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What Defiance Is—and What You Should Do about It

Seventeen-year-old Mark (mentioned in the Introduction) usually doesn't show up at home on weekdays until dinnertime, if then. So when he made a rare appearance at 3:00 one Friday, his mother, Sandy, looked at him suspiciously when he entered the kitchen, pointedly looked at her watch, and said sarcastically, "To what do I owe *this* honor?"

Mark just sneered and opened the refrigerator.

As she watched him pawing through the food on the shelves, Sandy became more and more irritated. She didn't want to start a fight. It had already been a long week. But she couldn't keep her silence.

"Mark, did you actually go to school today? Doesn't the last class end at 3:00?"

"Relax, Ma. My last class was canceled. Besides, what the hell do *you* care? You haven't asked me about school since, like, Christmas."

"Watch your mouth, young man," Sandy snapped. "If you miss much more school, you're not even going to graduate!"

"Oh, yeah, like that matters." Mark grabbed sandwich fixings from the refrigerator and plopped down at the kitchen table, where he started making three huge sandwiches.

“What do you need all that food for?” his mother demanded. “You get lunch money every week.”

“Yeah, well, I spent it on cigarettes,” Mark shot back, then leaned back in his chair and aimed an insolent grin at his mother. “Besides, I’m gonna be out for a while; I’m taking this with me.”

Sandy spun around from the sink. “You’re not going anywhere till you mow the lawn, like I asked you last Saturday—and the Saturday before, and the Saturday before that.”

“It’s Friday, and I’m going out. You want the grass cut so bad, *you* do it! All you ever do is sit around here anyway.”

“Don’t you talk to me that way! And don’t you even think about leaving here without cutting the grass!”

“OK, I won’t think about it,” Mark said slyly. Then he stood up, went back to the refrigerator, grabbed a six-pack of beer, and walked out the front door so fast he didn’t hear his mother yelling: “You get back here, Mark! Don’t expect to waltz back in here whenever you feel like showing up! Everybody has to pitch in around here, you know!” Mark was thinking about his plans for the weekend and had already tuned his mother out.

This scene or one a lot like it has been replayed in this household dozens of times over the last year. When Mark started to act as if his parents’ rules were negligible and their requests optional, his parents said nothing, hoping the phase would pass. When it didn’t, they tried threats and removal of privileges. Mark just laughed at them. Now he comes and goes as he pleases and treats them with more and more disdain. Periodically he erupts into cursing and threats of his own. Frankly, both of his parents are a little bit afraid of him.

How We Define *Defiance*

Pull this interaction apart, and you’ll have before you all the elements by which we define *defiance*:

1. *Failure to comply with an adult’s request within a reasonable time.* Believe it or not, a mere minute or so is considered a

reasonable time within which to comply with an adult's request—that's about the same window in which you'd expect an adult to do something you've asked, and it's fair to expect a teen to do the same. Yes, if a teen is already busy with another project, then a longer time to comply is reasonable, but in those cases the teen should at least acknowledge the request and an intention to comply with it within a minute or so. Mark not only didn't mow the lawn when his mother asked him, he's totally ignored her request for 3 weeks!

2. *Failure to keep doing what has been requested until the task is finished.* Maybe this seems like it goes without saying. But many teenagers start out doing what they're asked to do and then don't follow through. They pay lip service—they do half the job and then switch to something they want to do, they do a sloppy job, or they drag out the task for so long that it doesn't get done when you need it done. Mark, obviously, never even got started. Of course in some circumstances it's clear that compliance with an adult instruction is not expected immediately. But in those cases it's up to you to state explicitly when compliance should begin.

3. *Failure to follow previously taught rules of conduct.* Mark has racked up quite a score on this one: His parents expect him to attend school; let them know where he is; come home when expected; speak to them respectfully and listen attentively; and spend the money they give him as they intended, not for cigarettes and beer. He defies them on every count.

Although we'll use the term *defiance* throughout this book, it's important to understand that we mean both *noncompliance* (passively not doing what is asked or expected or not completing it) and more active *verbal or physical resistance* such as Mark's arguing, swearing, challenging, and threatening. It may very well be the latter that has brought you to this book, although 14-year-old Lauren (mentioned in the Introduction) has driven her mother to seek help just by quietly breaking all the rules and generally making herself scarce.

