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## **Sacred Stress**

### **Part I: How Stress Affects Our Interior World**

#### **Chapter 2: Creating Connections Learning to Embrace Our Emotions**

By reframing our thinking about stress, we can have fuller, richer lives. In the same way, embracing our emotions - what they are, what they are telling us, and what we can do about them - enables us to live with joy and purpose, to develop more authentic and grounded lives. This strategy is more difficult for most of us than reframing our thinking because we are not as familiar with our emotional life as with our thinking. Most of us expend tremendous amounts of energy trying to suppress, ignore, tune out, or numb what our emotions are telling us. The information our emotions provide can be life giving and restore a sense of balance and peace, however. We need to be willing to lean in and listen - and perhaps act differently as a result of what we learn.

#### **How Emotions Work**

Every emotion is a form of energy providing information and serves an important function. Without emotions life would be pretty boring. Through them, we experience a whole gamut of responses, from the positive of fun and excitement to the darkness of fear and sadness. We will explore some specific emotions further in chapter 3, but to understand how embracing emotions enables us to turn distress into eustress, we can look at emotions in general. All emotions tell us what is happening in the moment and what we need. They are simply a signal from the body telling us something has changed for good or bad and that we need to pay attention.

Neuroscientists have learned in the past three to four decades that our emotions arise out of the most primitive part of our brain and that they are produced incredibly rapidly. Emotions can't afford to be slow; informing our reaction time, in certain circumstances, may make the difference between life and death. James Gross, a scientist who studies emotions, discovered it takes one-tenth of a second for the brain to register and react to a stimulus. So if you are walking in the woods with a friend and see a shadow move in the grass, it takes one-tenth of a second for your brain to register threat and show the fear in your face, sending an immediate message to your friend that something is wrong. It takes six-tenths of a second (still pretty fast) for the message to get to the frontal cortex (thinking part of the brain), where the brain determines the stimulus was just the shadow of leaves blowing in the wind, not a snake. The problem is the half-second lag time between the initial registration of a threat and the frontal cortex decision to disregard it. When your friend whose brain reads the fear on your face in one-tenth of a second asks, "What's wrong?" and you say, "Nothing, everything's fine," you are sending a mixed message, because

your face said there is a problem while your words are saying everything is fine. We tend to believe the emotion. Appreciating the speed and wisdom of our emotional signals is the key to honest and direct communication.

In truth, emotions are exquisitely intelligent, and it is illogical to disregard the information they are sharing. Emotion shapes and coordinates our experience and communicates our needs to ourselves and others. As *movere* (to move), the Latin root of the word *emotion*, suggests, strong feelings literally move us to approach or to avoid. Emotions are a great motivational force pushing us to action.

The problem is many of us don't understand what our emotions are trying to communicate or where they are trying to move us. Because emotions are not always easily understood or contained, people in many cultures mistrust emotions, viewing them as misleading, needing to be tamed or controlled. Many of us are raised to believe that maturity is about governing emotions and relying on our thinking. As a result emotions are often pathologized and viewed as something to be overcome, not embraced. Emotions are often labeled as weak, dramatic, irrational, and problematic. Many of us learn at a young age how to suppress our emotions. Even our parents' well-intentioned assistance can often discourage embracing emotions. I (George) was reminded of this truth when my son CJ got off the school bus one day in first grade. CJ seemed down and said his friend Joey no longer wanted to be his friend at school. I felt bad and immediately wanted to protect both of us from the negative feelings by fixing the problem. So I responded, "Don't worry about it. Joey is a jerk. Let's call up Bobby for a playdate."

My attempt to avoid CJ's sadness and my own feelings of hurt resulted in sending the subtle message to CJ that it is not okay to share these "softer" feelings. CJ was being trained early on to hide his true feelings and adopt a veneer of strength by "soldiering on." The gloomy reality is that if I consistently discourage expressing vulnerable feelings, CJ will learn to protect himself by concealing his inner truth, moving him another step away from knowing and being able to act on his own emotions. Turning away from or hiding our feelings guarantees we will be alone when we feel bad. Instead, we need to learn how to lean into the hurt so we can listen to what the emotion is signaling.

For CJ to express his feelings, he needs his dad (George) to model how to embrace his feelings. We have identified the following four-step process for learning how to embrace emotion: (1) recognize you are experiencing an emotion by paying attention to where you feel it in your body, (2) name the emotion to engage your cognitive brain and provide perspective, (3) figure out what the emotion is signaling and what you need, and (4) make a decision to act.

This process of engaging emotion incorporates the popular concept of mindfulness, which is about being totally open to the present moment. It is only in being authentic by receiving what is, and moving into and through it, that we can attain peace and clarity. Mindfulness is not escaping life but entering more

deeply into it. We do not suppress, deny, minimize, project, or rationalize what we feel; rather, we receive what is and embrace the message.

Using this four-step process, let's look at how I repaired my relationship with my son CJ after a poorly timed suggestion that CJ not “worry about it.” First, I identified the bad feeling in my stomach (step 1) as I realized my advice to call up another friend did not lift CJ's mood. Then I named the bad feeling in my stomach (step 2) as helplessness and sadness at seeing CJ's pain. It hurts to witness your child in pain. Putting a label on the bodily sensation of the bad feeling in his stomach engages my brain to join the process. Making the emotion conscious and explicit allows me to focus more intently on the emotional signal. The good news is if we listen to the emotional message, not only does it convey the problem, but also the solution of what we need. I recognized my sadness and helplessness was trying to get me to seek connection and offer comfort to CJ (step 3). As a kid, I also experienced the rejection of peers, and I faced the pain alone. My only option as a kid was to try to avoid the pain. No wonder I tried to do the same with CJ! Plugged into my vulnerable feelings, I decided (step 4) to empathize with CJ instead of encouraging him to avoid his feelings. This last step of taking action to meet the emotional need is radically different from the inertia of emotional avoidance. Many times we can't fix the source of the hurt, but we can choose to use the adversity to turn toward those we love.

