

Healing my Heart and Finding Joy

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With Heather Hoyt (in italics)

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Introduction

I sat at the table with a range of thoughts and feelings racing through my mind. I knew that something was wrong: that I wasn't thinking straight and that I probably needed help. I had been talking to my husband, my newborn baby asleep in the other room. Our discussion had started off normal enough, but by now my tone was agitated, loud, upset. I can best describe what I felt as pain: deep emotional pain that seemed devoid of any logical sense and solution. My whole being wanted to run from the pain, to fight it and make it go away. I was so upset and frustrated that I pounded on the large table in front of me. The action didn't make sense, but I felt like I had to do something, anything, to relieve the pain.

This wasn't the first-time circumstance put me in a similar state, but at this certain point, it was the most overwhelming and tumultuous I had ever felt before. To me, this was the starting point of years of being unable to properly regulate my emotions. During this time, I added two more boys, raised my three sons, moved eight times, started a business, and watched my husband go through graduate school while often working part-time. It was a turbulent time in my life: but even after life finally settled down, when we had a permanent home, and stable job, I still found myself at times at odds with my emotions.

My heart was broken. Not because of lost love, but because my emotions betrayed me and led me down paths that I would never consciously choose for myself. My heart needed healing.

I don't have a reason or a cause: I've read about mental disorders, gone to therapy and researched on my own. And ultimately the reason was unimportant. What was important was learning the skills and techniques that I need to go from being overwhelmed by emotion and experiencing pain, to experiencing a calm and happy life. And the hardest and most important step: to learn how to love myself and practice self-compassion. I learned truths and practices that help me heal.

This is a discussion of what I've found that worked for me, what I still continue to work on so I do not find myself in a place of overwhelming emotional pain. I'm not a psychologist: I haven't thoroughly researched everything in this book and I don't have tons of factual information to back

it up. It's just me and my experience as I worked through one of the largest and most terrifying problems I have faced.

I walked out of my house, out of my yard, and I collapsed onto a piece of sand far enough away that I couldn't hear the cries of my children; I could only hear my own cries as I sobbed so hard that my face started to tingle, my thoughts racing in so many different directions, eventually spiraling downward until the only conclusion was despair, a feeling without hope completely.

That is my moment that I always remember when I think about the mental health issues I have dealt with: sitting in the sand and sobbing and feeling like the world was closing in around me in darkness.

Over the years, I have not really dealt with persistent sadness or depression, but a sometimes intense roller coaster of various emotions that has seemed unrelenting, confusing, and simply hard.

While the roller coaster hasn't ever completely stopped, like my sister, I have found better ways to deal with my own thoughts and emotions, and most of all, to find a hope in the despair that never goes away. With that hope, I keep going and have been able to find an intense happiness in contrast to that intense despair. And the intense happiness is much more lasting.

I'm glad that my sister has let me add some of my own words; we are similar in a lot of ways (though not completely the same), and often our journeys have intersected in phone calls, emails, and supporting and understanding one another.

Understanding Emotion

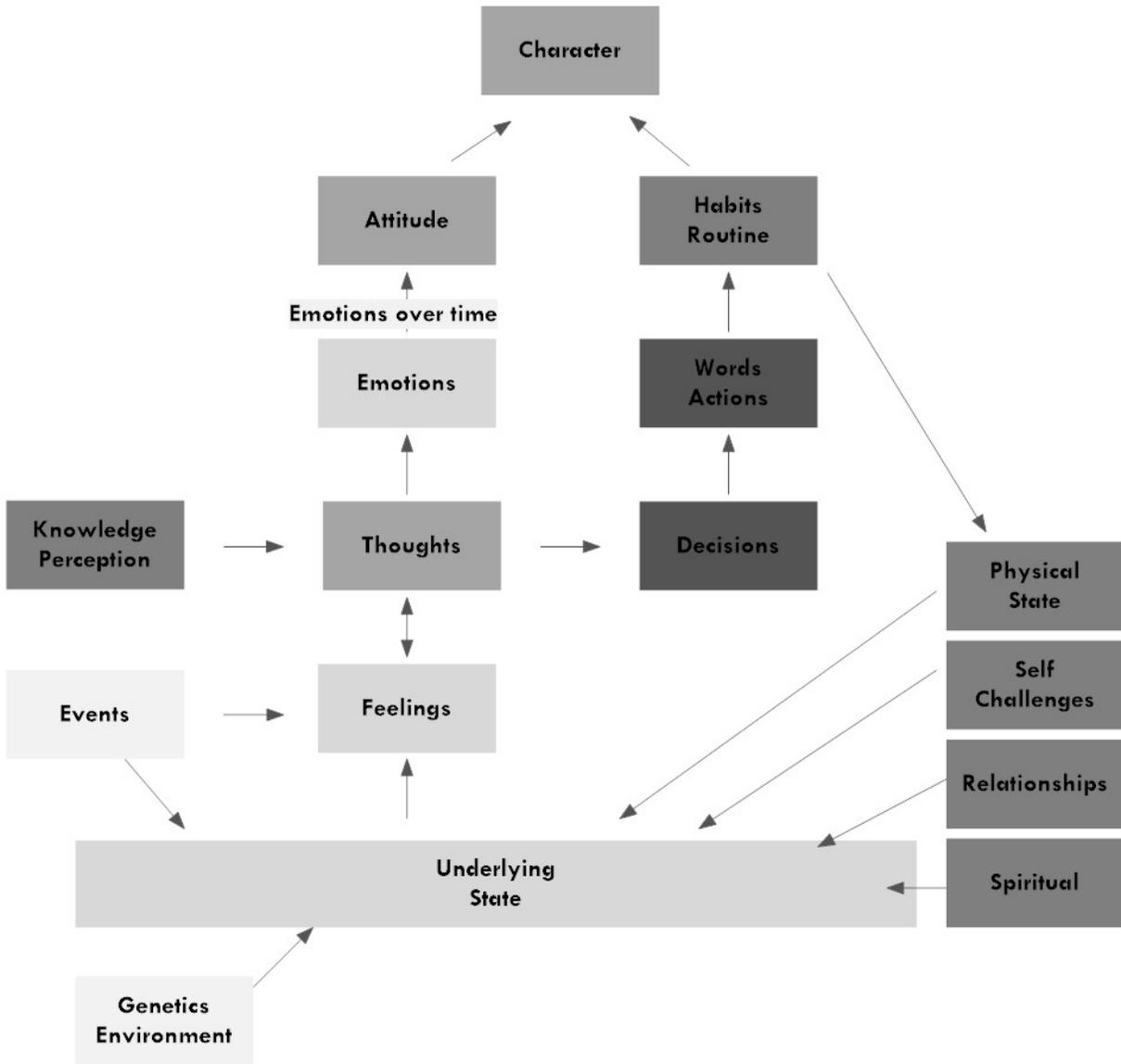
Feelings are often difficult to explain. I can often identify them, but any attempt at explanation is usually inadequate to fully express what I feel. I say I feel, “love” or “sadness” but a simple word has little to do with the reality of the experience. Sadness can be a temporary warning as I stub my toe or a depth of sorrow that has me crumbled in on myself and past a point where life seems worth living. *Words are not feelings.*

Feelings are a physical, chemical event in my brain and body. My feelings form a half of my consciousness, a half that helps me interpret my internal environment, understand morality and empathize with others. Without feelings, good and bad would be nearly meaningless, and experience would be bland. Feelings help me stay motivated and validated. Feelings bring connection, engagement, and joy, enabling me to communicate with others.

The other half of my consciousness is my thoughts and rational mind. Thoughts interpret the external world, solve problems, and bring the coolness of logic. With thoughts, things make rational sense. My environment is put into order, and I have the tools needed to function, live and interact.

My thoughts and feelings work together to create my consciousness. Within this consciousness are my emotions. My emotions are my primary feelings combined with the interpretation of my thoughts. Emotion is the strongest experience, both mind and feeling working together. I am the sum of my feelings and thoughts, working together to create my emotions and then character.

What exactly makes up my self, my character? I created this diagram, not as absolute truth, just as a way of thinking about what makes me me, and how feelings, thoughts, and emotions work together to form my character.



