CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT RECOVERY GUIDE

A Step-by-Step Guide to Naming What You Feel, Grieving What Was Missing, and Reconnecting With Yourself and Others

Hanz Yiglix



Tryhard Publishing

Dedication

For the child who learned not to ask,
and the adult who is learning to answer.

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A NOTE TO THE READER

You do not need a painful story to be holding this book.

You may have grown up in a home that was clean, stable, and well fed. Your parents may have worked hard, shown up to your games, and paid for your education. No one hit you. No one shouted. If someone had asked about your childhood, you would have said, truthfully, that it was fine.

And yet something has always felt faintly missing. You may find it hard to say what you feel, or even to know. You may be the capable one, the helpful one, the one who never makes a fuss, and you may feel strangely empty when everyone has gone home. You may feel a quiet loneliness in the middle of a crowd. You may have a nagging sense that other people have access to an inner life that you cannot quite reach.

This book is about that missing thing. It is about what happens when a child's emotional life is not noticed, named, or answered, even in a home where love was present and nothing dramatic ever happened. It is about why this wound is so easy to miss, how it shapes adult life, and how it can be healed.

I want to be honest about what this book is and is not. It is not a book about blaming your parents. Most parents who missed their children's feelings were never given the tools themselves, and many were doing their best under heavy strain. It is also not a replacement for therapy. It is a guide, built on research in developmental psychology, attachment science, and emotion regulation, that will help you understand what happened, grieve what you did not receive, and learn the skills you were never taught.

Some pages will ask something real of you. Go slowly. Put the book down when you need to. Come back to the parts that move you, and skip ahead when you are ready. There is no correct pace for recovery, only yours.

And your pace is enough.

Hanz Yiglix

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is not meant to be rushed.

Emotional neglect works quietly, and so does recovery. You may read a chapter in an evening and need a week for it to settle. You may notice, for a while, that you feel very little in response to what you read. That is not a sign that you are doing it wrong. It is often what the beginning looks like.

Here are a few suggestions to help you get the most from these pages.

Keep a journal nearby. Every chapter closes with a healing practice, reflection prompts, and a short summary called "What to Remember." Writing your answers, even a few lines, helps move insight from your head into your lived experience. Research on expressive writing suggests that putting difficult experiences into words can reduce their emotional weight over time (Pennebaker, 1997).

Read in order, at least the first time. The book has four parts. Part I explains what emotional neglect is, how it happens, and how it shapes the mind and body. Part II helps you recognize the signs in your own feelings, beliefs, and adult life, and addresses the common doubt, "But it wasn't that bad." Part III offers a recovery path: safety, a language for feelings, grief, and caring for yourself. Part IV turns toward living differently, with relationships, boundaries, family, and the next generation.

Meet the companions. Four fictional people appear throughout the book: Iris, Owen, Sofia, and Henry. They are composites created for illustration. You will meet them in the opening pages of many chapters, and you will see them again, a year later, in the conclusion.

Expect numbness, and be patient with it. If you grew up learning not to feel, you may find that the practices at first produce very little. That is normal. The feelings are not gone. They are waiting for enough safety to return, and that happens gradually.

Notice your body as you read. Emotions are felt in the chest, the stomach, the throat, and the breath. If you notice tightness, heat, sadness, or an urge to close the book, pause. Put both feet on the floor and take a slow breath. These reactions are not failures. They are information.

Go gently with the practices. Some will feel awkward, especially those that ask you to name feelings or speak kindly to yourself. Resistance is normal. You do not have to feel the words yet. You only have to be willing to try them.

Use the tools at the back. The appendices include a feelings vocabulary list, a guide to body signals, calm cards, conversation scripts, a thirty-day practice plan, a glossary, resources, answers to frequently asked questions, a guide for reading groups, companion worksheets, and a progress tracker. If you are not sure where to begin, start with the feelings vocabulary list and the thirty-day plan.

If this material brings up memories or feelings that feel too heavy to hold alone, please consider working with a trauma-informed therapist or another qualified mental health professional. Seeking support is not a sign that the work is failing. For many people, it is what makes the work possible.

And remember: you picked up a book about something that, for most of your life, had no name. That took courage. The silence would prefer you stay quiet. You chose to listen.

INTRODUCTION



THE QUESTION NOBODY ASKED HER

Iris Calder was sitting in a quiet café with a woman she had just met, nursing a cup of tea, when the woman asked a simple question.

"What was your childhood like?"

It was meant kindly. They had been talking for an hour, and the question arrived the way it often does between new friends, light and curious, an invitation to share.

Iris opened her mouth and found nothing there.

"It was good," she said. "Normal. My parents were great. We didn't have any problems."

All of this was true. It was also, she realized with a sudden, uncomfortable clarity, the entirety of what she could say. She searched her memory for a scene, a feeling, a moment, and found only a smooth gray stretch of years in which nothing had gone wrong. She could remember what the house looked like, what they ate for dinner, the name of every teacher. She could not remember a single time that someone had asked her how she felt.

"That's wonderful," the woman said, and the conversation moved on.

Iris is thirty-four. She is a senior accountant, respected, reliable, and precise. She has a good apartment, a few friends who value her, and a habit, honed over decades, of answering "How are you?" with "Fine, thanks, you?" before the question is finished. She has never been in trouble in her life. She has never been in love, exactly, either. She has

been very comfortable, and very alone, and has never been able to explain why.

Walking home from the café, she felt a small, strange ache that she could not locate. It was not sadness. It was something closer to the shadow of sadness, the outline of a feeling that she did not have access to.

If some part of Iris's afternoon feels familiar to you, you are in the right place.

THE QUIET WOUND: WHY IT IS HARD TO SEE

Most of the harm that people recognize in childhood is something that happened: a blow, a shout, a loss, a frightening event. These leave marks that can be pointed to. We can say, "This happened, and it hurt."

Emotional neglect is different. It is the failure to notice and respond to a child's emotional needs. It is the comfort that did not come, the question that was never asked, the feeling that went unnamed, the sadness that was met with "You're fine." It is a wound made of absences.

This is what makes it so hard to see. There is no event to point to. There is no villain. Often, there is a great deal of love and effort and ordinary care, delivered in a household where feelings simply were not part of the conversation. A child in such a home may grow up with every material and practical need met, and with an inner world that no one has ever visited.

The result can be a lifelong puzzle. *Why do I feel so empty when I have everything? Why can't I tell what I want? Why do I feel like a visitor in my own life?* Because the wound cannot be located, people often conclude that the problem is themselves.

This book offers a different explanation. The problem is not you. It is something that did not happen, and what did not happen can, to a surprising degree, be learned now.

WHAT EMOTIONAL NEGLECT IS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Emotional neglect refers to a persistent pattern in which caregivers fail to respond adequately to a child's emotional needs. A child's emotional needs include being noticed, comforted when distressed, helped to understand and name feelings, delighted in, and treated as a person whose inner life matters.

The idea draws on a long tradition of research on neglect. Researchers who study child development have described neglect as a failure to provide for a child's needs, and have noted that emotional and psychological forms can occur even when physical needs are met (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). The specific phrase "childhood emotional neglect" was popularized by the psychologist Jonice Webb, whose work brought wider attention to the experience of adults who grew up with emotionally absent but otherwise caring parents (Webb, 2012).

It helps to be clear about what the term does not mean.

It is not a formal clinical diagnosis. It is a way of describing an experience that many adults recognize and that researchers have studied under related names.

It does not mean that your parents did not love you. Many emotionally neglectful parents loved their children deeply. They simply did not know how to show it in a way that reached the child's feelings.

It does not mean that you are broken. The patterns that grew from neglect are adaptations, and they can be changed.

It does not mean that everything difficult in your life comes from childhood. Adult life brings its own challenges and choices.

And it does not require a dramatic history. You do not need to have been mistreated to have been missed.

WHY THIS IS NOT ABOUT BLAMING YOUR PARENTS

Almost everyone who begins this work worries about the same thing: *Am I blaming my parents?*

The worry is understandable, and it deserves a direct answer. Understanding a pattern is not the same as accusing a person. A father who never learned to talk about feelings, because no one talked to him, cannot hand down what he never received. A mother who was doing three jobs and surviving on little sleep had little left for noticing a child's quiet distress. Parents pass on what they were given, and many were given very little.

At the same time, understanding does not require pretending that nothing was missing. You can hold two truths at once: *They did what they could,* and *I still needed something I did not receive.* A large part of recovery happens in the space between those two sentences.

MEETING THE COMPANIONS ON THIS JOURNEY

Throughout this book you will meet four people. They are fictional composites drawn from patterns that are common among adults who grew up with emotional neglect, and they are not based on any real individual.

Iris Calder, thirty-four, is a senior accountant who answers "Fine" before a question is finished. She is dependable, articulate about numbers and silent about feelings, and she is beginning to wonder whether she has ever been truly known.

Owen Pryce, forty-one, is a project engineer and the father of a nine-year-old daughter. He is devoted to his family and works long hours, and he is baffled by the sense that he is a stranger in his own house.

Sofia Marin, twenty-nine, is a graphic designer who excels at everything she does and enjoys almost none of it. She was the easy, accomplished child, and she is beginning to suspect that no one ever asked what she wanted.

Henry Adeyemi, fifty-two, is a human resources manager whose wife recently told him, gently, that she does not know what he feels. He does not know either, and the realization has unsettled him more than he expected.

You will not agree with everything they do, and they will not always agree with themselves. That is part of why they are useful. They are not examples of perfect recovery. They are examples of what it looks like to try.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL ASK OF YOU

This book will ask for some things that are not always easy to give.

It will ask for **curiosity** where you may be used to dismissal. When you notice a gap, a blankness, or an automatic "I'm fine," the invitation is to ask, *What is this protecting?* instead of *What is wrong with me?*

It will ask for **patience**. If you were taught early not to feel, feelings will return slowly. A skill practiced for a month will not replace a habit practiced for thirty years, but it can begin to loosen it.

It will ask for **honesty**, including about the real strengths your upbringing gave you, such as independence, competence, and steadiness, and about the real costs.

And it will ask you to **take your own pace seriously**. If a practice feels like too much, make it smaller. If a memory feels too heavy, stop and seek support. Recovery that overwhelms you is not working.

A PROMISE BEFORE WE BEGIN

I cannot promise that this book will change your family. I can promise something smaller and, I think, more important.

If you read with openness and practice with patience, you will understand yourself better than you did before. You will have language for experiences that once had no name. You will have tools

for the moments when the old blankness descends, and you will have a clearer picture of what it means to feel, and to be known.

You may also discover something that surprises you. The part of you that says "I'm fine" is not the enemy. It is a young, intelligent part that learned what it had to learn. This book is about helping that part discover that, at last, it is allowed to be seen. Let us begin.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

CHAPTER 1
THE WOUND OF WHAT DID NOT HAPPEN



Iris tried to find the memory the following Sunday, and could not.

She sat at her kitchen table with a mug of tea and a blank notebook, and set herself what seemed like a simple task: write down one time in childhood when someone had comforted her. Not a scraped knee, not a dramatic event. Just an ordinary moment of being held, in the emotional sense, by a person who noticed she was upset.

She wrote, *Age 8, lost a school spelling contest.* She remembered the feeling, a hot thickness in her throat. She remembered walking in the front door and her mother saying, "How did it go?" She remembered answering, "I came second," and her mother saying, "Well, that's still good," and turning back to the stove.

That was it. That was the whole memory. Nobody had been unkind. Her mother had been busy, and cheerful, and entirely reasonable. The thickness in her throat had simply stayed there until bedtime, and had gone away on its own.

Iris put down the pen. She wrote a second memory, and then a third, each with the same shape: an event, a feeling, an adult who said something sensible, and a feeling that went nowhere. She looked at the three entries side by side. A pattern was emerging, as clear as a watermark. In none of them did anyone ask, *How are you really feeling?*

She did not feel sad, exactly. She felt something odd and quiet, like the sensation of reaching for a stair that is not there.

Nothing happened to me, she thought. *Why does it feel like something did?*

WHEN NOTHING WENT WRONG, AND SOMETHING WAS MISSING

This chapter begins with a puzzle that many adults carry: how can something be missing from a childhood in which nothing seemed to go wrong?

The answer lies in a distinction between two kinds of harm. The first is harm of *commission*, things that were done: violence, humiliation, threats, mistreatment. The second is harm of *omission*, things that were not done: attention that was not given, feelings that were not noticed, comfort that was not offered, understanding that was not shared.

The first kind is easy to identify, because it leaves a trace in memory. The second kind is nearly invisible, because it is made of what was absent. A child cannot remember what did not happen. The adult looking back sees a smooth surface with no marks on it, and concludes that nothing could be wrong.

Yet the developing mind depends on emotional input as much as the developing body depends on food. A child who is fed, clothed, and housed but not emotionally seen is, in a particular and important way,

undernourished. The deficit may not show up for decades, and when it does it can look like emptiness, numbness, loneliness, perfectionism, or a vague sense of not being quite real.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED EMOTIONALLY

To understand emotional neglect, it helps to be clear about what a child needs. Researchers who study child development describe several emotional needs that caregivers ordinarily meet.

To be noticed. A child needs an adult who pays attention to their inner state: *You seem sad. You look excited. Something is bothering you.* Being noticed tells a child that their inner life exists and matters.

To be named. Children do not arrive knowing the words for their feelings. They learn them from adults who offer them: "You're disappointed." "That scared you." "You're proud of yourself." Naming makes an experience graspable.

To be comforted. When a child is distressed, they need an adult who responds with warmth, helping them settle. Over time, the child internalizes the ability to soothe themselves.

To be validated. A child needs to hear that their feelings make sense: "Of course you're upset. That was hard." Validation does not require agreeing that the child is right. It says, *Your reaction is understandable.*

To be delighted in. Children need to see pleasure in a caregiver's face when they come into the room, and to feel that they are enjoyed for who they are, not only for what they achieve.

To be guided. Children need help learning what to do with feelings: how to calm down, how to express anger without harm, how to ask for what they need.

These needs are not exotic. They are, in a sense, what good-enough parents do dozens of times a day without thinking about it. A child whose parents provide them reasonably often grows up with an

internal sense that feelings are normal, communicable, and survivable. A child whose parents do not may grow up unsure that feelings are even real.

THE STILL FACE

One of the clearest demonstrations of how deeply babies depend on emotional responsiveness comes from the still-face experiments of Edward Tronick and his colleagues. In these studies, a mother plays warmly with her infant, then, at a signal, holds a blank and unresponsive face for a short time. Within seconds, most infants begin to work to reconnect: they smile, point, vocalize. When that fails, they become distressed, turn away, and may appear withdrawn or disorganized (Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, & Brazelton, 1978). The mother then reconnects, and the infant recovers.

The experiment is brief and harmless. But it reveals something profound: even very small babies are exquisitely sensitive to whether another person is emotionally present, and they work hard to restore connection when it is lost.

Now imagine a version of that experience stretched across years, not as a blank face but as a gentle, pervasive emotional absence. A parent who is physically present but emotionally elsewhere. A household in which feelings are never mentioned. A child who tries to connect, again and again, and finds a pleasant surface and no response. Over time, the child may stop trying, not out of defiance but out of adaptation. The effort to reach someone who does not reach back is exhausting, and a child will, quite sensibly, learn to do without.

TWO FORMS OF NEGLECT

It can help to distinguish between two ways in which a child's emotional needs may go unmet.

Absence of presence. Some children are neglected because the adults in their lives are physically or emotionally unavailable: working

long hours, depressed, ill, preoccupied, or absent. The child has little access to a caregiver's attention at all.

Absence of feeling. Other children grow up with caregivers who are physically present and attentive in practical ways, but who do not engage with emotions. The household may be orderly, kind, and well run, and feelings are simply not part of the conversation. Sadness is met with distraction, anger with a change of subject, fear with "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Both forms leave a similar mark. The child learns that their inner world does not receive a response, and so, gradually, they stop expecting one.

WHY IT IS SO EASY TO MISS

There are several reasons that emotional neglect can go unrecognized for decades.

There is no event. Memory is organized around things that happen. A pattern of absences does not produce memories, so the adult looks back and finds nothing.

It looked like a good childhood. Many emotionally neglected children were well cared for in every visible way. They had food, clothes, schooling, birthday parties. By ordinary standards, they were fortunate.

It was normal. If everyone in your family, extended family, and community handled feelings the same way, you had no point of comparison. A child cannot see the water they are swimming in.

Gratitude and loyalty get in the way. Many people feel that noticing what was missing is ungrateful, or a betrayal of parents who worked hard.

The symptoms look like personality. The adult who does not know what they feel, who prefers to manage alone, who works constantly, who feels empty, may simply think, *That's just how I am.*

There is little language for it. Our culture has many words for abuse and few for absence. People who sense that something is missing often have nowhere to put the feeling.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The research on neglect is substantial, though it often groups emotional neglect with other forms. A few findings are worth noting.

Neglect is common. In annual child welfare statistics in the United States, neglect is consistently the most frequently reported form of child maltreatment, though emotional neglect in otherwise well-functioning homes rarely appears in these figures (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, annual reports).

Neglect has lasting effects. A major review of the consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries found associations between maltreatment and a range of later difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and problems in relationships (Gilbert et al., 2009). A meta-analysis of studies on depression found that emotional neglect and emotional abuse were among the childhood experiences most strongly associated with later depression (Infurna et al., 2016).

Psychological forms of harm matter in their own right. Researchers who reviewed the evidence on psychological maltreatment, including emotional neglect, concluded that it is associated with serious mental health risks, even in the absence of physical abuse (Spinazzola et al., 2014).

These findings do not mean that every child who experienced emotional neglect will struggle. Many people grow up to lead rich and connected lives, especially if they encounter other sources of support. But they do suggest that what happens, or does not happen, inside the emotional life of a family is not trivial.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

Myth	Reality
If I was not abused, I cannot have been harmed.	Absence of care can shape a person as deeply as mistreatment, although in different ways.
My parents loved me, so nothing could have been missing.	Love and emotional attunement are different. A parent can love a child and not know how to meet their feelings.
Other people had it worse, so I have no right to feel this.	Pain does not need to be compared to be real.
Feeling nothing means nothing happened.	Numbness is often a sign that feelings were turned off for protection.
It is too late to change.	The skills of feeling, naming, and expressing emotions can be learned at any age.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

You will notice that this book uses the phrase "emotional neglect" as a description of an experience, not as a clinical diagnosis. It is not a label to put on yourself. If the phrase feels too strong, you can substitute "emotional absence," "not being seen," or "a childhood without emotional conversation." What matters is the experience, not the word.

This book also does not diagnose. If you experience persistent depression, anxiety, panic, flashbacks, or thoughts of harming yourself, please consider speaking with a mental health professional. These are common human responses to difficult experiences, and they respond well to appropriate support.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE EMOTIONAL MEMORY TIMELINE

This first practice helps you look at your emotional history with curiosity. You will need a notebook and about thirty minutes. If nothing comes at first, that is information, not failure.

Step 1: Draw a line. Draw a horizontal line across a page and mark it with ages: five, ten, fifteen, twenty, and so on to your current age.

Step 2: Mark the moments of being noticed. Above the line, write any moment when someone noticed how you felt and responded: a hug after a bad day, a question about how you were, a teacher who saw you were struggling. Include anyone. If you cannot find any, leave it blank. That is also true.

Step 3: Mark the moments of feeling unseen. Below the line, write moments when you felt something strongly and no one responded: a disappointment, a fear, a loss, a success that no one noticed. A few words will do: *Lost the contest. Moved schools. Grandfather died. Was scared at night.*

Step 4: Notice who said what. For each moment, ask: *What did the adults around me say or do? Was there a rule about feelings?* Write one or two observations.

Step 5: Look at the whole line. Notice the proportions. Is the line above fuller or emptier? Which period feels most blank?

Step 6: Write a sentence. Complete this sentence: *When I felt something as a child, I learned that...* Be as honest as you can.

Step 7: Be kind to yourself. End by writing one sentence of care to the person who lived this timeline.

If the exercise stirs strong feelings, pause. Plant your feet on the floor, take a few slow breaths, and return another day.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. When you were upset as a child, what happened? Who, if anyone, noticed?
2. How did your family talk about feelings? Were there topics, or emotions, that were never mentioned?
3. Which of the needs in this chapter, being noticed, named, comforted, validated, delighted in, or guided, feel most familiar as something missing?
4. Why might it be hard to see what was missing?
5. What would it mean to you if your emptiness were not a flaw, but the shape of something that did not happen?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Emotional neglect is the failure to notice and respond to a child's emotional needs. It is a wound of omission, and it often leaves no memory.

It can occur in loving, well-run homes. Love and emotional attunement are different things.

It is easy to miss because there is no event, no villain, and often a great deal of ordinary care.

Its effects are real, and the skills it left undeveloped can be learned at any age.

In the next chapter, we will look at how emotional neglect happens, and why so many loving parents miss their children's feelings.

IRIS'S THREAD

Iris did the timeline over two evenings. The line above, the moments of being noticed, was nearly empty. She found three entries: a kindergarten teacher who had knelt down when she cried; a grandmother who made soup when she was ill; and, in her twenties, a

roommate who had said, "You seem down. Want to talk?" and whom she had immediately reassured: "I'm fine."

The line below was full of small ordinary things. She wrote them without feeling much. *Lost the contest. Best friend moved. Cat died.* After each one she wrote what had happened next, and each time it was the same: *Told it was okay. Changed the subject. Went to my room.*

At the bottom of the page, she completed the sentence: *When I felt something as a child, I learned that it would pass, and that I should handle it alone.*

She read it aloud in her quiet kitchen. It sounded like a description of someone she knew very well, and had never properly met.

She did not cry. She put her hand flat on the page, as one might on the shoulder of an old friend, and said, softly, "I'm sorry nobody asked."

CHAPTER 2
HOW EMOTIONAL NEGLECT HAPPENS



Owen Pryce was helping his daughter with a school project when she asked him a question that stopped him cold.

They were sitting at the dining table with a poster board, scissors, and a glue stick, assembling a display about the water cycle. Wren, nine years old, was concentrating hard, her tongue between her teeth. Without looking up, she said, "Dad, how come you never ask me how I feel?"

He looked at her. "What do you mean? I ask you stuff all the time. I ask about your day. I ask about school."

"No," she said, with the patience of a child explaining something obvious. "You ask what happened. Mom asks how I *feel* about it."

Owen sat holding the glue stick. He could not think of a single thing to say. He felt a flush of defensiveness, and underneath it, a deeper,

more disorienting feeling: the sense of a door he had never noticed, standing slightly open.

That night, lying awake, he thought of his own father, a quiet man with a newspaper and a thermos, who had come home from the plant every evening at six, eaten dinner, said "Good dinner, Marie" to his wife, and gone to the garage to fix things. Owen had been well looked after. His father had never missed a day of work or a parent-teacher night. He had taught Owen to change a tire, to balance a checkbook, to shake hands firmly. In forty-one years, Owen could not recall a single occasion when his father had asked him how he felt.

He was a good father, Owen thought. *He did everything right.*

And then, in the dark, a second thought arrived, uninvited and heavy: *And I am doing exactly the same thing.*

WHY PARENTS MISS THEIR CHILDREN'S FEELINGS

It is natural to ask how emotional neglect happens. Most parents love their children. Many work extremely hard on their behalf. How can so many miss something so important?