Rather than dismissing CJ's feelings with advice, I said, “I'm sorry, son. I said to not worry about it. Of course you are worried. I know it feels bad when someone doesn't want to be your friend. It makes sense you feel sad, and I feel sad, too.” These words give CJ permission to listen to his emotional signal of sadness and trust his dad to be alongside him in moments of insecurity. Interestingly, sharing the sadness creates connection, the best antidote to what hurts. Our countercultural message is that hiding emotions leads to the distress of facing hurt alone, while embracing emotions leads to the eustress of dealing with hurt together.

### **Embracing Emotions Leads to Vulnerability**

Openness to embracing our emotions is crucial to being authentic and truly knowing ourselves. Emotional awareness empowers us to understand our needs and communicate these needs directly. Yet this willingness to expose ourselves emotionally is risky. At the heart of all emotional engagement lies vulnerability. Most people want to avoid vulnerability because of the possibility of painful rejection. They believe that to be vulnerable is to be weak, exposing them to disappointment and hurt. Avoiding vulnerability seems the safest course. The problem with this strategy is that in avoiding our vulnerability we must hide our true selves. By erecting a wall, presenting a false persona of strength, we relegate our insecurities and needs to the shadows. We imprison ourselves, needing protection so we do not get hurt, only to discover our protective tactics work too well, as they also keep out any comforting responses to our vulnerabilities. Walls do not discriminate.

The only way out of this prison is removing the wall and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. We (George and Heather) believe that, like common misunderstandings of stress, the traditional definition of vulnerability as weakness is limiting. We think of vulnerability as the willingness to be real and honestly share ourselves, especially our emotions, dreams, desires, talents, fears, doubts, failures, and flaws. At its core, vulnerability reminds us of our universal longing and need for connection with others. We are incomplete alone and crave to become part of something bigger than ourselves. Remove vulnerability, and we lose our greatest asset to connection, our authenticity. The risk and uncertainty inherent in vulnerability makes it the perfect raw material from which to build genuine relationships. Embracing the emotional signal of our vulnerability allows every encounter to offer a fresh chance for mutual discovery.

Sociologist Brené Brown's research sheds light on why embracing our emotions is so integral to optimal living. People who live "wholehearted" lives characterized by joy, purpose, meaning, love, resilience, belonging, and creativity share one prerequisite: a sense of worthiness. That sense arises not from the right education or job or from success, fame, or fortune, but from what is really important and life giving: deep connections with other people.

How do we deepen our closest connections? For Brown, our ability to be vulnerable - to show ourselves truthfully, warts and all, thus allowing another person to communicate that our blemishes are OK - empowers us to thrive. When we invest so much of our energy into showing others only what we anticipate they wish to see, we lose ourselves by performing, perfecting, defending, pleasing, and proving. Our sense of worth depends on our ability to be vulnerable. This is a profoundly counterintuitive message within our culture, but there are no shortcuts to a sense of worthiness. To like ourselves, we must embrace our emotions, show our true selves, and allow others to safely respond with affirmation.

I (Heather), after a year of trying to get pregnant, lost a child through miscarriage. With my pregnancy loss, I had to bury my dreams by saying good-bye to the child I would never comfort or cuddle. Still today, I sometimes find myself wondering what my baby girl's face would look like.

Many women have told me their miscarriages were the most profound losses they experienced. For me, the next seven years of trying to conceive were monthly battles with loss and bearing the heavy burden of keeping hope alive for a better outcome. Infertility work can be a painful, roller-coaster ride of treatments, procedures, daily blood draws, drugs, and agonizing months of waiting for any positive news. Sometimes good news doesn't come, or at least not in the form we would hope.

After an eight-year battle, I finally was able to conceive and give birth to my vivacious daughter, who is now thirteen.

How did I cope with the months of tortured waiting, painful procedures, drug reactions, repeated losses, and the ongoing story of failure? I found it was being real (as sometimes only grief can make us) with those who could uphold me, listen lovingly, and act with mercy on my behalf.

As a New Englander, being honest about how I am feeling with others is not something that comes naturally or easily. I come from the culture of the Puritans and the stiff upper lip. I remember the day when I finally decided to share that I had suffered a recent miscarriage with my class of eighty graduate students in Colorado during my lecture on development and loss. I wasn't sure I could get through my story without crying. As my voice cracked and eyes filled with tears, their looks of compassion and comments of grace convinced me that I did just what I needed to do. How better to share the intimate agony of loss than to say, "Hey, I am in it right now, and it's breaking my heart. But I can tell people around me care, and I can receive their love and grace, and somehow that is enough." I felt incredibly exposed but also free as well to acknowledge the dark mantle that surrounded me.

Applying our four-step process to embracing emotion, I was able to acknowledge the physical pain in my heart and the constriction in my chest that expressed the extent of my hurt, sorrow, and even embarrassment that I had lost a child and struggled with infertility. First, I named the truth of the pain inside. When I listened to my pain rather than pushing it away, I heard my desperate need for comfort and compassion for my tears, so I decided to reach out for support, and in so doing, I moved toward healing and being known through being real and honest about my own suffering. Rather than judgment or ridicule, I found grace and kindness, which brought relief to my hurt. This paradigm has continued to be true throughout my ministry and career, when I am real in sermons, with families at the bedside of a dying patient, and in dialogue with my spouse or children. I still feel a pang of fear that comes with being vulnerable but then I am rewarded tenfold by the response.

