave**, and staying with a wave without feeding it or fighting it I'll call **riding it**. The remedy's claim to have ended a feeling that was ending anyway is **the alibi**. And what follows the remedy, the small verdict on yourself, I'll call **the second feeling**.

Before you go on, try one thing. Tomorrow, each time your hand goes towards a remedy, write down the feeling it was going from. One word. If you can, score it out of ten for how bad it was, ten being the worst thing you've felt this year. Don't change anything. Just write. Most people who do this find two things. The list is longer than they expected, and the scores are lower. Twos and threes, mostly. That's what the rest of the book is about.

Why reaching seems right

Before I argue against the habit, I want to be fair to it, because you're not a fool for having it and it does things for you.

It works, or seems to. The feeling arrives, the remedy arrives, the feeling goes. That's happened thousands of times and it would be strange not to believe it.

Discomfort is unpleasant. That's not a belief, it's the definition. A person who has a way to make an unpleasant thing stop, and uses it, is behaving sensibly. You'd take a painkiller for a headache.

Life is hard, and yours may be harder than most just now. The remedies are small kindnesses in a day that doesn't have many, and a book that wants to take them away can seem to be taking away the only soft things you've got.

Each one is small. A biscuit. Five minutes on the phone. One glass. A jacket you can afford. None of them is a problem, and you'd know if it were.

Everyone does it. Look round any office at twenty past three, any queue, any kitchen at six. The reach is the ordinary furniture of adult life and you'd be odd not to.

It's efficient. You've got things to do and a feeling in the way, and the remedy clears it, and you get on. Sitting around feeling flat is a luxury for people with more time than you.

And you deserve it. The day was hard and the biscuit is the reward for getting through it.

And there's the plain fact that you're tired. A lot of reaching happens at the end of a day that took everything, and the remedy is the only thing left that asks nothing of you. That's not weakness. It's a person with an empty tank choosing the nearest thing that doesn't need fuel.

There are needs under all of this. A need for relief when things are unpleasant, which is real. A need for something soft in a hard day. A need to get on. A need to be rewarded for effort. None of these is going to be argued away and I'm not going to try. What I'm going to argue is that the reach meets them badly, that most of the feelings it answers were about to leave on their own, and that the remedy has been taking credit for the leaving.

"The feeling won't go on its own"

The belief at the bottom of the habit is this. If you don't do something about the feeling, it'll stay. Boredom doesn't end by itself. Flatness doesn't lift by itself. Something has to be done, and the remedy is the something.

Philippe Verduyn and four colleagues ran two studies, published in 2009, in which people recorded, day by day, how long their episodes of fear, anger, joy, gratitude and sadness lasted, and what was going on when each one started. The point of the studies was to find out what sets the duration of a feeling. Three things did, across all five emotions. How important the situation that caused it was. How intense the feeling was when it started. And whether the thing that caused it came back, in reality or in the person's mind, while the feeling was running. Important causes, intense starts and reappearing triggers made feelings last longer. Trivial causes, mild starts and triggers that stayed away made them short.

I'd like you to hold that against the list from chapter 1. What caused the flicker at twenty past three? A lull in the afternoon. How intense was it? A two. How important? Not at all. On Verduyn's three predictors, that feeling was set up to be brief. It had a wave shape, a small rise, a low peak, a fall, and the whole thing would have been over in a few minutes, provided the cause didn't come back, and a lull in the afternoon doesn't come back. It just ends.

That's the wave. Every feeling has one. Some are tall and long, and a bereavement is a wave that lasts months, and I'm not talking about those. I'm talking about the twos and threes, the flickers you

reach from thirty times a day. They're small waves with low peaks and short tails, and the reason you believe they won't pass on their own is that you've never once watched one to the end. The remedy always arrived first.

Take the queue at the post office. The cause is a queue. The intensity at the start is low, a mild restlessness. The cause won't reappear once you've left the building. On all three predictors that feeling was going to last as long as the queue and not a minute longer, and it would have fallen before the end of the queue anyway, because restlessness in a queue does that, once you've stopped attending to it. The phone didn't shorten it. The phone was what you did instead of finding out how short it was.

This is the first thing I'd like you to take from the book. The feeling was always going to pass. It had a shape and a clock, and the clock was short, because the cause was small. You've been treating a wave as a tide.

"The remedy is what ended it"

Now the alibi, because it's the mechanism that keeps the belief in chapter 3 alive.

Think about when the reach happens. Not at the very first flicker, usually. A few seconds or a minute in, when the discomfort has become noticeable enough to move your hand. That's near the peak of a small wave. The remedy arrives, you eat the biscuit or open the phone, and over the next couple of minutes the feeling falls. The remedy was there when it fell. So the remedy gets the credit.

But the fall was coming. On Verduyn's findings, a small feeling from a trivial cause has a short duration, and the part of that duration you'd already spent before reaching was most of it. A witness who arrives at the end of a fight and sees it stop doesn't get to say they stopped it. The remedy is that witness, thirty times a day.

There's a study that separates the two. Sarah Bowen and Alan Marlatt, in 2009, took a hundred and twenty-three student smokers who wanted to change and exposed them to cues that provoke the urge to smoke. Half were given brief instructions in what Marlatt called urge surfing, which is a way of attending to an urge as it rises and falls without acting on it. The other half got nothing. The urges themselves weren't different between the groups. The people who'd been taught to ride the urge felt it just as much. But over the following week they smoked significantly fewer cigarettes. The

researchers' reading was that the instructions didn't reduce the urge. They changed the response to it, and the urge, unfed, went away by itself.

That was cigarettes and students, and I'm reaching from it to biscuits and jackets. I think the reach is fair because an urge is a wave like any other, and the finding is that the wave passes without being fed. But it's my extension.