At the bottom, I started with my genetics and environment that form my basic underlying state. From the time I was an infant, I had this sense of self, and from that came my feelings. Feelings turned into thoughts, and sometimes back into feelings. As I grew, I experienced a wide range of events, gained knowledge and perceptions and began to experience a wide range of emotions. These emotions over time formed my attitudes.

My thoughts lead to my decisions and my words and actions. From these, I created my habits and routines. My habits and routines create what my physical state was, what challenges I created for myself, the relationships I developed, and my spirituality. These, in turn, have a direct influence on my underlying state.

My habits and routines, combined with my attitude form my character. My character is who I am on an ongoing basis. My underlying state is how I get there. Ideally, I want my underlying state to be one of happiness, and joy. So how exactly do I change and mold my character and influence my underlying state?

Each box is a different gradient. The darker the color, the easier it is to control and change. My decisions and words and actions are quite easy to determine and change. From there, I can change my knowledge and perceptions, my habits and routines, and to continue to influence all aspects of my self.

Often, I try to directly influence my underlying state or feelings or emotions: “Be happy,” declared with the force of a drill sergeant, rarely actually brings happiness. My underlying state, feelings, and emotions are often difficult to directly control.

Instead, I can try to influence my decisions, my actions, and even my thoughts. For instance, I put a small smile on my face, I think of an event in my life that brought me happiness. Usually, I start to feel happy, creating a pleasant emotion even if I didn’t quite feel that way before.

My underlying state has a lot of influence on how I function as a person, and ideally, I want a healthy, vibrant state, one of primarily peace and happiness. But this doesn’t start by directly molding my character: it starts with simple decisions and actions that work together in a circular manner to lift my underlying state.

There is this thing called the paradox of hedonism that basically envelops a lot of different philosophies on how pursuing our own happiness seems impossible because a lot of time when you actively want to be happy and try to make yourself happy, you end of failing completely. I think part of this idea comes from this basic idea is that one of our greatest desires is to control our emotions—and we find ourselves simply failing at it.

I remember first reading that our thoughts control our emotions—that phrase is understated, but it offered a glimmer of hope that I had more control of my life than I thought I had.

I can at least direct my thoughts, if I can’t control them completely. And I can control what I do.

Emotions can be terrifying because they seem so outside of our control—but they aren’t, not completely. Because we do have control over our decisions. I have to remind myself of that someday—often we give up that control in order to just go with the flow of life. But I can choose. I can choose something. Maybe I can’t choose happiness directly, but I can choose something that will get me there.

Emotions do not have to overwhelm me to a point where they control my life. I’m going to feel intensely—I’m going to feel emotions that I don’t want to. But my life is more than that.

I recently was trying to fix a toy—it was not a simple task, but at first I was excited for the challenge. Except for I ended up fixating on getting this toy fixed, and then when I couldn’t do, I felt a very large amount of frustration. I knew I didn’t have to keep working on this toy. My baby was crying and wanted attention, but I was choosing to ignore her. My kids were wasting their time. I had other things to do. But I wanted to get the toy fixed. Frustration grew to intense anger—and the mixture of frustration and anger usually results in throwing things. I broke the toy even more. The irony of it? My two-year-old broke it originally because he was frustrated and threw it. It soured the day, and it is a moment I am not proud o. But there were so many steps in that moment where I could have chosen differently: I could have stopped working on it. I could have taken a break. I could have asked for help. I could avoided the damage to the toy—and more importantly, the damage to myself and my children. I’ve had similar experiences that have not been intense at all—because I chose to

walk away. What I couldn't choose to do is keep working on that toy and do it happily—that was impossible. A lot of times deep intensity of frustration comes when I'm trying to do the impossible—but I can choose to stop trying, a choice that usually comes before the emotion.

Exercise:

Think of a time where you experienced a powerful emotion.

- What was the event?
- What were the initial feelings?
- What were your interpretations and thoughts regarding the event and feelings?
- What are your emotions after interpretation?
- How did your body respond?
- What were your actions or decisions?
- How did it affect your character, what were the aftereffects?

Vibrant Experience

Feelings by themselves are generally benign. In some ways, they are not positive or negative, and very few are inherently bad. When combined with my thought patterns, they are transformed into emotions. These emotions can be good or bad, pleasant or horrific, stagnant or seemingly out of my control.

Feelings of fear, disgust, anger, sadness, anticipation, surprise, trust, and anxiety often occur to me unbidden. There is no reason to attempt to control these unbidden feeling, or even sometimes to explain or understand them. What I can control are my thoughts, the thoughts I infuse into feelings to create emotion, and other feelings that occur from my direct actions.

Neutral feelings are generally transformed into positive or negative emotions. For example, I might feel anxious about giving a talk in front of a group. The anxiety can push me to be on my best behavior and perform well. But it can also result in total shutdown and even failure to give the talk.

Negative emotions bring confusion, darkness, and feel heavy. They often compound the initial feeling and create negative feedback that brings more pain and emotional discomfort. They are unbalanced and overpowering. For instance, a feeling of surprise can lead to anger, aggression, and rage.

Negative emotions are brought on when initial feelings are rejected when I just want it to go away. This non-acceptance can happen in several ways. Initially, I might simply ignore or discount the feelings and try to pretend they don't exist.

I might also fight against my feelings, be afraid of them and try to stop them. I often try to stop feelings because I fear them from past experiences and think that they can become dangerous. The very act of stopping or fighting the feeling gives it negative strength.

I can also over-identify with them and give them more value and thought process than they initially deserve. Over-identification means associating with the feeling too closely. It can lead to thinking about it too much, blowing it out of proportion, and allowing it to take me over. Rumination, or thinking about the feeling or problem for a long period of time, and over-analyzing feelings can be very damaging. I believe this is a form of rejection: I don't accept the feeling for what it initially is, I try to change it.

Often, when I reject my feelings they come back stronger and with more intensity: and usually with less effectiveness toward the original purpose. I might feel angry at an injustice done to me: but if I try to disregard my anger and push it away, it will come back with more force and intensity: and sometimes the actual injustice is forgotten in the wave of overpowering emotion.

My feelings are normal, healthy reactions, and are only bad when imbalanced. Depression, anger, anxiety, and sadness are all normal and are only negative if they overpower me.

Positive emotions feel light, and bring me love and joy. Even sadness can bring love, as I experience compassion with another person. Anxiety can prepare me for a joyful experience if properly expressed. Sometimes it's hard to see how my feelings that first bring feelings of pain

can lead to joy, but it is possible. All feelings can lead to a calm, balanced life, it often just takes time.

The key is acceptance. Negative reactions often happen because I am trying to deal with the emotion and make it go away, but without really accepting what I am feeling. When I genuinely, radically, accept what I feel without too much judgment, that's when feelings can become positive emotions.

When I accept my feelings, I validate myself. I tell myself that my feelings are real, they are okay, and I am capable of dealing with them. Validation can be powerful: simple recognition for what is happening with an understanding that it is natural, controllable and normal.

Acceptance and validation is the first step for self-compassion. Self-compassion is simply being kind to myself and will be discussed later.

It's easier to accept feelings and deal with them than deal with heavy emotions that have gotten out of control.

Sometimes it is difficult to accept what I feel. Often, I have feelings that are contradictory in nature, or against what I think rationally. This is normal, and nothing is wrong when I feel that way. I don't have to change myself if I feel feelings I don't exactly want to feel. It is just a normal part of life. If they are contradictory, after acknowledging each feeling, I do have to decide which one to act on. Double-mindedness and fighting with myself is damaging. Pick one, move forward, and don't live in regret.

Some feelings are painful and cause sorrow. Life isn't always happy and fun, it can hurt in a very real way. How will accepting these feelings lead to positive emotion? I like to think about crying. Crying is expressing raw emotion, and I always feel better after I cry. The pain is turned to relief with an expression of the feeling.

Crying can happen with all sorts of emotions, even ones of joy. Often, when I get emotional in a positive manner, it isn't because things are bright and perfect. The tears can actually be from suffering: from empathizing with pain, grief, for recognizing that life isn't perfect, that I or someone else made a mistake. Then, what makes these tears of joy rather than sorrow?

