



Lesson Nine:
Attending to Your Feelings

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The following articles will provide you with a thorough overview for how to attend to your emotional realm. I have included articles on why we have such a hard time meeting our painful spots and how to bring compassion to difficult feelings like jealousy, envy, frustration, rage, disappointment, and the fear of death. The more you understand and can name your emotional experience, the more readily and easily you'll be able to bring compassion to whatever is swirling and emerging inside of you.

While sometimes we may need to dialogue with a particular feeling to give it voice, or write a poem or song to give it expression, more often than not the only thing a feeling needs is to be seen, heard, and loved. We don't need to be talked out of our feelings and we certainly don't need them minimized ("just get over it"). We need to make room for the wide spectrum of our emotional experience, both past and present, so that we can remove any obstacles that are preventing us from flowing smoothly in the current of life.

Remember: When the passageways are blocked with unshed and unprocessed emotional residue, the energy has no place else to go but into the head. Therefore, must keep the channels clear if we are to move through anxiety and prevent it from taking root again.

Breathe in the Pain, Breathe out the Love

It's become increasingly clear to me that one of my primary roles as a mother is to help my kids learn how to soften their hearts to pain so that it moves through their body and the passageways can remain open to experiencing joy and love. I've watched too many people — both personally and professionally — develop a belief system early in life that said, "I can't handle pain," which consequently caused them to harden their hearts, find ways to numb out and disconnect via various addictions, and suffer from anxiety.

Consequently, I write a lot about the process of raising my kids because it helps people understand two things: 1. How their own experience of childhood may have been negatively impacted by parents who didn't know how to attend to their own pain, and 2. In writing about parenting, I'm giving a clear template on how to attend to your own inner child (feeling self). Therefore, as you read through these articles, some of which describe my own kids, put yourself in the position of the child, both in present day and in the past.

Note: I'm using the word pain as an umbrella term to include any uncomfortable feeling that you want to push away or resist: frustration, disappointment, heartbreak, jealousy, irritation, fear, anger, disappointment, vulnerability, loneliness, helplessness over outcomes and feeling out of control.

Why and where do we learn that we can't handle pain? It's largely human nature to avoid pain, both physical and emotional. Just as a starfish contracts when we touch its soft underbelly, so we instinctually contract when something hurts the vulnerable place in our hearts. The dominant parenting and educational models also teach us as children that pain isn't acceptable. We live in a "buck up and

deal with it" culture where kids are discouraged from crying even over physical pain, let alone emotional pain.

In our Western spirit of pursuing independence, we generally view crying as a sign of weakness and dependency, as exemplified by the phrase, "Don't be such a baby." Babies cry; little kids don't. Even if this message isn't transmitted at home, once a child begins school he's inundated with the "toughen up" mentality and is often teased or bullied if he cries about physical or emotional pain. (I'm intentionally using "he" here as the taboo against boys crying is stronger than it is for girls, but it certainly applies to girls as well.)

Another reason we develop the false belief that we can't handle pain is that very few of us grew up with parents who role-modeled how to attend lovingly and responsibly to their own pain. More powerful than any words, children receive their parents' emotional intelligence via instant download, meaning that even if a parent is saying, "It's okay to cry" but isn't role-modeling responsible crying where their own loving inner parent is showing up for their pain, the child receives the message that pain cannot be handled. In other words, kids learn what they see, not what they're told.

These are the tools that I use to teach my kids how to handle their pain. As you read through these suggestions, notice which ones resonate for you and imagine starting to incorporate them into your own life:

1. Whenever I see that my son's pain is causing him anxiety, I remind him to practice Tonglen: the simple practice of breathing in the pain and breathing out a prayer of love that I taught in Lesson One. For example, if he sees a dead animal on the side of the road and I see him rubbing his eyes or trying to stop or control

the loss in some way, I say, "What can you do when you feel loss?" I'm hoping that, with enough reminders, he'll incorporate the practice on his own and he'll develop a habit of moving toward the pain instead of away from it.

The Tonglen practice has shifted recently to a simple prayer I learned from Thich Naht Hahn's book, "Anger." I've changed the words to reflect the feeling that my son is struggling with and have taught him to respond to the loss by saying, "I see my sadness. I'm taking care of my sadness." The sentences are accompanied by hand movements, where he brings the sadness into his heart with the first sentence, then moves both of his hands in a circle around his heart with the second sentence.

2. We spend time every night talking about what made him feel sad that day. As I hold him on the bed, he unloads the daily list, which often includes snippets of conversations he may have overheard years ago. Here was one night's list:

- The raccoon I saw on the side of the road on our way to the science museum.
- That people die.
- That sometimes babies die before they come out of their mommies.
- A couple of years ago I heard P. (our neighbor across the street) tell you about a girl that went to his school who drowned.
- That you and daddy are going to die one day.

Sound familiar? His list echoes the lists of so many of my clients as they share their childhood fears with me.

As I gently rest my hand on his heart, I ask him to breathe into the pain. I say to him, "There's a lot of pain this world, and there is also so much beauty. One of my jobs as your mommy is to teach you that you can handle the pain, because you can. Pain is energy. It hurts to feel it, but it hurts more not to feel it. When you cry, the pain moves through you and you cleanse your soul. So let's breathe into the pain, and then say a prayer for the raccoon and the parents of the girl who drowned."

Then we talk about all of the happy parts of his day. Here was that same night's list:

- When my little brother made me laugh.
- When I took care of my brother because his toe was hurting.
- The beautiful trees.
- The beautiful full moon.
- Throwing berries in the creek and catching them downstream.
- The bees. (He loves bees.)

At other times, especially when he feels sad that I'm going to die one day, I'll say to him, "Sweetheart, when it's my time to die, you'll be okay. You'll cry a lot and it will hurt in your heart, but you'll be okay. Most likely, I'm not going to die for a long time, and by the time I die you'll be a grown man with a partner and kids that you love more than anything in the world. Right now you love me and Daddy and your little brother more than anything and it's hard for you to imagine that ever changing, but it will change. One day you'll love your partner so much that you'll want to get married, just like Daddy wanted to marry me. When I die, your partner will hold you when you cry. You might cry for many days and you might grieve on and off for a year, but you'll be okay." I don't want to set up false hope

that I'll live into old age, but I do want to communicate the message that when I die, he'll find the comfort and resources to handle it.