The answer is rarely cruelty or indifference. More often, emotional neglect arises from a combination of factors that make attending to a child's feelings difficult or unimaginable. Understanding these factors does not erase the child's unmet needs, but it can bring a measure of compassion, and it can help break the cycle.

In this chapter, we look at the most common routes into emotional neglect.

PARENTS UNDER STRAIN

The first and most common factor is simple exhaustion. Parents who are working multiple jobs, caring for ill relatives, living in poverty, or struggling to keep a household afloat have very little emotional bandwidth left. Their attention is consumed by the demands of

survival. The child's feelings, which may seem small by comparison, can slip through unnoticed.

This is especially true when a family is living through hardship. Parents who are preoccupied with money, safety, or the next crisis may be warm and devoted and still unable to attend to a child's quiet distress. They may even take pride in a child who "never gives any trouble," not realizing that the child is quietly managing alone.

Such parents are not failing from indifference. They are doing the best they can with limited resources, and the cost, which neither they nor the child can see, is paid in the child's emotional life.

PARENTS WHO WERE NEVER TAUGHT FEELINGS

The second factor is more subtle. Parents can only offer what they have received. A parent who grew up in a household where feelings were never discussed, where tears were met with "Stop that" and anger with silence, may simply not know how to respond to a child's emotions. The skills were never modeled for them.

Researchers who study how families socialize emotion have found that parents' own beliefs and habits about feelings shape the emotional climate their children grow up in. Parents who are comfortable with emotions tend to notice, name, and respond to children's feelings. Parents who are uncomfortable with them may ignore, minimize, or punish emotional expression (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998).

John Gottman and his colleagues described several styles of parental response to children's emotions. Some parents are "emotion coaches," treating feelings as opportunities for connection. Others are "dismissing," which means that they treat children's negative emotions as unimportant, try to make them go away quickly, or hurry the child past them. Dismissing parents are often warm and well-meaning. They believe they are helping, by distracting, reassuring, or

encouraging the child to "look on the bright side" (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

A dismissing parent, hearing their child say "I'm sad," will often respond: "Don't be sad. Let's get ice cream." The intention is kind. The effect, repeated over years, is that the child learns that sadness is something to be eliminated rather than understood.

DEPRESSION, ILLNESS, AND UNAVAILABLE PARENTS

A third factor is a parent's own emotional or physical condition. A parent who is depressed may be physically present and emotionally out of reach. A parent living with chronic pain, serious illness, addiction, or anxiety may have little capacity to focus on a child's inner world. The child may sense this and adapt by becoming undemanding, careful not to add to the burden.

In some families, the child becomes a caretaker, learning to monitor the parent's moods and keep the peace. The child's own feelings recede, and the child may be praised for being mature, helpful, or "no trouble at all."

It is important not to assign blame. Depression and illness are not choices, and many parents in this situation are fighting hard. But the child's needs remain, whether or not anyone had the capacity to meet them.

THE EASY CHILD AND THE PRAISED CHILD

Emotional neglect can also hide inside praise.

Some children are easy: calm, accomplished, self-sufficient. They do well in school, rarely complain, and seem to need little. Parents, relieved, may leave them to their own devices, not realizing that the child's competence is partly a response to an environment in which they learned that needing attention was futile.

Other children are praised only for what they do: grades, achievements, helpfulness. The message they absorb is that they are

valued for performance, not for who they are, and that feelings, particularly negative ones, are irrelevant or even unwelcome.

Both kinds of children may grow into highly capable adults. They are often the ones that others describe as "so together." Beneath the competence there may be a deep uncertainty about who they are and what they feel.

TEMPERAMENT AND FIT

It would be unfair to describe emotional neglect as something done by parents to a passive child. Children arrive with temperaments of their own, and the match, or mismatch, between a child's temperament and a parent's can shape what gets noticed.

A sensitive, emotionally expressive child born to a reserved, practical parent may be told repeatedly that they are "too much" or "too dramatic." A quiet, undemanding child born to a busy parent may simply be overlooked. An intense child may be seen as a problem to manage, rather than a person to understand.

This is one reason that siblings can have very different accounts of the same family. One child's temperament may fit the household's style, and another's may not. Neither account is wrong. It simply means that fit matters.

CULTURE, CLASS, AND THE RULE OF TOUGHNESS

Families live within cultures, and cultures have rules about emotion. Psychologists use the term *display rules* to describe cultural norms about which emotions may be shown, to whom, and when (Matsumoto, 1990). In some cultures, emotional restraint is a mark of maturity and respect. In others, open expression is encouraged. Within any culture, rules may differ by gender, class, and generation.

Many families live by a rule of toughness: *Don't cry. Get on with it. Be strong.* This rule often has deep roots in hardship. Families that survived war, poverty, migration, or discrimination frequently learned

that emotional display was a luxury, or a risk. The rule was protective, and it was handed on with love.

Gender can play a part as well. In many families, boys are taught that sadness and fear are unacceptable, and girls are taught that anger is unacceptable. Children who do not fit these expectations learn to hide what they feel.

Recognizing cultural and historical context is not about excusing the effects on you. It is about seeing that your family was following a script it inherited, and that the script was written long before you were born.

THE CHAIN ACROSS GENERATIONS

Putting these factors together reveals a pattern. Emotional neglect is often passed down. A grandparent who grew up in hardship learned not to show feeling. They raised a child to be tough and capable. That child, now a parent, did the same. And so on.

At each stage, the person doing the neglecting was also, in some sense, the neglected. They were doing their best, using the only model they had.

This understanding can bring a particular kind of grief and a particular kind of freedom. The grief is for everyone in the chain who was not seen. The freedom is that the chain does not have to continue. You are the first link that has noticed.

UNDERSTANDING WITHOUT EXCUSING

There is a risk, in studying how emotional neglect happens, of sliding into one of two unhelpful positions.

The first is excusing everything: *They had a hard life, so I shouldn't feel anything. It wasn't their fault, so it doesn't count.* This leaves your own experience without a home.

The second is blaming everyone: *They failed me. They ruined my life.* This may feel justified, but it often keeps you tied to anger, and it leaves you waiting for an apology that may never come.

A third position is possible, and it is more accurate. It says: *They did what they could with what they had, and I still needed something that I did not receive. Both of these are true.* From there, you can look at your history clearly, grieve what was missing, and take responsibility for what you do next, without needing anyone to be the villain.

HEALING PRACTICE: UNDERSTANDING WITHOUT EXCUSING

This practice helps you look at your parents' circumstances with understanding, without losing sight of your own needs. You will need a notebook and about thirty minutes. Check in with your body before you begin.

Step 1: Choose one caregiver. Pick a parent or primary caregiver to think about first.

Step 2: Write what you know of their story. In a few sentences, write what you know about their own childhood: how they were raised, what feelings were allowed, what hardships they faced. If you do not know, write that, and note what you might guess.

Step 3: Write their circumstances during your childhood. What pressures were they under? Work, money, health, grief, other children, marriage?

Step 4: Write how they showed care. Be generous. Include practical care, sacrifices, and gestures that may not have looked like emotional support.

Step 5: Write what they were not able to offer. Complete this sentence: *They were not able to...* For example: *notice when I was sad; ask how I felt; talk about hard things.*

Step 6: Write your two truths. Complete: *They did what they could, and I still needed...*

Step 7: Write one sentence of care for yourself. For example: *It makes sense that I learned to manage on my own.*

Step 8: Repeat for other caregivers, if you wish, on another day.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which of the factors in this chapter, strain, unlearned feelings, illness, praise, temperament, culture, seems to apply to your family?
2. What do you know about how your parents' own emotions were handled when they were children?
3. Were you an easy or praised child? What was the cost of that role?
4. What rules about toughness or restraint did your family follow, and where do you think they came from?
5. What would it mean to hold compassion for your parents and for yourself at the same time?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Emotional neglect usually arises from strain, from parents who were never taught about feelings, from illness or depression, from praise for performance, from temperament mismatch, and from cultural rules about emotion.

Most neglectful parents were doing their best with the model they had. The pattern is often passed down across generations.

Understanding the reasons does not erase the child's unmet needs. It can, however, bring compassion without denial.

You can hold two truths at once: *They did what they could,* and *I still needed something I did not receive.*

In the next chapter, we will look at how emotional neglect shapes the mind and body, and why feelings can seem like static.

OWEN'S THREAD

Owen did the practice on his lunch break, in his truck, with a legal pad on the steering wheel.

For his father, he wrote what he knew. *Grew up on a farm. His father was strict. Never talked about feelings. Left school at fifteen to work.* He realized that he knew perhaps ten facts about the first fifteen years of his father's life, and that two of them concerned the weather.

Circumstances during my childhood, he wrote. *Worked six days a week. Plant layoffs in 1991. Mom was sick for two years.* He stopped. He had known about the layoffs, in the way that one knows weather. He had not known that his father had been afraid.

How he showed care: Fixed my bike. Drove me to every game. Never missed a day. Taught me to work.

What he could not offer: He wrote it slowly. *Ask me how I was. Tell me he was proud. Say he was scared.*

At the bottom, he completed the sentence: *He did what he could, and I still needed him to ask.*

He sat in the parked truck for a long time. It was a gray afternoon, and workers were walking across the lot with lunch bags. Owen felt something rise in his chest that he did not quite recognize. It was not exactly anger. It was something closer to tenderness, directed at two people at once: a man holding a newspaper, and a boy waiting at a table.

That evening, at dinner, he turned to Wren and said, carefully, as though trying out a new language, "I've been thinking about what you said. How are you feeling about the project?"

She looked up, surprised. "A little worried," she said. "I don't think I'm good at the diagram part."

"That sounds stressful," he said. "Tell me more."

She did. It took twenty minutes, and the food went cold. Owen listened to every word, and felt, at the end of it, a strange new sensation, like a muscle he had never used coming awake.

CHAPTER 3
HOW NEGLECT SHAPES THE MIND AND BODY



At her cousin's wedding, Sofia Marin watched an entire room weep.

It was a beautiful ceremony, held in a garden at the edge of a lake. The bride's father stood to give a toast, and as soon as he began to speak, his voice cracked. Within seconds, tears were running down the faces of aunts and uncles and old friends. People reached for tissues, for each other's hands. The groom, grinning and wet-eyed, put an arm around his new wife.

Sofia sat very still in her chair, wearing a dress she had chosen with care, and felt nothing at all.

She did what she always did in such moments. She arranged her face into an expression of warmth, and nodded. She dabbed her eyes with a napkin, as if she had been moved. She said "That was lovely" to the woman beside her, and the woman said, "I'm a wreck!" and

squeezed her hand, and Sofia squeezed back, with a sense of being an actor who had learned the part so well that no one could tell.

Later, standing at the edge of the dance floor with a glass of wine, she felt something unexpected: a prickle of alarm, a tightness behind the sternum, a sudden urge to leave. It had no object. No one had said anything. She had no idea what she was feeling, or why it had arrived now, in the middle of a happy evening.

What is wrong with me? she thought. *Everyone else could feel it. Why can't I?*

She did not know that her body had been feeling things all along. It simply had not told her in words.

HOW EARLY EXPERIENCE BECOMES EQUIPMENT

We tend to think of emotions as natural, something that people simply have. But the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions is a skill, and like most skills, it is learned in relationship.

This chapter looks at how that learning happens in the early years, what happens when it is interrupted, and what that means for the mind and the body. The point is not to frighten you. It is to explain why emotional neglect leaves the particular marks that it does, and why those marks are not signs of defect but of an understandable adaptation.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS

Newborns do not arrive able to regulate their own emotions. A baby who is hungry or frightened is flooded, and cannot calm herself. She relies on a caregiver to do it for her: picking her up, speaking softly, feeding her, rocking her until the storm passes. This process, in which a caregiver lends calm to a child, is sometimes called *co-regulation*.

Over thousands of repetitions, something remarkable happens. The child's nervous system begins to internalize the pattern. The experience of being soothed becomes the capacity to soothe oneself.

The child learns, at a deep and wordless level, that distress comes and goes, and that it can be survived.

A second thing happens simultaneously. Caregivers do not only soothe. They also *mirror*. A parent who sees a baby's face crumple and says, in a sympathetic voice, "Oh, that was scary!" is doing something subtle and important. They are showing the baby what the feeling looks like from the outside, and giving it a label. The developmental psychologists Peter Fonagy, György Gergely, and Mary Target have argued that such responses help children form mental representations of their own emotions: a sense of "this is what I feel" (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002).

When caregivers do these things reliably enough, children build a foundation. They come to know their feelings, to trust them, and to find them tolerable. When caregivers do not, the foundation is thin. The child still has feelings. They simply lack the mirror in which to recognize them.

WHEN THE FEELINGS HAD NO PLACE TO GO

A child whose feelings are not met does not stop having them. Feelings are not optional. They continue to arise, and the child has to do something with them.

Children are inventive. Some push the feelings away, learning to go blank, to think about something else, to make themselves busy. Some turn them inward, into stomachaches, headaches, or a diffuse tension. Some convert them into achievement, discovering that when they work hard, the uncomfortable sensations recede. Some learn to read other people's feelings closely, since their own are not on offer.

Psychologists call the deliberate effort to hide or inhibit emotional expression *expressive suppression*. James Gross and Oliver John, in a series of studies, found that people who habitually used suppression experienced and expressed less positive emotion, reported less closeness to others, and were rated by others as less connected to them

(Gross & John, 2003). Another line of Gross's research suggests that suppression can reduce outward expression while leaving the underlying physiological response intact or even increased (Gross, 1998).

For a child in an emotionally unresponsive home, suppression is not a poor strategy. It is the best available. It prevents the pain of reaching out and not being met. But when it becomes automatic, it can follow a person into adulthood, where it limits intimacy and leaves them feeling oddly absent from their own life.

THE STRESS RESPONSE WITHOUT A BUFFER

The body's stress response is a marvel of design. When a threat appears, hormones and neural signals prepare the body to fight, flee, or freeze. In a healthy childhood, this response is activated, and then calmed by a caregiver's presence. The cycle teaches the body that stress passes.

Pediatric researchers use the term *toxic stress* to describe the prolonged activation of the body's stress systems in the absence of adequate protection from supportive adults (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The key idea is the buffering role of caregivers. A child can endure a great deal of stress if a warm adult is there to help them through. When the buffer is missing, the stress response can stay switched on, or learn to switch off through numbness.

For an emotionally neglected child, the stress may not be dramatic. It may be the quiet, chronic stress of having feelings and nowhere to take them. The child learns to carry it alone, and the body learns to carry it too.

THE BODY AS MESSENGER

Emotions are not only thoughts. They are bodily events. A feeling of anxiety is a flutter in the chest and a tightening in the stomach. Sadness

may be a heaviness in the limbs and a lump in the throat. Anger may be heat, a clenched jaw, a surge of energy.

The neuroscientist A. D. Craig has described a system for sensing the internal state of the body, which he called *interoception*, and argued that this bodily awareness is central to the experience of emotion (Craig, 2002). In other words, much of what we call feeling is the brain's reading of signals from the body.

This is important because many people who grew up with emotional neglect have learned, early, to tune out the body's signals. A child who is told "There's nothing to be upset about" repeatedly may stop attending to the sensations that accompany upset. Over time, the body keeps sending messages, and the person stops receiving them.

Researchers who study interoception distinguish between how accurately a person can sense their body, for example their heartbeat, and how aware they are of that sensing (Garfinkel, Seth, Barrett, Suzuki, & Critchley, 2015). Both can be trained. This is good news: reconnecting with the body's signals is a learnable skill.

WHY EMOTIONS CAN FEEL LIKE STATIC

Many adults who grew up with emotional neglect describe an inner life that feels muffled or blank. They may know that they are upset because their shoulders are tight or because they have snapped at someone, but they cannot say what they feel. When asked, they offer words like "fine," "stressed," "tired," or "off."

Clinicians use the term *alexithymia* to describe difficulty identifying and describing feelings, and distinguishing feelings from bodily sensations. The word, introduced in the 1970s, comes from Greek roots meaning "no words for feelings" (Sifneos, 1973). It is not a diagnosis but a dimension: people vary in how much of it they experience, from a little to a great deal (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).

Research suggests that alexithymia is associated with early family environments. In one study, adults who scored higher on alexithymia

were more likely to recall growing up in families that were low in emotional expressiveness (Berenbaum & James, 1994). The pattern makes intuitive sense. A child who never heard feelings named, discussed, or welcomed has not been given the vocabulary.

It is worth underlining that this is not a lack of feeling. It is a lack of access. The feelings are present, often strongly, but they register as static: a vague discomfort, a pressure, a restlessness, a hollowness that cannot be put into words. Learning to translate that static into language is one of the central tasks of recovery, and we will turn to it in Chapter 9.

THE BRAIN CAN CHANGE

Everything in this chapter might sound like a description of permanent damage. It is not.

The brain and nervous system remain plastic throughout life. Research on neuroplasticity shows that experiences, relationships, and practices can reshape neural pathways even in adulthood (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). The same adaptability that allowed a child to adjust to an emotionally quiet home allows an adult to learn a new relationship with feeling.

This does not mean that change is instant or effortless. It takes repetition, safety, and patience. But it does mean that the numbness, the blankness, and the static are not fixed features of who you are. They are habits of attention and expression that formed in a particular environment, and they can be revised by a different one.

HEALING PRACTICE: FINDING YOUR BODY'S SIGNALS

This practice helps you begin to sense your body's emotional signals, without pressure to interpret them. It takes about ten minutes and is best done once or twice a day for a week. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: Find a quiet moment. Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable. Let your feet rest on the floor or your body rest on the surface beneath you.

Step 2: Take three slow breaths. Breathe in through your nose for four counts and out through your mouth for six.

Step 3: Scan slowly from head to toe. Move your attention gently through the body: forehead, jaw, throat, shoulders, chest, stomach, hands, legs, feet. At each area, simply notice what is there. Tight, loose, warm, cool, tingling, heavy, nothing at all. "Nothing" is a valid answer.

Step 4: Choose one sensation. Find the most noticeable sensation, however small. Rest your attention on it for a few breaths.

Step 5: Describe it without interpreting. In your notebook, write what it is like: *a tightness in the chest, the size of a fist.* Avoid explanations for now.

Step 6: Ask a gentle question. Ask: *If this sensation had a feeling attached, what might it be?* Write any word that comes, even if it seems unlikely. If nothing comes, write "not sure yet."

Step 7: Thank your body. Complete this sentence: *Thank you for telling me something.*

Step 8: Repeat daily. After a week, look back at your notes. Notice patterns. Which sensations appear most? In what situations?

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What did you do with your feelings as a child? Did you push them away, turn them inward, convert them into achievement, or something else?
2. When you feel something strongly now, where do you notice it in your body?
3. Have you ever felt a gap between what the people around you were feeling and what you were feeling? What was that like?

4. What do you notice when you try to put a feeling into words?
5. What would it mean to treat your body's signals as messages rather than as noise?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Children learn to understand and manage emotions through relationship: through being soothed and through being mirrored.

When feelings are not met, children adapt by suppressing, internalizing, or converting them. These strategies make sense in childhood and can limit adult connection.

Chronic stress without a buffer shapes the body. Interoception, the sense of the body's internal state, often goes quiet.

Alexithymia, difficulty identifying feelings, is common among people raised in emotionally quiet homes. It is a lack of access, not a lack of feeling, and it can change.

The brain remains plastic. The skills you did not learn early can be learned now.

In Part II, we turn from understanding to recognizing: the feelings you cannot find, the rules you learned, and the ways neglect shows up in adult life.

SOFIA'S THREAD

Sofia did the body scan every morning for a week, sitting on the edge of her bed with a notebook on her knee, feeling faintly ridiculous.

On the first day, she wrote *nothing* eleven times. On the second day, she wrote *nothing* eight times and *tight jaw.* On the third day, she wrote *jaw, shoulders, stomach hollow.* She did not know what any of it meant, and did not try to know.

On the fifth day, while scanning her chest, she noticed a sensation she had never registered before, though she suspected it had been there all her life: a kind of pressure, like a hand lightly pressing on the

center of her breastbone. She stayed with it for three breaths. She asked the question. *If this had a feeling attached, what might it be?*

She waited. A word arrived, surprising her with its simplicity. *Lonely.*

She wrote it down. She looked at it for a long time. It did not feel dramatic. It felt like a correct answer to a question she had been failing for twenty-nine years.

That weekend, at her cousin's wedding photographs, she paused over a picture of herself, smiling, in the garden. She looked at the woman in the photograph and thought, with tenderness and a pinch of awe, *You were so lonely there. And you didn't know.*

PART II: SEEING THE SIGNS

CHAPTER 4
THE FEELINGS YOU CANNOT FIND



Ruth Adeyemi put down her fork, looked across the dinner table at her husband of twenty-six years, and said, very gently, "Henry, I don't think I know what you feel. About anything."

Henry looked at her. He had been in the middle of describing a difficult meeting at work, in his usual orderly way: the agenda, the objections, the compromise they had reached. He had presented it as he always did, fluently and without hesitation.

"I just told you what happened," he said.

"You told me what *happened*," Ruth said. "I'm asking what it was like for you."

Henry opened his mouth. He felt a small, unfamiliar alarm, like noticing that a familiar word has slipped his memory. He searched for

an answer, and found only the surface of the thing: "It was fine. A bit tiring. I'm glad it's over."

Ruth nodded slowly. She did not look angry. She looked sad, in a way he had seen on her face more and more often in the last few years, and had always filed under *tired* or *busy*. "That's what I mean," she said. "I've been married to you for twenty-six years and I know your opinions, your schedule, and your favorite soup. I don't know what you feel when you're happy. Or hurt. Or afraid. I'm not sure you do."

He sat very still. Outside, a car passed. The refrigerator hummed. In the quiet, Henry became aware of a faint, curious tightness in his chest, a sensation that he had felt a thousand times and never had a name for.

"I don't think I do," he said at last. It was the most honest thing he had said in years.

THE MISSING FEELINGS

If you grew up with emotional neglect, one of the most puzzling features of adult life may be the experience of not being able to find your own feelings. You may be told that you are "hard to read." You may notice that other people seem to have an immediate, vivid response to situations, and you have a delay, a blank, or a vague unease. You may be asked, "How do you feel about that?" and feel something like panic, as though you had been asked to translate a text in a language you never studied.

This chapter is about that experience. It will describe the main forms it takes, explain why they arise, and begin to suggest what you can do. If, as you read, you recognize yourself, that recognition is itself a beginning.

NUMBNESS, EMPTINESS, AND THE FLAT FEELING

For many people, the first sign of emotional neglect is not a particular feeling but the absence of feelings. They describe a kind of

flatness, as though their emotional life were a radio tuned between stations.

Numbness is the sense of not feeling much of anything, even in situations in which others are moved: a wedding, a funeral, a joyful reunion. It can be disconcerting, and sometimes frightening, as it may lead a person to wonder whether they are somehow defective.

Emptiness is a related experience: a hollow sensation, a sense that something is missing at the core, that life lacks color or meaning without any obvious cause.

Flatness is the muted version of both. Moods do not swing much, and neither do they lift. Pleasure is mild, and so is pain.

These experiences are not signs of a damaged heart. They are the natural result of long practice at turning down emotion. A child who learns that feelings go unanswered may gradually turn the dial down, until, in adulthood, the dial is hard to find. The feelings are not gone. They are muted, and often, when circumstances allow, they begin to return.