There's a test you can run yourself, and it's the most useful thing in this half of the book. Next time the flicker comes and your hand moves, don't. Score the feeling out of ten. Set a timer for ten minutes and do whatever you were doing. When it goes off, score it again. Most people find the second score is lower than the first, and that nothing was done to make it so. That's the wave falling on its own. Once you've seen it, the alibi doesn't work any more, because you've seen the fight end with no witness.

For food specifically, an earlier book in this series, named in the notes, goes through the evidence that eating doesn't shorten a bad mood by more than doing nothing does. The point here is the general one. Whatever the remedy, the timing of its arrival is what makes it look like a cure.

"It'll get worse if I don't"

The objection to the ten-minute test is the fear underneath the reach. If I don't do something, the feeling will climb. It'll get unbearable. The reach isn't about the two, it's about stopping the two becoming a nine.

Two things. The first is that this is a forecast, and it's one you've never tested, because you've always reached. You don't know what the flicker at twenty past three does at minute eight, because you've never been at minute eight without a biscuit. The belief that it climbs is a belief about a thing you've never observed, made by a mind that's motivated to justify the reach.

The second is what the evidence says about waves. Bowen and Marlatt's smokers felt their urges fully, and the urges didn't climb to somewhere unbearable. They peaked and passed, which is what let the surfers smoke less. Verduyn's durations were set by intensity at the start and importance of the cause. A two from a lull doesn't have anywhere to climb to. It has no fuel. What makes feelings climb is reappearance, the cause coming back, and a lull doesn't come back. It's replaced by the next thing.

There's a version of this fear that's more specific. Some readers know that the two is a two because the remedy is there, and suspect that without the remedy the two would be a five, that the calm they live in is on loan from the biscuit drawer. That may be true for some feelings and some readers, and the ten-minute test is how you find out. If the score goes up, that's information, and

chapter 14 is about what to do with it. In my expectation it mostly goes down, because most flickers are small waves with nothing behind them.

The scale exercise from chapter 1 is your own data on this. Look at the scores. If the list is twos and threes, then the fear of the nine is a fear about a different list, and you can put it down. If there are sevens on it, read chapter 14 and the preface again, because a seven that's reached from several times a day is a feeling that wants an answer and not a biscuit.

"I can't concentrate until it's gone"

Here's a practical objection. Whether or not the feeling would pass, it's in the way now. You can't work with the flicker sitting in your chest. The remedy clears it and you get on.

Some discomfort does block work. A headache does. Real hunger does. A worry with a deadline in it does. I'm not going to argue that every feeling can be worked through. But look at what the remedy does to the work. The biscuit takes you to the drawer and back, and while you're eating you're not working, and afterwards there's the second feeling, which is a small distraction of its own. The phone in the queue isn't work, but at the desk it's ten minutes and a lost thread. The remedy is a bigger interruption than the flicker was, and it comes with a return trip.

What I'd suggest instead is that a two is a background hum, and background hums can be worked through. Not fought, not fixed, just left running while you do the next sentence. You've done this before. You've worked through a slight cold, a stiff neck, a room that's too warm. A flat feeling at twenty past three is smaller than any of those. The belief that it blocks work is another untested forecast, and the test is one task done with the flicker present.

Notice too that "I can't concentrate until it's gone" has a hidden assumption, which is that the remedy makes it go. Chapter 4 is about why that's mostly the alibi. If the feeling was going to fall anyway, the remedy bought you nothing but a trip to the drawer, and the concentration you got back afterwards was the concentration you'd have had at minute eight without moving.

Try it once. When the flicker comes at the desk, pick one small piece of the job, ten minutes' worth, and do it with the feeling still there. Don't try to make the feeling go. Let it sit and work anyway. In my experience the feeling is gone before the task is, and it went while you weren't attending to it, which is the wave falling. The task got done, and there's no second feeling, because there was nothing to have a verdict about.

"I don't even notice I'm doing it"

A lot of readers will say, quite reasonably, that the method assumes a moment that doesn't exist. Catch the flicker. But there's no flicker to catch. The biscuit is in your mouth before there's been any feeling at all. The phone is out before the queue has registered. The reach is faster than noticing, and a method that starts with noticing starts too late.

I'd agree that the reach is fast. I'd put it differently, though. The reach isn't faster than the feeling. It's faster than your attention to the feeling. The flicker was there. The hand answered it. What was missing was you, in the half-second between the two, and that half-second can be widened. Not by trying harder to notice in the moment, which doesn't work, but by learning, in advance, what the flicker looks like in your body, so that it announces itself.

That's why chapter 18 starts with the body sign and not with the feeling. A feeling is hard to catch. A slackening in the chest, or the eyes going to the drawer, or the hand already lifting, is a physical event, and physical events can be learned. Spend a day watching for yours, after the fact if necessary. Each time you find the biscuit half eaten, ask what your body was doing just before. Most people find one or two signs that come every time, and once you know them, they start arriving in awareness a second earlier, which is the second you need.

There's a second answer, and it's the one for the reaches that get through anyway, which will be many at first. The word works late. If the biscuit is already in your mouth, name the feeling now. "That

was flat." It's not the catch, but it does most of what the catch does. It puts a word on a thing that had no word, it tells you what the reach was for, and it starts the list that will show you, over a week, what the flickers are and when they come. A week of late names becomes a map of your flickers, and the map is what turns late names into early ones.

Not noticing isn't a reason the method can't work. It's the reason the method exists. If you noticed already, you wouldn't be reaching.

"It's only a small thing"

Then there's the sense of proportion. A biscuit. Five minutes on the phone. It's not as if you're doing anything. A book about biscuits is a book about nothing.

