
Get off the Bus

Depression, Anxiety & Obsession

Steven A. Szykula, Ph.D.

“Dr. Steve”

***GET OFF THE BUS: DEPRESSION, ANXIETY &
OBSESSION***

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To my clients, colleagues, friends and family, thank you very much for showing me the way. It has been an honor for me to join so many in support of their quest to get off the bus and improve their lives.

Namaste and thank you to Hope Allred for inspiring me to start the book and to Rocky Anderson for his wisdom to finish it.

Steven A Szykula, Ph.D.

Dr. Szykula's work has spanned across three decades during which time he has provided psychological counseling and evaluation services to thousands of adults and children. Dr. Szykula has contributed to numerous articles and books on psychotherapy, counseling and parenting. His sense of humor and wisdom make him a sought after speaker. His books and presentations enable others to apply new practical knowledge and skills to reduce problems and achieve a more meaningful life.

To reach people he cannot counsel face-to-face, Dr. Steve writes practical “self-help” books, books on parenting and books used by counselors and therapists. Raised in Connecticut, he now lives and works in Salt Lake City, Utah. His multi-disciplinary clinic, Comprehensive Psychological Services, serves thousands of clients every year and is considered to be one of the best clinical practices for psychological counseling and therapy in the West. Further information about Dr. Steve, his books and presentations and Comprehensive Psychological Services can be found on his website: www.wecanhelpout.com.



Exchanges between clients and their therapist are included throughout this book. Personal details, situations, names, occupations, and symptoms have been altered to protect privacy.

The principals that are emphasized in this book may be integrated into anyone's life. Readers who are participating in medication therapies or various talk therapies should continue with these if progress is being made. The stories, therapy case examples and principals discussed in this book are universal, enhance and do not compete with other forms of treatment.

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7. LIVING YOUR LIFE OFF THE BUS

Chapter 1

Riding the Bus

How much of your day is spent worrying? Do you spend time endlessly resenting and regretting the past? Do you procrastinate? These are common problems my clients have experienced. In my work, I refer to these patterns of thinking and emotion as *riding the bus*—with the implied goal of *getting off the bus* and into life.

Riding the bus can affect one's life in serious and intense ways. Do depressing or anxious feelings and thoughts prevent you from living your life to its fullest? Does trauma from your past make poor decisions in the future seem inevitable? Do you put yourself down or “stress out” about what others may think of you?

Some of these questions reflect patterns associated with conditions like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, you may suffer from a current state of mind that will not shut down as it cycles through thoughts, delivering compulsive urges to use drugs, alcohol, or the Internet. Or you may

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suffer from anxiety and panic that make you so self-conscious that you fail to reach your goals.

Being stuck riding the bus can rob you of your life. I wrote this book to help you get off the bus and into healthy engagement with a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Bus rides can disrupt your day, your week—even your life. Allow me to illustrate how dysfunctional thoughts and feelings associated with procrastination, wishful thinking, self-doubt and worry play havoc with your mood and your thinking in the stories below. As you read below, think about the bus rides that rob you of precious moments and richness in your own life.

Procrastination: The Kitchen Floor

"Procrastination is the thief of time."

— Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

The kitchen floor weighed heavily on my mind. It was ripe for cleaning. The floor and I glared at each other for about thirty minutes. Slowly, procrastination caused me to feel heavy, lethargic, and depressed. I felt energy leaving my body. Here I was, the first day of the weekend, and I was sinking into a gloomy mood. Stalling, I made another pot of coffee. I begrudgingly thought about the tools and cleaners I would need to clean the kitchen floor. I wondered where I had stored them all. I started to resent having to clean the floor on

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my weekend. How long would it take to clean the kitchen floor? Would I find the cleaning supplies? With these questions, my mood sank even lower.