It's that the suffering was worth it. I overcame that mistake, that set back. It was worth it. I acknowledged the feeling and used it to become better: correct an injustice, strengthen my resolve or faith, and help another person.

Probably the most poignant example of this is Christ. I often cry when I think of his suffering, death, and resurrection. I cry because He did suffer because it was hard. And I rejoice because He overcame it, and He can help me overcome! That the suffering wasn't what defined Him: but that He did it out of love, and He overcame it.

This feeling of positive emotion first comes from radical acceptance of all my feelings, even if they at first seem painful and unpleasant. Vibrant experience is not the lack of feeling, or only feeling positive feelings: it is feeling a range and variety of feelings. Those feelings enable me to grow, overcome, and connect with others.

Joy can be both sorrow and happiness. I don't need to just get through what I might initially see as a negative feeling. I can live through it, embrace it and even enjoy it. For the majority of my life, I have had the goal to get stuff done, don't make too many mistakes, and be happy. Lately, I've realized that instead of trying to be happy all the time, I can accept the wide range of feelings and moods I have. Instead of just a happy life, I can have a joyful life: a life full of a wide range of feelings and experiences.

The wide range of emotions I feel can help me connect with others. Connection and love is the ultimate internal need of each of us. This connection can only happen with feelings and emotions, expressed appropriately. I need to allow myself to be vulnerable and open with those that are close to me: it is how I can connect and truly feel loved and appreciated.

Once I understand how feeling a wide range of emotions is healthy, I can start to use visualization as a tool to create a vibrant experience and joy. There is power in visualization. I can think about how I want my emotional self to be, and be able to see how to express feelings in an appropriate manner, to have better balance and love.

Visualization, study, and meditation can lead to a higher power and purpose in my life. With purpose, I have grounded through a wide range of experiences and feelings: they aren't without value. Purpose often comes from religious beliefs and is useful to help understand and regulate potentially negative emotions. I can develop purpose in my life with God.

One technique I find useful is to imagine the whole landscape of my life instead of just one specific event or feeling. Individual feelings do not make up the sum of my existence: but I can easily become so distracted that I forget about more than a single feeling. Stepping back and looking at more than just the current state can help see even difficult emotions in a positive manner.

As I accept my emotions in a healthy manner, I start to develop a positive sense of self. My self is more than just feelings. When I deal with feelings in a negative manner, my sense of self becomes entwined in the emotions I develop. Dealing with them positively involves self-compassion: and self-compassion is a powerful step to take to find acceptance and joy.

My feelings, no matter what they are, can help me to become a joyful, vibrant individual. Acceptance and self-compassion can help any feeling, no matter how difficult, change into a positive emotion. From there, I can have connection with others, overcome any challenge and create an emotional life that is full of joy.

For all the times I have felt sadness, frustration, or anger, there have been a whole lot more moments where I have felt intense happiness, joy, and content. But I forget to recognize what I'm feeling when I'm happy—I take happiness for granted often and I think it's normal. And then I think that somehow feeling anger and frustration and sadness are wrong. But they aren't.

I recently started to track my moods and I've been doing it for over three months. At the end of each day, I rank how the day felt. Awful days are days full of depression or despair; excellent days are generally full of joy and happiness.

I thought that how my day went—awful, good, bad, meh, whatever—would be more dependent on what happened during the day than it actually was. Some days I said were good even though they

were hard and I felt something like sadness or anger. It mattered a whole lot more what I did with that feeling than whether I felt it or not.

And, much to my surprise, the great majority of days were simply good. I was generally happy, and I think I always have been, but I got so focused on negative moments that I failed to notice my own happiness.

I found a greater ability to discover those good days—not that everything went well, but that I could control my own responses. I could have a hard time and be okay with it. I could cry during the day and still mark it as a good day at the end of it. Not everything needed to be happy—but I could still recognize happiness when it happened.

I once broke a computer at work—I was trying to fix it, and it ended up broken instead. There was an intense wave of guilt and confusion that came after I broke it—what was I going to do? I wanted to go back and change the past so I couldn't feel what I was feeling, but that was impossible. I couldn't fix it. I had to deal with it. So I sat there for a moment. I sat there and I felt awful. And then I got up, told someone what I had done, and we got help. The computer got fixed. I let the emotions happen and then I got up and went to work.

Exercise:

- Identify one feeling that you tend to reject and fight.
- Take a moment to recall an experience of this feeling, or wait until the feeling surfaces in daily living.
- When it comes, instead of the initial rejection and fight, accept and experience the feeling.
- Feel it, but do not act on it. Try to feel the feeling, without acting for a long period.
- Calm any internal dialogue or judgment about the feeling, and have complete acceptance.
- Notice how accepting and just feeling affects you.

Be Wise

In a difficult emotional situation, I have several options. Let's say I'm trying to get out the door to drop my children off at school. My children are not yet ready and are not being cooperative. We are going to almost certainly be late if they do not hurry up.

I could lose my temper; yell at the kids to hurry up. I might get so upset that they break into tears and refuse to cooperate, furthering my frustration. I could be late, and then beat myself up over being late, yet again. Many of these types of actions are acting on fear, bad rationalization and are reactive.

Instead, I can try to approach a situation with a wise mind. This acknowledges both the feelings I feel and uses rational thinking. Basically, I think through things and find healthy ways to get control of my life. It's not about being perfect or avoiding mistakes, but trying to be closer to who I want to be while acknowledging that I am human. I might decide that it's okay to be late today, and not stress it, or I could find a little game to motivate the kids to get ready by themselves quickly.

Creating a wise mind acknowledges both my emotions and the reasonable mind, and learning to be effective; to do what works. Wise mind combines both intuition and morality to make appropriate decisions.

To develop a wise mind, and live up to the wise expectations I set for myself, I can use the following steps: observe, validate, avoid judgment, describe the situation, set wise expectations, decided on appropriate action, and go for it.

Observing allows me to start seeing the situation correctly. When I observe, it's often helpful to try to see outside myself: like I'm watching my life on a TV screen or as an outside observer. I can observe the situation, and observe how I feel and how I'm reacting.

After observation, I can validate myself. Validation is simply a matter of acknowledging my feelings. When I feel validated, I know that my feelings and emotions are heard, normal, and within my control. My feelings are valid and understandable. Validation can simply be a matter of saying: I feel frustrated right now because I think I am going to be late and the children are being slow. It goes back to the previous chapter of not fighting my emotions, but being open to that experience.

When I am validated, I can take control of my behavior, and experience emotions fully. It is a primary step to establishing a normal life and to be able to solve everyday problems. It leads towards fulfillment and connection.

After validation comes a lack of blame and judgment. It's easy to judge and blame myself: If I just got ready a bit earlier...when will I ever learn...I shouldn't have done that...I should be able to do this...or even shame: I'm a terrible person. Blame and judgment will not lead me to where I need to go.

Speaking truth instead can be a powerful remedy. It is objective and leaves the door open for appropriate actions. Saying, "I'm frustrated because we are late," is a perfectly valid, truthful statement. Saying, "I hate being late all the time...I'm never going to do this again...It's all his

fault," are not truth, but rather my judgment upon the situation. They are subjective statements, judgments I often heap on myself and others.

During a difficult situation, it is very helpful to describe the situation to myself, using the tool of speaking truth. I get a clearer picture of what is going on. And there is no reason why I can't say aloud what I see going on: it can be very helpful to the people around me to know how I see things.

After describing the situation, I can set a wise expectation for myself and decide on the appropriate action. Wise expectations are developed when I balance what I feel with what needs to happen. I acknowledge that I'm not perfect, I have limitations, but I'm still going to try my best. My expectations and course of action are wise: I don't make everything perfect, I just do what I can.

Expectations by themselves can be quite damaging. When things don't live up to what I expect, then I'm frustrated. When I set expectations about a situation, other people, results or other events that I have little direct control over, it's easy to get frustrated about life. Expectations about outside circumstances should be entirely abandoned.

Wise expectations though are entirely focused inward. I expect myself to work hard, keep a good attitude, set limits for myself or those under my care, and act or think in a certain way, I can usually follow through with these expectations regardless of outside circumstance. Setting and following through these expectations brings a sense of power and control over life.