It has occurred to me often that, perhaps, the reason why sensitive kids fear their parents dying so much is that parents are the lifelines; our son believes that he couldn't handle this life without me right now. But when the fear of losing one's parents carries over to adulthood, it's indicative of a lack of an internal, loving parent that knows that you can handle life. This is why I say it's one of my highest priorities to teach our kids that they can handle pain, which really means teaching them to develop their own loving inner parent.

3. At various times, we've worked with a meditation teacher to learn the practice of mindfulness and we try to practice every night. We're now up to ten minutes, and the change on his face afterwards is visible 100% of the time. I also encourage him to take mindfulness breaks throughout the day if the pain starts to feel overwhelming and brims over into anxiety.

4. One night our son landed on his own tool. He was trying to fall asleep and he said, "Mommy, I want to say a prayer for the dead moths that A. finds," then proceeded to whisper the most beautiful, heartfelt prayers I've ever heard. In its purity, it was like poetry whispered from the mouth of an angel, the words too vulnerable and sacred to share here. Then he wanted to say a prayer for the mice that our new neighbors recently found, dead and decaying, in the walls of the house that they're renovating. Again, his entire being shifted into a higher frequency when he allowed the words to spontaneously be carried from his heart to his lips, like little boats of light. He finished with a big smile on his face and fell asleep more quickly than he has in months.

Prayer is powerful. It doesn't have to be a formatted or scripted prayer. In fact, the most honest prayers are those that come from the heart, and for many of my clients, prayer is one of the most powerful balms for their sensitive, deeply-feeling hearts.

5. We create rituals to acknowledge and contain the loss and rebirth on the solstice and equinox. We use these transitional days in the calendar to practice letting go, often writing down things we would like to let go of on leaves and sending them down the creek. I will talk more about the power of rituals in Lesson 11.

7. We laugh, dance, tickle, and hug as much as possible. Laughter is such good medicine for the pain we carry in our hearts.

Feelings are Manageable; Anxiety is Not

"Mommy, lets look at some rain boots for A.," my 9-year old says as we head to the sales counter at our favorite children's clothing store.

"Oh, great idea," I respond, and hold A's hand as we walk to the display. A. immediately grabs a pair of ladybug rain boots, an almost identical replica of his big brother's pair that has cracked open to the point where they need to be replaced. He tries them on, they're a perfect fit, and we start to walk to the counter when E. grumbles, "It's not okay that A. gets new rain boots before I do."

"But you just suggested that we look for new rain boots for him! I don't understand why you're upset," I say, annoyed.

"Because I don't want him to have new boots if I don't have new boots," he grumbles all the way to the cash register.

It's a classic case of sibling envy, but it takes me a while to see it.

A few minutes later, as we're driving to our next destination, E. complains, "It's not okay if A. wears his boots in the creek before mine arrive."

"It's not okay..." is an oft-used line from E. when he's trying to control outer circumstances. I used to try to convince him why it is okay until I realized that arguing with the fear-and-control driven ego is pointless. I'm becoming more adept at naming his experience then directing him down into his feelings.

"It sounds like you're trying to control instead of letting yourself feel envious," I said.

"What's envious?" E. asked.

"It's kind of like jealousy. Jealousy is when you're feeling left out, like when Daddy plays with A. and makes him laugh really hard. Envy is when you want something that someone else has. They're both really hard feelings to let yourself feel," I explain.

"You mean the green-eyed monster?" A. pipes up. "Humphrey was jealous of Og the Frog." He's referring to one of their favorite chapter book series about Humphrey the classroom hamster, and how he feels jealous when the teacher brings in a new pet, a frog, and all of the kids go ga-ga over him.

"Yes, that's jealousy. It's called a monster because it feels so big inside, like it could just swallow you up. Most people try to deny it when they feel jealous or envious because they think they shouldn't feel that way, but everyone does feel those feelings sometimes. They're part of being human.

"But they really are extremely difficult feelings to feel. A part of you, (ego — although I don't use that term with my kids yet) doesn't believe that you can handle such a big feeling so it tells you to control other people so that don't have to feel it. But it doesn't work! You can't control people and circumstances, and it takes a lot of energy to try. In the end it's much easier to let yourself feel the envy. It's just a feeling — an energy — and it's very uncomfortable but it will pass through you. When you try to exert control you turn tight inside and the feeling can't get out. Then it becomes trapped inside of you and actually grows bigger. If

you just let yourself feel envious it will pass through you and eventually you'll arrive at acceptance.”

E. seems to hear me. They both do. E.'s complaining and controlling quiet down and I can visibly see him exhaling. The tightness of control released into acceptance.

I was teaching my kids a simple equation, one that I teach my clients every day:

Feel your feelings = acceptance of what is = flowing with the river of life

Versus

Avoid the feelings = control what is = fight the river of life and feel stuck inside

This was one of my better parenting moments, but I admit: I get hooked into trying to talk E. out of his difficult feelings just like everyone else. Well, let me rephrase that: I get hooked into talking E. out of his controlling ways when I forget to identify the root feeling. Before I launched into my inspired speech above, I launched into a lecture about how he's focusing on the wrong things. He's grumpy about a pair of boots when some children don't have enough to eat, or clothes, or even parents. (Yes, I really said that and cringed at myself even while saying it.) It just goes to show what a mess is made when two egos spar for control: E. trying to control A. and me trying to control E. And beyond that what happens when we hook into the storyline of control and forget to ask: what is this attempt to control covering up?

For as soon as I identified the feeling encased in the control, the tension broke open for all of us. I stopped trying to convince E. to focus on something else and E. stopped trying to control me and A.

My son is far from alone in trying to control his outer circumstances in an attempt to avoid painful and uncomfortable feelings. We all do it. We seem wired to do it. I've watched him try to control others or circumstances from the time he was a baby as a way to avoid pain. And as newborn parents, we caved into his attempts more often than we should have, allowing him to have more control than any baby or young child wants.