Still in my pajamas, I moved very slowly. I looked at the clock and noticed I had been thinking off-and-on about cleaning the kitchen floor for nearly two hours now. My mood plummeted to an even lower level, gradually cascading to depression and no energy. I glared at the clock; almost all of Saturday morning had passed. In a flurry of motivation, I cranked up the stereo with the best Motown selection I could find. I located the cleaning supplies, got down on my hands and knees and began scrubbing the kitchen floor. Twenty minutes later, with a smile across my face, the floor was clean.

Who has not experienced something like this—being held hostage by thoughts about a task when the task itself only requires a little focused effort? Let's consider the pattern that underlies this behavior. In this example of procrastination, we observe that overthinking about cleaning the kitchen floor results in a lethargic and depressed mood. In this case, dwelling on such unproductive thoughts and their attendant emotions exemplify what riding the bus means. We observe that when the bus rider is fed up with the ride, he focuses and engages in the task, cleaning the floor. When engaged in cleaning the floor the negative thoughts and emotions dissipate. The task is completed and our example procrastinator gets back to experiencing a more productive and satisfying life.

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For many people, procrastination is a way of life that results in distress and diminished satisfaction. Yet the addictive power of riding the bus—that is, dwelling on thoughts and emotions—can be difficult to stop. Awareness of the thought patterns underlying procrastination is essential to being able to reduce or stop these behaviors. Rather than allowing this pattern to occur and recur, robbing hours at a time, my goal is to help readers identify these patterns promptly, if not to avoid bus rides altogether, to make the rides as brief as possible.

In another example of procrastination and overthinking, a working mother procrastinates and then dwells on her lack of results. This cycle causes her stress, while robbing her of the opportunity to fully enjoy time with her family.

Don't Bring Your Work Home: The Dreaded Weekly Report

"Never leave till tomorrow that which you can do today."

— Benjamin Franklin

At the end of every week, I am required to submit a report to the corporate office. This report reflects the work I have completed during the week. It also keeps the corporate office updated as to what is happening in the field. Each week, I dread preparing this report. I

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often resent that the corporate office wants me to spend fifty hours doing my job and then work two additional hours writing them how I did it. Corporate expects the report at the end of the day on Friday. However, I know they aren't going to look at it until Monday morning. Consequently, I habitually procrastinate writing it, finding myself preparing the report at the last minute every Sunday night. The report has to be submitted via the Internet before the system goes down at 9:30 PM.

At the end of the day on Friday, finally happy to be done with my workweek, I slap my laptop shut and turn my attention to the weekend. Almost immediately, I start to worry: first that I won't remember my activities of the workweek, then that I need to report on Sunday night. I immediately rationalize that I deserve a break now and that I can do the report later. I decide to be done with work for a few days.

On Saturday night just before going to sleep, I find myself dreading the weekly report again. The thought just keeps resurfacing. Then again on Sunday morning as I awaken, rubbing my tired eyes, lying in bed, I think, "Ugh — I have to get that weekly report done today." "But not yet, I will go get some coffee, maybe read the newspaper, and try not to think about work." I go about the activities of the day with the thought of the report repeatedly nagging at me. I wonder why the muscles in my neck are so tense and I find it difficult to focus and enjoy the time with my kids.

As the afternoon presses on, I start to feel sick to my stomach. I want to lie down and take a nap. I go through my day with my kids and I am only half conscious, just going through the motions. Sighing, I

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think about the unfinished weekly report off and on throughout the day. Then at around 6:00 PM, my 8-year-old son runs into the living room and announces, "I have a school project due tomorrow!" I pull out his backpack and realize it's going to take us a couple of hours to get this project done. Adding to my stress is the fact that we are going to have to go to the store and get some supplies in order to complete it. I think to myself, "Why on earth didn't he tell me about this sooner? He's known about the project for a whole week." I have no idea how we are going to get his project done before he needs to go to bed. I begin to panic because I must also get my weekly report completed before the server goes down at 9:30 PM. My mind races and my blood pressure rises.