Why You Need to Know More about Your Teen's Defiance

If your teen resembles Mark or Lauren or the other two adolescents depicted in the Introduction, you already know enough to justify trying the straightforward steps in Part II. You may *not* know enough, however, to get everything you possibly can from the program. First you need to know whether this self-help program is really what you need and whether it's *all* you need.

Is Your Teen's Defiance a Behavior or a Trait?

If we asked you to tell us what you mean by “defiance,” you'd probably be quick to define it as resistance, opposition, and disobedience—complete disregard for whatever you request, demand, or instruct your teenager to do. You may even liken it to Groucho Marx's refrain in the movie *Horsefeathers*: “Whatever it is, I'm against it!”

Of course you might look at it that way only on good days, when you can summon up a sense of humor about the issue. On most days your teenager's defiance is no laughing matter. Dealing with someone who always seems to want to resist or to fight, and constantly displays contempt or aversion, wears you down and beats you up. You want to “get this kid in line” and get your lives back to normal.

The trouble is, your lives may never get back to normal if you view the problem as something your teen *is* instead of something he or she *does*. As you can see from our definition of defiance, it's measured by specific acts. Yet when those acts add up to what feels like endless grief for you, defiance in a teen can begin to seem like a personality trait instead of a behavior. Personality traits generally can't be changed very much, but behavior can be changed. If you view your teenager as just *being* defiant, you're sort of stuck with the condition, aren't you? It's this perspective that leads to finger-pointing of the “You *always* . . .” and “Why can't you *ever* . . .?” variety. It puts you at loggerheads and keeps you there.

Yet if you look closely at the way your teenager acts, you'll probably see that she isn't defiant as "constantly" as you may feel; she may not be defiant everywhere, with everyone, all the time, and in exactly the same way. Some kids are so defiant at home that their parents can't believe they don't act the same way at school—but they don't. Others are much more defiant with certain people than with everyone else or when faced with certain demands. Defiance is often demonstrated to different degrees, but it all begins to run together and seem like one big rebellion to parents who are expecting it. When you become aware of these nuances, you gain information about what goes wrong and what goes right—and consequently where to address the problem first and how to capitalize on the positives.

Remember, behavior can be changed. Looking more closely at your teen's defiance will reveal the cracks in the behavior and help you see where you can wiggle your way in and make a difference.

Is It Just Normal Adolescent Behavior or More Serious Problems?

Your lives may also never get back to normal if you put the emphasis on "back." Taking a closer look at the history of your teen's defiance and training a magnifying glass on the current behavior will help you see how easy it can be to confuse normal adolescent striving for autonomy with out-of-control rebellion. We'll get into this important topic more in the chapters that follow, but, for now, try to keep in mind that there *is* a line. It's just that it gets pretty blurry in the heated battle of wills, and we all take a little time to adjust to these new creatures who are so eager to be shed of our supervision and care. If you can begin to see the difference between "normal" assertions of growing independence—the way kids typically behave when they hit the teen years—and how what we call "defiance" departs from that pattern, you won't make the mistake of trying to "correct" behavior that is just fine as it is (as trying as it can be).

Remember What You Stand to Gain

When your patience has been pushed so far past its limits that you don't remember what calm feels like, it's hard not to view defiance as a one-way street. Your teenager defies you (the cause), and conflict erupts (the effect). Look more closely, though, and you'll be reminded that defiance is not just an action; it's a *reaction*—to the person being defied or to a situation deemed intolerable. Technically, it's an *interaction*. Your teen cannot defy your instruction if no instruction is given or break a rule if one has not been laid down previously and you do not react with anger or frustration at everything your teen does. Defiance doesn't occur in a vacuum or when a person is alone. "It takes two to tango," as they say. This may be hard to believe considering that teens often express defiance through their absence. You tell your 15-year-old to do the dishes and then hit the books, and instead he hits the pavement—running. You've set a weeknight curfew of 10:00 P.M., and your daughter responds to your edict by staying out till midnight. Whether the teen is present or not, every act of defiance is a response to something you or some other authority figure has said. Defiance makes the interaction a conflict. It pits you and your teen against each other; it pulls you farther and farther apart over time. When you look closely at your teen's defiance, you'll see the damage it's doing to the parent-child relationship. We hope this realization will motivate you to keep at the program even when it's tough because you have so much to gain. And we hope you'll remember that, if you're part of the interactions where defiance occurs, it means you have a lot of power to make a difference. Fairly simple changes in your behavior may lead to big changes in your teen's behavior.