But I will say here (although it's not really the main point of this article) that when a child is highly sensitive (or off-the-charts, over-the-top sensitive, as is the case with my firstborn sweet love), the mainstream rules about "don't coddle your child" don't apply. You must coddle. You must attend. You must listen very closely to their needs and attend to them as much as possible. But at a certain point, when the inner strength and outer body have solidified, it's time to allow the child to come into contact with the powerlessness of being human, which means learning that you have control over very little outside of you in this life. Instead of trying to protect them from their powerlessness, you hold them through their pain and agony. You love them through their rage. And you guide them lovingly through this almost unbearable lesson, over and over and over again.

It's what all spiritual traditions teach: the attempt to control circumstances as a way to find happiness will only land you in misery. Rabbi Shefa Gold writes about it this way in *Torah Journeys*: "It is an incredibly radical realization when we discover that it is the inner state of consciousness, and not outer circumstances, that determines whether our lives are an expression of Heaven or Hell. [She's

writing about heaven and hell as inner states of consciousness, not actual locations]. Personally, this realization stands as the foremost challenge to my own ego, which has struggled for nearly half a century to manipulate my outer circumstances.

"The fear-driver ego says, 'If only I had these things, this job, that lover, a slimmer body, nicer clothes, a good teacher, friends who were more loyal to me, or more time... then, everything would be OK. The wisdom of my soul says, 'I will find Heaven here regardless of circumstances.'" (p. 131)

And one of the golden keys, one of the ways that we learn to let go and flow in the river of life and find heaven in each moment, is to allow ourselves to feel our feelings. It's a satisfying moment in a session when a client says to me, "I finally understand what you've been saying. Today I noticed by brain swimming and churning and the anxiety building up and I took a few deep breaths, turned inside, and asked myself, 'What am I feeling right now?' It's usually something like grief or envy or maybe fear of the unknown, and when I just let myself feel it, the anxiety fell away."

That's it. That's everything. Feelings are manageable; anxiety is not. The more you practice cutting through the habit of spider-monkeying up the vines of anxiety that entrap your brain and instead drop back down into your heart, where your feelings live, the less anxious and more peaceful you will feel.

Take Care of Your Anxiety Like a Scared Child

In Thich Nhat Hanh's brilliant little book called [Anger](#), he elucidates the Buddhist views on managing and healing this most difficult and human emotion. You likely struggle more with anxiety than anger, so if you read the book simply replace the word "anger" with "anxiety" and you'll have a prescription for handling your difficult emotions.

For example, in one section called "Caring for Your Baby, Anger" Hanh writes:

"Embrace your anger with a lot of tenderness. Your anger is not your enemy; your anger is your baby.

"You have to be like a mother listening for the cries of her baby. If a mother is working in the kitchen and hears her baby crying, she puts down whatever she is doing and goes to comfort her baby. She may be making a very good soup; the soup is important, but it's much less important than the suffering of her baby. Her appearance in the room is like sunshine because the mother is full of warmth, concern, and tenderness. The first thing she does is pick up the baby and embrace him tenderly. When the mother embraces her baby, her energy penetrates him and soothes him. This is exactly what you have to do when anger begins to surface. You have to abandon everything that you are doing, because your most important task is to go back to yourself and take care of your baby, your anger. Nothing is more urgent than taking good care of your baby."

The first step in managing difficult emotions is to find the willingness to move toward your painful feelings. You recognize that no one can save you, rescue you, or fix you; as an adult, you and you alone must find the willingness to care for and attend to your emotional life. You must recognize that it's only through

embracing and exploring the entire range of human emotions that you find the serenity and freedom that you seek.

In the above quote, Hanh is saying that we need to attend to our anger — or anxiety — the way we would attend to a baby crying in the next room. This is an interesting point because many of you were left to cry alone as babies and, later, as young children. Your emotional blueprint says, "I don't need to attend to my difficult feelings because no one attended to me when I was a baby. It's not safe to have needs. No one will come anyway. It's not that important." Our culture's dominant parenting philosophy still supports the idea that babies and kids need to be left alone to "cry it out." Whether we're discussing sleep or discipline, we still maintain the (in my opinion) damaging belief that if we embrace a crying child we're teaching that child that crying will "get them what they want." This belief assumes that babies are trying to manipulate adults into caring for their needs.

Now I understand the difference between not giving in to a toddler who's crying because he wants another scoop of ice cream, but I still don't support the notion that a parent should ignore the child or send them to their room for a time-out. From my perspective (and I know I'm in the cultural minority here), this communicates to the child that they're bad or wrong for having a desire and that if they cry they will be punished in some way and banished to solitary confinement. It sends them the message that their form of communication is manipulative and not to be taken seriously. They absorb the belief that says, "My feelings don't matter."

So what happens as adults when we're faced with an anxiety-provoking situation? Most people, following their own historic parenting, banish their scared inner self to solitary confinement with a good dose of shame and judgement to

accompany them out the door. They've simply never learned to do otherwise. They don't know how important it is to take responsibility for their anger or anxiety as they would take care of a child. They don't prioritize their emotional experience and recognize that there's essential information locked inside the feelings, if only they take the time to sit with themselves with compassionate curiosity.

I've come to understand that a large portion of anxiety is a scared inner-self left out to dry with no wise adult-self present. It's the young, scared, emotional, uncertain part of you that doesn't know how to manage life and doesn't have anyone to put a loving arm around your shoulder and say, "I'm here. I've got you. It's normal to feel scared when you're about to do something brand new. Oh, you think you can't do it? You think you don't deserve this loving relationship? Of course you deserve it! You're a shining, loving, smart, delightful person and I won't ever let you forget that!"

Anxiety is the inner self screaming out for attention, guidance, reassurance, and nurturing from your own stable and wise self. It's a terrified child left alone with her scary thoughts or, even more harmful, she has a scary thought and the adult says, "Yes, you're right to have that fear. That's what's going to happen." Imagine if you had a child who was experiencing bedtime fears. She says to you, "I'm scared a T-Rex is going to eat me" and you said, "Yes, you're right, a T-Rex is going to eat you. It's coming through the door right now." Not only would your little girl feel terrified, you would also be lying to her. *This is what you do to yourself when you let your anxious thoughts run away with you.*

If you're experiencing anxiety, it's because you've let your inner self drown in the currents of a river without a lifeline. You tell your inner self a lie and do nothing to

replace it with the truth. You watch as she drowns in her anxiety without realizing that you are, in fact, causing it. A loving inner parent would say, "Of course a T-Rex isn't going to eat you. Come here, sweetie. I'll hold you until your fear goes away," but instead you corroborate with the fear and the two of you drown together in the river. This is anxiety.