I'd agree that any one reach is nothing. I want to look at the pattern instead of the item, because the pattern is the habit and it's not small. Thirty reaches a day, each from a flicker, each teaching the same lesson. The lesson is that discomfort is an emergency. Every time the hand moves at a two, the mind learns that a two is a thing that must be dealt with now, and the threshold for what counts as unbearable comes down a little. Over years, that's a person who can't sit through a queue, a lull, a flat half hour, or a cancelled Sunday, and who doesn't know it, because they've never been without a remedy long enough to find out.

There's research on this pattern under the name experiential avoidance, which means the habit of trying not to have unwanted feelings, thoughts or sensations, and doing things to get away from them. Todd Kashdan and three colleagues, in 2006, ran two studies on it. In the first, experiential avoidance accounted for the link between various unhelpful ways of coping and anxiety-related distress. In the second, people were tracked for three weeks, and avoidance went with fewer positive experiences and positive events, more negative events, and more negative feeling day to day. It was a better predictor of how people's days went than the specific strategies they used to manage their emotions. This is correlational work, so it can't say that avoidance causes the bad days rather than the other way round, and the participants were

probably students. But the association is there and it runs in the direction you'd expect. People whose policy is to get away from discomfort have worse days, not better ones.

Do the arithmetic once, because it's the only way the pattern becomes visible. Thirty reaches a day is two hundred a week and ten thousand a year. Ten thousand times the hand answered a two. Ten thousand lessons that a two needs answering. Nobody would sign up for a course with that many sessions, and you've been on it for years without a syllabus.

The item is small. The policy isn't. And a policy is made of small items, thirty a day, none of which looks like anything.

"At least it's not something worse"

A lot of readers will have a comparison ready. It's a biscuit, not a bottle. It's the phone, not the casino. Whatever this is, it's the mild version, and mild versions don't need books.

I'd ask you to notice something about the four remedies, which is that they're interchangeable. The feeling at twenty past three can be met with a biscuit or the phone, and which one depends on which is nearer. The flat half hour can be wine or a screen. People who give up one remedy nearly always find another, and it's usually not because they chose it. The hand goes where the remedy is. That's the point. The habit isn't the biscuit or the wine. It's the move from flicker to hand, and the move doesn't care what it lands on.

That has two consequences. The first is that "at least it's not something worse" is true today and says nothing about next year, because the move is the same move and it'll take whatever's available. The NHS's advice on stress says not to use alcohol, cigarettes, gambling or drugs to relieve it, and its list of stress-busters says that these can provide temporary relief but in the long term won't solve the problem and will create new ones. I'd say the same of the four remedies, at a smaller scale. The relief is temporary and each remedy brings its own bill.

The second consequence is the useful one. If the habit is the move and not the item, then you don't have to give up biscuits. You have to change the move. That's what the second half of the book does,

and it doesn't ask you to touch the biscuit drawer. It asks you to put ten minutes between the flicker and the hand, and let the wave show you what it was.

So keep the comparison if it helps you feel better about the biscuit, because there's nothing wrong with the biscuit. Just don't let it tell you that there's nothing here to look at.

"Everyone around me does it"

Some of the reaching is social, and it's worth a chapter of its own, because the social version doesn't feel like a reach. It feels like joining in.

The biscuit tin goes round the office at eleven and you take one because everyone takes one. The drinks after work are how the team talks. Your family's evenings are four people on four phones in one room, and to put yours down is to be the odd one out. The Saturday shopping is the thing you and your sister do together. In each case the remedy is also the company, and to decline the remedy looks like declining the company.

Two things about that. The first is the good-day test from chapter 11, applied to the room. Would you take the biscuit at eleven on a good day, when you weren't flat? Sometimes yes, because it's a nice biscuit and a nice moment, and then it's a reward and you should have it. Sometimes no, and you'd have taken it anyway, because the tin was going round and the flicker was there and the two things arrived together. The room supplies the remedy. It doesn't supply the flicker. The flicker is yours, and so is the choice about what to do with it, even when the tin is in front of you.

The second is that you can keep the company and decline the remedy, and it's less awkward than it seems from the inside. Nobody at the drinks after work cares what's in your glass after the first five minutes. Nobody at the biscuit tin notices who didn't take one. The family evening with three phones and a book in it is still a

family evening. The awkwardness you're imagining is a flicker of its own, awkward, two, and it will pass without help, usually before anyone's noticed anything.

There's a version of this that's worth being honest about, which is the room where the remedy is the whole of the company. The team that only talks when it's drinking. The friend you only see in shops. Those aren't rooms this book can fix, and I'd only say that if the company depends on the remedy, it's worth finding out, gently, whether it would survive without it. Most do. The ones that don't were company for the remedy and not for you.

"I've had a hard day, I deserve it"

This is the belief I most want to be careful with, because there's something right in it and something that's been smuggled in alongside.

You do deserve things. A hard day earns a rest, a glass of wine, a bath, a bar of chocolate, a new jacket if you've been meaning to get one. I'm not going to argue that pleasure is suspect or that rewards are a weakness. A life without rewards is a grim life and this book isn't trying to sell you one.

What I'd like to separate is the reward from the remedy, because they wear the same clothes and do different jobs. A reward is chosen. It's the thing you'd pick on a good day, for its own sake, and you enjoy it. A remedy is reached for. It's the thing your hand goes to at the flicker, to make the flicker stop, and you don't so much enjoy it as get through it. The wine at half past six on a day you'd like to celebrate is a reward. The wine at half past six because the half hour before dinner is flat is a remedy, and the fact that it's the same wine doesn't make it the same act.