### **Vulnerability Is the Birthplace of Resiliency**

Resilience is the process of overcoming adversity and turning distress into eustress. Embracing our emotions is the key to opening the doorway of resilience. Stress triggers emotional reactions that provide the impetus toward either vulnerability and connection or further isolation and protection. Even though stress can function in different ways, it is the essential stimulus for seeking and finding growth. Regardless of the type of distress suffered, the people who survive best don't look to return to their former life; rather, they welcome the creation of a "new normal." They are realistic, aware of their distress, and still able to seek out opportunities to transform their experience into eustress. Esther Perel, a noted author and therapist, grew up in a community of

Holocaust concentration camp survivors, and she discovered there were two groups of people: “Those who didn’t die, and those who came back to life.” Those who didn’t die survived with perpetual distress. “They lived tethered to the ground, afraid, untrusting,” and waiting for the next bad thing to happen. In an unsafe world where fear dominates, there is no room for fun and thriving. Focusing all their energy on avoiding fear, they never could outrun its shadow.

Perel observed, however, that those who came back to life learned that the best way to escape focusing on perils is to concentrate on finding purpose for living. These Holocaust survivors did not get lost in the distress. Instead, they used the distress as stimulation to find meaning and fulfillment. Fear was replaced by curiosity and exploration. They never forgot the horror, but they used it to motivate positive living. Through embracing their emotions, they gained greater clarity of their own resilience. Among those who have found hope in the midst of great fears and challenges were Margaret and H. A. Rey, authors of the famous Curious George series. They were German Jews who escaped the Nazis on their bicycles and intentionally turned unimaginable distress into eustress, inspiring millions to celebrate life.

We hope our point is crystal clear. The best things in life - love, connection, empathy, comfort, compassion, vulnerability, and resilience - are not possible without embracing our emotions. Emotions remind us that what matters most is the space between things, people, and relationships, not the isolated entity. Everything in the known universe, from molecules to solar systems is dependent on relationships. Our Western ideology of autonomy and independence is a myth. In truth we are all functioning parts of something much bigger than ourselves. Reality is communion. If we listen, emotions constantly let us know about our need to connect. Our emotional signals provide accurate evaluations of where we are in the present moment. If we are communicating our needs directly and they are being responded to, then our emotions typically signal positive feelings of contentment. If our communication is indirect through camouflaging or suppressing our emotions, then the scrambled messages often signal distress, which is pleading for us to repair and find connection. Do you reading this book have the courage to embrace your own scary and confusing emotional messages? We hope our argument to embrace emotions is bolstering your resolve. As we make ourselves vulnerable in the present moment with whatever the signal is saying, we develop our ability to be flexible and adaptive - to be masters of sacred stress.

### **Emotions and Spirituality**

Historically, religious traditions view emotions with similar mistrust as the general public. Some believe that emotions, equated with passions and temptation, are evidence of weakness and sin. Resisting our emotions is linked with righteousness. For some, the goal is to disregard and overcome the body’s signals and aim for a perfect state of calmness. We believe this saintly image of perpetual peacefulness is misguided and unattainable. Fortunately, people are

as effective at stopping an emotion as they are preventing a sneeze. Our bodies are going to communicate, even if we try not to listen to them.

Emotions are not morally good or bad; rather, they are indicators that help us survive and thrive. Learning to pay attention to emotional signals allows us to adjust our actions and continue growing. When we embrace our emotions, we honor their sacred function and allow our mind, body, and soul to come together into one integrated whole. We believe one of the major goals of healthy spirituality is to help us all feel more at home in our body and with our emotions.

### **Chapter 3: Opening the Door to Transformation Knowing and Naming Our Emotions**

Because embracing our emotions is an essential skill for turning distress into eustress, we need to be familiar and comfortable with our feelings. As noted in chapter 2, however, many of us have been taught to mistrust or dismiss our emotions. Consequently, we have difficulty knowing and naming our emotions so that we can then embrace them.

Paul Ekman, a pioneer in studying emotions, suggests six basic emotions - four negative and two positive - are universally recognized through facial expressions, regardless of culture or language. These are anger, sadness, fear, and disgust (negative emotions) and happiness and surprise (positive emotions). Like the primary colors red, yellow, and blue, from which all variations of color emerge, so these basic six emotions form the foundation from which arise the hundreds of emotional responses of our complex emotional world. In this chapter, we'll examine these emotions to help you understand and name them as you develop in your ability to embrace emotion.

#### **The Wisdom of Dark Emotions**

As we begin this chapter, we invite you to consider making a seismic shift in your thinking. We believe the negative emotions of anger, sadness, fear, shame, and guilt are not, in fact, negative. Miriam Greenspan, in her book, *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair*, says there is no such thing as negative emotions, only "unskillful ways of coping with emotions we can't bear." Changing our perspective - no longer seeing these emotions as negative but actually respecting their wisdom and redemptive nature - is essential to being able to manage stress effectively.

#### **Anger**

Anger is a natural response when something is wrong. Such things as a simple slight, an unpleasant event, an unfair action, a rejection, or a serious danger can trigger anger. It is an emotion that mobilizes the body to take corrective action, empowering us to stand up for our needs and say, "I am important and worthy of being heard."

It is in our best interests and of those we love to learn how to understand and engage anger well. Poorly managed anger is related to a slew of health conditions, such as headaches, sleep problems, fatigue, infection, digestive disorders, heart disease, and stroke. If anger flourishes unchecked, it can lead to hatred and violence. In counseling couples, we have both witnessed how anger crushes intimacy, breeds defensiveness and distance in relationships, and breaks up families. Anger is such a universal danger that it was included by the early spiritual writers as one of the seven deadly sins.