In the Introduction we said that if you answered "Yes" to any of the following questions, you probably need to address your teen's defiance.

1. Is your teen's defiant behavior much worse than it is for most other adolescents?

2. Is your teen's defiant behavior making it hard for him or her to function as expected, or does it risk eliciting serious consequences from others?
3. Is your teen's defiant behavior causing a lot of emotional distress or harm?

The rest of this chapter will help you examine the nature of your teen's defiant behavior so you know how to answer these questions. On page 24 you'll have a chance to enter all the information you've gathered on a Decision-Making Worksheet to help you determine whether you need help, and, if so, whether self-help is likely to be enough or you need professional help.

What Does Your Teen's Defiance Look Like?

Defiance takes all kinds of forms in teenagers. Just to get an overview of what you've been dealing with, check off the behaviors in the Defiant Behaviors list on page 18 that you've been noticing recently. Feel free to copy the list for later use or download it from www.guilford.com/barkley16-forms.

Notice the four categories of defiant behavior: Verbal (**V**), Physical (**P**), Aggressive (**A**), and Passive Noncompliance (**PN**). How many behaviors in each category did you check off? Keep this in mind as we proceed through the rest of the book. We'll be suggesting different techniques to deal with different categories of defiant behavior. In Chapter 15 you'll learn to use communication skills to deal with verbal defiance. In Chapters 10–12 you'll learn to use contracts, point systems, and punishments to deal with physical and aggressive defiance. In Chapter 14 you'll learn to use problem solving to deal with passive defiance as well as elements of the other types of defiance. If you checked off any of the last five symptoms in the Aggressive category, be sure to read the section "Do You Need Professional Help?" later in this chapter.

Defiant Behaviors

Verbal

- Yells
- Whines
- Complains
- Screams
- Insults
- Swears
- Lies
- Argues
- Humiliates/annoys
- Teases
- Cries
- Sassses or talks back

Physical

- Defies
- Throws tantrums
- Disrupts others' activities
- Steals
- Runs away

Aggressive

- Physically resists requests or instructions
- Throws objects
- Destroys property intentionally
- Physically fights with others
- Carries or uses weapons
- Breaks into other people's homes or businesses
- Is cruel to others
- Is cruel to animals
- Lacks guilt or remorse or seems to have no conscience

Passive Noncompliance

- Ignores requests
- Fails to complete routine chores
- Fails to complete school homework
- Ignores self-care tasks

Other: _____

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Is Your Teen's Defiance Much Worse Than Defiance in Other Teens?

Is your teen's defiant behavior much worse than it is for most other teens? To answer this question, we need a standard for other teens to which you can compare your teen. First, circle the word below that represents how frequently your teen exhibits the following three behaviors:

Fails to comply with an adult's request within a reasonable time

never sometimes often very often

Fails to keep doing what has been requested until the task is finished

never sometimes often very often

Fails to follow previously taught rules of conduct

never sometimes often very often

Second, fill out the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents, developed by Dr. Robin. Feel free to copy the questionnaire or download it from www.guilford.com/barkley16-forms for later uses. Save your frequency ratings above and your scores on the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents to use in the Decision-Making Worksheet that appears later in this chapter.

Is Your Teen's Behavior Creating Impairment?

Is your teen's defiant behavior making it hard for him or her to function as expected at home, in school, or in the community? To help you answer this question, we have listed the major settings where defiant behavior may be a problem. Consider all the oppositional behaviors that you rated *sometimes*, *often*, or *very often* on the previous checklist. Taking all these behaviors into account, circle the ratings on the Impairment Rating Form on page 22 that represent how much these behaviors interfere with your teen's ability to function in each life activity. Feel free to copy or download the form from www.guilford.com/barkley16-forms for later uses.