Let's bring this specifically to the topic of relationship anxiety:

You feel anxious. You make up in the morning with a knot in your stomach. You didn't sleep well the night before and you haven't been able to eat much lately. Anxiety is consuming your daily and nightly existence. You're miserable, and because the anxiety is connected to your partner in some way, you form the thought, "I'm anxious because I'm with the wrong person." The anxiety intensifies because you're telling yourself a lie. You've misinterpreted your anxiety and are now convinced that if you left the relationship, your anxiety would disappear.

But if you sat down with yourself and embraced your anxiety like the scared child that it is, you would ask, "What's underneath this anxiety? Let me hold myself with compassion and curiosity and explore what's underneath this fear. Am I scared of growing too close to someone? Why does that scare me? Am I scared of feeling engulfed by my partner, or feeling responsible for his or her feelings? Am I scared of being abandoned, of losing my partner in some way? Am I grieving an old relationship or a fantasy of "perfect love"?" Once you can contact the underlying fear and sadness, the anxiety will start to dissipate. You can then explore the false beliefs that are informing many of the fears and sit with the grief that's inherent to loving someone with an unfettered heart. Then the real work begins.

It's not easy work. As we've talked about throughout this course, it's terrifying, exhausting, and will shake you to your core. You will wish with every prayer that something or someone would reach down a hand and save you from your misery. And then one day, after falling to your knees in despair, you realize that the hand you're wishing for is attached to your own body — that you, in fact, can lay your own loving hands around your own heart and take the necessary steps that will break open the encasement of anxiety to reveal the scared, sad, alone child that lives inside. You learn to hold the child the way no one ever held you. You make room for the difficult feelings. You embrace your sadness, your fear, your vulnerability, your helplessness, your loneliness. You explore the false beliefs that are creating your anxiety. You learn that you can handle what you thought was unmanageable. You learn to rely on a source of spiritual guidance. You learn that your negative feelings have nothing to do with your partner, your job, your city, or your family. Finally, you're free.

Behind a Pane of Glass

I sat at the creek one day in autumn on a stone step that my husband and older son built a couple of years ago. They positioned the step in the side of a steep incline that rises up from the banks of the creek and overlooks a section where the water flows more quickly, making a bubbling sound over a sisterhood of rounded rocks. My boys and I were enjoying a morning "treasure hunt" where we walk through our yard looking for nature's special gifts: feathers, pine cones, worms (my younger son's favorite), heart-shaped rocks (my older son's favorite), autumn leaves. On this particular morning, E. had collected some bright red tree-berries and had invented a game where he and A. would throw them into the creek, then scramble downstream to collect them. Eventually, they ran out of berries, and I sent the two of them back to the other side of our yard to collect more.

In their absence, I had a few minutes alone. I closed my eyes and breathed into my body, then opened my eyes and breathed into the scene. Beauty was everywhere: in the yellow-gold leaves of autumn dancing from tree to creek, in the simple yet magical sound of water falling over rocks, in the sunlight dappling the green lawn, in the sound of my boys' laughter traipsing through the crisp, morning air, in the stones that my husband had carefully placed, evidence of his thoughtfulness and artistry. *I'm so blessed*, I thought to myself. *Beauty is everywhere. Look at this beautiful world.*

But I couldn't feel it. I could see and hear the beauty, but it was as if there was a layer of film across my senses that prevented the sights and sounds from entering my heart where it would be translated into a true feeling of gratitude. I could say the words, "I'm so blessed. Thank you for this beauty," but they fell flat without my heart pulsing life into them. It's like the difference between saying rote

prayers out of obligation and allowing true prayers to erupt spontaneously from your heart. It was like looking at the world from behind a pane of glass.

Or a glass of pain. I could feel an ache in my heart, so I put my hands on my chest and breathed. Within seconds, the tears started to flow. I didn't know why I was crying; it didn't matter. I closed my eyes, opened the channels and let the pain of life move through me. I let myself cry for a few minutes, and when I opened my eyes, the world looked clear again. The release of pain had cleansed the pane of glass away and the beauty was now transposed into gratitude. When my boys returned from their little expedition, they found a Mommy with a softened expression on her face and a renewed capacity to create a solid container in which to hold and witness their lives.

I've said it many times before and I'll say it again: Pain is the doorway to joy, and when you refuse to feel the pain, you create a narrow and muted realm in which you experience life. Why do we block the pain? Sometimes we fail to make the time to allow pain to come through. Pain is a bodily experience, a heart experience, and the body-heart doesn't function at the light speed at which we live our lives. When we spend our time fixated on a computer screen or accomplishing all of our items on our to-do list, we squeeze out the empty spaces where pain has room to unravel itself. Grief doesn't move on modern, technological time; it moves on natural, poetic time. In order to feel our pain, we must slow down.

Pain is often blocked by false beliefs that grew out of early experiences with big feelings. When you're little and you're hit with a big feeling, unless the feeling is contained by a loving adult that is able to both teach and model how to attend to

big feelings (see [Breathe in the Pain, Breathe out the Love](#)), you will likely form one or more of the following beliefs:

- If I start crying, I'll never stop.
- I can't handle my pain. If I cry, I'll fall apart and never function again.
- My pain is so big that if I open up that box, I'll go crazy.
- I might die from my pain.

These are not beliefs that you're likely to be conscious of. They formed during early years and settled comfortably into the deeper layers of psyche, or the unconscious, as a way to try to protect you from being hurt. And it works! When you live your life according to these beliefs, you create a protective shrink-wrap around your heart that prevents others from affecting you too deeply. You don't risk being vulnerable and so you don't risk being hurt. The problem, again, is that you also shrink-wrap against feeling love, excitement, aliveness, and gratitude.

Grief and joy live in the same chamber of the heart.

