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EPILOGUE

A GUIDE TO FUTURESELVES

Futureselves is the experience of thinking and feeling about oneself in the future. Everyone has Futureselves. People would find it impossible to live without representations of themselves in the future because Futureselves are inherent in the way the brain functions. People who have well-developed Futureselves are, however, likely to have an increased sense of agency, which leads to a purposeful life and improved psychological wellbeingⁱ. Put another way, by having a clear vision of one's self in the future, a person is likely to find meaning in the pursuit of that future. Futureselves are, therefore, a central road to mental wellness and a feeling of fulfilment.

Self-development is the process of moving into the future and progressing toward an improved version of one's self. In line with this definition, Futureselves is the science of self-development, bringing to the forefront our attention that the future, not the past, is where one's focus should reside if one wants to maximise their human potential.

The problem is that not everyone is aware of their Futureselves. Few people have gone through a systematic process of defining appropriate Futureselves to guide their life. As a result, many people do not benefit from the sense of purpose and agency that arises from conscious awareness of well-formulated Futureselves.

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The Basis for Futureselves

Futureselves are central to our human experience and govern what we attend to, what we become, and how we define ourselves. Futureselves are at the heart of the science of the human experience. To understand how this science translates into a philosophy for living, we must look to the psychologists and philosophers who have incorporated the core idea of Futureselves into psychological theory and therapy. As you will learn in this book, Futureselves is not a new concept; instead, it is a concept that has a long history. Futureselves have long contributed to our understanding of what it means to

human. Psychologists have known about the potential benefits of the application of Futureselves within psychological interventions for well over a century.

The journey toward Futureselves should be systematic and grounded in self-knowledge and self-acceptance, two things that are critical to creating meaning and fulfilment in one's life. The self-development journey begins with acquiring the knowledge of what a person is and what they can become. This book will first explore what it means to have a self so as to provide a solid foundation for your journey towards understanding and applying Futureselves. I will then discuss Futureselves in the context of history, neuroscience, pharmacology, and evolution before moving on to the practical application of Futureselves for self-development.

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Part One: Defining the Self

To understand Futureselves, one must first appreciate the nature of the self. Many self-help and applied psychology books gloss over conversations about the self for good reasons. Despite being the foundation of human psychology, defining the self is a rabbit hole in which few dare to plunge. Discussions of the self invariably touch on notions of what it means to be human, giving rise to questions about beliefs, the benefit and role of meritocracy, and how to implement justice. These are merely three of the curly issues related to the self that many psychologists prefer to overlook.

If I have any hope of conveying what Futureselves are and how they might unlock the key to self-development, I must, however, start by defining the notion of a self. Rather than ignore what the self may or may not be, I need to address philosophical and scientific questions head-on and provide a definition of the self that is fit for the purpose of providing people with a sense of control in their life and charting a course toward an ideal state.

The time has come for the psychology of self-development to acknowledge and accept the nature of the self. Continuing to avoid these issues is to do a disservice to the discipline and mislead practitioners and those hoping to apply psychological principles to improve their lives. Without defining the self, a psychological theory is without foundation. Any theory applied to self-

development presupposes what the self is and how the self operates. A model of the self is the foundation of self-development, and readers require an explicit definition of the self to examine the foundation of any self-development theory.

Free will and consciousness

Futureselves adopts the radical but well-supported notion that the self is without free will. Given the theory draws on over a century of work on the self of the future, paradoxically, *Futureselves* is heavily influenced by recent neuroscience, indicating the absence of a self in the traditional sense while maintaining a focus on the practical outcome of enhancing self-development. *Futureselves* will attempt to explain why free will is unlikely and what this means for self-development—turning attention away from free will as an essential component of self-development and refocus the discussion on the role of meaning and happiness. I will argue that life outcomes like meaning are not dependent on free will but are reliant on a sense of agency, which is vital to psychological health and growth. Crossing the paradox of free will is mentally challenging. Many significant scientific breakthroughs have nevertheless come through embracing seemingly contradictory ideas and the adoption of a paradox mindsetⁱⁱ. I believe one can best understand the concept of free will by embracing the paradox between the experience of living and the reality of life, an idea I will discuss in this book.