For instance, I can go on a day trip to an amusement park with my family. If I set the expectation that my trip would go a certain way: the children would be extremely happy, I get to ride these rides in this order, or everything will just go perfectly, I am probably going to be frustrated in some way. I set the expectation that I will have a good time, and be flexible and happy. It might rain, a child might throw a fit, and my favorite ride might be closed. But all those circumstances do not prevent me from being flexible and having a good time.

When setting wise expectations, it is often necessary to realize my limitations and seek help. I can trust others and humbly acknowledge my own weakness. When other people help me, I can grow in ways that would not be possible otherwise. I cannot do it alone, especially when I am struggling with powerful emotions. I need the support of others around us and can foster relationships with the others that I can draw on for emotional support. It is helpful to recognize and ask for the help I need from others to thrive. Don't just look to be okay, but look to truly thrive and be happy. Identify the people that you can rely on in your life when you need help.

When setting expectations for myself, avoid fear, and replace it with daring. Fear is a fusion with my thoughts, getting stuck or avoiding an experience or rationalizing my bad behavior. Daring is disengagement from unhelpful feelings and acceptance that I might feel some discomfort. It's not seeking the easy way, but having firm values and action on realistic goals.

When I am deciding on my course of action, I also can remember that just because I feel a certain way doesn't mean I need to act on the feelings. I can validate and feel my feelings and still make effective decisions that not always act on my feelings. When I analyze my feeling, I can frequently do the exact opposite: and doing so can give me an added measure of control and growth.

After my expectations and course of action are set, I simply need to act, to participate and go for it. Because I have taken the preceding steps, I know my actions are wise and proper. I'm no longer reacting, I'm acting wisely.

When I am working with others, is often more difficult to work with emotions because I cannot change others. Perhaps the best way to be wise is to remember the serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

Self-compassion is a natural result of acting wisely. I treat myself with self-respect and love: as I would treat a dear friend or family member. An effective way to develop self-compassion is to pretend that I am another person that needs help...what would I do if I was a loved one instead of myself? Can I treat myself the same way?

Having self-compassion and a wise mind does not mean I no longer care about the mistakes I make or that I am no longer striving for growth. Instead, I look at the gap between where I am and where I want to be, and I take appropriate steps to close that gap.

There is resilience in a wise mind and self-compassion. At times, I fall apart or fail. A wise mind enables me to not be too hard on myself, pick myself back up and continue to try. It provides the resilience I need to keep going no matter what.

As feelings and thoughts work together, and they are united and equal, I experience pleasant and balanced emotions. My life will feel like is in my control. Giving in, ignoring or fighting feelings often lead to an out of control feelings. But living with a balanced mindset creates a unified being, working together to create emotions that are entirely within my control and positive.

Ultimately, I always have control over my life: and the best way to gain control is to believe I have it. As I believe in my ability to control my thoughts, emotions and actions and environment, I can be empowered to act in a way that will enable me to have that control and be resilient.

We can choose and change our expectations—and that is a whole lot easier than changing how you feel during an emotional moment. During one vacation, my expectations were appropriately low—I honestly had the expectation that the whole vacation might be a completely disaster. It wasn't my hope, but I understood it was a possibility, and so anything above that was a success for me. The vacation was much more enjoyable that way.

I also don't expect my children to clean up after themselves. I don't expect that I'm going to be on top of it every day. I don't expect that winter will end in March—I expect it will end sometime in May or June. I try to expect that everyone makes mistakes. I try to expect that I will have quite a bit of failure and rejection. Not that I'm pessimistic about the future—but I want to deal with problems as they occur a bit more rationally, and that's a bit easier if I'm prepared.

When we try to clean up the house as a family, my husband is often frustrated because the kids don't help. He has certain expectations that don't get met, and so that causes a ton of frustration. I have experienced that same frustration a whole lot. But I want to realize that I can control what I feel, not what my kids do. And it's okay if I feel frustrated because they never seem to clean up after

themselves, but I don't have to get angry and yell about it. I've tried to make a choice beforehand and what I'm going to do.

Even the fact of realizing that we're struggling with a particular situation can help us deal with it better. When we expect something will be hard, we can think it through beforehand and better decide how we act. We might feel awful still, but we can act sensibly.

It can be helpful to make a plan on how to deal with common problems before they happen, instead of only dealing reactively to them. Being wise means to live intentionally, and if we always are making choices in the heat of a moment, we often don't make the choices that we want to.

I once had an interesting experience: I went hiking with my four kids and some other family members. I was feeling overwhelmed and tired beforehand. But the hiking helped, and when I was coming down the mountain, I felt, in a way, powerful. I was still overwhelmed and tired, but I knew I was doing the best that I could, and I was more able to recognize the good things around me. It was hard, but I was excited that it was hard. I was tired, but I was not a bad mother (yes, I've gotten those confused before). I had a lot to do, but that did not mean I had to feel overwhelmed.

Exercise:

- Think of a current or upcoming challenge in your life.
- Take a step out of the situation and observe what is happening or will happen.
- Use validation, avoid judgment and speak truth, and describe the situation in detail.
- List expectations that are wise and acknowledge your feelings and limitation. Decide on appropriate action.
- Try to hold yourself to those wise expectations as you go through the challenge.

Thinking Traps

I've discussed many ways to develop healthy emotions, and in this section, I am going to specifically talk about thinking traps: ways my thoughts turn feelings into negative emotion.

Sinful Living

The first one is not living up to my values and morals. If I am focused on living a righteous life, and living like the kind of person I want to become, I am less likely to experience negative emotions. When I justify sin and acting outside of my ideals, I am bound to experience a wider range of difficult feelings and negative emotions.

A related issue is when I do make a mistake, and I am unable to move past it. The mistake is often repeated, and there is an inability to get back on track. Self-talk can take the form of, "Oh I blew it, I might as well not try anymore.... I blew it, you're so stupid...You're just going to continue to mess up." I fail to do anything because I don't feel like anything I do is good enough.

The remedy is easy: repentance and righteous living. Also, I need to not strive for perfection, but just to live the best I can. It is important to recognize my mistakes, but not to beat myself up about them. Avoid tacking my self-worth to any task or circumstance: but have self-worth be intrinsic. Make small steps, one thing at a time, with gratitude.

I like noticing the difference between shame and guilt. Guilt makes you want to change and fix your actions. Shame is saying that you are your actions and you are a horrible person because you did something wrong. But who we are and what we do are different: we are children of God. We do make mistakes, but we can also fix those mistakes.

Perfectionism and Comparison

Perfectionism is not striving for excellence, it is a desire to avoid mistakes and live up to other's expectations. Perfectionism is unobtainable. There will always be little imperfections and ways that I don't meet when I perceive as society's perfect image. Comparison is similar and just as damaging. It is looking to others and how they do things to see if I'm good enough. With it brings an inherent need to measure up, or I will not be worthy or valuable.

"Should" and "must" in my mental dialogue can be a sign that I am striving for perfection and comparing. The words often make me feel guilty or like I have already failed. Just trying to restate a dialogue without a should or a must can begin the process of dropping comparison.

Perfectionism is overcome with a good enough attitude: not working to please everyone but honestly trying my best and understanding that everyone makes mistakes, and it's okay if I do too. I can make sure my self-worth is not tied to my work, but an inherent value from within. I can seek my own path instead of following everyone on theirs.

Another technique is to just drop judgment altogether. Perfectionism and comparison are centered on judging myself against some standard or others. Why do I even need to judge? So much of my life does not need to come under the magnifying glass of a ruler. It is enough without judgment and grading.

Half the time I am feeling miserable about myself and my actions, I am telling myself I “should” do this or that or the other. I like to rephrase it—and the easiest way I have found it saying I “want” to do something. So instead of telling myself I should clean my house, I say that I want to clean my house. It’s more motivating.

I am also a firm believer in good enough. Very few things need to be done perfectly; most of it can be done good enough.

Over-Analyzing

I can take perfectly normal feelings and give them too much thought and value. This can include overreaction/magnification: or having a strong reaction to a small feeling and blowing things out of proportion, fantasizing catastrophe, or thinking through the worst-case scenarios, and rumination, thinking about a problem for a long period of time.