If we weren't meant to cry, we wouldn't have been born with the capacity to cry. To let the tears run freely is a sane response to the pain of life, both personal and global. We can handle the pain. We must handle the pain. It's when we push away the pain that it accumulates inside like a black rain cloud and mutates into depression or anxiety. It takes courage, yes, and a profound commitment to carving out the space and time to attend to your inner world. But, in the end, attending compassionately and responsibly to your pain is one of the most loving actions you can take for yourself, for your loved ones, and for the world. Let the tears cleanse your soul. That's what they're there for.

Frustration and Rage

Just as I'm about to pour a splash of vanilla into the shake I'm making for my son, I hear two blood-curdling screams followed by the sight of my older son, E., tearing around the corner with his 3 1/2 year old brother, who has transformed into the Tasmanian devil, close behind. E. dashes behind my back to create a blockade between him and A. A. runs full-force toward his brother, but finds himself in my arms instead.

I carry him to the couch and hold him tightly. Contained in my arms and against the warmth of my skin, the flailing in his body quickly stops, but he continues to scream at the top of his lungs for several minutes. I put my face close to his to let him know that I'm here and to send the silent message that it's okay to scream. E. watches from the safe distance of the hallway, still rattled by the intensity of his brother's rage directed at him. When the frustration has passed through him, A. is quiet. I hold him and kiss him. He looks up at me with his big, brown eyes, his cheeks wet with tears, and says, "I *had* to tear the paper out of my notebook. I needed a bookmark."

"I know, sweetheart. And that was so frustrating when E. didn't understand."

Silence.

"And you ran after him because you were so angry and frustrated."

Silence.

But I know the words are going in. I know how important it is to re-tell the story so that he can begin to process it and make sense of his big feelings.

"And it's okay to feel angry and frustrated, but when you chase E. he feels very scared. When you're frustrated, instead of chasing E., you can scream and hit the pillows, or run around the house. Or we can practice what we learned in [Steps and Stones](#)."

Silence, but he's listening to every word. I know from raising E. that it will take hundreds of conversations (literally) before the words sink in and change happens. That means hundreds of times of him behaving in ways that aren't loving to others or himself before he can assimilate the message and make a different choice.

From my work with clients and reading parenting books in E.'s early years, I know that the dominant parenting message supports a punitive model of discipline. Culturally we support tools like "time-outs" and "logical consequences" as a way to teach "good" and "bad" behavior. While I do believe that it's possible to apply these techniques in a way that doesn't negatively affect a child, more often than not the message that is communicated is, "Big feelings are bad. If you're going to scream, go to your room. If you hit Charlie, you need a time-out." These techniques may work in the short run, and certainly achieve faster results than what I've described above, but they typically leave unseen scars and transmit unhealthy messages about big feelings.

We also sanction distraction techniques, so when a child is crying loudly an adult walks over with a toy or video game to get him to stop. Again, distraction certainly has its place in parenting, but usually the overarching message is, "Your big feelings are not okay." Why do we feel a need to stop a child from crying loudly?

From my work with clients, it's clear that the single most common cause of anxiety is learning early in life that big feelings are unmanageable and that one's self-worth is dependent on "good" behavior. Obviously, from a parents' perspective, good behavior is defined as quiet, calm, and reasonable. Thus is born the "good boy" or "good girl" syndrome where a child's true nature is stuffed away deep inside because he or she learns that grown-ups are uncomfortable with big feelings and that if she wants their approval, she has to be good in order to get it. And, of course, parents are uncomfortable with big feelings when they haven't done the work necessary to heal from the unhealthy messages absorbed from their childhood about their own feelings.

The entire interaction with A. lasted less than five minutes. It doesn't take a long time in the moment to teach kids that they can handle big feelings and that loud feelings like frustration and anger are okay, but it is dependent on a relationship of trust, and repetition, patience, and taking the long view are key. When A. cried as a baby in the middle of the night, I held him through it. When he screamed in the car as a two month old, I did my best to soothe him, and often pulled over to nurse him or comfort him in other ways. When he throws everything off the coffee table in frustration because he can't fit two Lego pieces together, I gather him up, hold him close, and let him know that his frustration is okay. When the storm passes, we talk about other, less destructive, ways to handle frustration. Both of my boys also learn about big feelings by watching how I handle the other one. As I sat with A. on my lap, E. witnessed the entire interaction. And when it was over, A. walked over to his big brother and said he was sorry — an authentic expression that wasn't motivated by me saying, "Now, say you're sorry". Then they ran off to continue their game.

Dealing with Disappointment

The theme of disappointment emerged last week in my sessions with clients. Some were disappointed by the reality that there's no such thing as a perfect relationship. Others became aware of how scared they felt about the prospect of disappointing their partner. Others felt disappointed that their child was different in some way from their fantasy child. They covered the range and types of disappointment: the type of disappointment that occurs present-day as a result of what's happening right now — i.e., My partner is half an hour late, or Oh, shoot, I just dropped my ice cream cone — to the disappointment that results when our expectation of how we think things "should" be doesn't match up to reality.

How you deal with disappointment is directly correlated to how your disappointment was handled when you were a child. If you learned that disappointment was a normal part of the human spectrum of emotions and your parents or caregivers didn't try to immediately distract you from or talk you out of your disappointment, you probably have a healthy relationship to this feeling. But if, like most kids, your parents' discomfort with their own and, thus, your big feelings — and disappointment can emerge in a huge way with kids — caused them to shut you down, you would have learned to sequester disappointment into the same corner of your psyche where all other uncomfortable feelings live. Kids are confronted with disappointment on a weekly basis (if not more), and I certainly understand the impulse to distract them out of it by directing their attention to some other shiny new object. But if we want our kids to develop a compassionate relationship to their big feelings, we have to make room for this one as well.

Making room for disappointment also means developing a capacity to tolerate others' disappointment. Just as people will disappoint you, so you will inevitably

disappoint others countless times throughout the course of your lifelong relationships. If you believe that you can't tolerate others' disappointment, you'll sacrifice yourself, giving yourself away in order to appease them. So if your partner asks you to accompany him to his parents' house this weekend and you say yes even though you really need to be alone, because you're scared of disappointing him or don't believe that he can handle feeling disappointed, you're laying the foundation for resentment to breed. The same is true with parents, kids, friends, and co-workers. In the most extreme case, if you aren't willing to tolerate others' disappointment you may end up lying or omitting information (which is, of course, lying). So in order for healthy and conscious relationships to grow, dealing with disappointment is an essential element.