By the skin of our teeth, we complete the school project. I help my son get ready for bed. I look at the clock and panic. There is no possible way for me to complete the weekly report tonight. I realize I will have to get up at 5:00 AM to submit the report before corporate opens at 8:00 AM on the East Coast. I try to sleep, but I toss and turn stressing over the weekly report. I worry that I will sleep through the alarm. My stomach is in a knot.

I awaken at 4:00 AM and my mind continues to race with anxiety. I decide to get up and orient myself. At about 5:00 AM I compile my notes and write up a report that summarizes the events of my last workweek. I electronically submit the report. I vow to get the report completed and submitted before 6:00 PM next Friday from now on. I think, "Why do I ever put this report off? I should always do it on Friday so I can enjoy my weekend."

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Repetitive thinking, wishing, and worrying can derail you from progressing in life. In the next account you will see that thoughts alone can become tremendous obstacles to accomplishing goals. Wishful thinking—as opposed to accepting reality and moving forward—is often a repetitive pattern of thought that hinders healthy activity and increases distress.

Interview Anxiety: The Graduate

*"Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows,
but only empties today of its strength."*

— Charles Spurgeon

I graduated from college assuming that my college degree would guarantee me a good job. I was wrong. There are no guarantees. I worked at a golf course through school and could not find a better job after graduation. I thought after working there for eight years and passing golf credential tests, I should at least be earning more than minimum wage without benefits. I was recently passed over for a promotion in favor of someone who was older. I also thought that he might have interviewed better than me. I was very nervous during my interview. I dwelled on the fact that I became terribly nervous before job interviews.

I told myself over and over again how unfair interviews were, how I sucked at interviews, and how I would never get a job that required an interview. I wished that I could get a job without getting interviewed. I considered myself a loser. I worried about what others

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might think of me. I wished I were different—and I made myself sick with these thoughts.

Deep down I knew these thoughts were not actually true. Yet I could not stop thinking this way. It made me sick with depression and anxiety. My thoughts had me convinced I would never succeed in finding a job. They froze me. I completed a few online applications. My girlfriend's mother helped me scout jobs online but this only seemed to add pressure! I felt like I was such a disappointment to her now.

My obsessive thinking and worrying sidetracked me from studying for my second level golf-pro test and from my online job search. People gave me advice to go to employers in-person and to ask to meet with the hiring manager. I froze up even more. I thought over and over again, “I don't do that,” “That's not me,” “That would be rude,” and “I would be bothering potential employers.” I was anxious about going out and walking into a situation cold. I thought to myself, “What if I stumbled on my words? After all, I suck at interviews.”

I noticed that bad days were the result of not having a schedule or an activity to focus on, like golf or work. On these days, I was overtaken by my thoughts. I would think about what other people might think of me and how they might be judging me. I would then turn on myself, thinking about how I couldn't succeed, or how I should have taken a different direction in college—and on and on. My self-esteem would plummet and I would feel like crying. Several times, I considered going to a doctor to get medication.

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I began to notice that I had good days and bad days. When I had a good day, I woke up with the alarm, engaged in a schedule that included job searches, interviews and resume drops. I also scheduled activities and worked.

The young man in the case scenario above clearly is thinking and dwelling on negative self-judgment and the possible negative judgment of others about him. In his case riding the bus was debilitating. Not only was the thinking excessive, it also drove severe negative emotions like anxiety and depressed mood. These emotions are also a bus, from which one wants to depart quickly in order to get on with life.

The graduate discovered that he got off the bus and enjoyed the feeling of moving forward on days when he was fully engaged in a busy schedule that even included completing job applications and interviews.

The *Kitchen Floor*, *Weekly Report* and *The Graduate* illustrate the effects of riding the bus—engaging in dysfunctional and repetitive thinking and emotion. What are the examples of dysfunctional thinking and emotion in *your* life? Boarding the bus by overthinking, one finds his or her thoughts can lead to depressed feelings, reduced energy, and even physical symptoms. Conversely, intensely focusing and engaging in productive activity leaves behind the cycling of negative thoughts and their attendant emotions. When you ruminate and procrastinate you create unnecessary emotional distress—in other words, you are riding the bus. Getting off the bus first requires that you increase your awareness of the bus

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and is then followed by focusing and engaging in the task at hand.