I think trying to stop myself is often a losing battle. Laughing at myself will take me further. Catch my crazy thoughts, and recognize them for what they are. Go ahead. Ruminating, think about the catastrophe. But do not take it seriously. Focus on keeping a perception that is further away, not too caught up in the emotion, but looking at the broader landscape of the problem.

Naps can be helpful when my brain is going too fast. I often overthink things the most when I am tired.

Mental Clutter and Distraction

My life can full and busy, and most of it is usually not important. Mental clutter can include focusing on getting things done, staying busy, and filling my life, most of which is a distraction. I can easily get distracted by simple, non-important things around me. My life can be full of media I don’t really like, tasks that don’t need to get done, and general busy work. Distraction is often caused by the need to be busy, and keep my mind occupied with something.

Instead, I can focus on the moment and practice mindfulness discussed later. Busyness is often an illusion: if I focus on the essential, much of the clutter dies away. It is good to fill my day up with goodness. Do I just want to go through life getting things done, or do I desire joyful experience and connection with others? Paying attention to how I feel after I do something can bring a lot of clarity on what is essential. Use planning to fill life up with what you want to be doing, not what is right in front of you.

Setting goals can be extremely helpful for me—so I remember the things that I actually want to do and are helping me achieve my purpose and then I’m not living reactively on the things that present themselves first to me. Sometimes that means I don’t clean my house in favor of writing—but I’m happier that way.

Blaming, or Complaining

Blaming is finding the person that “caused” a problem, and it can be myself or others. I might also personalize a problem and take the blame or responsibility for something that wasn’t my fault. Complaints are expressing discontent with no plan to actively change the problem.

I need to be responsible for what I can control. Complaints and blame can be redirected into an intention of change for the better, or often an expression of gratitude. After I take responsibility and set an intention to change, I can stop worrying about anything else. I don't need to have opinions or blame others beyond what is my responsibility.

Sometimes I have prioritized my own hurt feelings—which isn't a good way to forgive at all. Yes, my feelings are hurt, but my anger is not more important than another person. I don't need to hurt them, and sometimes I can just let it go and forgive without even bringing it up and letting them know that they hurt me. I do not always need to share my pain with others by choosing to blame them.

Denying, or Minimizing

Trying to ignore a problem, or underplay its importance in my life can result in damaging emotions. Feelings need to be dealt with in their entirety, as discussed in topics about validation

But I don't think we always need to solve our feelings/emotions—sometimes they can exist without needing a solution. I can hurt without figuring out how to stop the hurt. I can be angry without fixing the thing that makes me angry. Letting the emotion occur without trying to solve the problem related to the emotion is fine.

Negativity

This unbalanced approach includes black or white thinking and overgeneralizing. I see a pattern or problem and apply on an overly broad conclusion. Always and never are keywords that appear with this type of dialogue. Many times, I apply a mental filter and pay attention to only certain types of evidence: noticing all my failures but not my successes. I can discount the good that I have done or has happened.

The remedy for this is optimism. Optimism isn't being happy all the time. It is an attitude of growth, change, and improvement. I choose to focus on the good as much as possible, while still acknowledging the bad.

People exaggerate all the time: This was the worst day of my life. Everything I have done is horrible. I am a failure. There is nothing good about this. I watch myself and say—hey, not everything is bad. I did do good things today. There were good moments. I haven't failed at everything I've attempted. I have laughed and cried—but the crying is not more important than laughter. They both exist, and I need to recognize all the good there is my life. Life is not going to be all good—and good is not necessarily normal. That's what we do, though: we say good is normal and then minimize it down, taking a magnifying glass to all the bad things.

Over-Attachment

I can identify too much with my feelings. I can assume that because I feel a certain way, what I think must be true: replacing my rational reason with emotional reasoning. I can take a singular instance or feelings and connect my entire identity to that one instance, over-identifying with it.

I can assign labels, conclusions to myself and other people that have little to do with the actual facts of the situation. I do not possess the ability to mind read or fortune tells, and so my

perception is limited. If I try to broaden my perception with my own judgment, I will make many false assumptions.

People are complex. Labels and singular conclusions usually have little to do with reality. Many times when dealing with my emotions, I need a certain detachment.

I've tried to take away a lot of the labels of who I think I am—like I am a writer, or I am a failure, or I am a bad person, or I am a bad mother. I am a child of God, and that's about all that is important about my identity. And then everything is things I do, but they don't totally define me at all.

Laziness and Hyperactivity

These are two opposite moods. The first is slothful laziness. I am tired, I want to rest, relax, and not deal with anything. I often have little motivation, don't want to face life and procrastinate what I desire to get done. (This mood often happens to me when I am behind on sleep, but that isn't a prerequisite.)

The second is a wired feeling, hyped up, often relying on survival instincts of fight or flight. I feel this way when I am too busy, running late or in another disaster type situation, or constantly engaging in activities that I don't like. It can be a feeling of being worked so much, trying so hard, that I just can't calm down.

I included these moods together because they are often two sides of the same coin: laziness on one side, and hyperactivity on the other. I need balance between both moods and avoid stresses that will push me to one or the other. Feeling overwhelmed often leads to laziness or even working hard, but often on all the wrong things.

Creating a healthy lifestyle, discussed later, will help avoid these moods: but also recognizing them can go a long way to overcoming them.

Overall Strategies

Whenever I deal with a thinking trap, it is helpful to identify it, and then talk back. Many of these thinking traps are not rational, and talking back with a bit detachment will go a long way to stopping them. Talking back can occur through physically talking to myself, having a conversation with another person, or writing it out. Writing is my go-to way to clarify and see exactly what is going on in my thinking patterns.

Many negative thoughts, and an inability to have a sense of detachment come from the fact that I feel I have little worth internally: instead, I look for external sources for validation and approval. When my value and worth are ingrained and internal, I no longer need that external validation and I'm not overly attached to my feelings.

Establishing an identity whole can help many thinking traps vanish. Establishing an identity whole is integrating all parts of myself. Is creating balance between both sides, for example (i.e. caring so much, and distancing from others). It's also accepting my weaknesses and learning how to limp: not always to be perfect, but just keep going and adapt. I cannot often change the hand I am

dealt (even if I was the one who dealt it) and must leave the past behind, but I can learn how to play that hand well.

Another strategy to overcome negative thinking patterns is connection with others. The best remedy can be a kind word, a hug, a thoughtful gesture: anything that helps me to feel that I am worthy of connection, and I am loved and cared for. Often when connection doesn't readily come from others, I need offer it to others first. Helping others can be more powerful than others helping me.

Sometimes we need to take our emotional glasses and turn them away from ourselves and look at other people—and when we are looking to remember to see the whole picture, and not use a magnifying glass to scrutinize every single flaw. We often spend too much time thinking about ourselves and not enough genuinely caring about the people right in front of us.

Finally, relaxation can go a long way to helping overcome these thinking traps. When I am relaxed I am less likely to struggle with these traps. This can be done through meditation, relaxing exercises, or even simple things like wearing clothes I feel relaxed in, sitting in a comfortable position, or taking long deep breaths.

Exercise:

- Identify one thinking trap in your life.
- What steps can you do to change it?
- Write it down!
- How does it decrease your self-worth and how can you reclaim your worth?

Enjoy Challenges

Life is better with positive challenges. I have an inherent need to grow and develop, and I can do this by setting goals and moving beyond my comfort zone. Don't be afraid of challenging things. Find reasons to do things that will help me grow. It doesn't matter if it turns out perfectly, or if I fail or feel stupid. I can grow from it if I don't back down.

These goals do not have to be super challenging: the purpose is not to overwhelm myself and stay busy in the rat race of life. I can get more joy over small victories: making a new friend at the park, finally asking for a favor, finishing a video I wanted to create, or publishing an article.

I like to consider goals in the following categories: physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual. Having a healthy body, vibrant emotions, engaged mind, active social life, and purposeful spirit will ensure I am a well-balanced person.

The challenges I design for myself can be about anything, but there is a certain emotional power in two types of goals: relationships with others and creation. Improving my relationships will help me in the stability of my life, and brings great joy. Creating just about anything is a wonderful way to create beneficial challenges: it can be arts and crafts, but can also include writing, music, or anything new.