Even if you circled *often* or *very often* only once, your teenager's defiant behavior is interfering significantly with his or her ability to function in a major life activity. As with your frequency ratings, keep your results handy so you can use them in the Decision-Making Worksheet.

Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents

The following is another way to measure your teenager's defiance. If you wish, fill out this questionnaire and compare the results you get with those from the rating forms earlier in the chapter. Essentially consistent results should reinforce the decision you've made about what action to take.

This form is also an excellent way to see whether your teen's problematic behavior occurs more with you or another parent or caregiver (such as a grandparent who plays a parenting role). As you'll see later in this book, when the teen's behavior (or perceptions of the behavior) differs significantly between parents, or is perceived differently by the two, you may have to take extra measures to fend off a "divide-and-conquer" strategy and to stay on the same page when working through the program.

If more than one adult plays a significant parenting role with the teen, all of these adults should complete this form.

I am the child's ___ mother ___ father (check one)

Think back over the last 2 weeks at home. The statements below have to do with you and your teen. Read the statement and circle True or False for each statement. Answer for yourself, without talking it over with anyone.

- True False 1. My teen is easy to get along with.
- True False 2. My teen is well behaved in our discussions.
- True False 3. My teen is receptive to criticism.
- True False 4. For the most part, my teen likes to talk to me.
- True False 5. We almost never seem to agree.
- True False 6. My teen usually listens to what I tell him/her.
- True False 7. At least three times a week, we get angry at each other.
- True False 8. My teen says I have no consideration of his/her feelings.
- True False 9. My teen and I compromise during arguments.
- True False 10. My teen often doesn't do what I ask.
- True False 11. The talks we have are frustrating.
- True False 12. My teen often seems angry to me.
- True False 13. My teen acts impatient when I talk.
- True False 14. In general, I don't think we get along very well.

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Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents (continued)

- True False 15. My teen almost never understands my side of an argument.
- True False 16. My teen and I have big arguments about little things.
- True False 17. My teen is defensive when I talk to him/her.
- True False 18. My teen thinks my opinions don't count.
- True False 19. We argue a lot about rules.
- True False 20. My teen tells me he/she thinks I am unfair.

Scoring and Interpreting Your Results

1. Add one point for each of the following items answered TRUE: 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.
2. Add one point for each of the following items answered FALSE: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9.
3. Add all of the points together.

There are two ways to interpret the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents Summary Score:

1. Compare your score to the mean scores that we obtained in our research for families in conflict and families without conflict. See which mean your score is closer to.

Mothers: Mean score for families in conflict = 12.4 (standard deviation = 5.0)

Mean score for families without excessive conflict = 2.4 (standard deviation = 2.8)

Fathers: Mean score for families in conflict = 10.5 (standard deviation = 5.0)

Mean score for families without excessive conflict = 3.2 (standard deviation = 3.0)

2. Use the following cutoffs for high scores:

Mothers: Any score above 8 is definitely in the problem range (higher than in 98% of families without excessive conflict). Any score of 6-8 is probably in the problem range (higher than in 84-93% of those families).

Fathers: Any score above 10 is definitely in the problem range. Any score of 7-10 is probably in the problem range.

Impairment Rating Form

| | | | | |
|--|--------|-----------|-------|------------|
| In home life with the family | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In social interactions with peers | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In school | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In community activities | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In sports, clubs, or other activities | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In learning to take care of him/herself | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In play, leisure, or recreational activities | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |
| In handling daily chores or other responsibilities | rarely | sometimes | often | very often |

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Is Your Teenager's Behavior Causing a Lot of Emotional Distress?

Emotional distress comes in many different forms. Maybe your teenager's defiant behavior is making you or others in your family feel angry, frustrated, upset, depressed, and/or hopeless. This is a difficult experience to measure because each person experiences emotional distress differently, so your ratings in the Emotional Distress Rating Form below are bound to be inexact, which is fine. Just try to rate the overall degree of emotional distress you and other family members experience on a typical day because your teen engages in the defiant behaviors that you've reported on our earlier rating scales. Feel free to copy or download the form from www.guilford.com/barkley16-forms for later uses.