Left unchecked, these thoughts and feelings may develop more serious distress, which often culminates in emotional problems. Although entirely eliminating these patterns of thinking and feelings is impossible, interrupting them and refocusing intensely on healthy, productive activities can reduce the number of rides and make getting off the bus much easier.

Chapter 2

The Road to Anxiety, Depression and Hopelessness

"You may believe that you are responsible for what you do, but not for what you think. The truth is that you are responsible for what you think, because it is only at this level that you can exercise choice. What you do comes from what you think."

— Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*

Have you ever experienced a major life event that left your thoughts and emotions in a seemingly inescapable cycle of hopelessness? Maybe it was the death of a loved one, loss of a job, or a divorce. These life-changing events can begin cyclical thought processes beyond what would be considered a normal reaction to a stressful situation. Following any major life change, you might become vulnerable to repetitive thoughts and feelings. These thought patterns are insidious and can become addicting. They divert you away from living a healthy life and from processing stressful situations with healthy responses, leaving you more vulnerable to life's many obstacles. These cycling thoughts can, and often do, lead to bouts of mental illness.

What follows are stories about my clients who, over time, created their own severe mental suffering that took them to the breaking point. Their bus rides led them to experience extreme depression, anxiety, anger, and hopelessness. Riding the bus almost always comprises a pattern of habitual emotions or repetitive thinking. Assigning the buses more specific names allows us to identify the kind of thoughts and emotions that are being repeated. In the cases below, my clients were susceptible to multiple bus rides and double-decker bus rides while the active living of their lives slipped away from them.

Depression, Low Self-esteem and Hopelessness

Martha is a young woman who spent most of her days thinking about the critical judgments she thought others, including her parents, had of her. Not an hour went by without her feeling she was behind and guilty for being less accomplished than her peers. She obsessed about what people thought of her. Over and over, she would think that others judged her as a “loser”.

Martha isolated herself from friends who were making progress in their personal development and lives. She resented them and presumed to know what they thought of her, much like she presumed to know precisely what her parents thought of her. She ruminated over these assumptions day in, day out. Over time, she convinced herself that her parents and her friends could not care less about her. This pattern of obsessive, assumptive thinking about the imagined negative judgments of others, along with her own self-deprecating judgments, created extreme mood swings, anger, depression, sadness, and hopelessness. Indeed, Martha was riding the bus.

Martha suffered self-deprecating feelings and thoughts on a daily basis. If anyone made a comment that she perceived as negative in any way, Martha would become outraged and vindictive. She would spend hours thinking about what the person said, twisting their motives, interpreting otherwise innocuous comments in a deeply personal way. To say the least, this was exhausting. To escape and buffer the impact of her own thinking and emotional upheaval, Martha became rebellious. She drank heavily and frequently. She partied hard. She sought out and clung to “bad boys,” young men who went about their lives irresponsibly and taking risks.

Martha’s pattern of dating these players in the party scene enabled her to temporarily distract herself from her own mind and suffering by attaching herself to the *vida loca* that these men brought with them. It was high stimulation, lots of people, lots of laughs and lots of intoxication. Many of the men were bright and college educated but none were trustworthy. Deep down Martha knew this. But they provided her an escape from her suffering mind.

Over and over, it seemed that no matter whom she hung out with, they would eventually “dump” her and at times even strand her miles away from where she lived. Martha’s blood would boil.

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She wanted to retaliate. Her head spun with anger. She rode the anger bus for months after these episodes. Each of these relationships afforded Martha only temporary relief from her feelings and thoughts of her low self-esteem, her lack of progress in her life and what she thought about how her parents would judge her. In the end, hooking up with these guys only led to further misery and obsessive anger, while leaving Martha's life in continuous turmoil and suffering.