I like to create goals that are project oriented. Projects have an ending and tangible outcome. I enjoy projects because they are something I can really throw myself into and find passion for doing it. When I'm working on projects, I can engage in a state of flow: when I am totally engaged in the work I'm doing, and every though it is challenging, I push through and finish.

Often, I like to simply challenge myself with things I already enjoy. Which isn't really helpful. I can be busy and accomplish a long to-do list; it's a lot harder to sit still and to have things remain undone. I need to remember when I am setting goals and developing projects not just to focus on things I already can do, but to put in things that I really need to work on.

And I love thinking about goals as projects—concrete, with a concluding date, and something you can finish. I try to do somewhere around ten completed projects a month—obviously, some projects take more time, but when I break my life up into projects I feel more able to accomplish things and more satisfied with what I've done.

Enjoyment

Through the goals and challenges I engage in, I can create a life that I enjoy. The life that I create doesn't have to be incredible, and it shouldn't be unrealistic. Creating a life that I enjoy can be simple: recognizing the activities and hobbies that I love to do and doing more of them: eliminating the things I do out of obligation and can easily remove, and learning to keep a positive attitude.

Often, I am not realistic about what I enjoy. I might find myself doing an activity because people around me are doing it, not because I actually like it. I engage in activities out of perceived obligation instead of enjoyment and dedication. I can instead seek the things I truly enjoy and do more of them. Often, they are harder to do than many things I normally do. For instance, I might normally watch a movie at home but will find greater enjoyment going on a hike with my family.

Lazy fallbacks easily become my primary source of enjoyment when I am overstressed, tired or worried.

The following table illustrates how I categorize many things in my daily life. I strive to increase the amount of time I spend on the essential and eliminate lazy fallbacks and obligations.

Essential: True Enjoyment	Service, recreation with family, mediation, time outside, working on a goal
Needs to Get Done	Chores, exercise, employment, caregiving
Lazy Fall Backs	Fiction, social media, TV, eating out
Obligations	Some volunteer work, extra work, meetings

Even as I strive to create a life I enjoy, there comes a point where I need to enjoy the life I have. Many tasks and even goals I have aren't that enjoyable but are necessary. It's often easy and better to enjoy right where I am instead of constantly trying to overhaul my life into something I might enjoy. Sometimes, life changes are necessary, but often, joy is found in what I already possess and the circumstances I'm already in. It's far more powerful to learn to enjoy where I am at instead of always chasing an elusive state of happiness that might never come.

Learning to enjoy the life I have is founded on habits of mindfulness, gratitude, work, and integrity. Often it is simply paying attention to the good that is already inherent in my life. Even when I need to clean up yet another mess, deal with a family crisis, and just go through the daily chores of life, I can find joy within very mundane tasks.

Creating a life I enjoy, and also enjoying the life I have, should have a foundation of ideals and values. Creating a personal mission statement, and going through a goal program can help clarify the principles I want in my life and help me live up to those ideals.

Engaging in pleasurable and challenging experiences can be a great step to enhance my underlying state and create more moments of joy. Over time, positive experiences will happen more often, goals are reached, and relationships are strengthened.

Usually, I don't enjoy my life when I sitting and worrying about it instead of getting up and doing things.

Exercise:

- Make a goal that is something essential and will bring you true enjoyment.
- Try to create a goal that will have a tangible outcome that you can easily control.
- Set a deadline and hold yourself accountable for getting it done.

Love-Filled Lifestyle

My emotional vulnerability is lessened when I am engaged in a lifestyle that is healthy. To maintain a healthy body, I can engage in good nutrition, exercise, avoid addictions, sleep well, and take care of physical illness.

For my own health, a consistent sleep schedule is critical. I take a range of vitamins that are a good balance for me. I try to eat lots of fruits and vegetable. I exercise in the morning for 20-30 minutes and maintain an active lifestyle.

I only exercise 10 minutes a day right now—but I can do that consistently and so I keep at it instead of worrying about the fact that other people do more.

But more than that, I need a lifestyle that is intentional and simple. My habits should include steps to reduce stress and foster more connections with others. To really declutter my emotional life, this can include not being so busy but still engaged in meaningful projects. It is easy to get too busy, and easy to also get too bored. I strive to balance my activities so that I feel I have a healthy mix of engaging projects, time for play, and time to take care of myself and others entrusted to my care.

One day as I was on a walk, I had the serendipitous opportunity to visit with a friend. Although the visit was enjoyable, it also threw off my whole schedule for the morning. After talking to myself, I realized I never want to be so busy that I don't have time to talk to a friend.

Schedules and goals are so helpful and necessary—but they should never get in the way of your purpose.

I need connection with others. I need my family and friends, and opportunities to serve and help them. My life is better with others because others bring love. Part of this connection can include physical touch. Sometimes, there is nothing better in life than a hug.

When I'm striving to develop connection with others, it is always more effective if I'm looking outward. If I wait for others to come to me, I am bound to be disappointed. There isn't always someone to give me the hug I want or to converse about a subject I enjoy or give me a compliment.

But there are always people out there who need a hug, who could use a kind word or would appreciate the small act of service I give. We do need each other, and I need to make sure I'm a part of the community I live in, that I'm contributing and doing what I can.

I try to develop attitudes and habits that bring long-term joy. This includes gratitude, service, and happiness. Happiness is:

- Choosing not to worry
- Keeping a good outlook and perspective
- Controlling my thoughts in a positive direction
- Doing things that I like to do
- Focus on my accomplishments and victories
- Helping others

- Being inspired
- Being happy for others and being with people who are happy
- Smiling
- Mindfulness during hard times
- Not having regrets
- Laughing

Happiness involves looking at the good things I can do and focusing on that instead of what is lacking or other things I cannot control. I am optimistic, for I know that God is in control and everything will work out.

My life can also be filled with a connection to God. A relationship with God is the source of all love and happiness. Prayer is powerful and can help through the hardest times, and make happy times even more meaningful.

It is good to have time for play, for enjoying beauty and nature, and taking advantage of opportunities that might not ever come again. Life is meant to be enjoyed with the people I love, and sometimes the only thing getting in my way is myself. There are opportunities to have fun, to just be happy, to dance, sing, and do things that might look silly to others, but fill me with life.

There are simple habits I can develop to increase my enjoyment of life. Enjoy good smells, and bring new smells into my life such as baking or cutting fresh flower. Listen to music that fills me with energy, or sing or play the music myself. Laugh, and find harmless things that I find amusing.

And breathe. Learn to relax and not be tight and high-strung. Find relaxation over fun: try a massage, learn to meditate, learn to just sit quietly and breathe deeply of fresh air. Enjoy going outside and finding beauty in the natural world. Live life today, now, and live it calmly.

Exercise:

- Determine one healthy habit that you want to develop
- Schedule it, set an alarm, and hold yourself to this new habit.

So I have a tracking app that I use to keep track of habits. I can set alarms on it and it's super helpful. The other day, I didn't have a very good day and I was about to mark big red Xs in my app to show that I hadn't completed habit. And then I stopped myself—how was that being helpful, really? I had failed, but I need to focus on the next day and getting back on track. So I changed the Xs to checkmarks. Because if I can get a long string of days when it looks like I am really good at my habit, I'm more much motivated to keep doing it. When I slip up, I'm going to forgive myself and pretended I did it anyway. I know that sounds a little weird—but try it. You find yourself less discouraged and much more motivated to keep trying.

Mindfulness

It is important to be where I am at and totally accept it. A common term is mindfulness. Mindfulness is not necessarily a zen-like peaceful state. Rather it is acceptance of whatever state I am in, or just being. Mindfulness is living in the moment and paying attention to what is happening.

Depression and anxiety are direct results of not living in the present. Depression is a sad state of looking backward, and anxiety is a state of looking forward with fear.

When I look backward, I can fill my mind with regret and guilt. Do I choose to focus on the problems I had, lost opportunities, my inadequacies? Or I can look backward seeing the victories that I have won, that have enabled me to get to today. I can look at how hard I looked to improve myself, at the progress I've made. I can deal with the past and move forward.

Looking forward, I want to know my future and can have an overwhelming fear that I won't measure up, that it will be hard and things will never get better. Or I can look forward with hope, knowing that good things will continue to happen in my life, and I can make it through the hard ones. I can look to the future with an eye to prepare and improve.