There's a test, and it's the good-day test. Would you choose this on a good day, in this form, at this time? A glass of wine with dinner, yes. A glass at half past six in an empty kitchen, on a good day, probably not. A biscuit with a cup of tea at four when you're pleased with the afternoon, yes. A biscuit at twenty past three from the drawer while staring at the screen, no. The good-day version is a reward. The other is an escape in a reward's clothes, and "I deserve it" is the clothes.

So keep your rewards. Have more of them, in fact, chosen, at times you'd choose, for reasons you'd give happily to a friend. What the book asks is that you stop letting the flicker choose them for you, because a reward chosen by a flicker isn't enjoyed. It's used, and the second feeling afterwards is the proof.

"Distraction works, everyone says so"

Here's a belief with a lot of support behind it. When you feel bad, distract yourself. It's what everyone says, and there's evidence that it works. The phone in the queue is distraction, and the queue is more bearable for it.

Distraction does work, for a while. That's not in dispute. The question is what happens afterwards, and here Verduyn's third predictor matters. The thing that most extended the duration of a feeling, in those diary studies, was the reappearance of its cause, physically or in the person's mind. Distraction is a way of getting the cause out of your mind for a stretch. It's also, by the same token, a way of ensuring that it reappears, because you didn't deal with it and it's still there when the phone goes back in the pocket. The feeling comes back. Sometimes it comes back with interest, because now there's the second feeling too, the mild verdict about the twenty minutes on the phone.

There's a study that put distraction up against the alternative this book will recommend, and it's worth describing carefully because the result was mixed. Katharina Kircanski, Matthew Lieberman and Michelle Craske, in 2012, worked with people afraid of spiders. Each person was exposed to a live spider in short sessions, and was told to do one of four things during the exposure. Put their feelings into words, which the researchers called affect labelling.

Reappraise, meaning think about the spider differently. Distract themselves from it. Or nothing beyond the exposure. A week later, with a different spider in a different room, the labelling group had lower physiological fear, measured by skin conductance, than the

other three groups, and were marginally more willing to approach than the distraction group. On self-reported fear, there was no difference between groups. People who'd used more fear words during exposure showed larger reductions.

So naming the feeling beat distracting from it on the body's measure a week later, and not on the questionnaire. I'd hold that lightly. But the direction fits Verduyn. The feeling you distract from returns. The feeling you name has been attended to, and has less reason to.

That's why chapter 18 begins with a word rather than a remedy. The word does what the phone claims to do, and the feeling doesn't return to collect.

"Sitting with it sounds like therapy-speak"

Some readers will have flinched at the direction this is going. Sit with the feeling. Ride the wave. Name it. You've heard this language before and it sounds like something from a leaflet, and you're not a leaflet person.

I'll concede the language. It's been worn smooth by overuse, and I've tried to keep it to a minimum. So let me say plainly what the method is and isn't.

It isn't meditation. You don't need a cushion, an app, a quiet room or ten years of practice. It isn't a belief about anything. It doesn't require you to think the feeling is wise or a teacher or a message from your body. It's not a therapy and it doesn't replace one.

What it is, is ten minutes of not reaching. That's the whole of it. The flicker comes, you notice, you say what it is, and you carry on with what you were doing for ten minutes without giving it anything. In those ten minutes you'll notice it rise a little, sit, and fall. That noticing is what the leaflets call sitting with it, and it's less mystical than a bus timetable.

Bowen and Marlatt's smokers were given brief instructions, in a single session, and they weren't meditators. They were students who wanted to smoke less. The instructions didn't lower their urges. They changed what the students did when the urge came, and a week later there were fewer cigarettes. That's the evidence

for the method, such as it is, and it's the evidence for something ordinary, which is that an urge you don't act on goes away and you do the thing less.

The word surfing, which Marlatt used, is the one bit of the vocabulary I'd keep, because it's accurate about one thing. A surfer doesn't stop the wave and doesn't get off it. They stay on it while it does what waves do, and it puts them down on the beach. That's the whole of the skill. Nothing about the wave changes. Only what you do while it's under you.

Nor does it require you to feel nothing. The feeling will be there, and you'll feel it, and that's the point. The leaflet version sometimes sounds as if the aim is a calm blankness. It isn't. The aim is to find out what a two does, which means letting it be a two for long enough to see.

If it helps, don't call it anything. Call it the ten minutes. Or call it finding out, because that's what it is, finding out what the flicker does when nobody helps it, which you've never once done.

"But some feelings are real problems"

Now the objection that matters most, and I want to give it its full weight. Some of what you feel isn't a lull. It's a real problem. The tension at six is about the conversation you're not having with your partner. The flat Sunday is about a job you should have left two years ago. Sitting with those for ten minutes isn't wisdom. It's doing nothing about a real thing.

Yes. And here the remedy does its most expensive work, because a feeling that's information gets covered along with the ones that aren't. The wine at six covers the flat half hour and it also covers the conversation. The phone in the queue covers the boredom and it also covers the thing you were about to think about the job. The remedy doesn't check what it's covering. It covers everything at a two, and some of the twos were the beginning of a thought you needed to have.

So the method has two lists, not one. The first list is feelings to ride. The flicker from a lull, the awkwardness in a queue, the flatness of an unplanned hour. These have no information in them. They're weather. You name them and let them pass, and they do. The second list is feelings that are answers waiting to be asked. The tension that comes back every evening at the same time. The flatness that arrives with Monday. The low that follows every visit to a particular person. These have Verduyn's reappearance built into them, because the cause keeps coming back, and they won't pass with ten minutes because they're not waves. They're tides, with something under them.

How do you tell which list a feeling is on? Two questions. Does it come back at the same time, with the same cause? And when you name it, is there a second word behind the first? "Flat" and nothing behind it is the first list. "Flat, about work" is the second. The feelings on the second list need an answer, and chapter 20 is about answers. The remedy is not one. The remedy is what stops you finding out that there was a question.