DIFFICULTY NAMING EMOTIONS

A second common experience is difficulty identifying and describing what you feel. As described in Chapter 3, clinicians use the term *alexithymia* for this experience, and it exists on a spectrum.

People with this difficulty may:

- Describe physical sensations, such as a tight chest or a knot in the stomach, without knowing what emotion they signify.
- Confuse emotions with bodily states: "I feel sick" when they are anxious, or "I'm tired" when they are sad.
- Use a very small vocabulary: *fine, good, bad, stressed, annoyed.*
- Focus on facts and events rather than inner experience, as Henry did with his meeting.
- Find it hard to imagine what others mean when they speak of emotions in detail.

None of this indicates a lack of intelligence or of sensitivity. Many people with these difficulties are perceptive observers of others. They have simply not had the practice, or the safety, to turn the same attention inward.

"I'M FINE"

If one sentence could summarize the legacy of emotional neglect, it might be *I'm fine.*

It is the most common answer to the question "How are you?" It is often said automatically, before the question has been fully asked. It can be sincere, in the sense that the speaker genuinely does not know of anything wrong. It can also be a shield, a polite way of closing a door that no one ever opened.

Many people who grew up in emotionally quiet homes learned that "I'm fine" was the expected answer, and that anything else would have led to awkwardness, dismissal, or burden. They learned that being fine was a way of being good.

If this is your habit, a simple experiment can be revealing. For one day, notice each time you say "fine," "good," or "okay" in response to a question about how you are. Do not change anything. Simply count. Many people are astonished by the number.

FEELING EVERYTHING, THEN NOTHING

Not everyone who experienced emotional neglect lives in a state of numbness. Some experience the opposite: moments of intense, overwhelming emotion that seem to come from nowhere, followed by a collapse into flatness.

This pattern makes sense in terms of the window of tolerance, which we will explore further in Chapter 8. When a person has had little practice regulating emotions, small feelings may escalate quickly, because there is no experience of letting them rise and fall. The nervous system may flood, and then, in self-protection, shut down.

You may recognize this as an evening when something small, such as a critical comment or a cancelled plan, produces a surge of distress that feels out of proportion, followed by a long gray stretch of feeling nothing. This is not instability. It is the signature of a system that has not learned the middle range.

THE THINKING MIND AS REFUGE

Many emotionally neglected children discover that thinking is safe. Ideas do not hurt. Facts are reliable. Analysis keeps the unpredictable at a distance.

Adults who grew up this way often become very good at intellectualizing: analyzing a situation in detail, constructing explanations, discussing what they "should" feel, and speaking about their lives in the third person, all without touching the feeling itself. Henry's account of his meeting is a good example. It was lucid, complete, and empty of emotion.

Thinking is a strength, and nothing here is meant to diminish it. The difficulty arises when thinking becomes the only way of knowing. The goal is not to give up analysis but to add something: the ability to sense, in the body, what a situation means to you.

WHEN THE BODY SPEAKS

Feelings that are not recognized in the mind often find expression elsewhere. Many people with a history of emotional neglect describe physical symptoms that seem to come from nowhere: headaches, muscle tension, digestive trouble, fatigue, a tight chest, poor sleep.

It is important to be careful here. Physical symptoms have many causes, and anyone experiencing persistent or concerning symptoms should consult a medical professional. But it is also true that chronic stress and unprocessed emotion can influence the body, and that bodily awareness is part of understanding what you feel (Craig, 2002).

A helpful practice is to treat physical sensations as potential information rather than as noise. A tight jaw may be holding anger. A heavy chest may be carrying sadness. A knot in the stomach may be anxiety. Over time, learning these connections gives you a way of reading your own emotional weather.

THE POWER OF PRECISE WORDS

If you find it hard to name your feelings, there is an encouraging body of research on the value of doing so.

Lisa Feldman Barrett and her colleagues have studied what they call *emotional granularity*: the ability to make fine-grained distinctions between emotions, such as telling apart *anxious*, *disappointed*, *ashamed*, and *overwhelmed*, rather than lumping them under "bad." They found that people who made finer distinctions in their emotional experience were better at regulating their emotions and responding to them effectively (Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001).

This helps explain why a richer emotional vocabulary is not a nicety. It is a practical tool. A person who can say "I'm lonely" can do something about loneliness. A person who can say only "I feel bad" has little to work with. Building vocabulary is a central part of recovery, and Appendix A offers a list to help.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

It is easy to misunderstand the difficulty of finding feelings as a deeper defect. A few clarifications may help.

It is **not coldness.** People who struggle to feel often care deeply for others. They may express care through action, loyalty, and presence.

It is **not a lack of intelligence or imagination.** It is a missing skill, not a missing capacity.

It is **not permanent.** The ability to sense and name emotion can be developed.

It is **not your fault.** You did not choose to turn your feelings down. A child did, for good reasons, and the habit has persisted.

THE STRENGTHS INSIDE

There are also strengths in this pattern, and it would be incomplete to ignore them. People who grew up learning to manage on their own are often steady, observant, thoughtful, and resilient. They are reliable in a crisis, good at practical problem-solving, and respectful of others' autonomy. They notice details. They keep promises.

Recovery does not require giving these up. It adds a missing dimension, so that the steady, capable person you already are can also be a person who knows what they feel.

COMMON QUESTIONS

"Does feeling nothing mean I am a psychopath?" No. People who worry about this are, almost by definition, concerned about others' feelings and their own, which suggests the opposite. Numbness after neglect is common and different from a lack of empathy.

"How can I feel something if I can't find it?" By starting small: with the body, with words, and with safety. The practices in this book are designed for exactly this.

"What if the feelings come all at once?" Go slowly and use the calm plan in Chapter 8. Feelings returning in a flood is common and manageable, with pacing and support.

"Should I see a doctor about physical symptoms?" Yes, if symptoms are persistent, new, or worrying. Medical care and emotional work are not alternatives. They complement each other.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE FEELINGS CHECK-IN

This practice builds the habit of asking yourself what you feel. It takes about three minutes, three times a day. You will need a notebook or a note on your phone, and Appendix A.

Step 1: Pause. Choose three moments each day: morning, midday, evening. Stop what you are doing and take a slow breath.

Step 2: Scan your body. Notice where in your body you feel something: tightness, warmth, heaviness, buzzing, emptiness. Write it down briefly.

Step 3: Look at the vocabulary list. Read through the feelings in Appendix A slowly. Notice which words produce a response in your body: a small tightening, a loosening, a recognition.

Step 4: Pick the closest word. Choose the word that seems closest, even if it is not exact. It is fine to choose more than one. Write it next to your body note.

Step 5: Ask what happened. Ask: *What happened in the last few hours that might connect to this?* Write one line. If you cannot find a cause, write "not sure."

Step 6: Add a kind sentence. Complete: *It makes sense that I feel...* Even if the connection is unclear.

Step 7: Review at the end of the week. Look back over your notes. Which feelings appear most? Which situations? What do you notice?

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. When someone asks how you are, what do you usually say? What do you actually feel in that moment?
2. Which of the experiences in this chapter, numbness, difficulty naming feelings, "I'm fine," swings between flooding and flatness, intellectualizing, bodily symptoms, feel most familiar?
3. What emotions are easiest for you to name? Which are hardest?
4. Where in your body do you tend to feel stress or sadness?
5. What would it be like to have a few more words for what you feel?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Numbness, emptiness, and flatness are common after emotional neglect. They are not signs of a damaged heart but of long practice at turning feelings down.

Difficulty naming emotions is a missing skill, not a missing capacity. It can be learned.

"I'm fine" is often a shield learned in childhood. Noticing it is a first step toward changing it.

Finer distinctions between emotions support better regulation. A larger vocabulary is a practical tool.

You can keep your strengths, including thoughtfulness, steadiness, and reliability, while adding the ability to know what you feel.

In the next chapter, we turn to the rules you learned about feelings and needs, and how they continue to shape your life.

HENRY'S THREAD

Henry began the feelings check-in the following week. He felt faintly absurd, sitting in the car park outside his office with a notebook open to Appendix A. He read the list slowly, the way one might read a menu in a foreign language.

On the first morning, he wrote: *Tight jaw. Chest heavy.* Looking at the vocabulary list, one word seemed to light up in a way that unsettled him. *Worried.* He chose it. He wrote: *Worried about Ruth.* He did not know where it had come from, but it seemed true.

At midday: *Stomach knotted. Shoulders up. Overwhelmed,* he wrote, *or maybe nervous.* At night: *Warmth in the chest, a loosening.* He read the list again. *Grateful,* he wrote, and a moment later, to his surprise, *Moved.*

By the end of the week, he had a page of small entries. *Worried. Irritated. Embarrassed. Content. Lonely.* The last one had appeared on Thursday, in the evening, while Ruth was out. He looked at it for a long time.

On Saturday, over breakfast, he said to her, in his careful, formal way, "I've been trying something. I've noticed I feel lonely sometimes. Even when you're in the next room."

Ruth set down her coffee. She said nothing for a moment. Then she reached across the table and took his hand. "Thank you for telling me," she said, and her eyes were wet.

He did not know what to do with his face. But he left his hand where it was.

CHAPTER 5
THE INNER RULES YOU LEARNED



It was ten past nine on a Thursday night, and Sofia Marin was still at her desk, adjusting the kerning on a logo that the client had already approved.

The studio was empty. Everyone else had left at six. Her screen glowed in the dark office, and her tea had gone cold. She zoomed in until the letters filled the screen, nudged one letter a pixel to the left, zoomed out, and frowned. It was perfect. It had been perfect an hour ago.

One more pass, she told herself. *Just to be sure.*

Her phone buzzed. It was her friend Camille, asking whether she wanted to come to a small birthday dinner on Saturday. Sofia read the message and felt the familiar, immediate, almost physical response: a tightening, a wish to hide. She typed, *I would love to, but I have a deadline!* and sent it. There was no deadline. The project was already

finished. But Saturday would mean sitting at a table with people who would ask how she was, and she did not know what she would say.

She turned back to the screen. The kerning was perfect. She adjusted it again.

If someone had asked her why she was still there, she would have said that she was a perfectionist, and that this was just how she was made. It would not have occurred to her that she was following a set of instructions, written a long time ago, in a language she had never learned to read. They said, among other things: *Be impressive. Do not need anything. Do not be a bother. Make sure no one has a reason to worry.*

Nobody had ever said these things aloud. She had simply known them, the way one knows the rules of a house.

THE RULES YOU DID NOT KNOW YOU HAD

Every family has rules. Some are spoken: *Take your shoes off. Finish your homework. Be home by ten.* But the most powerful rules are never spoken. They are absorbed, by watching what is rewarded, what is ignored, what is met with a silence or a change of subject.

In a family in which emotions were not discussed, a set of hidden rules typically develops. They are rarely articulated, even privately, and they can govern an entire life.

Here are some of the most common.

- *Don't need anything.*
- *Don't be a burden.*
- *Handle it yourself.*
- *Feelings are weakness.*
- *Don't make a fuss.*
- *Keep the peace.*
- *Be strong.*
- *Don't cry.*
- *Be grateful for what you have.*
- *Don't talk about family business.*

- *Achievement is what matters.*
- *If you're fine, no one has to worry.*

You may find that some of these produce a particular reaction in your body, a tightening, a flinch, a flicker of recognition. That reaction is a clue.

HOW RULES ARE TAUGHT WITHOUT WORDS

It is worth considering how such rules are communicated, because most were never stated.

By example. A child who never sees a parent cry, ask for help, or say "I'm struggling" learns that these things are not done.

By reaction. A child who cries and is met with "Stop that" or a change of subject learns that crying is unwelcome. A child who expresses a need and sees a parent's face tighten learns that needs are a strain.

By reward. A child who is praised for being "so independent," "so mature," or "no trouble at all" learns that independence and silence earn warmth.

By absence. A child who never hears feelings discussed has no model for doing so. The silence itself is a lesson.

None of this required cruelty or even awareness. These are lessons that families teach simply by being what they are.

SELF-RELIANCE AS ARMOR

The rule *Handle it yourself* deserves special attention, because it is both a real strength and a hidden cost.

Self-reliance is admirable. It lets people cope, solve problems, and stand on their own. But for a child who learned it too early, it can harden into a kind of compulsion. The psychiatrist John Bowlby described *compulsive self-reliance* as a pattern in which a person insists on managing alone, avoids depending on others, and is uncomfortable

receiving help, often as a result of early experiences in which turning to others did not work (Bowlby, 1988).

People with this pattern may feel proud of managing alone, and also quietly exhausted. They may be the one everyone relies on and the one nobody checks on. They may find that when they finally need something, they cannot ask.

There is an interesting finding that complicates the picture. In a series of studies of couples, Brooke Feeney found that people who felt they could depend on their partners during times of stress showed *greater* independence in pursuing their own goals, not less (Feeney, 2007). The researcher called it the dependency paradox. Being able to lean, it turns out, supports the ability to stand.

For someone who grew up believing that needing anyone is weakness, this finding can be unsettling. It suggests that the armor of self-reliance may be limiting your freedom rather than protecting it.

PERFECTIONISM AND THE SEARCH FOR WORTH

The rule *Achievement is what matters* often goes hand in hand with perfectionism.

Children who do not receive emotional attention may discover that achievement brings a different kind of attention: praise, approval, relief on a parent's face. They learn, implicitly, that worth is earned. If a high grade brings warmth and a quiet afternoon brings none, the lesson is clear.

The psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett have studied perfectionism extensively and have distinguished several forms. One involves setting extremely high standards for oneself, another involves believing that others demand perfection of you, and a third involves demanding perfection of others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The first two, in particular, are associated with distress when standards are not met.

For adults who grew up emotionally neglected, perfectionism often has a protective function. If everything is flawless, there is nothing to

criticize, nothing to worry about, and nothing that might expose a need. It also supplies a sense of worth that nothing else does. The cost is chronic strain, difficulty enjoying accomplishments, and a nagging fear that beneath the polished surface there is nothing of value.

THE COMPETENT CHILD AND THE HIDDEN COST

Many people who grew up emotionally neglected were praised, sometimes lavishly, for competence. They were "mature for their age." They were "no trouble." They were the child who made everything easier.

It can be very difficult, as an adult, to recognize this as a form of loss. The praise was real, and so were the accomplishments. Yet the child learned that the version of them that was welcomed was the capable one, and that the child who was scared, sad, or unsure was best kept out of sight.

If this describes you, it may help to remember that competence was not a flaw. It was a gift that a child gave to a family, at a price. Part of recovery is allowing the other parts of you to be seen as well.

THE QUIET SHAME OF NEEDING

Underneath many of these rules lies a feeling that is rarely named: shame about having needs.

As we noted earlier in this book, shame differs from guilt. Guilt says, *I did something wrong*. Shame says, *I am wrong.* Researchers have found that shame tends to prompt hiding and withdrawal, while guilt tends to prompt repair (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

A child whose needs are met with silence, sighs, or tension may conclude that having needs is itself shameful: that there is something excessive or defective about wanting comfort, attention, or help. This shame often goes underground. Adults may not experience it as shame at all. They may simply find that asking for help makes them feel

exposed and slightly sick, and that they will go to great lengths to avoid it.

Recognizing this quiet shame can be a turning point. It allows you to see that your reluctance to need is not a personality trait but a learned response, and that the belief beneath it, *needing is shameful*, is something you were taught, not something that is true.

WHEN RULES BECOME IDENTITY

Over time, rules harden into identity. *Don't need anything* becomes *I'm independent. Be strong* becomes *I'm a strong person. Don't make a fuss* becomes *I'm easygoing. Achieve* becomes *I'm driven.*

These descriptions may be partly true. But they can also function as a cage, because they make it hard to see that the behavior is a choice, or that it was ever learned. When someone suggests that you might ask for help, rest, or feel sad, you may feel not just discomfort but a threat to your sense of who you are.

It can help to notice the difference between a *preference* and a *rule*. A preference allows flexibility: *I like to handle things myself, and sometimes I ask for help.* A rule does not: *I must never need anyone.* If you find yourself experiencing a strong, almost physical resistance to breaking a pattern, you may be dealing with a rule.

REWRITING THE RULES, BELIEVABLY

Once you recognize an old rule, the natural impulse is to replace it with its opposite: *I am allowed to need everything. My feelings are always important.* But research on positive self-statements suggests that this can backfire. In a series of studies, people with low self-esteem who repeated an affirmation such as "I am a lovable person" felt worse afterward than those who did not, apparently because the statement conflicted with what they actually believed (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009).

A more effective approach is to write a *believable alternative*: a sentence that is kinder than the old rule and honest enough for you to accept. Compare:

Old rule	Forced opposite	Believable alternative
Don't need anything.	I need everything and everyone.	Some of my needs are reasonable, and I can practice asking.
Handle it yourself.	I never have to cope alone.	I can handle many things, and I do not have to handle everything alone.
Feelings are weakness.	My feelings are always right.	Feelings are information, and I can learn to listen to them.
Don't be a burden.	I am never a burden.	People who care about me may want to help.

The final column leaves room for doubt while pointing in a new direction. Pair the alternative with a small action, such as asking for something minor, resting for ten minutes, or naming a feeling aloud, and let experience gather its own evidence.

HEALING PRACTICE: REWRITING THE RULES

This practice helps you identify one hidden rule and begin to write a believable alternative. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: List the rules. Read through the list in this chapter, and add any of your own. Write down the five that feel most true for you.

Step 2: Choose one. Pick the rule that, if it loosened, would make the biggest difference.

Step 3: Trace its origin. Ask: *Where did I learn this? Who showed it to me? What happened when someone broke it?* Write the first memory or image that comes.

Step 4: Name what it protected. Complete: *This rule protected me from...* For example: *being a burden, being disappointed, being hurt.*

Step 5: Name what it costs. Complete: *This rule costs me...* For example: *rest, closeness, help.*

Step 6: Write a believable alternative. Write a sentence that is kinder than the rule and that you can honestly accept. Begin with phrases like "I am learning that...", "Sometimes...", or "I can begin to...".

Step 7: Choose a tiny action. Pick one small action that goes slightly against the rule, and write it down: *Ask a colleague for a quick favor. Say "I'm tired" out loud. Take a lunch break.* Do it this week.

Step 8: Notice what happens. Afterward, write what you expected and what actually happened. Notice any gap between the two.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which of the hidden rules in this chapter feel most familiar? What does your body do when you read them?
2. How were these rules taught in your family, by example, by reaction, by reward, or by silence?
3. In what ways has self-reliance served you? In what ways has it cost you?
4. If you are a perfectionist, what do you think would happen if you stopped?
5. What is one small action that would go against an old rule, and what might you learn from it?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Families teach hidden rules about feelings and needs, mostly without words. Common ones include *Don't need anything*, *Handle it yourself*, and *Be strong*.

Self-reliance is a strength and can become a compulsion. Being able to depend on others supports independence rather than undermining it.

Perfectionism often protects against criticism and supplies a sense of worth. Its cost is chronic strain.

Beneath many rules lies a quiet shame about having needs. Seeing this allows you to separate what you were taught from what is true.

A believable alternative, paired with a small action, loosens an old rule more effectively than a forced positive statement.

In the next chapter, we look at how emotional neglect shows up in adult life: in relationships, work, the body, and the decisions you make.

IRIS'S THREAD

Iris wrote down her five rules at the kitchen table on a Sunday. *Don't need anything. Handle it yourself. Don't be a bother. Be grateful. Fine is good.*

She chose *Handle it yourself.* In her mother's house, she traced it to a night when she was nine, with a high fever. She had gone to the bathroom, found the thermometer, taken her own temperature, and gone back to bed, because her parents were having guests for dinner. She had not wanted to be a nuisance. In the morning her mother had said, "You were so good, not making a fuss."

Protected me from: she wrote, *being in the way. Being a bother.* And then, after a long pause: *Being refused.*

Costs me: Everything I never ask for. Closeness. Help. Being known.

Her believable alternative took several tries. *I can handle many things. I am learning that I do not have to handle everything alone.* She read it back. It felt both false and not false, like a coat that was slightly too large.

Her tiny action was to ask a colleague for help with a spreadsheet she could have done herself. She did it on Tuesday morning, with her heart thudding, in a voice that sounded to her like a stranger's.

"Sure!" said Dana, cheerfully, swiveling her chair. "I love this stuff. Pull up a seat."

Iris sat beside her and watched Dana's hands move across the keyboard. Nothing terrible happened. At the end, Dana said, "Anytime," and went back to her work. Iris sat for a moment at her desk, her pulse slowing, aware of a strange feeling in her chest. It took her several minutes to recognize it. It was the feeling of having been, briefly and without incident, a person who needed something.

CHAPTER 6
NEGLECT IN ADULT LIFE



Saturday mornings were supposed to be the best part of Owen Pryce's week.

He had cleared his calendar. Wren had her soccer game at ten, and afterward they had planned to get ice cream and spend the afternoon together. He had even put the phone in the glove compartment.

At the game, he stood on the sideline with the other parents, holding a coffee. Wren played well, scored a goal, and looked toward the sideline for his reaction. He clapped and called "Nice one!" She grinned and ran back to her position.

And then, as the game went on, Owen noticed something odd. He was watching, but he was not really *there.* He was thinking about a project timeline, and the permit that had not arrived, and whether the foreman would call. He was aware of Wren as one is aware of a landscape through a train window: pleasant, moving, a little remote.

Afterward, at the ice cream shop, Wren talked about the game, her friend Priya's new haircut, and a book she was reading. Owen nodded, said "Mm" and "Really?" and ate his scoop of vanilla. Watching her face light up, he felt a faint panic, like a man standing at the edge of a swimming pool who has forgotten how to swim. He loved her more than he could say. He did not know how to *be* with her.

On the drive home, she fell quiet, looking out of the window. Owen glanced at her and wondered what she was feeling, and realized he had no idea how to find out. It was the same silence in which he had spent his own childhood in the front seat of his father's truck.

THE LONG REACH OF EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

Emotional neglect rarely announces itself in adulthood as a memory. It appears instead as a pattern: a way of relating, working, feeling, and deciding that seems to belong to the personality, and that is, in fact, the continuation of a childhood strategy.

This chapter looks at the main places where these patterns tend to show up. As you read, you may recognize some and not others. There is no required number. The purpose is to help you see how a quiet childhood continues to speak through an adult life.

IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps the most painful arena is intimate relationships. Partners, friends, and family often feel the effects of emotional neglect even when they cannot name it.

Distance within closeness. You may be physically present and emotionally elsewhere. People close to you may say that they cannot reach you, that you seem "somewhere else," or that they do not know what you feel.

Difficulty with emotional intimacy. Sharing vulnerable feelings, receiving comfort, and talking about the relationship itself may feel awkward, exposing, or pointless.

Over-giving and under-receiving. You may be generous with practical help and attention to others, and uncomfortable when anyone tries to give to you.

Loneliness inside relationships. You may be surrounded by people and still feel unseen, because no one knows what is happening inside you. And you may not know either.

Confusion about what you need. Partners may ask what you want, and you may have no idea. Over time, a relationship can drift into a pattern in which your needs are never expressed and never met.

Difficulty with conflict. You may avoid disagreement, withdraw when tension rises, or be unable to say what is wrong. Alternatively, you may feel overwhelmed and explode, then shut down.

None of this means that you cannot love. Many emotionally neglected people love deeply and show it in actions. What they often lack is the practice of expressing feelings and receiving them in return, a skill that can be learned.