But mostly, I can live right in the present moment I have now. Life is made up of individual moments most of which are normal and mundane. All the joy that I want isn't found in some great victory or activity. It's often found in the everyday moments, and if I'm not paying attention, I will miss it. Live in the present.

You can't change the past and you can't change the future by thinking about them. That is a simple truth that we constantly ignore. Problems are impossible to deal with when they are already gone or they haven't happened yet.

What do I want my life to be? To enjoy exactly where I am and what I'm doing. This might not meet any worldly standard of happiness and success. My life might be simple and normal. So much of my ambition matters very little and rarely brings me the things I most value.

What does help create a life of happiness and value is paying attention to what I already have, and loving it. I can be content at any moment if I'm actually, truly, paying attention to it. Mindfulness is what the word describes: my mind full and engaged in the present moment.

Mindfulness brings gratitude, for I can see what I've been blessed with, the good in my life, even if it is mixed with bad. And with mindful gratitude, there isn't the mental clutter of stress and worry. It is a state of being present and enjoying that present.

Practicing mindfulness is often associated with meditation, but perhaps a better first step is to simply work on my focus and stop multitasking. Modern life creates opportunities to fill up every ounce of my mental space with external input. A simple step to mindfulness is to turn the TV off, the music down, the phone off, and pay attention to the main thing I am doing: eating a meal, playing with loved ones, conversing with others, or working.

When I am practicing mindfulness, boredom is pushed away and instead, there is a vibrancy of experience as I pay attention to whatever I'm doing with all my senses, and by being aware of my surroundings. Even mundane experiences can become quite interesting.

A practice of meditation can also enhance mindfulness. Meditation comes in many forms, but it is a simple act of being quiet. Guided meditations, hypnosis, listening to relaxing music, simple repetitive motions, a thought or mantra to focus on, or noticing my breath can all be effective parts of a meditation practice.

Mindfulness can be an enjoyable, fun experience as well. Indeed, I naturally experience mindfulness when I am enjoying myself. Dancing while cleaning the home, being a bit silly, and truly being happy and present when experiencing an enjoyable event, can all be mindfulness.

The state of "flow" or "being in the zone," is also a state of mindfulness. When I am in this state, my focus is direct and long: I am fully engaged in the task at hand, and any difficulty I experience is readily met and isn't that hard. (*Question: how do you break flow when you need to? I get overfocused sometimes and things will happen around me and I'm not aware of them?*)

In a book I read about meditation, it talked about every moment can be time for you. Because if you are present in a moment, you get something out of it. "Me time" doesn't need to wait for specific times in the corner of our life—we can get rich fulfillment out of cleaning up messes and taking care of children and working and whatever we have in front of us.

Exercise:

Practice mindfulness.

- Find one task that you generally don't like, or frequently don't pay attention to, and practice being mindful during it.
- Remove any distractions and focus entirely on the task at hand.
- Pay attention to each of your five senses during the task, and commit to paying attention until the task is complete.
- Rather than make this a hard, boring task, focus on having a light and fun experience.

Managing Distress and Trapped Emotions

There are times when all my good habits and intentions let me down and I find myself in a time of distress. I can learn how to manage this in an appropriate manner.

Sometimes, I am overwhelmed. It can be panic attacks, anxiety, overwhelming depression, distress, loneliness, grumpiness, explosive anger. It can be triggered by an external cause but also can arise out of nowhere. It feels like an uncontrollable state.

I think there are several causes of these periods. First, my brain goes into a fight or flight response, hampering my ability to reason. I am looking for action or escape, even when neither of these responses is appropriate. Second, it can be a temptation. Devils and evil spirits work on me to keep me away from righteousness. Third, it can be a chemical imbalance where my brain does not work properly, usually mixed with environmental conditions. And finally, it can be caused by an outside trigger or event.

Whatever the cause, when I am in the throes of an attack, I seem to have very little control over my own thoughts and actions. Just trying to control myself and snap out of it is usually ineffective. I know I'm not in a good state of mind, but the capacity to get out of it is very difficult and seemingly impossible. It is like I am in a black hole, and no matter how hard I try, I cannot climb out.

But I can learn to control this in an appropriate manner. I can give myself a ladder to climb out: steps that will enable me to get out of even the darkest hole. Prevention is the best option, and following the other steps in this book is the main course for prevention. Responding appropriately to my feelings on an ongoing basis will ensure the best chance to avoid pits.

Step 1: **Recognition**

I don't like where I am at, I'm in danger.

The first step is recognition that I am in such a state. I'm in a pit. My thoughts are no longer rational, my emotions are overblown, and there will be great opposition to getting myself out of the pit.

Warning signs can be racing thoughts, stress in my life, and feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped. I can feel grumpiness, frustrated or annoyed over small things, and irrational anger. Often my feelings turn to all or nothing, black or white frames of mind. I blame myself or others, I feel hopeless. I don't feel excited about anything, and often want to check out of life, often through distractions. In short, it is any thought, feeling or emotions that is dark and seems to drag me downwards.

The ideal is to catch myself before these feelings become too overwhelming: it will ensure a more rapid recovery and prevent regretful actions. But at any point, recognition that I am currently out of control, or soon will be is vital.

Recognizing it as early as possible is really helpful.

Step 2: **Pause**

Stop, take no action

After recognition, take a minute to STOP. Stop whatever I am trying to do, turn off the phone, or stop interacting with people (a short, polite excusal, such as “I need to go to the bathroom” can work well). If necessary, find somewhere to be by myself; but try to keep isolation short and productive. Isolation can also help me to dig myself into the pit more: the main goal is simply to give myself time away from people so I do not harm or blame them.

Pausing involves committing to not talk or act until I am calmed down. If I need to, I find a safe zone where I can go so that I won't harm myself or anyone else. Friends or family can be there, or I try an impersonal public area like a park, library, or store.

Step 3: Relax

Relax, speak truth

I use self-soothing techniques to calm myself down. There are many techniques. Some of my favorites are deep, rhythmic breathing, focusing on each of my five senses in turn, listening to relaxing sounds or music, recalling a pleasant memory, visualizing something relaxing, giving a little half-smile, connecting small movements to counting, breath or rhythm, like tapping my hands. Walking, writing and drawing can also work, especially if I'm extremely agitated and need something more concrete. A shocking sensation like cold water, gasp, the snap of a rubber band, or mild electric shock can help jumpstart the process.

And this time is also a great time to commit to speaking truth. Many things in my thoughts are not truths: they are simply my judgments, perceptions or outright lies I tell myself. Truth is generally simpler, and less damaging.

Step 4: Validation and Acceptance

I am feeling...

I begin by observing how I feel. I stop any fighting I am doing with myself and radically accept the way I currently feel. Even if I feel like I will be worse off if I accept it: I do it anyway. I don't act on my feelings; I just accept my current emotional state. I feel all those negative feelings. I try to not get caught up in the story of the emotions too much. Instead, I focus on the physical sensation and I don't try to judge or explain what I feel. It often helps to validate feelings by labeling them.

When it feels far too overwhelming, I take a step back from the situation and try to envision it as if I was watching it on the TV screen. I can describe the actions I took, the situation that happened as well, but as mentioned before, avoid judgment and keep it truthful. Sometimes it also helps to continue to imagine the situation continuing, and what would happen if I continued with the negative emotions I feel: imagining a worst-case scenario, so I can better understand how I feel, and the consequence of those feelings. Expression can also be done through prayer and writing.

I like the term “radical acceptance” because it sort of tells yourself that accepting things can be hard—but it's also possible. You can't change what happened. You can change what you will do in the future.

Step 5: Goodness

God is in my life: to return to goodness, I will...

I start this step with faith in a higher power, and commitment to God and Christ. If I walk with Christ and follow His will, He will forgive my sins. Because of the atonement, Christ can have power in my life. Prayer can be an excellent way to invite God to help me. Reading or reciting scripture is also very powerful.

If I feel it is appropriate, I can rebuke evil spirits and bad feelings. I commit to giving up bad feelings or experiences, asking the Lord to remove weakness, sin and negative emotion. It is also necessary to recognize and give up not only the feeling but the action or misperception that caused that feeling. I learn to identify wrong beliefs and correct them.