When Martha was not mindlessly partying, she spent almost every waking hour suffering with feelings of guilt, resentment and anger. For moments Martha would temporarily realize that she was smart, personable and capable. These moments would quickly pass as Martha had almost become addicted to her repetitive thoughts of how far behind her peers she was and how it was too late to "catch up."

Martha's thinking patterns kept her stuck. Her internal negativity was endless. Martha suffered and made little progress toward her life goals because she dwelled on her assumptions about what others thought of her. This dynamic was only worsened by her anger toward the men who would eventually treat her badly. This cycle derailed Martha's life.

One night Martha was partying hard. She drank too much. Feeling that she could still safely drive home, she left the party early. She was pulled over for drunk driving. Among her penalties was court-ordered counseling. Martha had never gone to counseling before; she avoided it because she knew how emotional it would be for her. Now her freedom and privilege to drive was in the balance. She had to comply.

To Martha's surprise, she liked her counselor. In counseling Martha felt protected and safe to share her thoughts and feelings. Martha knew she was off track and not making progress toward her life goals and shared this with the counselor.

In counseling Martha learned about the mind and how internally focusing on thoughts and feelings was addicting and seldom led to being productive. She learned to separate her sense of her own identity and power away from the thoughts. She learned to commit her concentration to the present and she learned to commit to what she truly valued: education, interesting people, time with her family and making friends who led a good life.

We can see that Martha's bus rides reflected her negative thinking about herself and her beliefs about how others judged her. This bus ride sank her mood and fostered her anger, depression and low esteem to the point where she quit trying. Her growth and development was frozen as her mind took over. Counseling helped Martha refocus on what she valued and wanted in her life. Counseling helped her

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raise her awareness of the subterfuge that the bus rides caused. Counseling helped her stay present-focused and follow her plan.

Hopelessness Following Career and Family Losses

Having achieved success as a father and entrepreneur, Phil had once been mentally healthy. Unfortunately, he began to spend most of his time riding the bus. He spent his days dwelling on events that were out of his control, undermining his own mental health. Losing hours at a time, his focus exclusively attended to negative thoughts and feelings evoked by the events over which he lacked any influence.

Phil spent hours alone at his private office, staring at the wall, agonizing over his plight. The district court judge had just ruled on a temporary child custody order based on his ex-wife's false claims that he was an unfit father. His parenting time had been reduced from Thursday through Monday overnights to only Wednesday evening visits. He was outraged and a flood of negative thoughts permeated his mind. Incessant questions of, "Why me?" and, "How could this be happening?" began to dominate his every waking moment. He spent hours each day dwelling on the anger he felt towards the judge. He was exasperated at the injustice and his perceived helplessness. The trial for the final custody decision was six months away.

Phil sat for hours replaying the court proceedings in his head. He worried about the words he spoke in court. He wondered over and over if he should have said anything differently or done something else—something more could have been done, perhaps. "Maybe then the judge would have seen things clearly and I wouldn't be in this mess," he constantly thought to himself.

Phil was naturally a problem solver. However in this case, incapable of taking matters into his own hands and forging a solution, stuck in his perceived helplessness, he dug deeper and deeper into negative thoughts and anger. As he saw it, there was no way for him to solve this problem. As each week passed, his anger and frustration only grew. At the same time, he neglected the problems in his life that he could address and resolve.

Phil sank deeper into sadness and depression and avoided going home. Instead, he spent more hours alone at his office thinking about the injustice handed down by the court. He overanalyzed the court proceedings as if he could fix the past by thinking about it. If this was not enough, his ex-wife often thwarted his efforts to be

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a father by encouraging his teenage daughters to make plans with friends during evenings scheduled with him. Each time this happened, Phil was crushed. He became distraught because he would not see his daughters for yet another week. He stewed in his anger towards his ex-wife. On one level, he understood that his daughters loved him, so he felt secure about their love for him. And he knew it was normal for them to want to be involved with their friends and with school. On another level, however, he wondered why they were not defending their time with him, which saddened him.