When it comes to intimate relationships, the theme of disappointment takes on a heightened charge because, just like we don't learn that it's okay to feel annoyed with your partner, not to love everything about him or her, hate him at times, not miss her every second of the day, and experience ambivalence around feeling in love and attracted, so we don't learn that it's normal to disappoint each other. You may carry a story that says, "If we disappoint each other our relationship is flawed and doomed." It's a false story and needs to be uprooted and allowed to wither just like every other myth that you carry about relationships.

The truth is that life is full of disappointment. It's partially a result of the unrealistic expectations we absorb from the get-go because of our fantasy-laden culture, but it's also just a normal part of life even in the healthiest cultures. In any case, when we move toward this uncomfortable feeling and develop tolerance for others' disappointment, we lay one more element of the foundation that will allow a healthy life to take root and flourish.

The Grief Place

There is a room in your heart where sadness dwells. Each story of sadness lives there like a stagnant, frozen particle of light waiting for you to see it, to hold it, to wrap it in a blanket and bring it tea. When you visit your grief place with love, the particles of light start to shimmer and move — dance, even — for all things, even our pain, *especially* our pain, only want to be seen and loved.

We can live our lives ignoring this grief place, until we can no longer ignore it; until anxiety or intrusive thoughts or physical illness jut up with such force that we must pay attention. The frozen particles start to move now with a new desire for attention, and hopefully, if we're guided skillfully, we see that the anxiety is a messenger that can bring us into direct contact with our pain, a crucial meeting, perhaps for the first time. It's often during transitions that inhabitants of the grief place speak more loudly and move with greater intensity. It's then, when we're broken down and broken open, trembling in the liminal zone when the thing we've known is no longer and the place we're growing into is not yet, that the pain in our chest pounds us awake in the middle of the night, begging to be known and seen.

This pain has been with you for a long time. There may be pain from a time before you had words or clear memories: the pain of the newborn being ripped from the womb; the pain of a baby trying to latch or the breast taken away too early; the pain of a three-year old being left before she was ready to be left. The pain of not being held when you needed to be held, or being held too much or in the wrong way. The pain of teasing and taunting and bullying. The pain of first love. The pain of a broken heart.

There may likely be sadness in your grief place that is yours but isn't yours: the intergenerational, un-lived pain of those who lived before you who didn't bring

warm blankets and mugs of tea to their grief. Jung wrote that we live the unlived lives of our parents and grandparents, that their pain and fear and anxiety that didn't receive attention funnels down through the generations and lands in the heart of the most sensitive child. That child is probably you. We can receive this as a burden, or we can hear it as the gift of being able to bring consciousness to pain and witnessing the miracles and openings that result from that loving attention. If every dancing particle of pain can be transformed into poetry or art or tears or a growing spot of compassion for others, then every particle is a gift.

As we tumble through a time of loss or transition — a loss of a loved one, a new marriage, a baby, a move, 20s, the holidays — memory synapses are ignited that trigger other, older losses. These losses may not scream out in the middle of the night; often they appear more quietly — a vague memory, a sense of sadness. You don't have to know why you're sad to attend to the sadness. The attachment to knowing "why" is one of our most ingenious mental traps to prevent us from feeling the pain. You're allowed to just feel sad without knowing the story. The paradox of pain is that when you allow yourself to feel it for no reason, the reason often bubbles to the surface. Pain lives in the unconscious layers of the body, the place without words, but when you bring it to the surface it touches the left-hemisphere and the words sometimes appear. But sometimes they don't. And it really doesn't matter either way.

We carry many old beliefs about pain. We believe we can't handle it. We believe if we open that door the flood of grief will never stop. We believe it will overwhelm us. These are preverbal beliefs born of early experiences where we were left to cry alone and the bigness of the pain in such a tiny, soft body felt as if it would kill us. The beliefs were true then — big pain in a small, lonely body *is* too much to handle and the only choice is to dissociate and shut down — but it's not true now.

You can handle your pain. I promise you can. I've seen clients as shut down as possible open to their pain and what happens in the thawing out is the most glorious sight you can imagine. They don't die. They come alive. They don't freeze in a fight-or-flight response; they open completely like a flower in spring. Oh, how we fear grief. But there is really nothing to fear. When my sons cry so hard they lose their breath and choke and I can see them trying to get away from their pain I hold them close and whisper in their ear, "It's okay to feel sad. It's only energy. It will pass through you." We only need to move toward to it with our breath and our attention, to carve out time and space to invite the grief to surface, and it will come. Many people move at a steady, serious pace and then wonder why they have trouble connecting to their grief, or can only do so during a therapy session. Sadness is a vulnerable, shy animal. It's a child that isn't going to tell you about her pain while you're frantically getting ready for work in the morning. The pain particles require that we slow down in order to hear their sobs and catch their tears. They require a slowness of living that is almost lost in today's breakneck pace.

But when you do stop and make time and open to another rhythm, you can enter the grief place. And then particles thaw out. And then they shimmer with light. And we realize then, when we've cried a small river of wordless tears, when we wake up the next morning and feel a ray of sun in the soul after the storm, when there's a lightness to our step, that the grief place is also the joy place. We know then that grief and joy live in the same chamber of the heart. We know it is not something to be feared, but that it is the pathway to the peace we all seek.

Grief and Gratitude

We must drop unguarded into the holy bath of grief, inside of which all truly happy men and women must bathe to transform the great losses of life, in war, sicknesses, the loss of homelands and the loss of one's confidence in human decency into a wailing that ends in poetry and elegant praise of the ability to feel. For desire, mistaken for love, without the capacity to truly feel the losses that actual loving entails, is what makes murderers of people who have no home friendly enough to allow them both the complete sadnesses and joys their love can feel. -- Martin Prechtel, Stealing Benefacio's Roses

As anyone who has endured trauma or tragedy well knows, life can change in an instant. The date of occurrence then becomes indelibly imprinted on your psyche, and for the rest of your life you'll relive the heartache and grief on each anniversary. For my family, the date is September 12, 2013, the day the 500-year flood roared through our yard and our life, destroying our home and changing us forever.