Many of us think our best strategy for dealing with anger is to avoid it. We invest so much energy in repressing this emotional signal because we believe our relationships and the world in general are better without anger.

Surprisingly, anger can actually be a constructive and creative force. Research overwhelmingly indicates that feeling angry increases optimism and creativity and helps us perform more effectively. Expressing anger leads to more successful negotiations and mobilizes people into becoming agents of change.

Anger also provides a sense of control against feelings of helplessness as well as confidence that the outcome can be altered. One researcher examined Americans' reactions to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and found that feelings of anger helped minimize paralyzing fear, allowing people to come together for a common cause. Those who became angry were less likely to be afraid of future attacks.

Many professionals, such as firefighters, police officers, and military personnel, are trained to use anger to push past their fears. Thinking about the terrible atrocities your enemy might commit to your friends and family provides extra energy to charge up a hill against machine-gun fire.

The feeling of anger isn't the problem; it's what we do with it that makes all the difference. The key is figuring out what need our anger is trying to communicate: Once we realize that anger is just asserting our needs, it gets easier for us to be more direct about communicating them.

I (George) remember trying to reach a customer service representative and getting redirected far too many times to automated voices. Each time I was put on hold and then asked to hit buttons, nothing worked. As my frustration mounted I kept pushing zero, hoping to speak with an operator, and then I was put back on hold for another half hour. By the time an actual live person got on the phone, I was livid. I started screaming about not knowing how their company stayed in business with such terrible customer service. My anger was clearly communicating my need for the injustice to be acknowledged. Astoundingly, the lady on the other end gave me permission for my anger and said their company's response was unacceptable. After apologizing, she said she would do whatever was necessary to make the situation right. My signal (anger) about the unfairness

of the treatment and my needing someone to listen was met. I no longer needed to send the signal (anger). It served its purpose and dissipated. Her interaction illustrates the power of someone understanding the need that anger is expressing. Imagine if instead of giving me permission to be angry, the agent had told me in the heat of my protest to calm down and stop being so difficult. My anger would certainly have increased.

Anger is powerful; it is very effective in getting responses. In couples and family counseling, we often find that it takes at least one partner's anger to bring awareness of what is wrong so the couple can find solutions. Anger empowers those involved to mobilize, in positive ways, to repair the relationship and get back a sense of harmony and reconnection. Take away our anger and ironically we lose the ability to fight for better relationships. Couples need anger to reach toward each other instead of going away. Although it is often lost in the intensity of the delivery, hope for change is the motivation behind anger.

We try to help couples approach their partners not only with different words and behaviors but also with an altered tone and mood. For example, a wife asking her husband in an angry tone, "Why were you so late getting home from work today?" expresses too much anger and no vulnerability. The husband will probably react with defensiveness and withdrawal, which will only reinforce the wife's underlying fears of rejection. If the wife instead listens to her anger and discovers the need it is communicating, she might say in a softer voice, "Please listen. I get concerned when I don't know where you go after work. I feel like you don't want to be with me, that I'm not attractive to you anymore. Is that true?" This question will likely elicit a completely different response. It encourages the husband to engage and comfort her vulnerability, helping her get what she longs for. She is courageous and tells him what is really going on rather than leading with a verbal punch.

Although misplaced anger can be unhealthy in relationships, appropriate anger can offer a pathway toward healthier connection. The crucial factor is using anger constructively. Stepping back from a situation that has upset us gives us a chance to calm down and figure out what is disturbing us and what options for change we have.

Respecting the vital function of anger to get us moving honors its basic function: to create change. Anger protects us from worry, anxiety, and feeling powerless. Angry isn't a sign of failure; instead, it can be a catalyst for success. If we heed its advice, our lives are enriched.

### **Sadness**

Sadness usually means something bad has happened; we have lost something or someone important, or we have failed at an endeavor. Sadness is a type of emotional pain and comes to all of us, no matter our age and in response to all

kinds of losses. A wife whose husband dies after fifty years of marriage or a child who drops her ice-cream cone will both express loss.

Feeling down is a normal reaction to life's struggles. If the feeling is persistent, however, then it may be indicative of depression. Depression, unlike sadness, doesn't depend on circumstances. Depression is like a low-grade virus that causes general fatigue, discomfort, unease, slower thought processing, lack of interest in usual activities, lack of appetite, and excessive sleeping or inability to sleep. Feeling sad isn't the primary problem of depression; rather, it is a lack of energy that makes depression so debilitating. Because expressing sadness uses a lot of energy and the body cannot maintain this expenditure perpetually, some people facing loss choose to shut down rather than stay present to the sorrow. Although this technique dulls the hurt, it also dampens all the other emotions as well. It is hard to feel happy and alive when you are numb. The negative impact of depression today is enormous. Depression is predicted to be the greatest single cause of diminished human potential in the near future, surpassing all other illnesses, including cancer and heart disease.

Given the potential severity of depression, it makes sense that people want to get out of their sadness as quickly as possible. They are afraid that their sadness will lead to depression. Keeping busy is a great strategy to ensure there is no time for sadness. Yet trying to avoid feeling sad guarantees that we will miss the wisdom of the signal. Sadness is communicating that something important is happening and we need to pay attention. If we open our hearts to listen to what sadness is saying, then we can learn about its amazing benefits.