AT WORK

The workplace is often where the strengths of an emotionally neglected childhood are most visible, and most rewarded.

You may be reliable, thorough, composed under pressure, and respected for your competence. You may rarely complain. You may be the person colleagues turn to when things go wrong.

The costs may be less visible. They can include:

- **Difficulty asking for help or delegating.** The rule *Handle it yourself* does not go away at the office door.
- **Overwork and perfectionism.** Achievement may supply the sense of worth that was missing elsewhere.
- **Difficulty receiving praise.** Compliments may feel awkward or suspicious.

- **Difficulty knowing what you want.** You may excel at tasks without being able to say whether you enjoy them or what you would choose if you could.
- **Burnout without warning.** Without awareness of your own signals, exhaustion can arrive suddenly.
- **Conflict avoidance.** You may avoid speaking up when something is wrong.

Many people in this pattern describe a quiet hollowness behind professional success: *I'm good at everything, and I don't feel anything about it.*

IN THE BODY

As discussed earlier, feelings that go unrecognized may express themselves through the body. People with a history of emotional neglect often report fatigue, tension headaches, jaw clenching, stomach problems, trouble sleeping, or a general sense of being "wound up." They may also have difficulty sensing hunger, thirst, tiredness, or pain until these become intense.

As always, physical symptoms should be evaluated by a medical professional. But it is also worth noticing the relationship between your body and your emotional life, and treating bodily signals as possible messages. Tension may carry stress. Fatigue may carry sadness. A churning stomach may carry fear.

IN DECISIONS

One of the most disorienting effects of emotional neglect is difficulty knowing what you want.

Emotions are, among other things, a guidance system. Feelings of interest, attraction, dread, and enthusiasm help us decide what to do, whom to spend time with, and which direction to take. When access to feelings is limited, decision-making becomes harder. You may find

yourself making choices based on logic, duty, or others' expectations, and feeling little attachment to the outcome.

This can show up as difficulty choosing a career, a partner, a place to live, or even a dinner menu. It can also show up as drifting: following a path because it is there, not because you chose it. If you often find yourself saying "I don't mind" or "Whatever you want," it may be worth asking whether you genuinely have no preference, or whether you have simply lost access to it.

IN PARENTING AND CARE FOR OTHERS

Many adults first recognize the pattern when they become parents, caregivers, or mentors. Owen's experience at the soccer game is typical. A child's feelings call for a response that the adult may never have received and may not know how to give.

Parents with this history may:

- Focus on practical needs and be uneasy with emotional ones.
- Respond to a child's distress with problem-solving or distraction.
- Feel overwhelmed when a child is intensely emotional.
- Feel guilty or baffled by their own emotional distance.
- Wonder whether they are repeating their parents' pattern, and often they are, despite the best intentions.

This recognition can be painful, but it is also an opening. Parents who see the pattern can change it, and children can benefit enormously. We will return to this in Chapter 14.

NUMBING AND FILLING THE SPACE

When feelings are hard to access or tolerate, people often find ways to numb or fill the space. These strategies are common, and they are not signs of weakness.

They may include working constantly, staying busy, scrolling through screens, overeating or undereating, shopping, using alcohol or other substances, exercising to excess, or moving from one relationship

or project to the next. Each can offer temporary relief from the feeling of emptiness or from feelings that seem too large.

The difficulty is that numbing tends to work in the short term and leave the underlying emptiness unchanged, or larger. If you notice that you rely on a particular behavior to manage how you feel, and it is causing harm or is difficult to control, please consider speaking with a mental health or medical professional. Support exists, and asking for it is a sign of strength.

LONELINESS

Perhaps the most consistent thread running through adult life after emotional neglect is a form of loneliness, a sense of not being truly known.

It is worth noting that loneliness is not simply a matter of being alone. It is the felt gap between the connection you have and the connection you want. Large-scale research has found that social relationships are significantly associated with health and longevity, and that loneliness and isolation carry risks comparable to better-known health factors (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Connection matters.

For emotionally neglected adults, loneliness can be especially confusing, because it may coexist with a full social life. You can be invited, busy, liked, and still feel unseen. If that is your experience, it does not mean you are ungrateful or that you are imagining it. It may be an accurate perception of a real gap: the gap between knowing someone's company and being known by them.

WHY YOUR STRENGTHS ARE REAL

It is important to hold all of this alongside an acknowledgment of what emotional neglect may have given you. Many people with this history are:

- **Independent**, able to cope on their own.

- **Observant**, attuned to other people's needs.
- **Reliable**, someone others can count on.
- **Resilient**, having learned to manage hard things.
- **Self-disciplined**, able to push through difficulty.
- **Thoughtful**, comfortable with analysis and reflection.

These qualities are not nothing. They are what made it possible to function in an environment that offered little emotional support. Recovery does not require discarding them. It requires adding the capacity to be known, and to know yourself.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE ADULT PATTERN MAP

This practice helps you see how emotional neglect may show up in your adult life. It is not a diagnosis. It is a way of noticing, with curiosity. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: Draw five boxes. Label them *Relationships*, *Work*, *Body*, *Decisions*, and *Caring for others.*

Step 2: Fill in each box. For each area, write one or two examples from the past month that feel connected to the patterns in this chapter. For example: *Relationships: I said "I'm fine" when my partner asked what was wrong. Work: I stayed late rather than ask for help.*

Step 3: Notice the rule. Beside each example, write the hidden rule from Chapter 5 that seems to be operating: *Don't need anything. Handle it yourself.*

Step 4: Notice the strength. Beside each example, write the strength that may be inside the pattern: *independence, reliability, steadiness.*

Step 5: Notice the cost. Beside each example, write the cost: *loneliness, exhaustion, distance.*

Step 6: Choose one area. Pick the area in which a small change would matter most.

Step 7: Choose one small experiment. For example: *Tell my partner one true feeling a day. Ask for help once this week. Take a real lunch break. Say "I'd like..." instead of "I don't mind."* Write it down and try it.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which of the areas in this chapter, relationships, work, the body, decisions, caring for others, feels most familiar?
2. What do the people closest to you say about you? What might they be noticing that you do not?
3. How do you fill the space when you feel empty or overwhelmed?
4. When did you last feel truly known by another person? What made it possible?
5. What is one strength from your upbringing that you want to keep?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Emotional neglect continues to shape adult life, in relationships, work, the body, decisions, and parenting.

Distance, over-giving, difficulty receiving, and loneliness within closeness are common patterns in relationships.

Competence and reliability are real strengths. The costs, such as overwork, burnout, and a lack of fulfillment, may appear later.

Numbing behaviors are common. If they are harmful or hard to control, professional support can help.

Recovery adds to your strengths. It does not require giving them up.

In the next chapter, we will address a doubt that stops many people in their tracks: "But it wasn't that bad."

OWEN'S THREAD

The following Saturday, Owen tried a small experiment. At the soccer game, he put his phone in the glove compartment, stood a little

closer to the field, and tried to stay with what he saw. When his mind drifted to the permit, he noticed it, said silently *there it goes,* and brought his attention back to Wren.

When she scored, he felt a small leap in his chest, and without planning it, he cheered out loud, a real cheer, undignified and loud. A few parents turned and smiled. Wren, on the field, put her hands up and shouted, "Dad!"

At the ice cream shop, instead of saying "Mm" and "Really?", he asked a question. "What did it feel like when you scored?"

Wren stopped with her spoon in the air. "Um," she said. "Kind of like when you're at the top of a roller coaster. Before it drops. Only good."

"That sounds amazing," he said, and meant it.

She grinned at him over the ice cream, and for the first time in a long while he felt that they were in the same place. It was not a grand moment. A little strawberry was running down her chin. But on the way home, she leaned her head against his arm, and he sat very still, so as not to disturb something that had been waiting a long time to arrive.

CHAPTER 7
"BUT IT WASN'T THAT BAD"



Sofia's sister Lucía arrived with a bottle of wine and an opinion.

They were sitting at Sofia's kitchen table on a Sunday evening, as they did every month or so. Sofia had been wondering for two weeks whether to mention what she had been reading and writing. She had practiced the sentence in the shower. She said it quickly, looking at her glass.

"I've been thinking about when we were kids. I think there might have been something missing. Emotionally, I mean. I'm not blaming Mom and Dad. It's just that I never remember anyone asking how I felt."

Lucía put down her wine. Her face went through three expressions in quick succession, and settled on a mixture of surprise and mild hurt. "Sofi," she said. "Our childhood was fine. Better than fine. We had a house. We had vacations. Mom drove us everywhere. Dad worked so hard. Do you know how many people would kill for what we had?"

"I know," Sofia said. "I'm not saying it wasn't good."

"It sounds like you are." Lucía's voice was not unkind, but it had an edge. "I think you're being a little dramatic. Honestly, you were the easy one. You never gave them a minute of trouble."

The words landed in Sofia's chest like a stone dropped into a still pond. She felt the familiar rush: heat in her face, a tightening in her throat, and an almost irresistible urge to say, *You're right. I'm sorry. Forget I said anything.* The sentence was already forming. It had been forming her whole life.

She opened her mouth. She closed it.

"Maybe," she said at last, very quietly. "Maybe I am being dramatic."

Lucía smiled, relieved, and reached for the wine. The evening moved on. And Sofia sat with a hot flush of shame, aware that she had just done to herself exactly what had been done to her for twenty-nine years.

THE DOUBT THAT STOPS THE WORK

Of all the obstacles to healing from emotional neglect, one of the most powerful is not an external barrier but an internal voice: *It wasn't that bad.*

Almost everyone who begins this work meets that voice. It may come from a sibling, a parent, a friend, a partner, or from the quiet interior commentary that says, *You're exaggerating. Other people had it much worse. You have nothing to complain about.*

It is worth giving this doubt serious attention, because it can end the work before it begins. This chapter explains where it comes from, why it is so persuasive, and how to hold it without being stopped by it.

MINIMIZING AND COMPARING

The doubt typically arrives in two forms.

Minimizing says: *It wasn't that bad.* It reduces the significance of your experience. It points to the absence of dramatic events, to your parents' good qualities, to the practical comforts you enjoyed.

Comparing says: *Other people had it worse.* It measures your experience against that of people who suffered more visibly: those who were abused, abandoned, or impoverished. By that measure, your difficulty looks trivial.

Both seem reasonable. Both contain a kernel of truth. Many people did suffer more. Many parents did give a great deal. Yet both quietly shift the question. They turn *What did I need, and did I get it?* into *Was I mistreated badly enough to count?* The first question is about your experience. The second is a contest with no winner.

The point is not that your childhood was as hard as someone else's. The point is that comparison is not a useful way of knowing what happened to you. A person with a broken ankle does not need to prove that someone else has a broken leg before seeking treatment. Pain does not need to be compared to be real.

WHERE THE DOUBT COMES FROM

It helps to understand why the doubt is so strong. Several forces combine.

There is no event. Because emotional neglect leaves no scene, there is nothing concrete to offer as evidence, to yourself or to others. The absence of a story invites the conclusion that there is nothing to tell.

Your parents' goodness is real. You may have been loved, provided for, and supported in many ways. This is true, and it makes the missing piece harder to believe in.

Loyalty. Noticing what was missing can feel like a betrayal of parents who worked hard and sacrificed. Many people experience the very act of looking as disloyal.

Family narrative. Families often have an official story: *We were a happy family.* Questioning it can feel like breaking a rule, and other family members may defend it.

Cultural messages. Messages like "Be grateful," "Others have it worse," and "Stop dwelling on the past" are common, and they function as general-purpose silencers.

Learned self-dismissal. Perhaps the most important force is that dismissing your own feelings is exactly what you were taught to do. The voice that says *It wasn't that bad* may be the same voice that, in childhood, said *You're fine* when you were not.

This last point deserves emphasis. When you notice yourself minimizing, you are not only facing a doubt. You are repeating a pattern. The original wound is quietly reenacted every time you tell yourself that your feelings do not count.

THE LOSS THAT NO ONE SEES

The grief researcher Kenneth Doka coined the term *disenfranchised grief* for grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned (Doka, 1989). Mourning the emotional attention you did not receive is a textbook example. There is no funeral. There are no condolence cards. Often, there is no one who believes there is anything to mourn.

The family therapist Pauline Boss described a related experience, *ambiguous loss*, in which the loss is unclear or unresolved, for example, the loss of a parent who is physically present but psychologically unavailable (Boss, 1999). Many people who grew up with emotional neglect recognize this. The parent was there, at the table, every night, and yet the parent they needed was not.

Both ideas offer permission. They say that your grief is real even if no one else sees it, and that a loss does not need witnesses to be a loss.

WHY SIBLINGS REMEMBER DIFFERENTLY

One of the most painful forms of doubt comes from siblings who recall a different childhood. A sister who says "It was fine" can make you feel as though you are imagining things.

There are several reasons siblings may give different accounts of the same family.

Temperament. As discussed in Chapter 2, children differ in how sensitive, expressive, and emotionally needy they are. A child who needs a lot of emotional contact will experience a reserved household very differently from a child who needs little (Thomas & Chess, 1977).

Fit. A child whose temperament matches a parent's may feel understood. A child who differs may feel unseen. Two children in the same family may experience different families.

Birth order and role. The oldest, the youngest, the "easy one," and the "difficult one" are often treated differently, and each develops a different story.

Timing. Families change. A parent who was depressed when one child was small may have recovered by the time another was born. Financial conditions shift. Marriages strengthen or break.

Defense. For some siblings, "It was fine" is a way of protecting themselves from painful feelings. Looking at what was missing can be frightening, and denial is a form of self-protection.

None of this means that either sibling is wrong. It means that childhood is not a single experience but a collection of individual ones, and that your account is a legitimate record of yours.

GRATITUDE AND GRIEF TOGETHER

One reason people dismiss their own experience is the belief that gratitude and grief cannot coexist. If I am grateful for what my parents gave, how can I mourn what they did not?

In fact, both can be true, and often are.

You can be grateful for the roof, the meals, the education, the hours of work, and the love expressed in the form your parents knew. You can also grieve the questions never asked, the comfort never offered, the feelings never named. You can feel admiration for how hard your parents tried and sadness for what they could not do.

Gratitude does not cancel grief. Grief does not cancel gratitude. A more accurate account of a real childhood includes both, and holding both is a sign of maturity, not of ingratitude.

ENOUGH TO MATTER

Perhaps the most helpful reframe is to replace the question *Was it bad enough?* with a different one: *Was it enough to matter?*

You do not need to demonstrate that your childhood was a catastrophe in order to take its effects seriously. You only need to notice that certain needs, to be noticed, comforted, understood, and delighted in, were not met often enough, and that this has had real consequences in your life.

Consider a simple analogy. A plant that is given soil and sunlight but not enough water will not die in a day. It will grow slowly, a little stunted, a little pale. No one would say that the plant was "mistreated." But no one would deny that it lacked something essential. The question is not whether the plant suffered a disaster. The question is whether it received what it needed to flourish.

TRUSTING YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

If you have spent your life discounting your feelings, learning to trust your own perception can feel like learning a new skill. It is. A few principles may help.

Treat your experience as evidence. Your feelings, memories, and bodily reactions are data. They may not tell the whole story, but they are a legitimate part of it.

Look at patterns, not events. You do not need a single incident. Ask whether a pattern was present: *How did my family respond when someone was sad? Was there ever a conversation about feelings?*

Notice what your body says. If a memory or description produces a tightening in your chest or a wave of sadness, take it seriously, even if your mind insists that nothing was wrong.

Allow ambivalence. You may feel loving, resentful, grateful, and sad at once. These feelings are not contradictory. They reflect a complex reality.

Choose your audience. Not everyone will understand. It is acceptable to share your discoveries with people who are likely to listen, and to keep them from those who are likely to dismiss them.

IF YOU TALK TO A SIBLING OR PARENT

You may wish to share your discoveries with a family member, and it is worth preparing for the possibility that they will not respond as you hope. Some suggestions:

- **Start with your own experience.** "I've noticed that I never felt very seen" invites less defense than "You never noticed me."
- **Do not seek agreement.** Aim to say what is true for you, and let go of the need for them to confirm it.
- **Expect defensiveness.** It is common, and it often reflects fear, not malice.
- **Keep it short.** A brief, calm statement is easier to hear than a long explanation.
- **Remember that you can stop.** You are allowed to end a conversation that is becoming dismissive.

We return to this in Chapter 13.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE TWO-TRUTHS PAGE

This practice helps you hold both gratitude and grief, understanding and need, without choosing between them. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: Draw a line down the middle of a page. Label the left column *What I am grateful for* and the right column *What I needed and did not receive.*

Step 2: Fill in the left column. Write everything your family gave you: practical care, sacrifices, moments of warmth, strengths you inherited. Be generous and sincere.

Step 3: Fill in the right column. Write what you needed and did not receive, without minimizing: *Someone to ask how I felt. Comfort when I was scared. To be told I mattered.* If the voice of doubt appears, write what it says in the margin and keep going.

Step 4: Read both columns slowly. Notice what happens in your body. Notice if you feel pulled toward one side. Try to give each equal weight.

Step 5: Write your two truths. Complete these sentences: *I am grateful for... And I still needed...* Read them aloud.

Step 6: Answer the doubt. Write a response to the voice that says "It wasn't that bad." For example: *It may not have been the worst. It was enough to matter.*

Step 7: Offer yourself care. Write one sentence of kindness to the person who is looking at their own life this honestly.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. When you notice yourself thinking "It wasn't that bad," what does that voice sound like? Whose voice does it resemble?
2. Who in your life, if anyone, has dismissed your feelings about your childhood? How did that feel?
3. What would it mean to treat your experience as evidence?

4. Where do you notice gratitude and grief existing together?
5. What would you say to a friend who described a childhood like yours and then said, "But it wasn't that bad"?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Minimizing and comparing are among the strongest obstacles to recovery. They turn *What did I need?* into *Was I mistreated enough?*

The doubt is strengthened by the absence of an event, by your parents' real goodness, by loyalty, by family narrative, and by the learned habit of dismissing your own feelings.

Grief for emotional attention you did not receive is a real loss, even if it is disenfranchised.

Siblings may remember different childhoods because of temperament, fit, role, and timing. Your account is a legitimate record of your own.

The helpful question is not "Was it bad enough?" but "Was it enough to matter?"

In Part III, we turn from recognizing to recovering, beginning with safety and the importance of going slowly.

SOFIA'S THREAD

That night, after Lucía had gone, Sofia sat on the kitchen floor with her back against the cabinet and a notebook on her knees. She was shaking slightly. She had caught herself, and she felt the wobble of having, for the first time in her life, noticed the moment of self-dismissal as it happened.

She drew the line down the middle of the page. In the left column, she wrote for fifteen minutes without stopping. *The house. The vacations. Dad working weekends. Mom driving us to dance. Always clean clothes. A piano. Birthdays, always, with cake.* She felt a warm, tender gratitude, and she let it stand.

In the right column she wrote more slowly. *Someone asking how I felt. Someone noticing I was sad. Someone saying "I'm proud of you" for something other than a grade.* A voice in her head said, *You're being dramatic.* She wrote it in the margin, in small letters. *Dramatic?* Underneath it she wrote, *Maybe. Or maybe not.*

At the bottom, she wrote her two truths. *I am grateful for everything my parents gave me. And I still needed someone to ask how I was.*

She read it aloud to the empty kitchen. Her voice shook on the last word. She waited for the flood of guilt that she expected, and it came, but smaller than usual, like a wave that had spent most of its force somewhere out at sea.

She answered the doubt. *It may not have been the worst,* she wrote. *It was enough to matter.* She underlined the last four words twice, then closed the notebook and sat for a while in the quiet, breathing.

PART III: THE RECOVERY PATH

CHAPTER 8
SAFETY AND STARTING SLOWLY



On a wet Tuesday in March, Henry Adeyemi sat in his car outside a low brick building, with the engine off and his hands on the steering wheel, unable to go inside.

It was the first appointment he had ever made with a therapist. He had booked it in a burst of resolve three weeks earlier, and ever since, the resolve had been draining away. He had a sheet of paper in his coat pocket on which he had written, in his careful hand, the things he wanted to say. *Wife says I don't show feelings. Not sure what I feel. Would like to learn.* It looked, now, like a work memo.

He noticed that his heart was beating faster. His hands were damp. He noticed these things the way one notices the weather: with interest, without alarm. For fifty-two years, signals like these had been

background noise. It had never occurred to him that they might mean something.

He tried to remember what he had read. *Slowly. Go at your own pace. Notice your body.* He placed both feet flat on the floor and took a slow breath, in for four, out for six. It felt faintly silly, and he did it again.

After four breaths, his hands were steadier. The weather had changed. He picked up his coat, walked through the front door, and told the receptionist his name.

I did not know, he thought, with a wry astonishment, *that you were allowed to prepare for feelings.*

WHY WE GO SLOWLY

If you have read this far, you may feel a pull to get on with it: to name the feelings, process the past, fix the pattern. That impulse is understandable, and it is worth slowing down.

For people who grew up with emotional neglect, recovery has a particular shape. The feelings have been muted for a long time. As the habit of numbness begins to loosen, feelings may return, sometimes gently, sometimes in a rush. Learning to meet them safely is the foundation of everything else.

There are several reasons to start with safety.

Feelings were not safe before. As a child, you learned that feelings brought no response, or brought discomfort. Your system may still carry that expectation. Feeling too much, too fast, can be disorienting or frightening.

Capacity comes before content. Before you dig into painful memories or complicated emotions, it helps to have tools for staying steady. This is true for everyone, and especially for those whose emotional skills were not practiced early.

Numbness is protective. It may have been the best option available. Dismantling it all at once is neither necessary nor wise. It will soften as you build safety.

Safety is itself healing. Every time you feel something and remain steady, you teach your nervous system that feelings can be survived. That lesson is more transformative than any insight.

THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

The psychiatrist Daniel Siegel offers a useful image for understanding emotional regulation: the *window of tolerance*, the zone of emotional arousal in which a person can feel strong emotions and still think, speak, and act in ways that feel like their own (Siegel, 1999).

Inside the window, you can feel upset, sad, or anxious without being overwhelmed. You can reflect and choose. You may be uncomfortable, but you are present.

Outside the window, things shift in one of two directions. Above it is *hyperarousal*: flooding, racing heart, panic, rage, an urge to flee or fight. Below it is *hypoarousal*: shutdown, numbness, heaviness, a sense of being far away.

For people with a history of emotional neglect, the window often has a particular shape. The lower boundary may be quite high, so that numbness is the default and a good deal of ordinary feeling lies beneath it. The upper boundary may be quite low, so that when feelings do surface, they quickly feel too big. The window is narrow, and the work is to widen it, gradually, so that you can feel more without flooding, and feel something without going numb.

TWO SURPRISES OF RECOVERY

People starting this work are often caught off guard by two things.

The first surprise is flooding. As you begin to pay attention to feelings, you may find that they arrive in waves. A small trigger may bring tears or anger out of nowhere. You may feel raw, tired, or

unusually emotional. This does not mean that you are getting worse. It often means that long-muted feelings are coming back online, and that the system does not yet know how to meter them.

The second surprise is flatness. You may also find that for long stretches, nothing seems to happen. You do the practices and feel little. This does not mean that the work is not working. Numbness thaws slowly, and sometimes it returns when you are tired or stressed. Be patient.

Both surprises are normal. Both are best met with the same approach: steady, gentle pacing, and tools to stay within your window.