I'd add that the second list is usually shorter than the first, by a long way. Most of the day's flickers are weather. But the remedy treats them all the same, and the two or three that weren't get lost among the thirty that were.

"I'd just be miserable all the time"

Under a lot of the resistance to this book there's a picture, and it's of a life without remedies as a life of unrelieved discomfort. Grey afternoons with nothing in the drawer. Queues with nothing to look at. A person who's given up every soft thing and is now just sitting there, feeling it.

Two things about that picture. The first is that it assumes the discomfort stays, which is chapter 3's belief again. It doesn't. The waves pass, and once you've watched a few pass you stop dreading the next one, and the afternoon that used to be a series of flickers reached away from becomes an afternoon with a few small feelings in it that come and go. That's not misery. It's what an afternoon is like for people who don't reach.

The second is Kashdan's finding, which cuts the other way from the picture. The people whose policy was to avoid discomfort had fewer positive experiences and fewer positive events over three weeks, not more. Avoidance didn't buy them a more pleasant life. It bought them a narrower one, with less of the good in it as well as less of the bad, because the good things in a day are mostly on the other side of some small discomfort. The conversation that starts awkward. The walk in the cold. The afternoon with nothing planned that turns into something. A person who reaches at every flicker never gets to the other side of any of them.

And there's what comes after a ridden wave. I don't want to oversell this, so I'll say only what I've observed. When a small feeling has risen and fallen and you didn't reach, there's a quiet afterwards

that isn't there after a biscuit. Nothing happened. Nothing was used. The afternoon is still yours. The second feeling, the verdict, never arrives, because there's nothing to have a verdict about. That quiet, repeated thirty times a day instead of the second feeling thirty times a day, is most of what people mean when they say they feel better after a few weeks of this.

Keep your pleasures. Keep the wine with dinner and the biscuit with the tea and the jacket you wanted last month. Those aren't remedies and they aren't in the picture. The picture is wrong about what's left when the remedies go, because what's left is the pleasures without the escapes, and that's more, not less.

What the reaching costs

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and most of it is paid in small coins.

A day made of small escapes. That's the first cost and the largest. Thirty times a day something happens in you and thirty times you leave. A life lived that way is a life in which you're never quite in the room for the flat bits, and the flat bits are most of any day. You can't be present for the queue and absent from it at the same time.

The remedies' own bills. Each of the four has a book of its own in this series, and I won't repeat them, but the headings are familiar. Food eaten without hunger, and what that does over years. Alcohol as a nightly routine, and what the NHS says about drinking to relieve stress. The phone as the answer to every gap, and what that does to attention. Purchases made from a mood, and the boxes that arrive on a better day. None of these is the point of this book, and all of them are downstream of the move it's about.

Time, which nobody counts. Thirty reaches at five minutes each is two and a half hours a day, and that's a conservative figure for the phone. The flicker would have taken ten minutes to pass on its own, but the remedy doesn't take ten minutes. It takes as long as it takes, and the phone in particular takes as long as you'll give it. An afternoon of small reaches is an afternoon with a large hole in it, and the hole is where the thing you meant to do went.

Sleep, if the evening remedy is a screen or a drink. Money, if it's a purchase or a drink. The second feeling, thirty times a day, which is thirty small verdicts on yourself and adds up to a low opinion by bedtime that you'd never have formed from any one of them.

The lesson. Every reach teaches that discomfort can't be borne, and the person who's learned that lesson thirty thousand times is a person with a very low threshold for what counts as unbearable, and doesn't know it, because the remedy is always there before the threshold is reached.

Never knowing your own weather. You've had feelings all your life and you've never watched one. You don't know how long your boredom lasts or what your flatness does at minute eight, because there was always a biscuit. That's a strange thing not to know about yourself, and it's the thing that makes every flicker frightening.

The narrowed range. Kashdan's avoiders had fewer good days as well as fewer bad ones. Reaching at every flicker means never getting to the far side of any of them, and the far side is where a fair amount of the good stuff is.

And the two or three feelings a day that were information, covered along with the weather, and the conversation not had and the decision not made, for another month.

What it does to the feeling

There's a cost that lands on the feeling itself, and it's worth a short chapter because it explains why the habit gets worse and not better.

A feeling that's reached from never completes. The wave was on its way up when the remedy arrived, and the remedy put a lid on it, and the wave went on underneath, and came back later because its cause came back or because the lid came off. Verduyn's finding was that reappearance extends duration. A feeling interrupted by a remedy is a feeling whose cause will reappear, because nothing was done about it and nothing was learned about it. So it lasts longer, in total, across the day, than it would have if it had been allowed to run once to the end.

The wave never gets learned. If you'd watched a hundred small waves rise and fall, you'd know their shape, and the hundred and first would arrive as something familiar with a known end. You haven't watched one. So each flicker arrives as a stranger with no known end, and a stranger with no known end is frightening in a way that a familiar wave isn't. The reach keeps the feeling strange.

Researchers have a name for the general capacity to bear discomfort, which is distress tolerance. Teresa Leyro, Michael Zvolensky and Amit Bernstein reviewed the research on it in 2010 and found documented links between low distress tolerance and a range of psychological problems, alongside a good deal of muddle about how to define and measure the thing. I'd take from that only the modest claim that the capacity exists, varies between people,

and matters, and not any of the stronger claims that get made about it. But it fits everything else here. A capacity that's never used doesn't grow. Thirty reaches a day is thirty times the capacity wasn't used, and after enough years it's smaller than it was, and the flickers are bigger.