On a physical level, having a good cry actually does make someone feel better, something we seem to know intuitively as children. Tears relieve stress by removing some of the chemicals built up in the body from stress. The opposite is also true: suppressing tears increases stress levels and contributes to diseases aggravated by stress, such as high blood pressure, heart problems, and peptic ulcers. One study found that crying is more effective than any antidepressant on the market. The old Jewish proverb, "What soap is for the body, tears are for the soul," supports the mounting scientific evidence.

Crying also helps us cope psychologically. It forces us to confront the situation. Naming what our tears are saying focuses the problem and points us in the direction of the solution. Some people fear that once they or a loved one start crying, they will never stop. However in our personal and clinical experience, we have found tears, which may feel out of control, actually decrease a feeling of helplessness by calming us down as we allow them space. Tears open the doorway to growth.

Sadness is a plea for empathy and compassion. It highlights our healthy dependency and is nature's way to appeal for another's help. The baby cries because it wants to be picked up. The good news is that receiving care is a win-

win situation. Both the receiver and the giver feel better from the exchange. Think of moments in your life when you were able to comfort someone else. What an amazing gift to know that your presence could make such a difference. Sadness also has the power to unite people, something we witness at most funerals. Petty squabbles are put aside when sadness reminds us of what really matters: connections.

For over three years, I (George) ran a weekly ongoing grief group for parents who lost their firefighter sons at the World Trade Center after 9/11. The group provided a chance for parents to talk about their sons and express their sadness. They were all in the pain together, and they appreciated feeling understood. There were lots of tears but also tons of comfort and compassion. For most members the group became the highlight of their week. This grief group provided a space for each parent to be real and connect with others who could embrace their pain and not run away. Unlike the larger culture that avoided their sadness, these parents leaned in. An amazing thing happened as the sadness was shared: it led to greater love.

The positive view of sadness is captured by the Buddhist perspective that difficult circumstances are *necessary* for us to become happy. A famous Buddhist teaching states: “When obstacles arise, the wise rejoice while the foolish retreat.” One of the greatest sufferers of hurt and sadness is Jesus, a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). His life was one of continued sorrows, from the manger to the cross. Yet Jesus didn't fall into hopelessness and depression. He used adversity to love more deeply. Jesus understood the benevolent nature of tears.

Sadness is one of our greatest vehicles for repair. It pushes for connection and draws hearts toward us. The saddest thing isn't the tears when you are feeling down but having no one to hold you while you cry. Honoring the purpose of sadness to foster connection allows us to embrace the tears and use them to reach out to others and not pull all our energies into avoiding our pain.

## **Fear**

Fear can paralyze us and crush our hopes. Fear causes a change in brain and organ function and ultimately a change in behavior, such as fighting back, running away, freezing, or trying to appease. Fear may occur in response to a specific stimulus in the present or to a future situation that is perceived as a threat to health, status, power, security, or anything held valuable.

Fear is the ultimate warning system, alerting us that there is danger. The signal happens rapidly, mobilizing us to act and reduce or avoid the threat. Scientists have discovered how easily fear, like our other emotions, can take charge and make decisions, bypassing the rational part of our brain. If something jumps out of the shadows, we don't have time to think. Our bodies take over in an immediate flight response.

Like the rest of our emotions, fear is designed to be a temporary state. It quickly assesses a situation for risk and pushes for action. However, when fear is long lasting, it can ravage our health, taxing all of our body's systems and increasing the risk for a multitude of physical ailments. When temporary fears turn into a generalized, continual anticipation of negative consequences, then the body stays stuck in a perpetual fight-or-flight response. Visualize running a marathon every day with a lion chasing you. The toll of constant anxiety is enormous: anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States, affecting over forty million adults in the United States age eighteen and older (18 percent of the US population). Even though many people in our society are affluent and enjoy frequent opportunities to unwind, we are being overwhelmed by fear. Our relentless pursuit of happiness combined with our constant attempts to escape fear are not working well.

The best way to deal with fear is to face it. Fear is not our enemy; it is our friend. Embedded in our fears are our hopes and dreams. Even chronic anxiety is trying to tell us something. Not listening to the signal prevents us from making the changes necessary to move forward. Buried fear still influences our behavior, but it often remains outside our awareness. We need to learn how to lean into fear and listen to its message.

Understanding the many benefits of fear can make it easier to embrace. Fear is a great motivator. Not only does it stay alert to a threat, but it also provides energy to respond. Fear keeps us going, rather than settling for complacency. Being afraid to let the team down allows members to push themselves past their limits. Fear of failure sparks creative energy and pushes us to stretch our limits. Often our greatest risks produce our greatest successes. Fear helps us focus and adjust to the demands of our environment. It tells us when to push and when to pull back.

Fear causes us to worry, and in the short term our brains like to worry because it provides a sense of control and ability to change our fate. Anxiety sharpens our focus and boosts our concentration. For example, anxiety helps air traffic controllers stay alert. Air traffic controllers who are too happy make more mistakes than their more focused, anxious counterparts.

Realistic fears also assist us in saying no, setting limits, stopping risky behaviors, and appreciating the need for discipline. Fear of making mistakes makes us more efficient and effective. In our work with families, we see the fallout when children who don't learn the value of *no* become lazy, selfish, disrespectful, and out of control. Fear of disappointing parents and others can channel our energies in socially appropriate ways. Healthy fear can provide necessary guardrails in life.

We believe fear's greatest asset is the vulnerability it creates. Fear creates an opportunity for us to signal to others that we need help. Like sadness, it is a beacon calling for connection. Imagine a child awakening from a bad dream and calling out for help. A parent's gentle comfort bonds the two together. As strange as it may sound, take away the nightmare, and they lose the opportunity for connection.