TOOLS FOR STAYING STEADY

None of these tools requires belief. All work best when practiced before you need them.

Slow breathing. Slow breathing, especially with a longer exhale than inhale, is associated with improvements in heart rate variability and reductions in stress and anxiety (Zaccaro et al., 2018). A simple pattern is to breathe in through the nose for four counts and out through the mouth for six, repeating five or six times.

Grounding through the senses. Bring your attention to the present moment through what you can see, touch, hear, smell, or taste. Naming five things you can see, four you can touch, and three you can hear is a simple way to begin.

Feeling support. Press your feet into the floor. Feel the chair beneath you. Notice that you are being held up.

Orienting. Slowly look around the room, letting your eyes land on whatever they find. Notice that there is no threat here.

Movement. Walking, stretching, or shaking out your hands can discharge energy when you are flooded. Gentle movement can also help when you feel numb or frozen.

Warmth. A warm drink, a blanket, a hand on your chest. Many people find that gentle self-touch calms the body.

Naming. In a series of studies, Matthew Lieberman and colleagues found that putting feelings into words was associated with reduced activity in the amygdala and increased activity in regulatory regions of the prefrontal cortex (Lieberman et al., 2007). Silently saying *This is sadness* or *This is fear* may help.

Other people. The presence of a calm, caring person is among the most powerful regulators. If it is safe, spend time near someone steady.

STARTING WITH WHAT IS SAFE TO FEEL

If you have spent most of your life turning feelings down, it can help to begin with sensations that are neutral or pleasant, rather than with painful ones.

Try noticing the warmth of a cup in your hands. The feeling of your feet in warm socks. The way sunlight lands on your arm. The sound of rain. The taste of food. These small sensory experiences build the skill of attending to the body, without the demands of strong emotion.

You can then add small emotional experiences: noticing a flicker of amusement, a moment of contentment, a gentle sadness at a song. The practice is to notice, name, and let it be. Starting with the gentle end of the range teaches the nervous system that feeling is not an emergency.

BUILDING RESOURCES

Therapists who work with trauma often begin by helping people build *resources*, internal and external supports that make it safer to explore difficult material. You can build your own.

A safe place. Think of a real or imagined place where you feel calm and secure: a beach, a library, a garden, a grandparent's kitchen. Imagine it in detail. Practice returning to it for a minute or two each day.

A safe person. Think of someone who makes you feel steady, even a little. Recall a moment when you felt cared for. Notice what happens in your body as you remember.

A calming object. A smooth stone, a scarf, a photograph, anything you associate with comfort.

A supportive routine. Regular sleep, meals, movement, and time outdoors are among the most effective regulators.

A professional. If possible, work with a trauma-informed therapist who can help you build resources and pace the work.

PACING THE WORK

Therapists use the word *titration* to describe approaching difficult material in very small doses, returning to safety in between. You can apply the same principle.

- **Go slowly.** It is better to take many small steps than one overwhelming one.
- **Keep sessions short.** Fifteen to thirty minutes is often enough for a practice.
- **Return to safety often.** After approaching something difficult, take a break, ground yourself, and do something calming.
- **Choose your timing.** Avoid starting emotional work late at night or when you are exhausted.
- **Plan something kind afterward.** A walk, a warm drink, a call with a friend.
- **Stop if needed.** You are allowed to stop at any time and come back later.
- **Keep a bridge to the present.** If you begin to feel flooded, look around the room, name the date and where you are, and use your calm tools.

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

The practices in this book are generally safe. But some people find that attending to feelings stirs up intense reactions, such as flashbacks, panic, dissociation, or overwhelming sadness. If this happens, you do not need to push through. It may be a sign that you would benefit from the help of a trauma-informed professional.

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration describes a trauma-informed approach as one that realizes the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes its signs, responds by integrating knowledge into practice, and seeks to avoid retraumatization, with principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (SAMHSA, 2014). A therapist who works this way will let you set the pace.

Other signs that extra support may help include persistent depression or anxiety, nightmares, difficulty functioning in daily life, use of substances to cope, or thoughts of harming yourself. If you are in crisis, please contact emergency services or a crisis line right away. Appendix G lists some options.

Research on psychotherapy suggests that the quality of the relationship between therapist and client is one of the most consistent predictors of outcome (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). If the first therapist is not the right fit, it is reasonable, and often wise, to try another.

HEALING PRACTICE: BUILD YOUR CALM PLAN

This practice helps you create a personal plan for the moments when feelings become too much, or too little. You will need a notebook, and you may want to copy the finished plan onto a card or into your phone.

Step 1: Learn your signals. Write down the earliest signs that you are leaving your window. For flooding: *heart racing, jaw tight, thoughts looping*. For shutdown: *going blank, heavy limbs, feeling far away*.

Step 2: Rate your levels. On a scale of one to ten, where one is flat and five is steady and ten is flooded, write the level at which you want to take action. A good target is around seven on the high side or three on the low side.

Step 3: Choose three tools. Choose one for the body (such as breathing or movement), one for the senses (such as grounding), and one for connection (such as calling a friend or sitting near a pet).

Step 4: Write your script. Write a sentence for yourself: *This is a big feeling. I am safe right now. I can take it slowly.* And, if useful, one for others: *I need a few minutes. I'll be back.*

Step 5: Choose a safe place and a safe person. Write down your safe place and one safe person you can think of when you need steadiness.

Step 6: Practice when you are calm. Spend five minutes each day practicing one of your tools when you are in the middle of your window.

Step 7: Review. After a hard moment, ask: *What helped? What would I change?* Adjust your plan.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. When feelings come, do you tend to flood, shut down, or both? What are the earliest signs?
2. Which tool from this chapter feels most helpful? Which feels uncomfortable?
3. What sensations are safe for you to notice right now?
4. What would pacing look like for you, in practice? What helps you stop?
5. Who or what in your life helps your body feel safe? How might you let more of it in?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Recovery begins with safety. Feelings were not safe before, and the system needs to learn that they can be.

The window of tolerance describes the zone in which you can feel and still think. After neglect, it is often narrow. The aim is to widen it gradually.

Two surprises are normal: flooding as feelings return, and flatness as numbness thaws. Both call for patience.

Simple tools, such as slow breathing, grounding, movement, naming, and connection, help you stay steady. Resources and pacing make the work safer.

Seeking professional support is part of recovery, not a sign that it is failing.

In the next chapter, we turn to the language of feelings: building a vocabulary and learning to hear what your emotions are telling you.

HENRY'S THREAD

Henry's first session was awkward and shorter than he had expected. He handed the therapist his sheet of paper, and she read it, smiled, and said, "That's a very clear list. Would it be all right if we didn't use it today? I'd like to start by getting to know you."

He said it would. It turned out that "getting to know him" involved a good deal of her asking what he noticed in his body while he talked, and him saying "Nothing, really," and her saying "That's useful information. Let's stay with 'nothing' for a moment."

By the end, he had written a calm plan in his notebook. *Signals: jaw tight, hands damp. Level to act: 7. Tools: breath (4 and 6), feet on floor, walk around the block. Safe person: Ruth. Safe place: the lake cabin, early morning.*

He practiced it on the drive home. At a red light, he noticed his hands gripping the wheel. He breathed in for four and out for six, and felt his shoulders drop. He was aware of the warm leather under his

palms. He had driven that road hundreds of times, and he had never noticed that the trees were turning green.

At home, Ruth asked how it had gone. "It was strange," he said. "She asked me to notice my hands." He paused. "I did. And then my shoulders. I think I've been carrying them up around my ears for a long time."

Ruth looked at him for a moment, and gently put her hand on the back of his neck. They stood there in the kitchen, not saying anything, until the kettle began to sing.

CHAPTER 9
LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF FEELINGS



On a Wednesday evening, Iris Calder spread a long list of words across her kitchen table and began to read them aloud.

She had printed the list from the back of a book, and it ran to several pages: *amused, anxious, ashamed, bewildered, bitter, content, deflated, disappointed, embarrassed, envious, grateful, hopeful, irritated, jealous, lonely, moved, nervous, overwhelmed, proud, relieved, resentful, tender, uneasy, wistful.* She read slowly, pausing after each word, the way one might taste wine, noticing what happened in her chest.

Content. Nothing.

Resentful. A small, sharp tug under the ribs. She paused. She had not expected that.

Wistful. A softening, almost a lift. She said it again, aloud. "Wistful."

She had been using perhaps six words to describe herself for most of her adult life. *Fine. Good. Tired. Stressed. Busy. Okay.* Now, looking at

the long list, she felt as though she had been given a box of colors after spending thirty-four years with a single gray crayon.

I didn't know there were this many, she thought. *Did other people always have these?*

She chose three words from the list that matched how she felt that evening: *wistful, a little lonely, quietly curious.* She wrote them at the top of a clean page. She looked at them for a long time, and was surprised to find that her chest, which had felt tight all week, was beginning to loosen. It was as if the feelings, finally named, had been allowed to take their coats off.

WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS

If you grew up in a home where feelings were not named, you were not given the words. Emotional vocabulary is not innate. We learn it, over years, from the people who describe our feelings back to us: *You look disappointed. That was frightening. You're so proud of yourself.*

When this learning is missing, the experience is not so much a lack of feelings as a lack of handles. Without words, a feeling is a vague pressure, a mood with no edges, a discomfort that cannot be located. You cannot talk about it. You cannot reason with it. You cannot ask for what it needs.

Learning the language of feelings is therefore one of the most practical steps in recovery. This chapter explains why, and offers a way to begin.

BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

As we saw in Chapter 4, Lisa Feldman Barrett and her colleagues found that people who made finer distinctions between emotions were better able to regulate them (Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001). A person who can tell apart *anxious*, *embarrassed*, *disappointed*, and *ashamed* has more options than a person for whom all of these are "bad."

The reason is simple. Different emotions call for different responses. Embarrassment may pass with a bit of humor. Disappointment may need acknowledgment and a new plan. Shame may need compassion. Anxiety may need grounding. A single word like "stressed" covers all of these and guides none.

Vocabulary can be built gradually. Here are some ways.

Use a feelings list. Appendix A at the back of this book organizes emotions into families, such as sadness, anger, fear, shame, joy, and connection. Read through it regularly, and notice which words resonate.

Learn the neighboring words. If you notice that you often say "angry," learn its relatives: *irritated, resentful, indignant, frustrated, furious, bitter.* If you often say "sad," learn *disappointed, lonely, grieving, discouraged, hurt, wistful.*

Use two words. If one word does not capture it, use two: *relieved and a little sad; excited and nervous.* Mixed feelings are normal.

Use images. If words do not come, try a metaphor: *like a stone in my stomach, like static, like a held breath.* Images are often an easier door.

Ask what is closest. You do not need the perfect word. Choose the closest and refine over time.

NAMING CALMS THE ALARM

There is evidence that putting feelings into words does more than label them. It appears to change how the brain responds to them.

In a series of brain imaging studies, Matthew Lieberman and his colleagues asked participants to look at emotionally charged images while labeling the emotion, for example, by choosing the word "angry" or "afraid." Compared with simply viewing the images, labeling was associated with reduced activity in the amygdala, a region involved in threat detection, and increased activity in areas of the prefrontal cortex

involved in regulation (Lieberman et al., 2007). In everyday terms, naming a feeling seems to take some of the heat out of it.

This is part of why the simple act of saying *I feel anxious* can bring relief. It creates a small gap between you and the feeling, a place from which to observe rather than be swept away. It is not a cure, and it is not instant. But it is one of the most accessible tools available, and it is entirely free.

FEELINGS AS INFORMATION

A change of attitude also helps. Many of us were taught, directly or by example, that feelings are a nuisance: something to be managed, overcome, or hidden. A more useful view is that feelings are *information*.

Psychologists have long observed that people use their feelings as signals about their situation. In classic work by Norbert Schwarz and Gerald Clore, people's judgments about their lives shifted with their mood, and when they were reminded that their mood was caused by something irrelevant, such as the weather, the effect disappeared (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). The finding suggests that feelings function as information, and that we can examine that information rather than simply obey it.

What kind of information? Each emotion tends to carry a kind of message:

- **Fear** says: *There may be danger. Pay attention.*
- **Anger** says: *Something important is being violated. A limit may be needed.*
- **Sadness** says: *Something valued is lost or missing. Slow down. Seek comfort.*
- **Shame** says: *I am afraid of being disconnected from others.*
- **Loneliness** says: *I need connection.*
- **Joy** says: *This matters. Do more of this.*
- **Disappointment** says: *Something I hoped for did not happen.*

- **Guilt** says: *I may have acted against my values. Repair may be needed.*

The messages are not commands. They are data. You do not have to act on every feeling. But if you ignore the data entirely, you lose an important guide.

NEEDS BENEATH FEELINGS

One of the most useful steps in learning the language of feelings is learning to ask what a feeling is pointing to. Beneath most feelings lies a *need*: something you require to be well.

Feeling	A need it may point to	A small response
Lonely	Connection, being known	Message a friend; sit near someone
Overwhelmed	Rest, simplification, help	Take a break; ask for help
Resentful	Fairness, limits, acknowledgment	Name a boundary; ask for what you need
Anxious	Safety, certainty, preparation	Ground your body; make a plan
Disappointed	Acknowledgment, a new hope	Say it aloud; adjust expectations
Ashamed	Acceptance, compassion	Speak kindly to yourself; tell someone safe
Bored	Meaning, challenge, play	Try something new or playful
Sad	Comfort, time, support	Allow tears; seek a warm presence

This is not a rigid chart. The same feeling can point to different needs at different times. It is a way of practicing the question: *What might this feeling be asking for?*

For many people who grew up with emotional neglect, this question is revolutionary. They were never taught that feelings had anything to ask. The very idea that a need might be legitimate, and might be met, can feel new.

BODY FIRST, THEN WORDS

If words do not come easily, begin with the body. As discussed in Chapter 3, feelings are bodily events, and reading the body is a skill that can be trained (Craig, 2002; Garfinkel et al., 2015).

Try this sequence:

1. **Notice the sensation.** *Tight chest. Heavy limbs. Fluttering stomach.*
2. **Describe it.** *Pressure, the size of a fist; heavy, like wet sand.*
3. **Ask what it might be.** Consult the feelings list. Try a word on, as you would a coat.
4. **Check how it fits.** Does saying the word bring a small loosening, a sense of recognition? If so, it may be close. If not, try another.

This approach respects the fact that the body often knows before the mind does. It also makes the process less intellectual. You are not solving a puzzle. You are listening.

FEELINGS ARE NOT FACTS

A common difficulty is confusing feelings with thoughts. People often say "I feel that he doesn't care about me" or "I feel like a failure." These are not feelings. They are thoughts and judgments, and the feelings underneath might be *hurt, afraid, ashamed.*

It helps to practice noticing the difference. A feeling can usually be expressed in a single word: *sad, anxious, angry.* A thought usually requires a sentence and includes an interpretation: *He doesn't care about me.*

The distinction matters because feelings are real, but the thoughts attached to them may or may not be accurate. You can honor the

feeling, *I feel hurt,* and examine the thought, *Is it true that he does not care?* This is a more skillful stance than either dismissing the feeling or accepting the thought as fact.

WHEN FEELINGS ARE MIXED

Another feature of mature emotional life is that feelings are usually not pure. They come in mixtures: *grateful and resentful, excited and afraid, relieved and sad.* People who grew up with emotional neglect often find this confusing. They may feel they should have one clear feeling.

It is normal to feel more than one thing at once. The practice is to name all of them, without trying to resolve the contradiction: *I feel proud of her and a little left out.* Naming mixed feelings tends to reduce the sense that something is wrong with you.

WRITING AS A WAY INTO FEELINGS

Writing can be an excellent way to learn the language. In a series of studies, James Pennebaker found that people who wrote about emotionally significant experiences for a few days showed improvements in several measures of well-being compared with those who wrote about neutral topics (Pennebaker, 1997). Later research suggests that the benefits are strongest when writing helps you build understanding and meaning, rather than repeat distress (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

You do not need to write well. A few minutes of unedited writing can be enough: *Today I felt... I think it was because... What I might need is...* Many people find that feelings that were invisible in thought become clearer on the page.

WHEN A FEELING IS BIG

Learning to feel means occasionally meeting feelings that are large. A few principles may help.

Name it. *This is grief. This is fear.*

Locate it. Find where it lives in your body.

Breathe with it. Slow your breathing, with a longer exhale.

Let it move. Emotions tend to rise, peak, and fall, like waves, especially when they are not resisted. Trust that the wave will pass.

Stay in your window. If you notice flooding or shutdown, use your calm plan from Chapter 8.

Reach out if needed. Telling a trusted person, or a therapist, can make a heavy feeling lighter.

HEALING PRACTICE: DAILY EMOTION NOTES

This practice builds your emotional vocabulary and your habit of asking what you feel, what has happened, and what you might need. It takes about five minutes a day. You will need a notebook and Appendix A.

Step 1: Choose a regular time. Evening works well for many people. Set an alarm if it helps.

Step 2: Take three slow breaths. Settle your body before you begin.

Step 3: Scan for a feeling. Notice any sensation in your body. Describe it in a few words.

Step 4: Find the word. Use Appendix A to find one or two words that fit. Write them down. If you find several, write them all.

Step 5: Link it to the day. Ask: *What happened today that might connect to this feeling?* Write one sentence. If you do not know, write "unclear."

Step 6: Ask about the need. Ask: *What might this feeling be asking for?* Write the first answer that comes: *rest, company, acknowledgment, a break.*

Step 7: Choose a small response. Write one thing you can do about the need, however small: *Call a friend tomorrow. Go to bed early. Say no to one request.*

Step 8: Close with kindness. Write: *It makes sense that I feel this.* Then close the notebook.

Step 9: Review weekly. At the end of the week, read through your entries. Which feelings appear most often? Which needs? What do you notice?

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which words on the feelings list resonated most with you? Which produced no response at all?
2. What emotions were easiest to name in your family? Which were never mentioned?
3. When you notice a feeling, what do you tend to do with it?
4. What needs do you notice beneath your most common feelings?
5. How might your life change if you could say, clearly and kindly, what you feel and need?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Emotional vocabulary is learned. A lack of words is a lack of handles, and handles can be built.

Finer distinctions between emotions support better regulation. Naming a feeling appears to reduce its intensity.

Feelings are information, not commands. They often point to needs, and learning to ask what a feeling is asking for is a key skill.

Start with the body, distinguish feelings from thoughts, and allow mixed feelings.

Writing, in small daily doses, helps feelings become clear.

In the next chapter, we turn to the work of grief: mourning what you did not receive.

IRIS'S THREAD

Iris kept the daily notes for three weeks. At first the entries were short. *Tight shoulders. Tired. Maybe worried.* By the second week, they had become longer. *Chest heavy, like a stone. Lonely, and a bit wistful. Today a colleague told a story about her grandmother's kitchen, and I wanted that, though I couldn't have said what.* Under *Need*, she wrote: *Warmth. To be someone's grandchild.* She stopped, the pen above the page, and then wrote: *To be asked.*

She carried the list in her bag, and she began to notice, with some surprise, that the vocabulary was spilling into ordinary life. On the phone with her mother, instead of "I'm fine, just busy," she said, "I'm a bit tired, but I'm happy about the project." Her mother paused. "Well," she said, in an odd voice, "that's good to hear."

On a Friday evening, at a dinner with friends, a woman across the table said, "Iris, you seem different lately." Iris looked at her, feeling the familiar impulse to say *Do I? I'm fine.* She took a breath. "I think I'm learning to notice what I feel," she said. "It's new. I'm a bit nervous saying that."

"That's lovely," said the woman, and the conversation turned. But Iris sat for a moment with her heart beating a little fast. She had said something true, aloud, at a table, to people who were not going to leave. She took a sip of water. She was, she realized, *a bit nervous, and a bit proud.* She added a third word, privately, for the evening's notes: *seen.*

CHAPTER 10
GRIEVING THE UNSEEN



It began, as grief often does, in an unremarkable place: the produce aisle of a supermarket.

Owen was holding a bag of apples, deciding between two varieties, when a little boy in the next aisle fell off the end of a shopping cart. It was not a bad fall. The boy sat on the linoleum with a stunned expression, and then began to cry. A woman, presumably his mother, dropped to her knees, scooped him up, and held his head against her shoulder. "Oh, honey," she said, "that was a big bump. Come here. I've got you."

Owen stood still, apples in his hands. He watched the boy's sobs soften, watched the mother rock him from side to side. A sudden pressure rose behind his eyes, and his throat closed. He put the apples down, blindly, and walked to the end of the aisle, and stood with his back to the shoppers, breathing hard.

What is this? he thought. *It's a kid falling off a cart.*

He pressed his hand against his chest and, with an effort, made himself stay with the feeling rather than push it away. He noticed that it had a shape: heavy, aching, centered under the sternum. He tried a word from the list he had been carrying in his wallet. *Grief,* he thought, and the word had barely formed before a wave went through him and he had to grip the edge of a display.

He was, he realized, mourning. Not for the boy, and not for his father, who was alive and well and watching a baseball game in a house forty minutes away. For a seven-year-old, in a different kitchen, a long time ago, who had fallen and had not been picked up.

WHY GRIEF COMES

As you begin to understand what was missing in your childhood, and as feelings begin to return, a particular kind of grief often arises. It may surprise you. It may arrive suddenly, set off by a small event, as it did for Owen. It may arrive slowly, as a heaviness that gathers over weeks. It may appear as sadness, or anger, or a deep tiredness.

It is worth knowing in advance that this is a normal and healthy part of recovery. It is not a sign that you are going backward. In many ways, it is a sign that you are moving forward. Grief requires feeling, and feeling is what you are relearning.

This chapter is about how to make room for that grief: what it is, what it can look like, and how to move through it safely.

WHAT YOU MAY BE MOURNING

Grief after emotional neglect has an unusual shape because what is lost is not a person or an event, but a set of experiences that should have happened. You may be mourning:

- **The comfort that did not come.** The hug after a bad day, the voice saying "I'm here."
- **The attention that was not given.** The questions never asked, the interest never shown.

- **The words that were never offered.** "That sounds hard." "I'm proud of you." "I love you."
- **The child you did not get to be.** The lighter, freer, more spontaneous version who learned early to be careful.
- **The relationship you did not have.** The parent who might have known you.
- **The years lost to numbness.** The time spent not knowing what you felt.
- **The relationships that your protection cost you.** The closeness that did not happen because you could not let anyone in.

You may also grieve for your parents: for what they went through, for what they could not give, for the closeness that might still be possible, and may never be.

AMBIGUOUS AND UNWITNESSED LOSS

As we saw in Chapter 7, the grief researchers Pauline Boss and Kenneth Doka offer two ideas that help make sense of this experience. Ambiguous loss is loss without clarity or closure, such as the loss of a parent who is present but psychologically unavailable (Boss, 1999). Disenfranchised grief is grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported (Doka, 1989).

Both matter here because they remind us that you may be grieving without any of the usual supports. No one has sent flowers. No one has said, "I'm so sorry for your loss." You may be mourning in secret, and perhaps doubting that you are entitled.

You are entitled. A loss is a loss, whether or not anyone else sees it.

WHAT GRIEF CAN LOOK LIKE

Grief takes many forms, and it does not follow a neat sequence. Several are common in this context.

Sadness. A deep, quiet ache, sometimes with tears and sometimes without. You may feel tender toward your younger self, especially when you look at childhood photographs.