I will present the idea that the self is best understood through reference to two perspectives—a subjective self, the 'I' that has the appearance of thinking and has the feeling of responsibility for doing, and the objective self, the 'Me' that is more of an object acting in the world. Being able to distinguish between the subjective and objective self is crucial to understanding the nature of the self. The difference manifests in the reality of the self as a biological object being separate from the conscious experience one has of one's life. Part One of this book will argue that recognising these two ways of understanding the self has implications for how one can think about self-development. These implications give rise to the importance of one being consciously aware of their *Futureselves*.

Part Two: The Basis for Futureselves

Scientific markers

At its foundation, psychology is an extension and application of neuroscience. Any psychological theory aiming to be more than just an idea must have a connection to neuroscience. Knowing the scientific nature of the self is vital for developing a scientific approach to personal development. A scientific approach is more than wishful thinking. It reflects how humans experience growth, why this growth is meaningful, and how the sense of meaning is at the heart of significant positive psychological outcomes.

There appears to be an underlying brain mechanism that links Futureselves to action, and this provides more substantial neurological support for the idea of Futureselves and how best to activate them for behavioural change. To be a robust scientific theory, Futureselves needs to demonstrate evolutionary adaptability, as well as be able to be described by neurological processes. While it is beyond this book's scope to delve deep into neuroscience, I need to define some key terms used in neuroscience to help the reader better understands the neurological base of Futureselves.

The history of psychology

As a psychological paradigm, Futureselves is not new. The heavy intellectual lifting of psychologists who have come before me provides much of the scientific backing for the Futureselves framework. As an applied psychologist, I implement existing research-supported theory into novel frameworks to solve modern problems. A lineage of thought on the importance of the self of the future is easily recognisable by examining related theories that precede Futureselves. Therefore, I discuss the work of past psychologists and provide background on conceptualisations of the self of the future. I stand on the shoulders of giants in the field in drawing lines of thought together when looking at the central role that Futureselves has in psychology.

Possible selves

Having discussed some of the research and theory that underpins Futureselves, I turn attention to a model of the self in the future that is most applicable to self-development—possible selves. The theory of possible selves is one of the most useful frameworks for understanding the self in the future. By combining possible selves with theoretical aspects from other frameworks that discuss a self in the future, I aim to build a comprehensive approach to personal development, which I term the *Futureselves framework*.

Before I get into the process by which Futureselves aids self-development, I will take a step back and review the extensive body of work on possible selves which underpins the application of Futureselves. I draw primarily on the theory of possible selves to advance an approach to self-development consistent with the reality of the self and the empirical evidence on achieving desired future states. To complete my objectives, I will supplement research and theory on possible selves and other self-development theories with psychological findings on motivation, goal setting, and performance psychology.

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Part Three: The Futureselves Framework

The remainder of the book is about how to use the Futureselves framework to develop compelling goals that capture the type of life a person wants and help create a sense of agency that will result in enhanced wellbeing. The development of the Futureselves framework for personal growth has four parts.

The first part is to explore what Futureselves to pursue. Before one can define their Futureselves, one must engage in deep and considered introspection on what matters in their life, individual differences, and the significant influence of past life events on what a person wishes to become. There is a systematic way of exploring one's past and present to establish Futureselves. I

cover some fundamental techniques that I have found helpful in my practice. These techniques are at the base of the Futureselves framework.

The second part of the Futureselves approach is selecting and elaborating compelling Futureselves that will form goal states to pursue. Comprehensive goal states, represented as Futureselves, will cover life domains like family and work. Futureselves are vivid, detailed, and associated with emotions and relationships to significant people in one's life. I will discuss the importance of examining the perceived likelihood one has of achieving their Futureselves and the central role that hopes and fears, together with the related likelihood of realising these hopes and fears, have on how Futureselves drive self-development.

Having defined suitable Futureselves that one will pursue, one is then ready to look at how to turn these Futureselves into goals. The third part of the Futureselves approach covers how to set goals that lead to successful outcomes and create behavioural patterns that ensure one is consistently making progress toward one's Futureselves. Behavioural patterns, not free will, are crucial to achieving desired future states.

Obtaining Futureselves is difficult. Those who commit to their Futureselves will likely face many challenges and obstacles as they attempt to achieve their desired states. Therefore, the final part of the Futureselves framework covers techniques people can use when the journey towards their Futureselves becomes difficult. I look at ways people can overcome feelings of doubt to stay on course toward their hoped-for future.