Vulnerability entails risk because the outcome is uncertain. Vulnerability can lead to either rejection or closeness. Yet even in a worst-case scenario - taking a risk and being utterly rejected - that fear and pain also provides an opportunity for us to turn toward others for comfort. If we are courageous enough to show ourselves fully, exposing our fears and failings to those we love, then we give ourselves a chance to be truly seen and accepted unconditionally. One of the most fulfilling experiences in life is to be known in the fullness of our authenticity, not only in the places where we shine, but in the darkness where we hide.

I (George) will never forget playing in a baseball championship game when I was nine years old. The big hitter on the other team hit a monster fly ball to the outfield. I was playing right field, and I ran backward to catch the ball. Unfortunately, the ball bounced off my glove, striking me in the head and momentarily knocking me out. When I came to, my dad was holding an ice pack on my head. We lost the game, and I was scared my dad was disappointed with me. I'll never forget him taking me out to dinner afterward to celebrate me being such a good son and having such a hard head. To this day, I still carry his message that I'm loved unconditionally, even with my blunders.

When we feel isolated, fear can be terrifying. However, the darkness is not so scary when it is shared. The choice is crucial: we can use fear as a catalyst to turn toward others or use our energy to avoid and hide from fear until it eventually sneaks up and catches us.

### **Shame and Guilt**

The last of the so-called negative emotions are shame and guilt. Just thinking about shame and guilt can elicit bad feelings about ourselves and make us want to look away from others. Shame and guilt exist in every culture and are understood by every major religious tradition. Today, people often use the words *shame* and *guilt* interchangeably. However, there are important differences. Shame is a more global and painful feeling that something is bad or wrong with us personally. Guilt is a feeling of remorse caused by specifically doing something wrong. Simply put, guilt says, "I have done bad," while shame says, "I am bad." Both emotions can make us feel diminished and damage our self-esteem. Yet, shame is often more powerful and profound than guilt. Both emotions elicit feelings of being sorry, yet guilt tends to push us to make amends, while shame propels us to hide.

A major drawback to this propensity to hide is that no one sees or understands what is going on inside of the person hiding. I (George) became aware of this when interacting with my son in a recent conversation. I had just read an article about how the brains of kids today are not developing the ability to read facial expressions because of not enough practice interacting with people. The core issue seems to be that they spend too much time watching electronic screens. As a therapist who knows the importance of reading emotions on faces, this scared the hell out of me. So I decided to read the article to my son CJ, who spends too much time playing video games. He sat down next to me as I carefully read him the article, emphasizing important passages. When I finished, he got up and said, "Dad, you know every time you read me something and try to help me, I feel bad about myself."

Wow! My attempt to love my son was training him to go away from me. Thank God he said something, and I was given a chance to change my ways and repair our relationship. But how many people just go away with diminished spirits and never express their pain? If CJ had hidden his pain and placated me with some head nodding, he would have been alone with his hurt. The intention of the person sending the message is not what matters; rather, how the message lands for the receiver is critical. CJ felt bad about himself after our interaction. He doubted my belief in him and his faith in himself.

It is my job as a parent to protect my son, even if that means delivering hard messages. But despite my noble intentions, if my interactions continually send signals to my son that he is doing something wrong, then I am chipping away at his essence and increasing the distance in our relationship. Criticism is like little punches to the brain, literally triggering the pain receptors in our heads. The more I criticize, sending CJ into shame, the easier it is the next time for both of us to enter that same critical shaming cycle, strengthening these negative pathways. Creating new positive pathways is essential to closeness. To repair my relationship with CJ, I decided to cut down on my blaming, and the next evening, I read him a comedy with plenty of jokes in it to give his body an upbeat experience of reading with Dad.

What is so vicious about shame is that not only are we tortured by being cut off from connection, but also in our confinement, we turn on ourselves. When we are the most down and in need of help, we are utterly alone and treat ourselves with contempt. When we don't like ourselves, it is hard to believe we are lovable. Imagine being stuck in a scary dark hole and hating yourself for being so stupid for falling into the hole. Is there a worse abyss than thinking everyone dislikes you and hating yourself? Research is resoundingly consistent in its finding that the more shame a person feels, the more anxious, aggressive, and detached he becomes. Shame thrives as a secret and becomes a tomb of our own making. In the long term, the more we try to outrun our shame, the more the isolation and pain grows.

One of my stories of shame occurred when I (Heather) was in sixth grade. I was the target of a bully's taunts and told I could not sit at the "cool" table in the classroom and needed to leave my seat. I got elbowed, and someone kicked me under the table. Later, I found cruel anonymous notes in my desk. The situation escalated, until the bully put Scotch tape in my hair, which the teacher had to cut out. It was then that I decided to concede and moved to the other girls' table. The bullying wasn't worth trying to be "cool" - or to make a point. Sometimes, we need to remove ourselves from the abuse. Even in recalling that story, I feel a sense of embarrassment and a fear that it could make you, my readers, think, "There must be something wrong with her. She must be flawed or defective." After many years of working to redeem stories of my past, I know that is not true. But the reality is that there is still a pocket of shame that I touch when retelling and reliving this story. As a result of this difficult experience, I was wary of getting too close to potential friends and imagined the script would repeat itself. With time, faith, and healing relationships, I was able to restore a sense of self-worth. Looking back, I see how that sixth-grade story helped deepen in me the capacity for empathy and compassion. I understood what it meant to be hurt and made a commitment to be a person who helps those who hurt.

The key to healing shame is bringing light into the darkness. When we can courageously confront the darkness instead of turning away, we are on the road to recovery. Brené Brown says the antidote to shame is empathy, from both ourselves and others. By searching out and embracing our shadow side, we give ourselves a chance to shrink the darkness. When others come alongside our brokenness and cradle us with grace and compassion, our wounds heal. Self-compassion and loving responses from others are the key ingredients to transform shame into deeper security through connection.