Emotional Distress Rating Form

| | | | | | |
|---|------|-------------|----------|-------|-----------|
| 1. Emotional distress that I experience | none | very little | moderate | a lot | very much |
| 2. Emotional distress that my spouse experiences | none | very little | moderate | a lot | very much |
| 3. Emotional distress that my other children experience | none | very little | moderate | a lot | very much |

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If one or more of the people in your family are experiencing at least moderate degrees of emotional distress because of your teen's oppositional behavior, you need to think seriously about trying the program outlined in this book or seeing a therapist.

Setting a Course of Action

Now you have some measurements to help you see where your teen's defiant behavior has brought you. Use them to fill out the Decision-Making Worksheet on page 24 to help you figure out what to do about the problem. Our recommendations are general guidelines based on our clinical experience, not on research data. Feel free to copy or download the form from www.guilford.com/barkley16-forms for later uses.

Do You Need Professional Help?

The Decision-Making Worksheet gives you a rough idea of whether you need self-help or professional help. If you have any doubts, read this book and try our suggestions first; if they don't seem to help after you make a decent effort, find a mental health professional. We have included information on how to find a qualified professional in Appendix B at the back of this book.

Decision-Making Worksheet

1. How many of the three behaviors on page 19 did you rate *often* or *very often*? _____
2. Did either parent score the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire in the problem range? _____ Yes _____ No
3. On the Impairment Rating Form (p. 22), did you circle *often* or *very often* for impairment in one or more settings? _____ Yes _____ No
4. Did you rate at least one of the three items on the Emotional Distress Rating Form (p. 23) as *moderate*, *a lot*, or *very much*?
_____ Yes _____ No

Here's how to interpret your answers to each question above:

Were your answers like these?

1. 2–3 2. Yes (especially a Yes for both parents) 3. Yes 4. Yes

If so, consider using this self-help book and consulting a mental health professional to help you deal with your teen's defiant behavior.

Were your answers like these?

1. 1 or more 2. Yes 3. Yes 4. Yes

If so, this book *may* be enough to help you deal with your teen's oppositional behavior.

Were your answers like these?

1. 1 or more 2. Yes or No 3. No 4. No

If so, this book will probably be enough to help you with your teen's defiant behavior.

Were your answers like these?

1. 0–1 2, 3, and 4. No to any one of these

If so, you probably will find this book sufficient.

Were your answers like these?

1. 0 2, 3, and 4. No to any one or all of these

Your teen is probably within the normal range of defiant behavior. You may find the advice in this book helpful, but you probably don't need professional help.

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In broad strokes, your teen's defiance may require professional help even if it's not quite that severe but has been going on for so long that you can't begin to imagine disentangling it. If it's a more recent development but is causing your child or you such huge problems (e.g., refusing to go to school, complete withdrawal from family activities or mealtimes, persistent sadness or depression, an abrupt change in your teen's personality) that school and home life are totally disrupted, you also might need professional intervention, at least to get you on the right track.

But you can also look a little more closely at the specific behaviors of your teen: During the last year, has your son or daughter started physical fights or used a weapon, bullied others, demonstrated physical cruelty (to animals or people), or committed crimes such as assault or burglary? Has your teen run away from home and been truant? If you answer Yes to any of these questions (roughly corresponding to the last five symptoms in the Aggressive category in the Defiant Behaviors checklist, page 18), you're dealing with a problem that is more than you can handle without expert help; seek a professional evaluation. Your teenager may have conduct disorder, discussed in Chapter 4. If you find yourself having any doubts about the severity of your child's problems, talk to others who have had a chance to observe and interact with your son or daughter: teachers, coaches, friends' parents.

Is There More to the Story?

It's not unusual for parents completing the rating forms in this chapter to realize that things may not be as awful as they thought. Stepping back and looking at your teen's behavior objectively could reveal that the daughter who's driving you crazy isn't impaired by her actions or attitudes, meaning you need to figure out whether something else is going on that's causing her to behave differently. Or maybe you'll find that the son who is causing such tension between the two of you isn't really headed for the

life of crime that has become your worst fear. Marsha's daughter, Julie, had started at a new high school following her parents' move 6 months earlier, but no one noticed that she wasn't adapting well until she started acting out at home. The "defiance" exhibited by Darrell's 13-year-old, Jake, has been pretty innocuous—like "purposely" leaving his clothes all over the house or having to be reminded three times to take out the garbage or to walk the dog. But Darrell can't see that his son's developmental needs are different today than they were just a few months ago and expects his son to act like the acquiescent kid he was before puberty.