That's the loop. Reach, and the feeling stays strange and the capacity stays small, and so the next flicker is more frightening, and so you reach. Ride it once, and the feeling gets a shape and the capacity gets a use, and the next flicker is a little less frightening. Every ridden wave makes the next one easier. Every reach makes it harder. That's the only sense in which this habit is like the more serious ones, and it's the sense that matters.

The flicker

The next three chapters are the method. This one is about the first thirty seconds, which is where the whole thing is decided.

Catch it. The flicker has a body signature and you can learn yours. For most people it's a slackening in the chest, or a tightening in the jaw, or a restlessness in the hands, or the eyes going to the drawer or the phone before the mind has caught up. Find yours by watching for a day. Once you know it, you have a few seconds between the flicker and the hand, and those seconds are the method.

Name it. One word, said in your head or under your breath. Bored. Flat. Awkward. Tense. Sad. Restless. Lonely. Kircanski's spider study is the evidence that putting a feeling into words does something to it that distraction doesn't, and the word is the first thing the remedy has always prevented. If the first word that comes is "hungry", check it. Would an apple do? If not, it wasn't hunger.

Score it. Out of ten. This takes two seconds and does two jobs. It tells you what you're dealing with, and it turns a formless discomfort into a number, which is a smaller thing than a formless discomfort. Most scores will be twos and threes. A seven is chapter 14.

Say the sentence. "This will pass without help." It's the title of the book and it's the thing you've never once tested. Say it as a prediction, not a hope. Then test it.

Ten minutes. Set a timer if you like. Carry on with what you were doing. Don't reach. Don't fight the feeling either. Just let it be there while you do the next thing. At ten minutes, score it again.

Then decide. If the score has fallen, which is what I'd expect most of the time, there's nothing to decide. The wave passed and you watched it. If it hasn't, ask whether there's a second word behind the first, and go to chapter 20. And if after all that you still want the biscuit, have the biscuit. It's now a choice made at the end of a wave, not a reach made at the start of one, and that's the whole difference.

One word on paper. In the first week, write the word and the two scores down each time. A list of "flat 3, 1" and "bored 2, 0" and "tense 4, 2" is the most persuasive document you'll ever read about yourself, because it's your own evidence that the feeling passes without help.

Riding the wave

Inside the ten minutes, there's a way of being with the feeling that makes it easier, and it's worth describing, because the alternative is to spend the ten minutes fighting, and fighting feeds it.

Find where it is. A feeling has a location. Chest, throat, stomach, hands, behind the eyes. Find it. This isn't mystical. It's the difference between "I feel bad" and "there's a tightness under my ribs", and the second is a smaller thing to be with.

Watch it rise. It will, a little, for the first minute or two. This is the part where the hand usually moves. Let it rise. It's a wave and waves go up before they go down, and you've never seen the down because you always left at the up.

Breathe out slowly. Not as a technique, just because a slow breath out is the opposite of bracing, and bracing is what makes the rise feel like a climb. In through the nose, out slowly through the mouth, twice. Then back to what you were doing.

Don't fight, don't feed. Fighting is telling yourself it shouldn't be there, or trying to think it away. Feeding is the remedy. Both keep it going. The third option is to let it be there, the way you'd let a bit of weather be there while you get on. It's allowed to be there. It's a two.

Note the peak. Somewhere in the ten minutes there'll be a moment where it's as bad as it gets. Notice it, and notice that it's not very bad. A three, at worst. That's the top of the wave, and everything after it is down.

Keep the hands busy. The hands want something, and you can give them something that isn't a remedy. A pen. A cup of water. The next line of the job. A walk to the window. The hands don't care what they have as long as they have something, and the something needn't come from a drawer.

Notice the after. When the score has fallen and the ten minutes are up, stop for a second and notice how you are. The feeling has gone, or mostly. Nothing was used. There's no second feeling. This is the quiet I described in chapter 15, and it's the reward for riding, and I'd like you to feel it consciously the first few times so that you know it's there.

Answering the feeling

The second list, from chapter 14. Feelings that came with a second word, or that keep coming back, or that didn't fall in ten minutes. These aren't waves. They're asking for something, and the remedy has been the wrong answer for a long time.

Ask what it wants. Not "how do I make this stop", which is the remedy's question, but "what does this want?" Flat, about work, wants a decision or a conversation. Lonely, on a Sunday, wants a person. Tense, at six, wants the thing you haven't said to your partner. Tired, at twenty past three, wants rest and not sugar. The answer is usually obvious once the question has been asked, and the reason it's never been obvious before is that the question was never asked, because the biscuit arrived first.

Make the answer small. You don't have to leave your job at twenty past three. You have to write one sentence on a pad about what you'd do if you did, and that's an answer. You don't have to have the whole conversation at six. You have to say one true sentence at dinner. Lonely wants a person, and a person is a two-line message to a friend, sent now. The remedy is fast and small and available, and the answer has to compete with it on those terms, so make it fast and small and available too.

Some answers. A walk, for restless and for tense. A message or a call, for lonely and for flat-about-people. One sentence on paper, for flat-about-work and for the feeling that keeps coming back and hasn't been looked at. Rest, actual rest, lying down for fifteen

minutes, for tired. One true sentence to the person it's about, for tense-at-six. A decision written down with a date next to it, for the low that comes with a situation you've been putting up with.

When the answer is nothing. Sometimes you ask what it wants and the honest answer is nothing, it's just a bad afternoon. Then it's on the first list after all, and you ride it.

When the answer is too big. Sometimes the second word is a big word. A marriage. A job. A parent. The remedy has been covering something that needs more than a sentence on a pad. That's not a failure of the method. It's the method working, because you've found the thing, and finding it is the first step towards the help it needs, which might be a conversation, or a friend, or a GP, or a therapist, and the NHS talking therapies can be self-referred. The book's job ends at finding it. It doesn't end at covering it up again.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to be one sentence.