For many people, the healing response that undoes the power of shame comes from a loving parent, a true love, or a sense of the Holy. Mystical theologians of different faith practices often describe a mystical union between one's soul and the divine spark - the Source or God. This deep knowing is a space of connection where we are filled with joy and experience an overpowering, all-encompassing love. One can imagine how a spiritual encounter of that magnitude could diminish one's self of isolation and the need to hide. This mystical union offers the template to healing shame and for unconditional love and acceptance. We can offer that same message of love and worth to those around us as we reach toward them. We can be a part of the divine spark, illuminating others' darkness, helping them come to the light. It is one thing to be loved for all the good we do and our most flattering traits. It is another thing entirely to be loved in the midst of our failings, shortcomings, emotional outbursts, and small-mindedness.

Shame offers us a sense of control, direction, and understanding and something for us to hold onto. Pinpointing the problem inside ourselves gives us

hope for a different outcome if we can change who we are. Many of us just burrow deeper into the shame and hope doing so will motivate us to change. For example, shame might cause someone to look in the mirror with disgust and call herself a “fat pig” in a faulty attempt to motivate herself to lose weight. Her underlying belief is that identifying her character flaws of laziness and lack of discipline in controlling her eating might stimulate her to change her actions. Picture the abused little girl saying to herself “I’m a bad girl” and hoping that if she acted better, her life would improve. Sadly, our attempts to change ourselves to avoid bad things happening often fall far short of the intended goal.

The popular perception that shame is always bad blames people for developing these normal reactions to life’s struggles. If shame didn’t serve a purpose, however, it would not be so universal. Sometimes we actually do really bad things, and feeling bad can motivate us to improve our behavior. There are countless stories in sacred texts about how mistakes led to transformation. Although shame often leaves us in dark places, it is not inherently evil. Feeling bad about ourselves signals disconnection and implores us to repair, to address the underlying need: connection.

Like all emotions, shame is informational. Avoiding the signal means avoiding the solution. Expanding the definition of shame empowers us to connect with and listen to the underlying needs. When we are mindful of our core needs for connection and the survival strategies we employ to protect ourselves, then we can decide the best way to get our needs met. If, instead of hiding, we actually used the energy of shame to turn toward connection, think how different our lives could be. Shame points us toward the opportunities for grace and for repairing what is wrong with the world and us. Its purpose isn’t punishment but redemption. In Judaism, the faithful are called to *tikkun olam*, which means to repair or heal the world. All are called to play their part to restore and transform the brokenness of our world. Overcoming shame by leaning into what it is telling us is part of healing our world and all those our lives touch.

### **The Beauty of Connection**

Recognizing that all emotions provide neutral information that we can respond to negatively or positively, we now turn to the “positive” emotions of surprise and happiness. Surprise and happiness certainly signal good things happening, but they can also cast a dark shadow. Just as negative emotions hold the potential for good, the positive emotions carry the possibility for bad. Expanding the definition of all emotions to include both positive and negative elements ensures these tools have the greatest versatility and usefulness.

### **Surprise**

At the heart of surprise is a state of “not knowing.” Its main function is to immediately shift our attention to an unanticipated event. Our ordinary expectations and routine assumptions are interrupted by a fresh experience.

Surprise is a great wake-up call that forces us to be radically aware of what is happening in the present. We have to notice something before we can act on it. Our cognitive thinking brain is too slow to comprehend and adapt to sudden changes in our environment.

Although surprise can be a response to both negative and positive events, we want to emphasize its impartial role as a messenger for change. Because stress and change are instrumental for growth, the amount of surprise in our lives is a good gauge of whether we are embracing or avoiding change. People who are risk takers and open to feedback discover surprises every day. Consistent, daily “not knowing” moments are physical markers that we are growing and continuing to learn. In contrast, those who need to feel in control work hard to make life predictable and eliminate surprises. They view change as a threat. Too many of us get stuck in our routines, choosing the comforts of predictability and control rather than the discomfort of stretching. Yet it is the ruptures and repairs that cultivate revitalization and expansion. Stress is an essential ingredient to flourishing. Surprise is confirmation that we are open to receiving feedback and engaging with our environment.

Depending on the triggering incident, surprise is often followed by other emotions. Someone menacingly jumping out of a dark alley or a scantily clad lover opening the door to welcome us for a dinner date both elicit a response of eyebrows rising and jaw dropping. Surprise immediately focuses attention and paves the way for other emotions to take over.

### **Surprise and Curiosity**

We often interpret surprise as a positive emotion because of its frequent association with feelings such as excitement and curiosity. Surprise can propel us to try to understand. We all know the rush of energy when we are enthusiastically trying to figure something out. This yearning to explore seems to be in our DNA.

Maintaining a curious mind is essential to growth, both individually and as a species. Cultivating curiosity requires openness to the unfamiliar and courage to face possible failure. Humanity's greatest achievements are in large part a product of curiosity. Albert Einstein appreciated the value of surprise and curiosity. He said, “The important thing is not to stop questioning. I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.” It is clear that we sometimes need to be curious and perhaps deviate from the norm if we hope to innovate. Surprise ensures we are awake and alive in the present moment.

As for its impact on relationships, increased curiosity is linked to stronger connections. It is easier to meet and maintain important relationships when we are open to others' points of view and interested in learning about them. Knowing your partner is interested in you is a huge component of building trust and security. Gallup polls from more than 130 nations report the two most common

sources of happiness are engaging in good relationships and continuing to learn new things. Both are natural outcomes of healthy curiosity.