As we've walked through the rubble of these past days, my husband and I have each charged full force into different aspects of repair: He's thrown himself into saving our house and rebuilding our land, and I've sunk into the world of grief and emotional recovery. Both paths are necessary, and our division is consistent with how many couples navigate trauma; the practical and emotional attention are essential as we figure out how to move forward. So while he's mucking through four feet of mud and building pumps to attempt to dry out our crawl space, which continuously fills with water, I'm in our temporary home with our kids, guiding

them through the muck of our internal mud. And this means teaching them about grief and gratitude.

[The best way I can teach them about grief is to model it myself.](#) As I'm someone who hasn't had trouble connecting to the shadow places and moving toward the uncomfortable feelings as they arise, this isn't difficult for me. What is difficult, however, is knowing how much to share with my kids and how much to process after they've gone to sleep at night when my husband returns from our house after a day of fighting the water or early in the morning as I'm lying in bed thinking about the 10-foot serpent of the river that raged through our land just days before. It's at those moments that the full force of the loss hits me with such power that it feels like I'm going to split apart. But I don't split apart. I grieve hard and long, allowing the flood to wash through me. And when the quiet whisper of our mainstream culture slithers in that says, "It's not that bad. Some people have lost their entire homes, or even their lives. Get over it," I tell that voice to take a hike and return to the essential task of grieving.

Because your pain is your pain. When you're suffering a loss, it's not helpful to compare to others' losses. We live in a culture of comparison, so whether we're comparing joys — like an engagement or a new baby — or losses, we're conditioned to validate the experience only if it's "better" or "worse" than someone else's. So when the voice traipses through my brain that tries to invalidate or dismiss my loss, I shush it aside and continue to allow myself to cry as hard as I need to cry. This is my pain. This is my loss. We have loved our land deeply, like a good friend, and she's now been ravaged by the destructive force of Mother Nature that I've heard about but have now witnessed with my own eyes.

And here's the secret about what happens when you allow grief to surge full-force through your body: When you're done grieving, a genuine space of clarity and gratitude opens up inside. I cry, I rage, I fall apart, and then I'm okay. When my clients ask how I'm able to work so soon after the loss, I tell them that there's a place inside untouched by the floods, a place that is my anchor and my true home regardless of what happens to our actual house. It's the place that's held afloat by the love of my family and friends, by my healthy marriage, and by my own spiritual practice. When I grieve without inhibition, when I surrender to the torrential flood that shakes and rocks me body and soul, this enduring and unchangeable place reveals itself. It's then that I'm flooded with real gratitude as opposed to the platitude of gratitude that results from listening to the unloving and false voice that says, "Buck up and get over it. You have so much to be grateful for."

Grieve and be grateful. Both can be true. The deep grieving clears the debris and opens the channels for real gratitude to enter. In our black-and-white culture that doesn't allow for two or more emotions to exist simultaneously, we encourage people enduring loss to "look at the bright side" or attempt to offer comfort with statements like, "It will be better than before." While this may be true, when someone is in the trenches of grieving a profound loss, the only thing they really need is the space to grieve.

After each wave of tears, my eyes and soul are clear again and my gratitude overflows to reveal what stands before me: My incredible husband and our love which has only grown stronger through the years, our healthy, sweet, resilient boys and the true shelter we bend over them like the weeping boughs of a willow tree, our home which, although damaged, still exists, our neighbors, many of whom we had never met before September 12, who came out of the woodwork

to help us minimize damage during the flood and clean up afterwards, the hoards of volunteers who have shown up at our house to muck out the mud, our hero-cat, who woke us up at 6 a.m. to alert us to the danger and has accompanied us to our temporary dwellings, offering infinite comfort as we try to create a sense of home.

As often happens during tragedies, the non-essentials fall away and the very best of human beings shows up. We dwell in a neighborhood of love, on a planet humbled by disasters that are peeling us away and inviting us to build communities anew from the place inside each of us that knows what truly matters. And it's only one thing: love. The love we extend to one another through action when our small worlds are swept away on a flood of loss are lifelines of connection. Let us take each other's hands as we rebuild our homes, our neighborhoods, and our world on a foundation of goodwill, giving, and love.

The Fear of Feeling Too Good

A synchronistic theme appeared across my work one autumn: The fear of feeling too good. As several clients shared:

I'm terrified that if I embrace what's good in my life — if I consciously acknowledge my blessings — something will come in and yank them all away.

And as a Trust Yourself forum member once wrote (re-printed with member's permission):

I have entire days without experiencing anxiety, and everything feels so real — it's as if I had been wearing gloves all my life and could suddenly touch the texture, shape and temperature of my emotions, and of life in general. Every moment feels very real when they are not covered by the thick layer of anxiety and constant worries.

When I am in this space, though, I sometimes feel very scared and actually do get very anxious. I am afraid something bad will happen, I feel I don't deserve to be happy, to be content with my partner and my job, despite all the imperfections. I am uncovering this deep belief that it is dangerous to be happy. Any guidance on how to deal with this fear?

Still others often describe it in this way:

I commit to something good for me — a yoga practice, journaling daily, eating well, being more creative — and I'm gung-ho about for a week or two, and then inevitably I lose steam and even sabotage it. So I'll have a week of making

green smoothies every day and exercising, and then the next week I'm suddenly drinking wine and staying out late every night. What's wrong with me?

If any of this describes you, you're not alone and there's nothing wrong with you. You're suffering from what Gay Hendricks, in his book [The Big Leap](#), names "The Upper Limit Problem". Here he shares his own process of discovering this phenomena:

"I had just returned to my office from lunch with a friend, and we'd spent a congenial hour talking about the projects we were working on. My work was going well, and I was happy in my relationships. I leaned back in my chair and gave myself a good stretch, letting out a sign of relaxed satisfaction. I felt great. A few seconds later, though, I found myself worrying about my daughter, Amanda, who was away from home at a summer program she has very much wanted to attend.

"A slide show of painful images flickered through my mind: Amanda sitting alone in a dorm room, Amanda feeling lonely and miserable away from home, Amanda being taunted by other kids. The joy disappeared from my body as my mind continued to produce this stream of images."