When I feel the flicker and my hand moves, I name the feeling, and I give it ten minutes before I give it anything.

Three parts.

The first is the catch. The body sign, the word, the score. This is the part that takes practice and the part everything else depends on. For the first week, write it down every time.

The second is the ten minutes. Carry on, don't fight, don't feed, breathe out, note the peak, score again. This is where you find out, thirty times a day, that the feeling passes without help.

The third is the two lists. If the score fell, done. If it didn't, or there was a second word, ask what it wants and give it a small answer. If you still want the remedy after all that, have it, as a choice.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When my hand goes towards the drawer or the phone or the bottle, I'll stop, say one word for what I'm feeling, and score it.

When I've scored it, I'll set ten minutes and carry on with what I was doing.

When the ten minutes are up and the score hasn't fallen, I'll ask what the feeling wants and do one small thing towards it.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first two days will feel like a lot of stopping, because the flickers are more frequent than you knew and you'll be catching a fair number of them. Your list will fill up with twos and threes and second scores that are lower than the first. Around day three or four, one of the flickers will surprise you by being gone before the ten minutes are up and before you'd thought about it, and you'll realise you rode it without trying. By the end of the first week you'll have found one or two feelings on the second list, with a second word behind them, and you'll have done one small thing about one of them, and that will feel more like a change than any number of biscuits not eaten. Around the second week, the reaches will have thinned on their own, because the hand learns quickly that a flicker doesn't require it. The remedies will still be there. You'll still have wine with dinner and biscuits with tea. You'll notice that you're choosing them, and that the second feeling has mostly stopped, and that the afternoons have a quiet in them that they didn't have. You'll also notice, some days, that you reached at a flicker without catching it, and chapter 23 is for that.

Drink, screens, shopping, food, the bad week and when it's more than a habit

The rule holds for every remedy. A few of them, and a few situations, need their own paragraph.

Drink. The wine at six, poured for the flat half hour and not for dinner, is the most common evening remedy and the one most worth looking at, because alcohol has costs the other three don't. The NHS advice on stress is not to use alcohol to relieve it, and the ten-minute rule works on the six o'clock glass as it works on the biscuit. Name the flatness, give it ten minutes, and then pour the glass with dinner if you want it. I'll repeat the preface. If you drink every day and feel shaky, sweaty or sick without it, don't reduce on your own. See a GP and plan it with them. That's not a judgement. It's what the body does after regular heavy drinking, and it needs medical care.

Screens. The phone is the remedy that's always in the pocket, and so it catches more flickers than any other. The earlier book in this series on the phone gives it a whole method. Here, the one addition is that the ten minutes are hardest with the phone because the phone is already in your hand. Put it in a different pocket or a bag for a week, so that the reach has a step in it, and the step is where the word goes.

Shopping. The Sunday basket is a remedy with a delivery date, and the earlier book on buying has a rule for it, which is that nothing is bought on the day the want arrives. Here, the addition is that the

flat Sunday is nearly always on the second list. It has a second word. Find it before you find the jacket.

Food. The biscuit at twenty past three is the remedy this book has used as its example, and the earlier book on eating outside hunger goes through the feelings one by one. Here, the one thing to add is the hunger check. Would an apple do? If yes, eat. If no, name the feeling. And if the reach is for large amounts with a feeling of being unable to stop, that's a different thing with its own help, through Beat and a GP.

Gambling. If the remedy is a bet, the NHS lists gambling alongside alcohol and drugs as things not to use to relieve stress, and there are NHS gambling services and a GP route. It's a remedy with a bill that can run away in a way the others can't, and I'd put it outside this book.

The bad week. Some weeks are made of sevens. A death, a diagnosis, a job lost. In those weeks the flickers aren't flickers and the ten-minute rule isn't the point. Be kind to yourself, keep the remedies moderate, and let the week be what it is. The method is for ordinary days, and the ordinary days come back.

Low mood. If the flat feeling has been there most of the day for two weeks, or nothing has felt good for that long, that's health. The ten minutes won't shift it and shouldn't be asked to. See a GP, or refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. The book will still be here.

Panic and self-harm. If the discomfort is panic, with the heart going and the breath short and the sense that something terrible is about to happen, that's a different thing with its own treatment,

and a GP is the route. If you've had thoughts of harming yourself, that's urgent. Talk to a GP or call 111, and 999 if you're in danger. Samaritans are on 116 123.

Living with someone who reaches. You can't run the ten minutes for another person. What you can do is not supply the remedy, not comment on the reach, and be the answer for the feelings on their second list, which mostly means being someone they can say one true sentence to at dinner.

When you've reached again

It will happen, and often at first. You'll find the biscuit half eaten, or the phone in your hand in the queue, or the glass poured, and realise you never caught the flicker. Then the thought will come that you're back where you started.

One reach isn't the day. The list from the first week will show you what a day looks like now, and it isn't what it was. What happened was a flicker that got past the catch, which is what flickers have been doing all your life, and one of them did it again.

Name it late. The word works after the reach as well as before it. "That was flat." "That was awkward." Say it, and score what's left, and notice that the remedy didn't do much, which is the alibi seen from the other side. The feeling's probably about the same as it would have been, and now there's a second feeling as well. That's information, and it's the last lesson the alibi has to teach.

Work out which flicker you missed. Was it a place where the remedy was already in your hand? A time of day that's always a reach? A feeling you don't have a word for yet? Each of those has a small fix. Move the phone. Watch that hour. Find the word.

If it was a bad one, a whole evening on the sofa with the bottle and the phone and the delivery app, then name that too, in the morning, and score what's left. What's usually left is the feeling that started it, unchanged, plus a second feeling that's bigger than

usual. Neither of those is a reason to give up the method. The first is the thing to ask what it wants. The second is the thing to ride, because a verdict is a wave like any other and passes like one.