Anger. Resentment at what happened, at the people who did not notice, or at the unfairness of it all. Anger is often an important part of grief. It signals that something mattered. For people raised in homes where anger was unwelcome, it can be frightening. It helps to remember that feeling anger is different from acting on it.

Longing. A yearning for the parent, the home, or the childhood that might have been. This longing can be intense, and it can seem childlike. It is.

Guilt. A feeling that grieving is disloyal: *They did so much for me. How can I be sad?* As discussed in Chapter 7, gratitude and grief can coexist.

Relief. When grief is finally allowed, something that was clenched may relax. Many people are surprised by a sense of lightness.

Numbness. A pause, or an absence. Numbness can be protective. It may signal that you need rest before feeling more.

Confusion. Feelings may shift quickly. You may weep at a commercial and feel nothing at a funeral. This is normal for a system that is relearning to feel.

There is no right order and no deadline. Grief moves in its own time.

LETTING GRIEF MOVE THROUGH THE BODY

Grief is not only a thought or a story. It is a bodily experience: heaviness in the limbs, tightness in the throat, an ache in the chest, tiredness, changes in sleep and appetite, a sense of emptiness. Listening to these sensations is a way of listening to the grief.

It can help to think of grief as a wave. When it is allowed, it rises, crests, and falls. Fighting it tends to prolong it. Giving it space, with breath and attention, often lets it move.

Simple ways to support the movement include:

- **Slow breathing,** with a longer exhale.
- **Placing a hand over the area** where the feeling lives.
- **Allowing tears,** without needing a reason.
- **Gentle movement:** walking, stretching, swaying.
- **Making a sound,** such as a sigh or a hum, if that feels natural.
- **Warmth:** a bath, a blanket, a warm drink.

At the same time, it is not necessary or wise to push through grief to the point of overwhelm. As described in Chapter 8, the window of tolerance matters. If you notice that you are flooded or shutting down, step back, use your calm plan, and return later.

GRIEVING THE CHILD YOU WERE

Many people find it helpful to direct some of their compassion toward the child they were. This idea appears in various forms across psychotherapy. Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model, for example, describes "parts" of the self, including young, vulnerable ones that carry early feelings (Schwartz, 1995). Whether or not you use that language, the underlying idea is common: that early feelings and needs can remain active in adulthood and respond to compassionate attention.

It can be moving to look at a photograph of yourself at six, eight, or twelve, and to ask: *What did this child feel? What did they need? What would I say to them now?* Many people discover that they have an immense capacity for tenderness toward a child, and that they have never offered any of it to themselves.

This is a metaphor, not a literal second person. If it helps, use it. If it does not, you can simply think of it as caring for the feelings and needs that arose early in your life.

COMPASSION FOR YOUR PARENTS' LIMITS

Grieving is not the same as blaming. As your grief moves, you may find that you feel not only sadness for yourself but also compassion for your parents. You may see more clearly what they were carrying, and what was never given to them.

This compassion is not required. It arises when it arises, and it should never be forced. But if it comes, it does not diminish your grief. It is part of a more complete picture: *They could not give what they never received. And I still needed it.*

RITUALS OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Because disenfranchised grief has no public ritual, it sometimes helps to create your own. A ritual says, in some form, *This mattered. I am allowed to feel it.*

- **A letter,** to the child you were, or to a parent, that you do not send.
- **A symbolic act:** lighting a candle, visiting a meaningful place, planting something, releasing a note into running water.
- **A photograph:** looking at a picture of yourself as a child and speaking to that child kindly.
- **A conversation,** with a trusted friend or therapist, in which you name what you are mourning.
- **A marking of time:** choosing a day to acknowledge the loss, so that grief has a place.
- **Creative expression:** music, painting, poetry, movement.

There is no right ritual. Choose what feels natural and bearable.

PACING AND SAFETY

Grief work, like all deep emotional work, is best done gently and in small doses. A few guidelines:

- **Use your calm plan.** Before and after any grief practice, check in with your window.
- **Keep sessions short.** Twenty to thirty minutes is often enough.

- **Plan something kind afterward.** A walk, a warm drink, a call to a friend.
- **Do not do it alone if you can avoid it.** Let a safe person know what you are doing.
- **Stop if needed.** If you feel overwhelmed, numb, or unsafe, stop and come back another day.
- **Seek help for heavy grief.** If grief feels unmanageable, or you have thoughts of harming yourself, contact a mental health professional or crisis line right away.

If your history includes serious abuse or violence, please consider working through this chapter with a trauma-informed therapist.

HEALING PRACTICE: A LETTER TO THE CHILD WHO WAS NOT ASKED

This practice invites you to write a letter from the adult you are now to the child you once were, offering what was missing. Set aside thirty minutes in a private, quiet place. Keep a glass of water nearby. If you have a photograph of yourself as a child, put it where you can see it.

Step 1: Choose an age. Pick an age at which you remember feeling something that no one noticed. It does not have to be the most painful time.

Step 2: Check your window. Take three slow breaths. Notice your body. If you feel steady, begin. If not, try another day.

Step 3: Begin the letter. Write, "Dear [your name] at [age]," and describe what you see: where they are, what they look like, what they are carrying.

Step 4: Ask the questions no one asked. Write: *How are you feeling? What happened today? What do you need?* Imagine the answers, in the child's voice, and write them down.

Step 5: Offer what was missing. Write what you wish someone had said: *"I see you." "That sounds really hard." "You don't have to handle this alone." "Your feelings make sense."*

Step 6: Make a promise. Write one small, realistic promise you will keep to yourself: *"I will ask how you are." "I will listen."*

Step 7: Close gently. End with words of care, and sign your name. Read it aloud, slowly, if you can.

Step 8: Care for yourself afterward. Do something gentle. If strong feelings remain, use your calm plan or reach out to someone safe.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What do you find yourself mourning? Which items on the list in this chapter feel most true?
2. Which forms of grief, sadness, anger, longing, guilt, relief, or numbness, are present for you now?
3. How does your body hold your grief? What helps it move?
4. What would it feel like to offer compassion to the child you were?
5. What ritual or small act could give your grief a place to rest?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Grief is a normal and healthy part of recovery. It may arrive suddenly or slowly, and it is a sign that you are feeling again.

What you may be mourning includes comfort that did not come, attention that was not given, words never spoken, the child you did not get to be, and years of numbness.

Ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief are real. You do not need witnesses for a loss to be a loss.

Grief takes many forms and moves like a wave. Give it room, and go slowly.

Rituals, letters, and gentle company give grief a place to land.

In the next chapter, we turn to caring for yourself: becoming, for yourself, the attentive caregiver you needed.

OWEN'S THREAD

Owen wrote his letter in the garage on a Sunday, with the door open to the autumn light and a photograph of himself at seven, grinning in a baseball cap, propped against a toolbox.

Dear Owen at seven, he began. *You are standing in the driveway with your bike. You've just come off it. Your elbow is bleeding and you are not crying, and you're trying very hard to look like it doesn't hurt.*

His hand shook slightly. He kept writing.

How are you feeling? I'm asking now. I think you're scared, and you feel stupid, and you want someone to come out of the house. I think you're sad that no one saw.

He stopped and let the tears come, which they did, heavily, without embarrassment. The garage was quiet. A bird landed on the fence and left.

I'm sorry nobody asked, he wrote. *It wasn't because you weren't worth asking. Nobody had been taught how. I'm here now. I'm going to ask. How are you feeling?*

He read the letter aloud once, softly, and then folded it and put it in his shirt pocket.

That afternoon, he drove to his parents' house for dinner, as he did every second Sunday. His father was in the garage, tinkering. Owen stood at the doorway for a moment, watching the hunched, familiar back. He did not say anything about the letter. But when his father looked up, and said, "Owen. Hand me that wrench," Owen crossed the garage, handed it over, and rested his hand for a moment on his father's shoulder.

His father stiffened, very slightly, and then, to Owen's surprise, did not move away. They stood like that for perhaps three seconds. Neither of them said a word. It was, Owen thought afterward, the longest conversation they had ever had.

CHAPTER 11
BECOMING YOUR OWN EMOTIONAL CAREGIVER



On a Sunday afternoon in October, Sofia Marin did something that seemed, to anyone watching, entirely unremarkable. She made a pot of soup.

It was not a complicated soup. Carrots, onions, a bit of garlic, a handful of lentils. But she did it slowly, with her phone in another room. She chopped the vegetables carefully, listening to the knife on the board. She stirred, and the kitchen began to smell like warmth. She set the table for one, with a proper bowl, a spoon, a napkin, and a candle, which she felt faintly ridiculous lighting.

She sat down. She took a spoonful. Then she paused, the spoon halfway to her mouth, and said, to the empty kitchen, in a tone she had never before used on herself, “You’ve had a long week. You deserve a good meal.”

It felt peculiar, like trying on a stranger's coat. Her face flushed. She nearly laughed. But she stayed in her chair, and she ate the soup slowly, and a sensation began to spread through her chest that took a while to place. It was not excitement or happiness. It was something quieter. It was the sensation of being looked after.

For years, Sofia had cooked for friends, for colleagues, for her sister's children, and had eaten standing at the counter when she was alone. It had never occurred to her that the person who was always attending to everyone else's needs might be allowed to attend to her own.

She finished the soup. She washed the bowl. And for the first time that she could remember, she went to bed without checking her email, and fell asleep with the faint warmth of that sentence still in her chest: *You deserve a good meal.*

WHAT IT MEANS TO CARE FOR YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY

If you have worked through the previous chapters, you have done a great deal of difficult work. You have named what was missing. You have begun to build safety and a language for feelings. You have begun to grieve. This chapter turns to a practical, tender question: what can you do now to give yourself some of what you needed?

The answer is sometimes called *reparenting*. It means learning to offer yourself, as an adult, the qualities that a caring adult offers a child: attention, comfort, encouragement, structure, and the sense that you are welcome. It does not mean pretending to be a child, or blaming your parents for everything, or replacing relationships with other people. It is a daily practice of treating yourself the way a good-enough caregiver would.

For people who grew up with emotional neglect, this is not a luxury. It is the heart of recovery. The attention you did not receive can, to a surprising degree, be learned and provided from within. And

as you do so, you often find that you are better able to receive it from others, too.

THE CORE SKILL: NOTICING

At its most basic, caring for yourself emotionally means doing what a good caregiver does: noticing.

A good caregiver notices when a child is tired, hungry, lonely, afraid, or happy. They do not wait for an emergency. They watch for small signals and respond. You can do the same for yourself, many times a day, with a simple question: *What do I need right now?*

You may find that at first, you do not know. That is normal. The question itself is the practice. Over time, you will begin to hear answers: *water, a break, company, quiet, a walk, to say no.*

THE INNER CRITIC

Almost everyone who grew up with emotional neglect has an inner critic. It is the voice that comments on your performance, your appearance, and your needs. For some, it is a mild murmur. For others, it is a relentless prosecutor. It may say: *You're too sensitive. Stop making a fuss. You should be grateful. Other people have it worse. You're lazy.*

Where does it come from? In many cases, it is an internalized version of the way you were treated. A household in which feelings were dismissed may produce an inner voice that dismisses them. A household in which achievement was prized may produce one that never lets you rest.

The critic often believes it is protecting you. It operates on a theory: *If I criticize you first and hardest, you will avoid being criticized by others, work harder, and stay safe.* The problem is that harshness rarely produces lasting improvement. It tends to produce shame, anxiety, and avoidance.

A first step is to notice the critic as a voice rather than a truth: *There's my inner critic.* A second is to ask what it fears. A third is to offer a different response.

WHAT SELF-COMPASSION IS

The psychologist Kristin Neff defines self-compassion as treating yourself with the kindness you would offer a good friend, and describes three connected components (Neff, 2003):

Self-kindness versus self-judgment. Responding to your own pain and failure with understanding and warmth, rather than harsh criticism.

Common humanity versus isolation. Recognizing that suffering and imperfection are part of the shared human experience, rather than feeling that you alone are flawed.

Mindfulness versus over-identification. Holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness, neither suppressing them nor being swept away by them.

Each of these answers a different wound of emotional neglect. Self-kindness answers the dismissal. Common humanity answers the isolation. Mindfulness answers the habit of not noticing.

WHAT SELF-COMPASSION IS NOT

Because the word is often misunderstood, it helps to say what it is not.

It is not self-pity. It does not say, "Poor me." It recognizes that everyone suffers.

It is not weakness. It takes courage to turn toward your own pain.

It is not self-indulgence. It does not mean avoiding responsibility or doing whatever feels good. A good caregiver is both loving and firm.

It is not lowering your standards. Research suggests the opposite. In a series of studies, Juliana Breines and Serena Chen found that people who were led to take a self-compassionate view of a failure were more motivated to improve and spent more time preparing than those who were not (Breines & Chen, 2012). Harshness tends to produce fear. Kindness creates the safety in which people can look at their mistakes and learn.

If you were taught that self-criticism is what keeps you honest, this finding may be worth sitting with.

SMALL DAILY ACTS

Caring for yourself emotionally is made of small, repeated acts. Here are some of the most important.

Check in. Several times a day, pause and ask: *How am I? What do I need?* Use your feelings vocabulary.

Respond. When you notice a need, meet it when you can. If you are tired, rest. If you are lonely, reach out. If you are overwhelmed, take a break.

Speak kindly. Pay attention to your self-talk. Ask: *Would I say this to a child I loved?* Research by Ethan Kross and colleagues found that using your own name or the third person when reflecting on a stressful experience can reduce emotional reactivity (Kross et al., 2014). "Sofia, you've had a long week" may be easier to hear than "I've had a long week."

Keep promises to yourself. Children learn trust through reliability. Small promises kept, such as going to bed on time or taking the walk you said you would, build trust in yourself.

Set limits with love. A good caregiver offers structure as well as warmth. This includes boundaries around work, sleep, screens, and the people and situations that wear you down.

Celebrate. Notice what you do well. Many people are far better at criticism than at acknowledgment. Practice saying, *That was hard, and I did it.*

Make room for pleasure. Eat something you love. Listen to music. Take a longer shower. Pleasure is not a reward you must earn. It is part of being cared for.

REST, PLAY, AND JOY

For people who learned to be competent, helpful, or self-reliant, rest and play can feel unfamiliar, even undeserved. Yet these are among the most basic ways in which a nervous system restores itself.

Rest is not laziness. It is the time in which the body repairs. If rest feels uncomfortable, start small: ten minutes of doing nothing, with no screen and no task. Notice what arises. Often a wave of restlessness or guilt comes first, and then, if you stay, it eases.

Play is activity done for its own sake, without a goal. It might be music, drawing, dancing, gardening, a board game, a game with a child, or wandering with no destination. Play is not frivolous. It signals safety to the nervous system.

Joy is not a prize for completing your healing. It is part of the process. Allow yourself, regularly, to notice what delights you and to do more of it, even when other things are unresolved.

MEETING THE RESISTANCE

When you begin to care for yourself, you may notice resistance. It can take several forms.

Guilt. *I shouldn't be spending time on myself. Other people need me.* This is the old rule, *Don't be a burden,* speaking. It does not mean that you are doing something wrong.

Awkwardness. The practices may feel artificial, silly, or forced. This is normal for any new skill.

Disbelief. A part of you may say, *This won't help.* You can acknowledge the doubt and try anyway.

Sadness. Being kind to yourself can bring up grief for the kindness you did not receive. This is common and not a sign of failure. It is part of the work.

Self-sabotage. You may find yourself overriding your own plans. Notice this with curiosity. It often reflects an old rule.

If resistance feels overwhelming, go smaller. Choose a practice so small that it feels almost silly. A single minute counts.

REPARENTING IS NOT DOING IT ALONE

It is worth saying clearly that caring for yourself does not mean that you must do everything alone. For people with a history of emotional neglect, that would be a repetition of the original pattern.

Healthy emotional care is relational. It includes friends who listen, partners who notice, therapists who guide, communities that welcome. The aim of self-care is not to make other people unnecessary. It is to give you enough footing to receive from others, and to give back.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE COMPASSIONATE REPLY

This practice has two parts. The first is a short self-compassion break for use in the moment. The second is a longer writing exercise. You will need a notebook for part two.

Part One: The Self-Compassion Break

Step 1: Notice. When you are in a hard moment, pause and say silently, *This is a moment of struggle.* Naming it is the first step.

Step 2: Remember you are not alone. Say, *Struggle is part of being human. Other people feel this too.*

Step 3: Offer kindness. Place a hand on your chest or arm if that feels comfortable. Say a kind phrase, such as *I'm here with you, I'm doing the best I can,* or *What do I need right now?*

Part Two: The Written Reply

Step 1: Write down the critic. Write one thing your inner critic says to you often, exactly as it sounds.

Step 2: Find its origin. Next to it, write whose voice it resembles, and when you first heard something like it.

Step 3: Thank it. Write a sentence to the critic: *Thank you for trying to protect me. I know you were afraid.*

Step 4: Write what a good friend would say. Imagine a friend telling you the same thing about themselves. Write what you would say to them, specifically and warmly.

Step 5: Rewrite the sentence. Turn the critic's statement into one that has both accountability and kindness. For example: *"You're too sensitive" becomes "You feel things deeply, and that's allowed."*

Step 6: Choose a care phrase. Write a short phrase you can say to yourself in hard moments, such as *I'm here. I'm listening. What do you need?* Practice saying it aloud, in your own voice.

Step 7: Read it aloud. Notice how it feels. If it feels false, soften it until it feels bearable.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What does your inner critic say about your feelings or needs? Whose voice does it sound like?
2. How do you speak to yourself when you are struggling? What would you say to a child you loved?
3. Which small daily act, checking in, responding, speaking kindly, keeping promises, setting limits, celebrating, feels most important for you right now?
4. What resistance do you notice when you try to care for yourself?
5. What would it mean to treat yourself as someone worth caring for?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Caring for yourself emotionally means doing what a good caregiver does: noticing, responding, speaking kindly, being consistent, setting limits, and making room for play.

The inner critic is often an internalized version of how you were treated. It usually believes it is protecting you, and harshness rarely works.

Self-compassion has three parts: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. It supports motivation and accountability, and it is not self-pity or weakness.

Small daily acts accumulate. Rest, play, and pleasure are part of recovery.

Caring for yourself does not mean doing everything alone. It gives you the footing to receive from others.

In the next part, we turn outward, to the work of letting others in: asking for what you need, boundaries, family, and the next generation.

SOFIA'S THREAD

Sofia kept a small card on her desk at the studio. It said, in her careful handwriting: *What do I need right now?* At first she looked at it with embarrassment, as if it might be read by someone passing. Then she began to use it.

At eleven, when a client's email arrived with a sharp tone, she felt her shoulders rise and her breathing shallow. She glanced at the card. *What do I need right now?* Her answer, which surprised her, was *to step outside.* She stepped outside, stood on the sidewalk, took four slow breaths, and came back in. The email still needed an answer. But her reply was calmer, and shorter, and she did not stay until nine.

The inner critic did not disappear. It said, one evening, *You're so self-indulgent, making soup and talking to yourself.* She wrote it down. *Whose*

voice? she asked herself, and the answer arrived at once, in a kind of cold flash: her mother's, after a long day, saying, "Don't make a fuss."

She wrote the thank-you: *Thank you for trying to protect me. I know you were afraid I'd be a burden.* She wrote what a friend would say: *You've been working incredibly hard. Making soup is not self-indulgent. It's feeding a person who needs feeding.*

She rewrote the sentence. *You are looking after yourself. That's allowed.* She read it aloud, and her voice caught on the last word.

That weekend, she invited Camille to dinner, the friend whose birthday she had avoided. She made soup. They sat at the table with the candle, and Camille said, "I didn't know you could cook like this." Sofia smiled. "I didn't either," she said. "I'm learning."

PART IV: LIVING DIFFERENTLY

CHAPTER 12
LETTING OTHERS IN



Henry rehearsed the sentence for four days.

It was not a long sentence. He wrote it on an index card, and carried it in his breast pocket, where he could feel the stiff edge of it against his chest. *Ruth, I'm feeling anxious about my father's surgery, and I'd like to talk about it.*

He was fifty-two. He had managed budgets, negotiated contracts, and fired people, in calm and orderly voices. He had never, in twenty-six years of marriage, said such a sentence to his wife.

On Thursday evening, after dinner, while Ruth was drying a pan, he stood in the kitchen doorway, his hands in his pockets. He felt his heart going. His mouth was dry. The old impulse arrived with force: *Don't. It's nothing. She has enough to worry about.*

He took a slow breath, in for four, out for six. He put his feet flat on the floor.

"Ruth," he said. His voice came out slightly hoarse. "I'm feeling anxious about my father's surgery. And I'd like to talk about it."

She turned, still holding the pan. She looked at him for a long moment. Then she put the pan down, very carefully, on the counter, and said, "Come here."

They sat at the kitchen table. He did not know what to do with his hands, and so he laid them flat on the wood. He talked for twenty minutes, haltingly, in short sentences with long pauses. He said *scared* twice, and *helpless* once, and *I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't pull through.* She listened. She asked one question: "What's the worst part?" And when he answered, she reached across the table and covered his hand with hers.

He had always imagined that saying such things would feel like falling. Instead, it felt like being held up by something he had not known was there.

WHY LETTING PEOPLE IN IS HARD

You may have noticed, as you worked through earlier chapters, that the hardest part of recovery is not understanding. It is *other people.* It is one thing to name a feeling in a notebook. It is another to say it to someone who can look back at you.

For people who grew up with emotional neglect, this difficulty has deep roots. As children, you learned that bringing feelings to others did not help, and may have been uncomfortable. Your system learned to expect, quite reasonably, that the same would happen again. So when you consider telling someone what you feel or need, an old alarm may sound: *They won't understand. It will be a burden. It won't make a difference.*

This chapter is about taking small, careful steps through that alarm. It covers asking for what you need, being vulnerable in small doses,

choosing people who notice, and repairing after disconnection. You do not have to do all of this at once, or perfectly. You only have to take the next small step.

ASKING FOR WHAT YOU NEED

Asking is a skill, and like any skill, it can be learned. For people who have spent decades not asking, the first obstacle is often not knowing what to ask for. The previous chapters on naming feelings and needs are the foundation here.

A simple structure can help. It resembles one used in many approaches to communication (Rosenberg, 2003). It has four parts:

Describe what is happening, briefly and factually. *This week has been really busy.*

Say how you feel. *I'm feeling stretched and a bit lonely.*

Say what you need. *I'd like some company in the evenings.*

Make a specific, doable request. *Could we have dinner together on Thursday, without phones?*

Notice what this structure avoids. It does not blame. It does not mind-read. It does not generalize ("You never..."). It speaks from your own experience, which is hard to argue with, and ends with something the other person can actually do.

If a full structure feels like too much, start with a single sentence. *I'd like some help with this. Could you sit with me for a while? I need a hug.* The one-sentence request is a powerful tool, and for many people it is the first step.

SMALL DOSES OF VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability, the willingness to be seen as you are, sounds intimidating. For people who learned that feelings were unwelcome, it can feel like standing without clothes.

The good news is that vulnerability does not have to be dramatic. It can be built in small doses. A few examples:

- Saying "I'm having a hard day" instead of "I'm fine."
- Telling someone you are nervous before a presentation.
- Admitting you do not know something.
- Saying "That hurt my feelings" about a small thing.
- Asking, "Can I tell you something?"
- Letting a friend see you cry.