It is important to acknowledge what I am grateful for. I can use imagery and past experiences to remember the good in my life, and commit to returning to that state.

Step 6: Different Path

I choose....I feel...I am...

I commit to changing my direction and returning to goodness. I try to follow a middle path that acknowledges both my feelings and thoughts, to proceed with a wise mind. Pattern interrupting is a good tool. Imagine the unwanted pattern, break down the steps, and put them back together in a way that is more desirable. Rehearsing, or imagining things going right, is also effective. Using pros and cons or different approaches to the situation can help me visualize results and the correct action to take.

I might acknowledge a feeling, and realize that I need to act on it, that it originated from a need to take actions. But I might also recognize that the feeling would not lead to appropriate action, and choose not to act on it.

I ask myself to locate the origin of these thoughts or feelings and heal them with forgiveness and acceptance. I replace the darkness with light, that I may be filled with joyful emotion. I may also set an anchor, or associate the desired outcome with a movement or word that I can repeat.

Step 7: Act

The final step is to get up and do something. This can be a return to my life or the action I was performing when I paused. It is also an excellent idea to engage in a rejuvenating experience. This can be exercise, naps, doing something creative, positive distraction through media or book, especially something that makes you laugh, walks, hikes, service, play, baths, writing, associating with friends, reading, etc.

A good idea is often to put distance between myself and the current problem if needed. Rumination is not an appropriate action. I can work to directly solve a problem but should do so with appropriate boundaries and limits.

It's important to remember that I have control of myself: I can work contrary to an emotion if bad feelings continue. I can push a situation away and deal with it later, force myself to think of something else and force myself to have positive thoughts. I can make my actions consistent with my character: my thoughts consistent with who I want to be, instead of who I feel like being.

After: **Repair**

Repair is crucial to continue to not experience bad emotion. This includes making positive deposits to my emotional state and to others around me. Incorrect perceptions need to be corrected. Buried feelings may need to be addressed and let go of; amends need to be made if necessary. And most of all, it needs to be done with an attitude of forgiving myself. I can damage myself and those around me, with idle words, bad feelings, and incorrect actions: but I also have the power to repair them, with the help of God.

During repair, it is essential to practice self-compassion and reduce self-condemnation and shame or blame. My mistakes and feeling do not need to define me: beating myself up over every less than ideal circumstance can be very damaging. Self-forgiveness is a very powerful choice.

I can use a similar process when I'm also helping others through their difficult emotions.

You can practice these steps often, even when you aren't in distress. Sometimes it's really hard to train yourself to deal with intense emotions because the only time you address it is when you have intense emotions. Doing it during smaller, calmer moments can be really helpful in learning how to manage the bigger outbursts.

Trapped Emotions

Trapped emotions happen with incorrect perceptions and emotions that are not dealt with at the initial occurrence. The feelings I have that are "buried alive" often lead to perceptions that cloud my daily life and later feelings that seemingly arise out of nowhere.

Our trapped emotions are often expressed in incorrect perceptions. Often, I use such a perception to understand and deal with a problem. It might even be appropriate in that situation, but then it is applied to an overly large area and hampers me in my regular development.

For example, as a small child in a large family, I distinctly remember a time that I choose not to tell my mom what happened, even when she asked. I did not feel like sharing the story would be beneficial to me: I was slightly afraid of my mother getting upset at me or not listening and understanding. I developed the incorrect perception that it was courageous that my voice was not heard.

For many years, I applied this incorrect perception to many areas, and would at times be quite shy and soft-spoken. In my adulthood, I remember that first experience and could correct and heal the trapped emotion and incorrect perception. I no longer was overcome with feelings of not being heard or keeping my voice inside even when it was valuable to speak.

I think when I am working on trapped emotions, it's important to realize that it isn't anyone's fault that such an event happened. It wasn't my mother's fault that I felt I might not be listened to: and it wasn't my fault that I developed an incorrect coping mechanism. Even when someone does something directly wrong to me, or I do something wrong: it doesn't matter about the event. It matters how I responded. And sometimes my response can cause a trapped emotion, but this can be readily healed.

There are different methods for releasing trapped emotions, but they usually involved three simple steps.

- 1) Identification: correctly identify an incorrect perception or trapped emotion in succinct terms, or as a memory of an event
- 2) Intent: Have the intent to release, heal, and correct what you identified
- 3) Action: Perform some action that releases the feeling, and replaces it in a positive manner. I have seen this done with breath, tapping, massage, spoken words or writing, visualization, or reciting a script.

There isn't one right or wrong way to do it, and lots of methods: I try to find the one that is simple and easy for me to use.

Buried Problems

Another similar problem I often experience is burying problems instead of finding solutions. It might seem like a good option: to just not worry about something, ignore it, and it will resolve on its own, or I just accept that life is like that. Many times these buried, ignored problems, come back with a vengeance, causing even more issues and problems.

Identifying them is not always easy. Sometimes I've put them so far away from my conscious, that they aren't readily identifiable and accessible. But often, after exhausting options of trapped emotions and mindfulness, the next step is to think of problems and issues that have not been properly dealt with. Talking to others that know about me and my life is very helpful. Free writing, talking, and meditation can all be used to resurface the problem.

After resurfacing, I find ways to act and find a solution: don't just bury the problem again. Keep it in the foreground of my life, until a more acceptable solution is found. Most of my problems are solvable: I might need new ideas from outside sources when I find I cannot solve it on my own. But help is out there: my family, friends, church leaders, and professionals can help me when I find myself stuck.

It's also really helpful to work on solutions when you are not currently upset about a problem. Bring it up in calmer times, and you might find that the solution is easy, and you can put into effect. Always waiting for the time when the problem surfaces means that you're always in an intense, emotional state of mind when you are trying to find solutions. That's not incredibly helpful.

Final Notes

I am valuable, and that worth comes from inside of me.
I am worthy and grateful for the life I have.
I will not always feel happy, but I can always experience joy.
Enjoy the vibrancy of life.

(Who I am is not what I do. I always have worth even when I stumble.)

As I work through my emotions and came to a place I was happy with, I discovered again the ability to be playful and laugh. No longer bogged down by negative emotions, life has a sense of lightness. And to not be bored, I discovered that rather than filling life up with tasks, I could fill it up with play. To laugh, dance, listen to music, read books, and play games. Wondering at the world around me, asking questions and discovering the answers. I find hobbies and work that I want to do, not just have to do. Life becomes less of a battle and more of a joyful experience.

One more thing:

I got an app to start tracking my days. I rank every day: Awesome, Good, Mediocre, Bad, Awful.

I basically never have awful days—awful days means suicidal thoughts and possible self-harm and worst day of my life sort of things. Awful would be going to jail or getting in a car crash or whatever.

Awesome days are actually much more common than awful days. Awesome days are normal days when something a little extra special makes me just that little bit happier.

Normal days are good days. Because they should be. And they are.

Mediocre days and bad days happen—I get moody and make mistakes.

But the majority of my days are good. Tracking it for months and months have made me realize that. Even when I think I'm having a hard time, usually it's just a few hard moments. Life is usually a lot better than we think. Because normal isn't mediocre—normal is good.

Helping Others

This book primarily focuses on emotions within myself, but we associate with people all the time who could also use help with much of what is talked about in that book. This method is from *I Hate You, Don't Leave Me*, and can be very powerful in associating with other people.

It is founded on the acronym SET UP.:

Support: I care about you, I will support you.

Empathy: I see and understand how you feel.

Truth: Statements of the hard, undeniable truth.
with

Understanding

Perseverance.

Resources:

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- *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life: The New Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* by Steven C. Hayes
- [Addiction Recovery Program](#)
- *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown
- *Emotion Code* by Bradley Nelson
- *Feelings Buried Alive Never Die* by Karol Kuhn Truman
- *I Hate You - Don't Leave Me: Understanding the Borderline Personality* by Hal Straus and Jerold Jay Kreisman
- *Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle
- *Coping with BPD: DBT and CBT Skills to Soothe the Symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder* by Blaise Aguirre MD, Gillian Galen PsyD

- *Momfulness: Mothering with Mindfulness, Compassion, and Grace* by Denise Roy
- *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David D. Burns