He then calls the program director and learns, of course, that his daughter is fine. "I thanked her and hung up. I felt a bit foolish, but I also knew that something important had just happened. I sat there wondering, "How did I go from feeling good in one moment to manufacturing a stream of painful images in the next?" Suddenly a light of awareness dawned on me: I manufactured the stream of painful images *because* I was feeling good! Some part of me was afraid of enjoying positive energy for any extended period of time. When I reached my

Upper Limit of how much positive feeling I could handle, I created a series of unpleasant thoughts to deflate me." (pp. 5-6)

Sound familiar?

The first place to start when dealing with anxiety or any difficult feeling is to normalize it. When I talked about this theme on one of my Trust Yourself calls, I received many emails responses and forum threads from participants saying, "Wow. I had no idea so many people struggled with this! Now I feel like I can address it." Once you know you're not alone, a layer of the pervasive "What's wrong with me?" shame that tends to permeate areas of life that few people talk about is released. Now you're free to address what's needing attention without the block of shame in the way.

Let's deconstruct the belief, which, again, often sounds like this: *It's not safe to be too happy. If I'm too happy, something bad will happen. I have to keep my happiness under wraps, which even includes acknowledging it in a gratitude list. There's a limit to my happiness and to good things in my life. If I exceed the limit, something bad will happen.*

I always like to zoom out to start at the biggest layer of a belief, which in this case resides in the collective unconscious. Jung coined the term collective unconscious to explain the part of the mind that is shared by all humans, and is even connected to the memory of our ancestors. In other words, we often believe that we're the only ones to experience or feel something, but when we zoom out and connect to the invisible web we see that our experience is the collective experience. Gay Hendricks described how the fear of feeling too good is interwoven into the collective layer:

"The problem looked much bigger than my own small version of it. Our species in general had grown accustomed to pain and adversity through millennia of struggle. We knew how to feel bad. We had millions of nerve connections devoted to registering pain, and we had a huge expanse of territory in the center of our bodies dedicated to feeling fear. Certainly we had pleasure points in various places, too, but where were the mechanisms for ongoing, natural good feeling? I realized that we were only recently evolving the ability to let ourselves feel good and have things go well for any significant period of time." (p. 7)

I'll interject here to say that, of course, not everyone on the planet is blessed enough to worry about life being too good. There are millions of people who suffer on the most basic level of survival. So this fear, while collective for many, isn't universal, and would be categorized in Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the very top tier: Self-actualization. This doesn't invalidate how painful and self-limiting it can be when you're suffering from the fear of feeling too good, but I do believe it's important to approach it with a healthy dose of perspective.

The next layer to address is the level of ego. The ego — that small-minded, fear-based part of us that every human being is born with — is devotedly committed to one thing above all else: control. In pursuit of this futile quest for ultimate control, it convinces us that if we believe its lies, we will successfully control the future. In this case, the ego says: "If you acknowledge the good things in your life you'll make them go away." Can you hear the magical thinking in that statement? And finally we address the personal story, times when you were torn down by peers, teachers, siblings or parents for shining your light brightly. I can still remember the cliquey girls in fifth grade saying to me about another girl, "She's so conceited" or "She thinks she's so great," with great disdain. For a young child for whom peer acceptance is everything, it's a small leap to hear those

statements spoken about someone else and to then introject them into one's own code. In that one moment, we learn to be small.

It's also quite common for daughters of narcissistic mothers to receive a covert message that if they shine too big and brightly they will lose their mother's "love." A parent often unconsciously communicates to their children that they don't want to be outshined or surpassed in any way. Thus, when an adult child senses that they're growing past their parents in any way — emotionally, spiritually, financially — the unconscious, self-limiting voice steps in. One of the most loving statements my mother has said to me as an adult was when I was about to film the videos for MindBodyGreen last year and for some reason I was worried that she would feel threatened. I asked her about it and she said: "It is my complete joy to support you! I'm so excited for you and I'm completely delighted that you are doing so well. In my view, loving parents want their kids to surpass them, and I hope you do!" I'm deeply grateful that my mother has never tried to keep me small, and I firmly believe that it's one of the reasons I've been able to grow without limitation into who I am.

Now that we understand the roots of this issue, how do we transcend the part of us that believes it's not safe to feel too good?

1. **Notice it.** Bring awareness, just as Hendricks did above, to times when your good feelings suddenly shift into worry and rumination. The more consciousness you bring to this habit, the more easily you'll be able to change it.
2. **List your ego's beliefs and call them onto the mat.** The ego is most powerful when it works in darkness, hidden behind the great Oz curtain.

When you pull back the curtain, you discover that the ego, just like the Wizard of Oz, isn't a big, scary person with a loud voice but is actually just a small, little, scared part of us. When you write down all of your ego-beliefs, you shine the light of consciousness on them and they begin to dissolve.

3. **Write or explore times in your life when you've been torn down by others**, and experiences that led to the belief that it's not safe to be fully, extraordinarily, beautifully, magnificently, brilliantly you. As I discussed, most people learn somewhere along the way that it's not okay to think they're wonderful and that it's safer to stay small. When you explore these experiences you release them from your individual unconscious and can bring truth to the beliefs that were formed during those times. Grief may also surface as you come into direct contact with memories in which you were made to feel small, especially when those memories are connected to your parents.

4. **Connect to gratitude.** As I wrote about [here](#), gratitude carries tremendous power to sweep out the shards of negative thoughts and open the channels for goodness to enter. Gratitude orients our inner compass toward awe and wonder, which carry much more powerful energy vibrations than worry and negativity. You can even bring the sense of awe and wonder to your negativity, which will help it dissolve and transform into a feeling of goodness. Remember that the conscious path isn't about feeling "good" all the time in the traditional way that we think of the word good. Rather, it's about approaching yourself with a mindset of curiosity and compassion, which then connects us to the river of well-being that permeates our inner and outer worlds. Our only block to this steady inflow of well-being is our resistances to

it, which include any time we push away pain. Gratitude unblocks the resistance, as does love in any form.

The universe wants you to connect to well-being. The universe thrives when you embrace all that is good and beautiful and light in your life. In fact, the world *needs* you to embrace your goodness, because the more you embrace what's good the more light you bring to the world. And, goodness knows, we are in desperate need of more light in this world.