Curiosity is good for your health, especially your brain. Studies suggest increased curiosity is associated with longer life, higher IQ scores, and a lower likelihood of developing hypertension, diabetes, and dementia. Mental stimulation creates new neural pathways, which keep our brains growing. The more energy we invest in exploration and understanding, the more fully our passions blossom. The reverse is also true: declining curiosity is frequently associated with declining health.

However, sometimes curiosity hurts more than it helps. Think about how many explorers set off to discover new lands only to find misery, failure, and death. For many people, significant failures kill the desire to explore the unknown and lead them to choose safety over curiosity.

Appreciating both the upside and downside of curiosity is essential for developing appropriate flexibility. Too often we swing to one extreme side of the continuum, risking too much or too little. Some people put up walls and don't take risks to protect against bad things happening. However, walls that keep out bad also prevent the good stuff. Others recklessly throw caution to the wind, and their extreme pushing against the limit leads to their undoing.

The most important aspect of surprise and curiosity is the way they affect our relationships with ourselves, others, and [our Source]. As Martin Buber says, "All real living is meeting." [Source] seems to be inviting us all to join in the adventure. Encountering new experiences with an openness to be changed - like the journeys of Abraham, Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Muhammad, and Confucius - is at the heart of most world religions. These religions all encourage transformation, which surprises us and takes us out of our comfort zones but also gives us an expanded view of ourselves and our spiritual story.

## **Happiness**

It is fitting to end our discussion of emotions with happiness. We all want to be happy. Happiness is a state of well-being signified by positive emotions ranging from satisfaction to intense joy. We are all familiar with the warm sensations we feel when we are greeted with a big smile, hear a deep belly laugh, or receive a compassionate hug. Life at its best is a celebration. Often happiness is associated with love, because when our universal needs to be seen, accepted, understood, protected, comforted, and loved are met, then the result is the positive emotions, such as joy, hope, contentment, calmness, and peace.

Happiness plays an essential role in our survival, as it is a natural antidote to the harmful effects of stress and negative emotions. The "highs" of positive emotions keep us going, grinding away each day. Happiness is the reward for all

the hard work. Happiness is so important to our existence that the founders of the United States built it into the Declaration of Independence, asserting that all people possess an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Barbara Fredrickson, a pioneering psychologist who researches positive emotions, believes happiness is humanity's evolutionary birthright. For thousands of years our ancestors passed down secrets and insights into living a happy life. These lessons are encoded in our DNA. As a result, the universal nature of happiness transcends race, culture, and geography.

Happiness has astounding benefits. According to Frederickson, not only does happiness counteract negative emotions, but it also helps build resources. Physically, happy people are more energetic, work out more frequently, and are overall in better health. They possess higher self-esteem, and because they feel good, it is much easier for them to put in the effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Conversely, eating right and exercising makes it easier to feel good, and a positive cycle is created. A whole slew of research is highlighting the benefits of happiness in increasing life expectancy, health, marital satisfaction, immune functioning, income, and job satisfaction. Mentally, happiness increases our ability to learn and is associated with better grades. While negative emotions constrict the mind to focus on threats, happiness expands the mind to integrate new information. Happy people are more open. Curiosity thrives in optimism and shrinks in anxiety. With all these benefits, given the choice, who wouldn't choose happiness?

Focusing too much effort on trying to be happy often makes it challenging to face discomfort and the negative emotions, however. Recent groundbreaking research supports the counterintuitive idea that striving for happiness may actually cause more harm than good. In fact, at times, the more people pursue happiness, the less happiness they seem able to obtain. Chasing happiness sets up high expectations and inevitable disappointment when the goals are not reached. Trying to remain forever happy guarantees that when the inevitable disruptions occur, we experience that as a failure instead of an opportunity for growth. Overpursuing joy exiles the other emotions, sending them underground. A relentless pursuit of happiness actually set us up for depression.

In fact, as life gets easier - with all our comforts - our actual resiliency to handle adversity shrinks with too little practice. Many kids today feel entitled to a life of joy and relaxation, and yet this attitude is producing poor results. Excessive ease and comfort equals a lack of stress and challenge. As we discussed earlier, too little stress means inertia and stagnation. It is hard to feel and deal with the darker emotions when we are spending so much energy trying to avoid them so we can be happy. A healthier understanding of happiness is that it comes and goes, that it is not meant to be a perpetual state.

We need an amalgamation of emotions to flexibly adjust to changing needs, not just a one-size-fits-all emotion. When we listen to the radio, the ability

to shift between stations, not being stuck on your favorite station, provides the widest range of fulfilling entertainment. When we experience life's ups and downs, the ability to both tolerate negative emotions and engage in positive emotions is the ultimate sign of flexibility. Clearly, the more we appreciate the value of the downs in life, the greater our gratefulness for the highs. Knowing that happiness without other emotions is inadequate to fully experience the complexity of life, we can learn how to seize and truly appreciate joy when we are lucky enough to encounter it.

A balanced pursuit of happiness and joy, allowing for the full range of other emotions along the way, is the ideal environment to access our "true self" and best qualities. We can dream of future possibilities; we can focus on and feel compassion for others; we can experience a sense of peace and harmony within ourselves, our world and with our Creator. When we are happy, we have what we need. We are fully satisfied in the moment. What might our lives be like if we lived into the words of the important adage, "I have enough, I do enough, I am enough"? We could give up striving for more, better, bigger. We could accept who we are, good, bad, and ugly, and therefore be more tolerant of those traits in others. We would have the patience to wait for outcomes, to listen for divine whispers, to adopt a broader perspective on what is important in life. We could find peace on earth.

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