To make matters worse, Phil's career and financial status were a disaster. Once a successful developer, Phil had over-extended himself by investing his personal fortune into developing luxury homes. The real estate and banking crash resulted in Phil's complete financial demise. Facing bankruptcy and no possibility of sustaining a business as a real estate developer, his mind spun out of control. He was distraught with worry. "Why me?" he wondered, while the thought, "I should have seen this coming," assaulted his thinking again and again. Phil was on many buses that made his life miserable. He was stuck.

Phil experienced bouts of depression. He brooded over many events that had occurred in his life where he had no control. When he wasn't grinding away over his children's custody, he would engross himself in thoughts related to his business failure, his inability to earn money, and his lost career, all of which led to greater emotional turmoil. He assumed people didn't want to be around him now that he was a failure. "Will I ever come out of this?" he wondered.

As Phil pulled away and began to isolate himself, Katie, his new wife, began to panic. A retired schoolteacher, Katie was upbeat and dynamic. Finding and marrying Phil, who she considered her soul mate, made Katie's life complete and meaningful. She begged him to pull himself together, to develop a plan to dig himself out, move forward, and appreciate what they still had and what they could rebuild.

Yet Phil remained frozen. When he looked at Katie, he saw himself as an even greater failure. He now believed he could never make her happy without the money that previously gave them the ability to buy things and do the activities they had enjoyed before his financial demise.

Phil was riding a bus of misery and was addicted to the ride. Most of his time was now spent dwelling on anger, guilt, worry and hopelessness.

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Phil exhausted himself with unproductive thoughts and depressed emotions. There was no resolution in sight. Phil's physician prescribed a mood stabilizer, a tranquilizer and sleeping pills. The medications dulled his thoughts, but Phil continued to dwell on the injustice of the system, as well as his professional failure, obsessing, "Why me?" Feeling worthless, he concluded he had no value to anyone. His life spun with despair.

Phil awoke in a hospital bed and learned that he had accidentally overdosed and nearly lost his life. His family thought he attempted to kill himself. Now he was humiliated—another bus ride—because he could not convince them that he did not intend to overdose. These thoughts and feelings of humiliation added to his other constant ruminations. In his perceived helpless state, he gave his wife his medications to dispense to him.

Although he had no intention of killing himself, life at this time did not appeal to Phil. He continued to isolate himself. He dropped deeper and deeper into depression.

Phil entered therapy with me after his release from the hospital. He attended sessions with his wife. In therapy, Phil and his wife, who was very supportive, learned how to get off the bus. Phil learned to focus on what he needed to do to live fully and to develop a new life plan. He learned to focus on spending time with Katie when they would visit his daughter. He learned to focus on what he could do to move forward in a new career. He began to be at peace, focusing on what was in his control to change his situation, rather than riding the bus, which offered no peace or resolution. When he began to dwell on something, he started calling it "the bus," which allowed him to get off of it and refocus on what he valued most. Katie and Phil also began to spend more time together and do things with friends.

Repeatedly focusing on what one's mind delivers can be devastating. Martha, Phil and Sarah became so over-focused and obsessed with anger, resentment, negative self-judgment and hopelessness that they did not want to live. Their work in therapy helped them get off the bus, not by focusing on the bus, but by helping them identify and focus on valued life plans, which helped them focus intensely on the present. One may choose to focus on worry, panic, stress, fear or anger as if they exist in the physical world but one must realize they are only in one's mind.

In the chapters to follow you will learn to identify and avoid the bus—or, when riding the bus, how to get off of it, and stay off as much as possible. You will learn about key elements and skills that will help you experience a more satisfying life that will increase peace of mind and joy. These skills and keys will help you avoid

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distressing thoughts and feelings allowing you to move forward toward a more fulfilling life.