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How to Use This Book

Applied psychology is the process of taking evidence-based techniques and sound theory to provide people with tools and frameworks they can use to make the changes they need or want to enhance their life. With a basis in psychology, self-help literature often shares this aim of wanting to improve people's lives. Still, even as theories are expounded and publishers release titles claiming to facilitate wellness and fulfilment, psychological health for many continues to deteriorate. Depression is on the

rise within specific cohorts, and anxiety is increasingⁱⁱⁱ, resulting in many people who have overdosed on self-help with little to show for their addiction.

Futureselves is not strictly a psychological text and is certainly not what one would consider standard self-help. With the explosion of science, theory, and practice pertaining to the self of the future in the past twenty years, there is now a need to connect past theory and research with the present to provide an integrated model of Futureselves. This integration involves linking psychological research on the self of the future with a modern approach to the process of self-development. *Futureselves* attempts to combine both the science and practice of psychology to present a framework for living a meaningful life by having a clear purpose, leading ultimately to improved psychological wellness.

Futureselves has the somewhat ambitious aim of being both a guide for developing a self-directed intervention (i.e., self-help) and a text that a helping professional, such as psychotherapists, can use to integrate concepts related to Futureselves into their practice. I have long felt that the divide between the popular press and psychotherapy has done an extreme disservice to helping professionals and those undertaking a self-directed approach to self-development. If there is a science to self-development, then this science should not only be the domain of helping professionals. While I am firmly in favour of people working with a trained professional to achieve their goals, this is not always possible or feasible. Scientific self-development should not be the luxury of the privileged few.

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Reading for Interest & Application

While my preference is that all readers will want to read the book cover to cover, the reality is that some sections of the book are more applicable to certain types of readers.

Part One of the book is especially relevant to academics and those wanting to appreciate the arguments for the absence of free will and definitions of the self. Some readers will find the notion of the absence of free will as being core to the science of self-development a contradictory idea.

Working through that paradox takes time, so don't worry if, on first reading, you find discussions of the self a bit confusing. What I aim to do is build our shared understanding of the self from a scientific foundation. My goal is to establish the case for the importance of self-development while highlighting that it is the feeling of self-development, not the self, as a causal force that is the crucial factor to improving one's quality of life.

Part Two is perhaps of most interest to academics and curious practitioners interested in the supporting evidence for Futureselves in neuroscience, evolution, and cognitive psychology. In this section, I delve into the evidence that supports Futureselves being more than just a theory with practical application.

For practitioners, and those purely interested in the application of Futureselves, either in their practice or for self-direct self-development, you may, however, wish to move directly to Part Three of the book. This section covers the application of Futureselves and discusses a framework for integrating Futureselves into psychotherapies and general self-development. Readers that have their interest in the theory behind Futureselves sparked by reading the practice section may wish to read earlier sections of the book to delve more deeply into the underlying theory.

The key takeaway is that one can read *Futureselves* in a modular fashion. While there are links between each part of the book, the chapters' structure is such that readers can go directly to the section most relevant to their interest in Futureselves.

Given that I have written *Futureselves* to appeal to a broad audience, the text interchanges first and third person. The purpose of this is to clarify that the methodologies discussed are applicable for both self-development and for helping professionals who guide others toward their Futureselves. The book also contains a range of case studies from my practice as a psychologist. I have changed all names in the case studies, modified cases, and removed identifiers.

References

I have provided references sparingly to direct readers to source text for key points made. As the intended audience for *Futureselves* includes practitioners, academics, and those interested in self-directed self-development, I have followed a hybrid method of referencing:

- A reference is used only once in a given paragraph or section, indicating where a passage of work or series of ideas has originated.
- I have not provided references for general concepts discussed, such as biological definitions.
- I have not referenced my PhD. However, I have derived and retrieved much of the work on the self and possible selves from my thesis.
- I have provided references where I have cited specific studies or quotes.
- While most references are academic, where appropriate, I have included articles from non-academic sources. The criteria I have used for non-academic references is where the source is credible (such as scientific magazines), or practical (relating Futureselves to self-development), or where I believe the substance of the research or ideas is well covered.

I hope that I have found a happy medium with the referencing, but I am sure there might be too much for some readers and not enough for others. For those interested in more studies related to Futureselves, I have set up a dedicated website to capture essential work in the area. The website has links to the research and research labs involved in the work on Futureselves or topics related to the self in the future. The website is www.futureselveslab.com.

END NOTES

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