Each of these is a small experiment. You offer a small piece of your inner life, and watch what happens. If the response is warm, you have gained evidence that it is safe. If it is dismissive, you have learned something about that person, and can adjust.

CHOOSING PEOPLE WHO NOTICE

Not everyone is equally able to receive what you offer. Part of letting people in is choosing wisely whom to let in.

Some qualities to look for:

- **Curiosity.** They ask questions and listen to the answers.
- **Responsiveness.** When you say something real, they respond, rather than changing the subject or offering quick fixes.
- **Respect for limits.** They accept "I don't want to talk about that" without pressure.
- **Consistency.** They are the same person over time.
- **Mutuality.** They share their own feelings, too, and care flows in both directions.
- **Safety.** After you have been with them, you feel more like yourself, not less.

People with a history of emotional neglect sometimes find themselves drawn to people who are, like their parents, emotionally unavailable. The familiar can feel like home, even when it is lonely. Noticing this pattern is a first step toward choosing differently. It may

help to widen the circle: to spend time with people who feel unfamiliar because they are attentive.

WHAT TO EXPECT

When you begin to share more of your inner life, the responses will vary.

Some people will respond warmly, and you may feel a mixture of relief, awkwardness, and even sadness. That sadness is common, because being met can bring up the memory of not being met.

Some people will respond awkwardly. They may not know what to say. This is not necessarily a rejection. Many people have never been taught how to respond to vulnerability either.

Some people will respond poorly: dismissing, joking, or changing the subject. This hurts, and it also tells you something. You can decide how much to share with them in the future.

In every case, the act of reaching out is itself a success. You have done something that, for much of your life, you could not.

RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE SLOWLY

If you are in a relationship in which emotional distance has been the norm, changing the pattern takes time. Your partner may be surprised, hopeful, wary, or uncomfortable. They may need time to adjust.

It can help to say what you are doing: "I'm trying to talk more about how I feel. It's new for me, and I may be clumsy." This invites your partner to join you, rather than be startled. Couples who face emotional distance together often find that it becomes a source of closeness.

Sue Johnson, who developed emotionally focused therapy, describes how much of relationship distress arises from a failure of emotional responsiveness: partners reaching for each other and missing (Johnson, 2004). She emphasizes that couples can learn to

become more accessible, responsive, and engaged with one another. In other words, the pattern can change.

If you and a partner are struggling, couples therapy, particularly an approach that focuses on emotional connection, can help.

REPAIR AFTER DISCONNECTION

Letting others in will not always go smoothly. You may share something and feel exposed. You may retreat and later regret it. You may snap at someone, or go silent for days. This is part of learning.

Perhaps the most important skill in any relationship is repair: returning after a disconnection to acknowledge what happened and reconnect. In studies of couples, John Gottman found that what distinguished stable relationships was not the absence of conflict but the presence of repair attempts: small gestures that reduce tension and help partners reconnect (Gottman, 1998). The same idea appears in the research on parents and infants, where relationships are strengthened by the repeated experience of rupture and repair (Tronick, 1989).

Repair does not need to be elaborate. It might sound like:

- *"I went quiet earlier. I was feeling overwhelmed. I'm sorry."*
- *"I got defensive. Can I try again?"*
- *"I need a break, and I'll come back in twenty minutes."*
- *"Thank you for being patient with me."*

For people who grew up in homes where disconnection was never repaired, this may feel awkward at first. It is a skill, and it grows with practice.

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE TOO MUCH

Opening up can sometimes bring a strong reaction: a sense of exposure, a wave of shame, a desire to retreat. This is common. It does not mean that you did something wrong.

If you notice yourself wanting to withdraw after sharing something, a few suggestions:

- **Use your calm tools.** Breathe, ground, and notice your body.
- **Remind yourself:** *This is an old alarm. I was brave, and it is okay to feel exposed.*
- **Reach out again, briefly.** A short message, such as "Thank you for listening," can help.
- **Give it time.** Feelings of exposure usually soften.
- **Talk to a therapist,** if the reactions are intense.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE ONE-SENTENCE REQUEST

This practice builds the habit of asking for what you need, one sentence at a time. You will need a notebook. Begin with something small.

Step 1: Notice a need. Over the next day, pay attention to any small need that arises: for help, company, quiet, reassurance, information, a break.

Step 2: Write it down. Write one sentence describing the need: *I'd like some help carrying the groceries. I'd like to talk about my day. I need a few minutes alone.*

Step 3: Choose a person. Pick someone who is likely to respond kindly.

Step 4: Turn the need into a request. Write a sentence beginning with "I'd like..." or "Could you...?" For example: *Could you listen for a few minutes while I tell you about my day?*

Step 5: Rehearse it. Say it aloud, alone, until it feels natural.

Step 6: Make the request. Say it, as simply as you can. Notice what happens in your body, and what happens in the response.

Step 7: Record what happened. Write what you expected and what happened. Write what you felt.

Step 8: Say thank you. If the person helped, thank them. Notice how it feels to receive.

Step 9: Repeat. Try one request a day for a week, starting small and moving gradually to more important ones.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. When you consider telling someone how you feel or what you need, what do you notice in your body? What does the old alarm say?
2. Who in your life has shown that they can notice and respond?
3. What is one small, safe way you could be more vulnerable this week?
4. How did your family handle disconnection and repair? What would you like repair to look like in your relationships?
5. What would it be like to be known by one more person?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Letting others in is hard because, as a child, bringing feelings to others did not help. Your system expects the same now.

Asking is a skill. A simple structure, describing, naming a feeling, stating a need, and making a request, makes it easier. A single sentence is enough to start.

Vulnerability can be built in small doses, with people who are curious, responsive, and consistent.

Relationships change slowly. Repair after disconnection matters more than perfection.

Each time you reach out, you are doing something that, for much of your life, you could not.

In the next chapter, we look at boundaries, family, and the hard conversations that may come with this work.

HENRY'S THREAD

In the weeks after his father's surgery, which went well, Henry noticed a change in the house. It was subtle, like the shift of a season. Ruth talked more. She laughed more. She asked him questions, and waited for answers.

One evening, a few weeks later, she was sitting beside him on the sofa, reading, when he put down his own book and said, "I'd like you to know something. When I'm at the office and I think about you, I feel something warm in my chest. I haven't said it. I'd like to say it."

Ruth lowered her book. For a moment she did not speak. Then she said, softly, "Henry. In twenty-six years, I don't think you've ever said that."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"Don't be sorry," she said. "Just keep saying things."

He laughed, a short surprised sound. "I'll try," he said. "It's a bit like learning to swim at fifty-two."

"Well," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder, "I'm here. I'll hold the side of the pool."

He sat still for a while, with her head against him, aware of something he did not yet have a word for. He found the list in his wallet and read through it silently. Several words came close. He settled, at last, on one: *held.*

CHAPTER 13
BOUNDARIES, FAMILY, AND HARD CONVERSATIONS



The phone rang at seven on a Sunday evening, as it did every Sunday, and Iris answered it on the second ring.

"Hi, sweetheart," said her mother. Her voice was bright and warm and a little hurried. "How was your week?"

"Fine," Iris said, out of habit, and stopped. She was standing at her kitchen counter, with a mug of tea cooling beside her. She was aware of her heartbeat in her ears. For three weeks, she had been planning to say something different. She had written a few sentences on a card, and the card was lying face up on the counter.

"Actually," she said, "it was a mixed week. I'm trying to say more about how I really am. It's new for me."

There was a pause. "Oh," said her mother. "Well. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. I've been thinking about when I was little. I realized that I don't remember us ever talking about feelings. I'm not blaming you. I just wanted you to know I'm thinking about it."

The silence stretched. Iris felt the old pull: *Say you didn't mean it. Say you're fine. Change the subject.* She put her palm flat on the counter.

"I don't understand," her mother said at last. Her voice had shifted, tighter, a little hurt. "We did everything for you. Your father and I worked ourselves to the bone. You had everything you needed."

"I know," Iris said. "I'm grateful. That's true. And there's something else that's also true."

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"I don't need you to say anything," Iris said. Her voice shook. "I just wanted to tell you. That's all."

Another silence. Then her mother said, quietly, "I'm going to need to think about that." And a moment later, in a voice that was almost normal: "Do you want me to send you the recipe for the soup?"

Iris closed her eyes. She had said it. It had not gone as she had imagined. Her mother had not wept, or apologized, or understood. But the sentence had been spoken, and she was still standing.

"Yes," she said. "I'd love the recipe."

BOUNDARIES, FAMILY, AND THE COURAGE TO SAY IT

Many people reach this point in recovery with a mix of hope and dread. Understanding what was missing may raise questions about the people you grew up with. Should you tell your parents? How? What will happen to the relationship? What if they do not understand?

This chapter addresses those questions. It looks at boundaries as a form of self-respect, at the question of whether and how to talk with parents about the past, at what to do when family cannot hear you, and at building connection elsewhere. None of this is obligatory. You decide what, if anything, to say, and when.

BOUNDARIES AS SELF-RESPECT

A boundary is a statement about what you will do to take care of yourself, not a demand that someone else change. "Please stop asking about my weight" is a request. "If the conversation turns to my weight, I will change the subject or leave" is a boundary. The first depends on the other person. The second depends only on you.

For people who grew up with emotional neglect, boundaries are often particularly hard, for a clear reason. The rules *Don't be a burden*, *Don't make a fuss*, and *Keep the peace* all run directly against saying "no" or "I need something different." Setting a limit may produce a rush of guilt, fear, or a feeling of doing something wrong.

It helps to remember that boundaries are not hostile. They are a form of honesty, and they often make relationships more genuine. They clarify what you are available for, protect your energy and wellbeing, and give others a chance to know the real you.

The writer Nedra Glover Tawwab, who has written widely about boundaries in families, emphasizes that they are about clear communication and self-respect, and that they vary with the person and the relationship (Tawwab, 2021).

WRITING A BOUNDARY

A good boundary has four parts. It is clear, it is specific, it states what *you* will do, and it is delivered with as much calm and kindness as you can manage.

Here is a simple structure:

1. **Name the situation.** *When conversations turn into advice about my life...*
2. **State the boundary.** *...I'm going to listen and then change the subject.*
3. **Add care, if true.** *I love talking with you, and I want to enjoy our time.*

4. **Follow through.** If it happens, do what you said, calmly and without punishment.

The follow-through matters most. A boundary that is stated and not kept teaches others that it can be ignored. A boundary that is kept calmly, even when it is uncomfortable, becomes believable.

Examples of boundary sentences:

- *"I can talk for twenty minutes now. After that I need to go."*
- *"I'm not going to discuss that. Let's talk about something else."*
- *"I'd love to see you, and I need to leave by four."*
- *"I understand you see it differently. My decision is the same."*

You do not need to justify, over-explain, or argue. A boundary is not a debate.

SHOULD YOU TALK WITH YOUR PARENTS ABOUT THE PAST?

There is no single right answer to this question. Some people find that speaking with a parent is deeply healing. Others find it unnecessary, or unsafe, or simply impossible. It is entirely legitimate to decide that it is not for you.

Before deciding, it helps to ask:

What is my purpose? Do I want to be understood? To repair? To set a limit? To say something that has gone unsaid? Be as clear as you can.

What outcome can I accept? If your peace depends on your parent responding in a particular way, you are handing them a lot of power. Consider what you can accept if they respond with defensiveness, silence, or confusion.

Is it safe? If a conversation could lead to harm, whether emotional or physical, it may not be wise.

Am I ready? Do you have support, such as a therapist or trusted friend? Do you have tools to stay steady?

Is there an alternative? An unsent letter, a conversation in therapy, or a ritual of your own can also bring relief.

COMMON REACTIONS FROM PARENTS

It is helpful to prepare for the range of reactions. You may be hoping for apology, acknowledgment, and tears. That may happen, and more often, the responses are mixed.

Defensiveness. *We did the best we could. You had everything.* This is common, and it often reflects fear or hurt rather than malice. It is hard for many parents to hear that something was missing. It can feel like an accusation of failure.

Denial. *That's not how I remember it. You're exaggerating.* This reflects the family narrative, and it does not make your experience less true.

Confusion. *I don't understand what you want.* Many parents have simply never thought about emotional life in these terms.

Silence or deflection. Changing the subject, as Iris's mother did with the recipe. This may be a sign of discomfort, not necessarily dismissal.

Hurt. Some parents are genuinely wounded, and may need time. This is not a reason to retract your truth, but it may call for gentleness.

Openness. Some parents surprise their children by listening, acknowledging, and even sharing their own stories. This does happen, and it can be profound.

In every case, you have done something brave. You have spoken. What the other person does with it is theirs.

HOW TO SAY IT

If you decide to speak with a parent, here are some suggestions.

Choose a good time. Not during a meal, an argument, or a holiday. Ask, "Is this a good time to talk?"

Regulate first. Use your calm plan before you begin.

Start with your own experience. "I've noticed that I never learned to talk about feelings" invites less defense than "You never asked how I felt."

Acknowledge the good. "I know you worked hard and cared for me" is true, and helps your parent hear the rest.

Be brief. A short, calm statement is easier to hear than a long explanation.

Say what you want, if you want something. "I'd like us to try talking more about how we're doing."

Let go of agreement. Aim to say what is true for you, not to persuade.

Allow pauses. Silence does not mean failure.

End kindly. "Thank you for listening" is a good way to close.

Take care of yourself afterward. Plan a walk, a call with a friend, or quiet time. It is normal to feel shaky.

WHEN FAMILY CANNOT HEAR YOU

Sometimes, despite your care and clarity, a parent cannot or will not hear. They may dismiss, deny, or get angry. This is one of the hardest realities of this work, and one of the most common.

It helps to remember that people can only give what they have the capacity to give. A parent who never learned to talk about feelings may be unable to, even when they love you. A parent who feels deeply threatened by the idea that they missed something may not be able to tolerate it. This does not mean that you were wrong to speak. It means that you have learned something about the limits of this relationship.

Acceptance is not approval. To accept someone's limits is not to agree with them, to pretend it did not hurt, or to stop caring. It is to see them clearly, and to stop waiting for a different response.

You can choose your level of contact. Relationships exist on a spectrum, from close and frequent to limited and structured. You might shorten visits, meet in public, keep conversations to certain topics, or communicate by writing. The right level depends on safety, respect, and what you can give without losing yourself, and it may change over time.

Grief often follows. When a parent cannot meet you, you may grieve the relationship you hoped for, even while the person is alive. This is real, and it deserves patience.

If contact is unsafe, your safety comes first. You do not owe anyone access to you. Ending or limiting contact is a significant decision, and it is wise to make it with support from a therapist or other trusted person.

GUILT IS NOT EVIDENCE

The most common obstacle to boundaries and honest conversation is guilt. It deserves special mention.

Guilt is a signal, but it is not always a reliable one. It can mean that you have acted against your own values, and that you owe someone repair. It can also mean that you have broken an old rule, such as *Don't make a fuss* or *Keep the peace.* These are very different situations.

A helpful question is: *Did I harm someone, or did I break an old family rule?* If you harmed someone, repair is appropriate. If you broke an old rule, the discomfort is the price of change, and it will usually ease with practice.

BUILDING CHOSEN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Many people who cannot find what they need in their families of origin build it elsewhere, with friends, mentors, partners, and communities. Sometimes called *chosen family*, these are relationships marked by consistency, respect, reciprocity, and safety.

The research on social support is clear about its value. A classic review by Sheldon Cohen and Thomas Wills found evidence that social support can buffer the effects of stress on health and well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). And as discussed earlier, large-scale research links social connection with better health and longevity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

For people recovering from emotional neglect, such relationships also provide something particular: repeated, ordinary experiences of being noticed and responded to. Studies of people who developed security despite difficult early histories find that many describe a steady figure outside the family, such as a teacher, mentor, friend, or therapist, who offered a different model of care (Saunders, Jacobvitz, Zaccagnino, Beverung, & Hazen, 2011).

Building chosen family takes time, and it begins small: showing up, being honest, accepting care, and offering it. It can begin with one person. It can also begin in a group: a class, a volunteer team, a creative circle, a support group. What matters is regular, reliable contact with people who see you.

VISITS AND HOLIDAYS

Family gatherings often activate old rules. Preparation can help.

Decide in advance how long you will stay, and what you will do if things become tense.

Plan a pause. A walk around the block, a few minutes in the bathroom, a phone call with a friend.

Bring an ally, if possible. A partner or a friend can be a steady presence.

Choose your topics. If you know a subject leads to conflict, decide in advance to change the subject or step away.

Lower your expectations. Many people hope a gathering will finally be the time when everyone behaves differently. It rarely is. Aim for getting through with your self-respect intact.

Plan recovery. Give yourself quiet time afterward. It is normal to feel tired, sad, or unsettled.

HEALING PRACTICE: ONE BOUNDARY, ONE CONVERSATION

This practice helps you prepare for one boundary or one hard conversation. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: Choose. Pick one relationship and one issue. Start with something manageable rather than the hardest thing in your life.

Step 2: Clarify your purpose. Write: *What do I hope for? What outcome could I accept, even if it is not the one I want?*

Step 3: Write your boundary or message. Use the structures in this chapter. Write one boundary sentence, or a short message that describes your experience, acknowledges the good, and says what you want.

Step 4: Anticipate the response. Write the three most likely reactions, and how you would respond calmly to each.

Step 5: Plan your regulation. Write what you will do if you start to flood or shut down: a breath, a pause, a sentence like "I need a few minutes."

Step 6: Rehearse. Say the words aloud, alone or with a trusted friend. Practice until they feel steady.

Step 7: Plan your aftercare. Decide what you will do afterward: a walk, a call, a quiet evening. Expect to feel unsettled.

Step 8: Do it, or decide not to. Both are legitimate. If you do, notice what you did well, regardless of the outcome.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What happened in your family when someone set a limit or said something difficult? How does that affect you now?
2. Where in your life do you most need a clearer boundary? What stops you?
3. If you were to speak with a parent about the past, what would you hope for? What could you accept?
4. How do you tell the difference between guilt that signals harm and guilt that signals a broken rule?
5. Who are the people, inside or outside your family, who offer the kind of connection you want more of?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

A boundary describes what you will do to take care of yourself. It is a form of honesty and self-respect, not hostility.

Whether to talk with parents about the past is your decision. Clarify your purpose, prepare for different reactions, and let go of the need for agreement.

When family cannot hear you, you can accept their limits, choose your level of contact, grieve, and build connection elsewhere.

Guilt after setting a boundary often means an old rule is being broken, not that you are doing wrong.

Chosen family and community provide the repeated, ordinary experience of being noticed that recovery needs.

In the final chapter, we turn to the next generation: how to raise children, or be a safe adult for children, who feel seen.

IRIS'S THREAD

For a week after the call, Iris felt unsettled. She had a feeling like having spoken in a language she had not known she knew. She

wondered whether she had hurt her mother. She wondered whether she had said too much. She wondered, at one point, whether she should call and take it back.

She wrote in her notebook: *Guilt. Is it harm or an old rule?* She read it, and thought of her mother's voice. She had said nothing unkind. She had said only that something had been missing, and that she was not blaming anyone. She wrote: *Old rule. Don't make a fuss.*

The next Sunday, the phone rang at seven. Iris answered. "Hi, sweetheart," said her mother, a little more carefully than usual. There was a pause. "I've been thinking about what you said."

Iris sat down on a kitchen chair, her heart going.

"I don't know that I understand all of it," her mother said. "But I thought about when you were small. I remember you went very quiet, around eight or nine. I thought, she's such a good girl. I didn't think to ask." Her voice wavered. "I should have asked."

Iris closed her eyes. A warm tide rose in her chest. "Thank you, Mom," she said. "That means more than I can say."

"I don't know how to do this," her mother said. "I'm sixty-eight."

"Neither do I," Iris said, and found that she was smiling, wetly. "We can learn."

They talked for another ten minutes, about nothing in particular, a neighbor's dog, the weather in the north. But Iris noticed, when she put down the phone, that the call had held a new kind of quiet, one in which something might yet be said.

CHAPTER 14
RAISING CHILDREN WHO FEEL SEEN



It was a Tuesday evening, and Wren was crying in her room.

Owen stood in the hallway outside her door, hearing the muffled sound from the other side, and felt the old reflex rise: *Fix it. Say something cheerful. Make it better.* His hand was on the doorknob. He could already hear the sentence in his mouth. *Hey, it's not that bad. Come on, let's get some ice cream.*

He stopped. He took a breath, in for four, out for six. He remembered the card he kept in his wallet, with a short list written on it: *Notice. Name. Stay.*

He knocked softly. "Wren? Can I come in?"

A sniff. "Okay."

He sat on the edge of her bed. She was curled on her side, her face red, a damp stuffed rabbit under her chin. He did not say anything for

a moment. He put a hand gently on her back, the way he had seen Ruth do, once, with a friend's child.

"You seem really sad," he said.

She sniffed harder, and her face crumpled. "Maddie told everyone I cried at recess," she said. "And now they're all calling me a baby."

"Oh," he said. "That sounds really embarrassing. And hurtful."

"It *was*," she said, and the tears came in a fresh flood. He kept his hand on her back. He did not say *it's nothing.* He did not say *kids can be mean.* He did not offer ice cream. He stayed. After several minutes, her breathing slowed.

"Do you want to tell me more?" he asked.

She did. It took half an hour. When she finished, she wiped her nose on her sleeve, looked at him with swollen eyes, and said, in a small, astonished voice, "Dad. You listened."

"I did," he said. His own eyes were wet. "I'm learning how. I want to keep getting better at it."

She leaned against him, and he held his daughter in the lamp-lit room, and understood that he had just given her the thing he had waited forty-one years to receive.

BREAKING THE PATTERN

Many people who recognize emotional neglect in themselves have a particular fear: *Will I do the same to my children?* The fear is well founded, because the way we parent is deeply shaped by the way we were parented. It also comes with real hope. Parents who understand their history are much more able to change it.

This chapter is written for parents, and also for anyone who plays a role in a child's life: grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, coaches, and mentors. If there are no children in your life, you may find that much of it applies to the child within you.

It rests on a simple idea: what children most need in order to feel seen is not perfection, but attention. The skills involved are learnable, and you have been building many of them throughout this book.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED TO FEEL NOTICED

As we saw in Chapter 1, children need to be noticed, named, comforted, validated, delighted in, and guided. These needs are not exotic. They are met in small moments, many times a day:

- **Noticing.** *You look tired. You seem excited. Something's bothering you.*
- **Naming.** *That sounds disappointing. You're frustrated.*
- **Comforting.** A hand on the shoulder, a hug, a steady voice.
- **Validating.** *That makes sense. Anyone would feel that way.*
- **Delighting.** A smile when they walk in the room. Interest in what they love.
- **Guiding.** Helping them find ways to calm down, speak, and ask.

You do not have to do all of these perfectly. The pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott introduced the idea of the "good-enough" parent: an adult who is attentive and responsive much of the time, and who allows small, tolerable failures that help a child learn to cope (Winnicott, 1953). Perfection is not the goal.