Marsha may get something worthwhile from the program in this book even though her daughter is mainly reacting to a tough transition in her life. At the very least, learning to pay more positive attention to her daughter—instead of always focusing on her moodiness—may offer her the support that serves as a suit of armor for some kids when they go out into a harsh world. But giving her incentives to be more civil in her interactions with family members and others and showing her respect by engaging in problem solving the way two adults would might also help her daughter develop the confidence to deal with the changes in her life. On the other hand, Marsha might consider whether her daughter is suffering from symptoms of depression and talk to Julie's doctor, if not to a mental health professional.

Darrell can use Part I of this book to start examining his expectations regarding his son and adjusting them to jibe with Jake's developmental changes. The behavior management techniques at the beginning of our program will help Darrell keep his responses (and his requests) to his son reasonable. Once he's found that he can enforce nonnegotiable household rules effectively, he and Jake can learn to communicate better and start negotiating the, well, negotiables—a right that all maturing kids should get as long as they show they can handle the responsibility of additional freedom. Meanwhile, the rest of Part I of this book will help both Marsha and Darrell figure out in detail what's going on with their teens' behavior so they know how to make the best use of the program in Part II.

Are You Ready to Take Action?

There's no doubt about it: Change is hard and lasting change is even tougher to make. You may have no doubt that you want to reap the benefits of a change in your teen's defiant behavior, but it can be a challenge to get there, and it's easy to get discouraged when the path proves to be anything but a straight line. The fact is, we all need to go through a series of stages to implement any significant change in our lives. There's always a period of time when we have a problem but aren't quite ready to see it that way. You may have gone through several months, or even longer, of battling with your teen before reaching the point where you realized that this might not be a phase and that you want to do something about the conflict that's taken over your family. It's probably at that point that you picked up this book. Reading these words is your way of preparing to start doing what it takes to make the changes you and your teenager need to make. Reading the rest of Part I is a terrific, and critically necessary, start. But once you dive into the program, it's important to understand that you need to do your best to stick with it. As you'll learn at the beginning of Part II, consistency is one of the hallmark principles behind successful behavior change. Your chances of hanging in there will increase if you keep in mind that you may take one step forward and two steps back sometimes—and you'll probably take a lot of sideways steps too. The path toward less conflict between you and your teen can look much more like a zigzag than a straight line. Don't be discouraged if you move back and forth for a while; just keep at it.

Taking Action

- Observe your teen's current behavior and think carefully about his or her behavior in the recent past, then fill out the rating forms in this chapter. Pay attention to what the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire for Parents tells you about how conflict with your teen may differ between parents.

- Based on your answers, decide whether your teenager is truly defiant and whether this book might help.
- Determine whether you might need professional help in addition to this book. If so, find a qualified clinician to consult for an evaluation and possible treatment.
- Figure out where you are in the “stages of change”:
 1. Do you feel defiance is a problem for you, your teen, and your family? If not, set this book aside for a while, but continue observing your teen’s behavior and the interactions between you. If the problem doesn’t resolve on its own within a few more weeks, come back to this chapter and complete the checklists again. If the problem really is the same or is worse, read the rest of this book.
 2. If you do believe defiance is a problem you need to address, finish reading this book before deciding whether to tackle the program on your own or with professional help.
 3. If you’re ready to take action, pay careful attention to your reading of Part I; you’re in the thick of the “preparation” stage.

Your next stage will be “action”—working through the 10 steps in the program. Once you’ve learned all the skills and techniques, you’ll be in the “maintenance” phase—keeping what you’ve learned in practice. Occasionally you may slip into “relapse,” but that’s perfectly normal—and reversible. Just return to Part II and see where you can take a refresher course; we’ll offer plenty of troubleshooting tips with each step that can pull you out of these slips and get you back on track.