No streaks. Don't count reach-free days, because a streak makes one biscuit feel like the end of something. Count waves ridden, if you count anything, and let the reach be a mark against a long column of them.

One more thing about the morning after a bad evening. The list of what you reached for will look long and the second feeling will want to read it as a verdict. Read it as a list of flickers instead. Each item was a feeling that arrived and didn't get named, and each one is on tomorrow's list to catch. That's not a consolation. It's what the list is for.

And carry on the same afternoon. Not tomorrow. The next flicker will be along within the hour, and it's the next flicker that the rule is about.

Twenty past three, again

It's twenty past three on a Wednesday, some weeks on. The morning went fine. Now there's the stretch that isn't quite a task, and something in your chest goes slack, and you notice the slackness, which you never used to. Flat. Two. You say the sentence under your breath, because it's become a small joke with yourself. This will pass without help. You go back to the thing you were doing, with the flatness sitting under your ribs like weather, and when you look up at half past it's gone, and you didn't see it go.

At half past five you're in the queue at the post office, and the phone is in the other pocket, and your hand goes to the usual one and finds nothing, and you stand in the queue and are bored. Bored, two. The queue moves. You read the notices. A man in front of you says something about the weather and you say something back.

The flat half hour before dinner is still flat, some evenings. You name it and give it its ten minutes and it turns out, most evenings, to be about nothing. On the evenings when there's a second word, you say one sentence to your partner at dinner, and the sentence is sometimes a hard one, and the wine, when you have it, is with the food.

On Sunday a friend cancels and the afternoon opens up, and there's a flicker of the old thing, and you catch it, and the word is lonely, and behind it there's nobody in particular, just an empty

afternoon. You send a message to someone else. They're free. The jacket is still in the basket from three weeks ago and you haven't bought it and you may, on a day when you want a jacket.

None of this is a transformation. You reached twice on Thursday and named them both late. The list on the pad has a week of twos on it and a couple of fives with second words next to them, and one of the fives has a date beside it now. The remedies are all still in the house. The difference is that the flickers have shapes now, and you've watched enough of them fall to know that they do, and the afternoon between the flickers is yours in a way it wasn't.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Next time your hand moves, say one word for what you're feeling, and give it ten minutes. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a therapist who knows you. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 19, 20, 23 and 24. The desk, the queue, the flat evening, the Sunday basket and the friend who cancelled are invented.

Before you start. The advice not to stop heavy daily drinking without medical help is the general NHS position on alcohol withdrawal. The two-week guide for low mood and the self-referral to talking therapies are from the NHS pages on depression and on stress. The Samaritans number is from the NHS stress page.

Chapter 3. Verduyn, Delvaux, Van Coillie, Tuerlinckx and Van Mechelen, "Predicting the duration of emotional experience: two experience sampling studies", *Emotion* 9, 2009, pages 83 to 91. Five emotions recorded daily. The summary doesn't give typical durations, so the claim that most small feelings are over in minutes is my inference from the predictors and not a figure from the paper. The wave as a description is mine.

Chapter 4. Bowen and Marlatt, "Surfing the urge: brief mindfulness-based intervention for college student smokers", Psychology of Addictive Behaviors 23, 2009, pages 666 to 671. One hundred and twenty-three students, a single session of instructions, a week's follow-up, described by the authors as preliminary. The extension from smoking urges to other feelings is mine. The alibi is mine. The earlier book on food is Eat when you're hungry, in this series.

Chapter 5. Bowen and Marlatt, and Verduyn and colleagues, as above. The claim that the fear of the peak is an untested forecast is my reasoning.

Chapter 8. Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth and Steger, "Experiential avoidance as a generalized psychological vulnerability: comparisons with coping and emotion regulation strategies", Behaviour Research and Therapy 44, 2006, pages 1301 to 1320. Two studies, the second over twenty-one days. The work is correlational and the chapter says so. The claim that each reach teaches a lesson is mine.

Chapter 9. The NHS page "Stress", for the advice not to use alcohol, cigarettes, gambling or drugs to relieve it, and "10 stress busters", for temporary relief that creates new problems. The claim that the four remedies are interchangeable is mine.

Chapter 12. Verduyn and colleagues as above, for reappearance. Kircanski, Lieberman and Craske, "Feelings into words: contributions of language to exposure therapy", Psychological Science 23, 2012, pages 1086 to 1091. People afraid of spiders, four

conditions, tested a week later. The labelling group differed on skin conductance and marginally on approach, and not on self-reported fear, which the chapter says.

Chapter 13. Bowen and Marlatt as above.

Chapter 15. Kashdan and colleagues as above. What I say about the quiet after a ridden wave is observation and not a finding.

Chapter 16. Kashdan and colleagues as above. The NHS page "Stress". The earlier books in this series on each remedy are The phone can wait, You didn't want it yesterday, The biscuit tin and Eat when you're hungry.

Chapter 17. Verduyn and colleagues as above. Leyro, Zvolensky and Bernstein, "Distress tolerance and psychopathological symptoms and disorders: a review of the empirical literature among adults", *Psychological Bulletin* 136, 2010, pages 576 to 600. A review that documents associations and also a good deal of inconsistency in how the construct is defined and measured. The loop I describe is my reasoning.

Chapter 18. Kircanski and colleagues as above. The method is mine. "Would an apple do?" is the hunger test from Eat when you're hungry.

Chapter 21. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 22. The NHS pages "Stress" and "10 stress busters" as above. The NHS pages on depression, alcohol and gambling as verified for earlier books in this series. Beat is the UK eating disorder charity.