EMOTION COACHING IN EVERYDAY MOMENTS

John Gottman and his colleagues, studying how parents respond to children's emotions, found a clear pattern. Parents who acted as "emotion coaches" tended to have children with better emotional regulation and social skills. Emotion coaches noticed emotions, treated them as opportunities for connection, listened with empathy, helped children name their feelings, and helped them problem-solve (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

In everyday terms, emotion coaching has five steps:

1. Notice the emotion. Pay attention to your child's feelings, even small ones. *She's quiet. He's slamming his books. Something is up.*

2. See it as a chance to connect. Instead of seeing the feeling as a problem to be eliminated, see it as an invitation.

3. Listen and validate. *That sounds really hard. I can see why you're upset.* Allow silence. Do not rush to fix.

4. Help name the feeling. *It sounds like you're feeling embarrassed.* Offer a word, and let the child correct you.

5. Set limits and problem-solve, when ready. Once the feeling has been heard, you can talk about what to do. *It's okay to be angry. It's not okay to hit. What could you do instead?*

The key is the order. Feelings first, solutions second. Many well-meaning parents skip straight to the solution, and the child, who has not been heard, does not take it in.

WHAT WELL-MEANING PARENTS DO

If you grew up with emotional neglect, you may have learned some well-meaning habits that you do not realize are dismissive. They are very common, and they are not signs of bad parenting. They are signs that you did not receive a different model.

Cheering up. *Don't be sad, let's go for ice cream.* This may feel kind, and it tells the child that sadness is something to get rid of.

Reassuring too fast. *It's fine. It's not a big deal.* The child hears that their feeling is wrong.

Problem-solving immediately. *Here's what you should do.* The child may feel unheard.

Distracting. *Look, a puppy!* The feeling is set aside, not understood.

Minimizing. *You're overreacting.* The child learns not to trust their own reactions.

Praise only for achievement. *Great job on the test!* without ever asking how the child feels.

Silence. Not responding at all, from discomfort or habit.

Each of these is understandable. And each, repeated over years, teaches the child that feelings are unwelcome. The alternative is simply to pause, to notice, and to say something like, *That sounds really hard. Tell me more.*

GIVING CHILDREN THE WORDS

Children, like all of us, need a vocabulary for feelings. Parents can build it gently, in the course of ordinary life.

- **Name feelings aloud, in your own life.** *I'm feeling a bit nervous about the meeting.* Children learn emotional language by hearing it.
- **Name feelings in their lives.** *You look disappointed. That was exciting!*
- **Use books and stories.** Many picture books and films are rich in emotional situations. Ask: *How do you think she's feeling?*
- **Offer several words.** *Are you feeling nervous, or more like worried?* Offering choices builds distinctions.
- **Accept their words.** If a child says "mad" when you think "sad," explore it with curiosity.

Research on emotional granularity suggests that finer distinctions support better regulation (Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001). A child who can say "I'm embarrassed" has far more to work with than one who says "I feel bad."

LIMITS AND FEELINGS

A common worry for parents who grew up with emotional neglect is that welcoming feelings means permissiveness. It does not. Emotion coaching includes limits. The distinction is between *feelings* and *behavior*.

- *You can be angry. You cannot hit.*
- *You can be disappointed. You cannot throw the game.*
- *You can feel jealous. You cannot take her toy.*

All feelings are acceptable. Not all behaviors are. Children who are guided this way learn that their inner life is valid and that they can choose what to do with it.

The developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind described a style of parenting she called *authoritative*, combining high warmth with clear, consistent expectations. Children raised this way tended to show better social and emotional outcomes than those raised by parents who were either harsh and controlling or permissive and unstructured (Baumrind, 1966). Warmth and limits are not opposites.

REPAIR IS YOUR MOST POWERFUL TOOL

You will make mistakes. You will be distracted, impatient, dismissive. You will say "It's fine" when it is not. This is not a catastrophe. As we have seen throughout this book, relationships are strengthened not by the absence of mistakes but by repair.

Studies of caregivers and infants suggest that even in healthy relationships, mismatches are common, and that the repair of those ruptures supports the child's developing sense of security (Tronick, 1989). The same principle holds for older children.

A good repair has several parts:

1. **Wait until you are calm.**
2. **Name what happened.** *I was distracted when you were telling me about your day.*
3. **Take responsibility without excuses.** *That wasn't fair to you.*
4. **Acknowledge the child's experience.** *I think you felt ignored.*
5. **Reassure.** *You matter to me, and I want to hear it.*
6. **Offer to try again.** *Can you tell me now?*
7. **Reconnect.** A hug, a shared activity, a few minutes of attention.

For young children, keep it short and concrete. For older children and teenagers, listen more than you talk. Be prepared for them to be

angry, and let them be. Your task is not to be forgiven instantly. It is to show that relationships can survive mistakes.

WHEN YOUR OWN HISTORY RISES

Parenting touches the oldest layers of your own experience. You may find that your child's tears bring up a flood of your own discomfort, or that your child's need for comfort makes you feel suddenly distant, or irritated, or blank.

The psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg and her colleagues described "ghosts in the nursery": the unacknowledged, unresolved experiences of a parent's own childhood that enter the room when the parent holds a baby (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975). The psychiatrist Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell argue that the best predictor of how we parent is how well we have made sense of our own childhood (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

This is the work you have been doing. And it also gives you a practical sequence for the moments when the ghost arrives:

1. Notice. Catch the early signal in your body: tightness, flatness, the urge to flee or fix.

2. Pause. Take one slow breath, longer on the exhale. Plant your feet.

3. Name. Silently say, *This is my old response.* Or, *My body is going numb.*

4. Remember. Tell yourself: *My child is having a hard time. They are not giving me a hard time.*

5. Stay. Ask: *What does my child need right now?* Often the answer is simply presence.

6. Respond. Offer a feeling word, a touch, a few minutes of attention.

None of this needs to be done perfectly. Even a half-finished pause is an improvement.

CHILDREN ARE NOT COPIES OF YOU

Every child has a temperament, and it may differ from yours. A parent who is reserved may have an exuberant, emotional child. A parent who is anxious may have a fearless one. A parent who is practical may have a child who feels everything deeply.

It is easy to see difference as a problem. A parent who was taught to hide feelings may find an expressive child tiring or overwhelming. A parent who learned to be independent may struggle with a clingy child. The invitation is to be curious: *Who is this child? What do they need from me, which may not be what I needed?* The concept of goodness of fit, developed by Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, reminds us that children thrive when the environment is responsive to their particular temperament (Thomas & Chess, 1977).

IF YOU ARE NOT A PARENT

Not everyone who reads this book is a parent, and the principles of this chapter are not limited to parenting.

If you are an aunt, uncle, teacher, coach, mentor, neighbor, or friend to a child, you can be one of the steady, caring adults that research on resilience has shown to be so important. The psychologist Ann Masten called the capacity for resilience "ordinary magic," arising from ordinary protective systems, and prominent among them is a caring relationship with a competent adult (Masten, 2001). The classic longitudinal study of children on the island of Kauai found that at least one stable, caring relationship was among the most important protective factors for children at risk (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Even a small, steady habit of noticing can matter. *You look like you had a hard day. Want to talk? I noticed you were quiet. I'm here.* A child who is noticed by one adult may carry that memory for life.

And if you are an adult learning to care for the child within you, you are doing the same work. You are practicing the noticing you

never received, and you are changing what you will pass on to anyone you love.

BEING GENTLE WITH YOURSELF

Parents who are working to break a pattern often carry an enormous burden of guilt. Every dismissive moment, every missed cue, can feel like evidence of failure.

It is not. It is evidence of a human being doing difficult work. The question is not whether you will make mistakes, but whether you will notice, repair, and keep trying. Self-compassion, the kind you have been learning, is one of the greatest gifts you can give a child, because children learn how to treat themselves by watching how you treat yourself.

If you are struggling, seek support. Parenting is hard and was never meant to be done alone. A trusted friend, a parent group, a counselor, a pediatrician, or a family therapist can help.

HEALING PRACTICE: THE NOTICING HABIT

This practice builds the habit of noticing a child's emotions and responding with attention. It takes a few minutes a day. You will need a notebook.

Step 1: Choose a child. Pick a child in your life: your own, a niece, a student, a neighbor. Choose someone you see regularly.

Step 2: Set an intention. Each day, decide to notice one emotion in this child. It might be a flicker of excitement, a moment of boredom, a quiet worry.

Step 3: Name it kindly. Offer a simple observation: *You look excited. That seemed frustrating. You seem a bit quiet today.*

Step 4: Stay a moment. Resist the urge to fix, reassure, or move on. Wait. Listen. Allow silence.

Step 5: Notice your own response. What did you feel in your body? Did you notice any old reflex, such as the urge to cheer up or change the subject?

Step 6: Write it down. At the end of the day, write: *What I noticed. What I said. What happened. What I felt.*

Step 7: Repair, if needed. If you missed something, or responded dismissively, find a moment to return: *I was thinking about what you said earlier. Can you tell me more?*

Step 8: Appreciate yourself. End by writing one thing you did well, however small.

Step 9: Repeat for two weeks. Notice how the child responds over time, and how you change.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What emotions were welcomed, and which were not, in your childhood? What does a child in your life most need to hear?
2. Which of the well-meaning habits in this chapter, cheering up, reassuring too fast, fixing, distracting, minimizing, do you recognize in yourself?
3. What happens in your body when a child you care about is upset?
4. What repair would you like to make, to a child or to the child you once were?
5. If you are not a parent, who in your life could benefit from a steady, noticing adult?

WHAT TO REMEMBER

What children most need to feel seen is attention: to be noticed, named, comforted, validated, and delighted in. Perfection is not required.

Emotion coaching puts feelings first and solutions second. Limits apply to behavior, not to feelings.

Well-meaning habits, such as cheering up, fixing, and minimizing, can dismiss children's feelings. Pausing and saying "That sounds hard. Tell me more" is often enough.

Repair after a mistake is among the most powerful things you can do.

You do not need to be a parent to be a safe adult. A steady habit of noticing can change a child's life, and your own.

In the conclusion, we return to the four people you have followed through this book, a year later.

OWEN'S THREAD

That evening, after Wren was asleep, Owen sat at the kitchen table with the notebook. He wrote, at the top of a clean page: *What I noticed. What I said. What happened. What I felt.*

Noticed: She was crying. I wanted to fix it.

Said: I said she seemed sad. I asked her to tell me more.

Happened: She told me for half an hour. At the end she said, "Dad. You listened."

Felt: He stopped. He held the pen above the page for a long time. *Proud. Tender. And grief, for the little boy who never got this. Grateful, that I get to give it.*

He closed the notebook, switched off the light, and stood for a moment in the doorway of his daughter's room. She was asleep, with the rabbit under her chin. He thought of his father in the garage, the shoulder under his hand, the three seconds of stillness.

The following Sunday, at his parents' house, he stayed after dinner. His father was in the garage again. This time Owen did not hand him a

wrench. He leaned on the workbench, and said, "Dad, can I tell you something?"

His father looked up warily, a screwdriver in his hand. "Sure."

"I've been learning to listen to Wren. To ask her how she feels. I think I didn't know how, because nobody ever did that for me. I'm not blaming you. I just wanted you to know."

The garage was very quiet. A long moment passed. His father put the screwdriver down. Looking at the bench, in a rough, unpracticed voice, he said, "I didn't know how either."

"I know," Owen said.

His father nodded slowly. He did not say more. But he reached out, after a while, and set a hand on Owen's arm, heavy and hesitant, like a man testing ice. They stood together in the sound of the tools and the late light, and Owen thought that perhaps this, too, was a kind of conversation.

CONCLUSION



YOU WERE ALWAYS ALLOWED TO FEEL

A year after the afternoon in the café, Iris Calder sat in a different café, with a different friend, and was asked the same question.

"What was your childhood like?"

She took a sip of tea. She felt the old reflex arrive, *It was good, normal, we didn't have any problems,* and she let it pass through her like a draft through an open window.

"It was loving, and it was quiet," she said. "Nobody ever asked how I felt. I think that was nobody's fault, and I've spent a year learning that it still mattered."

Her friend, a woman named Hana, set down her cup. "I think that might be true of me, too," she said slowly. "I've never put it that way."

They talked for two hours. Iris noticed, partway through, that she was feeling several things at once: nervous, warm, a little sad, and quietly proud. She noticed that she knew what they were called. She also noticed that Hana was crying, a little, and that she was not afraid of it.

THE CHARACTERS, ONE YEAR LATER

Iris still keeps a notebook, though she no longer calls it a practice. She calls it "checking in." She has told four people, in four different conversations, that she is learning to say what she feels. One of them was her mother, who now calls on Wednesdays as well as Sundays, and who once, haltingly, began a sentence with "When I was young,

nobody ever asked me." Iris did not say anything. She just listened, for forty minutes.

Owen and Wren have a ritual. On Thursday evenings, they sit on the back steps with hot chocolate and take turns saying one thing that was hard and one thing that was good. Owen is still a man of few words, but they are different words now. He has begun to use the vocabulary in his wallet at work, quietly, in meetings, saying, "I'm concerned about this" instead of "It's a problem." His father has not become talkative. But last month he came to one of Wren's recitals, sat in the front row, and afterward said, gruffly, "That was something," and then, a moment later, with some effort, "I'm glad I came."

Sofia quit her job at the studio, not out of dramatic rebellion but out of a growing certainty that she wanted to design for fewer clients and enjoy it more. She spent six months finding out what she liked. It turned out to include illustration, long walks, and cooking for people. She still struggles with the critic, who still says things in her mother's voice. But she has a card on her desk, and a name for the voice, and when it speaks, she says, kindly, "Thank you. I've got this." She and Lucía have not resolved their different memories of childhood. But last spring Lucía said, unexpectedly, "I've been thinking about what you said. I'd like to hear more." Sofia is, at the time of writing, still deciding how much to tell her.

Henry is still in therapy, and says that it is the best investment he has ever made. He and Ruth have started a habit of walking on Saturday mornings and, as they walk, telling each other one feeling each. Sometimes the feelings are large. More often they are small: *content, a bit tired, grateful for the light.* Last Christmas, Ruth gave him a notebook with a single line written on the first page. It said: *Thank you for letting me know you.* He keeps it on his bedside table.

WHAT YOU HAVE DONE

If you have read this far, you have done something that is not simple.

You have learned what emotional neglect is: a wound of what did not happen, in homes that were often loving and well run. You have seen how it happens, through strain, unlearned feelings, illness, praise for performance, temperament, and culture, and how it shapes the mind and body. You have looked at the signs: the feelings you cannot find, the rules you learned, the patterns in adult life, and the doubt that says *It wasn't that bad.*

You have begun to practice safety before insight. You have built a vocabulary for feelings and started to listen to what they tell you. You have grieved, or begun to. You have started to care for yourself as a good caregiver would. And you have looked outward, at letting others in, at boundaries and honest conversations, and at the children in your life.

You may not have completed every practice. You may have skipped sections, or put the book down for weeks, or found parts of it too hard. That is part of the process. Recovery is not a project to finish in a month. It is a way of living that you keep practicing.

RECOVERY IS NOT A FINISH LINE

It is tempting to imagine a moment when the work will be done, when you will always know what you feel, never again say "I'm fine" on reflex, and never again feel the old emptiness. That moment does not arrive, at least not in that form. What arrives instead is something quieter, and in some ways better.

You notice a feeling sooner. You find the word more easily. You ask for something a little more plainly. You let someone see you. You speak to yourself a little more kindly. You stay in a hard moment a little longer, and discover that you are still here.

These are not small things. They are the visible edge of a deep change in how you relate to your own inner life. Each one is evidence that what did not happen can, to a remarkable degree, happen now.

A FINAL WORD

This book began with a simple question that no one had asked: *How are you really feeling?* It is a question that, for much of your life, may have had no answer, and no one to hear it.

The silence you grew up in was not a judgment about your worth. It was the absence of a skill that your family never had the chance to learn. You are learning it now. And in doing so, you are doing something remarkable: you are becoming the person who asks.

On the hard days, when the old blankness returns, and the old "I'm fine" rises to your lips, remember this: you are not behind. You are not broken. You are a person doing quiet, important work, in the middle of ordinary life.

How are you really feeling? Take your time. The answer matters, and so do you.

You were always allowed to feel.

APPENDIX A: THE FEELINGS VOCABULARY LIST

Use this list to find words for what you feel. Read slowly, and notice which words produce a response in your body: a tightening, a loosening, a flicker of recognition. You do not need the perfect word. Choose the closest, and refine over time. Feelings often come in mixtures, so it is fine to choose more than one.

HOW TO USE THIS LIST

- **Start with the family.** Ask whether what you feel is closest to sadness, anger, fear, shame, joy, or connection.
- **Then look for the neighbor.** Within the family, find the word that fits best.
- **Check your body.** If the word brings a small loosening or a sense of "yes," it may be close.
- **Try two words.** Mixed feelings are normal: *relieved and sad, proud and nervous.*

SADNESS AND LOSS

Sad, down, blue, heavy, tearful, hurt, disappointed, discouraged, deflated, hopeless, grieving, mournful, lonely, empty, wistful, nostalgic, homesick, forlorn, crushed, melancholy, let down, left out, missed, unseen, abandoned.

ANGER AND IRRITATION

Annoyed, irritated, frustrated, impatient, grumpy, resentful, bitter, indignant, offended, outraged, furious, angry, enraged, hostile, fed up, defensive, disgusted, contemptuous, betrayed, provoked, jealous, envious.

FEAR AND WORRY

Nervous, uneasy, anxious, worried, tense, jittery, apprehensive, afraid, scared, frightened, panicked, terrified, overwhelmed, insecure, exposed, vulnerable, on edge, dread, alarmed, startled, uncertain, hesitant.

SHAME AND SELF-DOUBT

Embarrassed, self-conscious, awkward, ashamed, humiliated, guilty, regretful, inadequate, unworthy, foolish, small, flawed, inferior, like a burden, like a fraud, rejected, judged, not enough, too much.

JOY AND CONTENTMENT

Pleased, glad, content, calm, peaceful, relaxed, relieved, comfortable, hopeful, optimistic, cheerful, happy, delighted, joyful, excited, thrilled, amused, playful, proud, satisfied, grateful, fulfilled, uplifted, free, light.

CONNECTION AND WARMTH

Warm, tender, affectionate, fond, caring, loving, close, connected, trusting, safe, accepted, appreciated, valued, seen, understood, belonging, moved, touched, compassionate, supported, included.

CURIOSITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Interested, curious, intrigued, fascinated, engaged, absorbed, inspired, motivated, determined, energized, eager, challenged, focused, open, surprised, amazed, awed.

TIREDNESS AND FLATNESS

Tired, drained, exhausted, burned out, flat, numb, blank, bored, restless, detached, distant, foggy, apathetic, empty, spent, unmotivated, disconnected, stuck, indifferent.

MIXED AND IN-BETWEEN FEELINGS

Bittersweet, torn, ambivalent, conflicted, confused, bewildered, uncertain, wistful, relieved and sad, excited and afraid, grateful and resentful, proud and left out, hopeful and wary, lonely and content.

QUESTIONS THAT MAY HELP

- *What happened today that might connect to this?*
- *Where do I feel it in my body?*
- *Is it big or small? Heavy or light? Sharp or dull?*
- *What might this feeling be asking for?*
- *Have I felt this before? When?*

APPENDIX B: THE BODY SIGNALS GUIDE

Feelings are felt in the body. Learning to read your body's signals is a core skill of recovery. This guide offers possible meanings for common sensations. These are *possibilities*, not rules. The same sensation can mean different things at different times. Treat each as a question, not an answer.

If you have persistent, new, or worrying physical symptoms, please see a medical professional. Physical symptoms have many causes, and medical care is not an alternative to emotional work.

Sensation	Feelings it may carry	What may help
Tight jaw, clenched teeth	Anger, tension, holding back words	Unclench; breathe out slowly; ask what you want to say
Tight or heavy chest	Sadness, grief, worry, loneliness	Hand on chest; slow breathing; allow tears
Lump in the throat	Sadness, unspoken feelings, emotion held back	Sip water; hum; name what you feel
Knot or flutter in the stomach	Anxiety, dread, nervousness	Grounding; warm drink; slow breathing
Hollow or empty stomach	Loneliness, longing, fear	Check for hunger; reach for connection
Raised, tight shoulders	Stress, fear, bracing, carrying too much	Drop shoulders on an out-breath; stretch
Heat in the face or neck	Embarrassment, shame, anger	Cool air; slow breathing; name the feeling
Heavy limbs, fatigue	Sadness, depletion, shutdown	Rest; gentle movement; warmth
Restlessness, buzzing	Anxiety, excitement, unspoken need	Move; walk; stretch

Sensation	Feelings it may carry	What may help
Cold hands or feet	Fear, anxiety, withdrawal	Warm hands; grounding
Headache or pressure behind the eyes	Tension, strain, held-back tears	Rest; water; ease the jaw and neck
Numbness, feeling "far away"	Overwhelm, shutdown, protection	Orient to the room; cool air; gentle movement
Warmth, loosening in the chest	Tenderness, relief, gratitude, safety	Notice it; let it stay
Lightness, openness	Joy, relief, freedom	Savor it for a few breaths

A PRACTICE FOR READING THE SIGNALS

1. **Pause** once or twice a day and scan from head to toe.
2. **Describe** the strongest sensation without interpreting it.
3. **Ask** gently: *If this had a feeling attached, what might it be?*
4. **Check** the feelings list in Appendix A for a word that fits.
5. **Respond** with one small act of care.

APPENDIX C: CALM CARDS

These cards are designed to be photographed, copied, or cut out and kept somewhere you can reach quickly. Use them when you notice that you are flooded or shut down. They work best when you have practiced them in calm moments.

Card 1: Calm in Two Minutes

1. Place both feet on the floor and feel their weight.
2. Breathe in through your nose for four counts and out for six. Repeat five times.
3. Name five things you can see, four you can touch, and three you can hear.
4. Tell yourself: *This is a big feeling. I am safe right now.*

Card 2: When I Go Blank

1. Notice it without judging: *I am going numb. That is a protection.*
2. Move gently: stretch, walk, press your palms together.
3. Look around and name five objects in the room, out loud if you can.
4. Hold something warm or textured, such as a mug or a soft blanket.

Card 3: When Feelings Flood

1. Plant your feet. Slow your exhale.
2. Name it: *This is fear. This is grief. This is shame.*
3. Put a hand where you feel it. Breathe into it.
4. Remember: *Feelings rise, peak, and fall. This will pass.*

Card 4: When I Hear "I'm Fine" Coming

1. Pause for one breath before you answer.
2. Scan your body: *Where do I feel something?*
3. Choose one true word from Appendix A.
4. Say it, even if it is small: *I'm a bit tired. I'm a bit nervous. I'm okay, and a little sad.*

Card 5: My Support Circle

Someone I can call or message: _____

Another person I trust: _____

A professional or group I can contact: _____

A place where I feel safe: _____

Card 6: If I Am in Crisis

If you may harm yourself or someone else, or you are in immediate danger, contact your local emergency number right now.

In the United States, you can call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

Outside the United States, findahelpline.com can help you find a crisis line in your country.

Tell someone near you what is happening. You do not have to handle this alone.

APPENDIX D: CONVERSATION SCRIPTS

Words can be hard to find when you are not used to talking about feelings. These sentences are starting points. Change them until they sound like you, and practice them aloud before you need them.

NAMING A FEELING

- "I'm feeling a bit anxious today, and I wanted you to know."
- "I think I'm sad, but I'm not sure why. I'm working on noticing."
- "That was hard for me, and I'm still figuring out how I feel."

SAYING "I DON'T KNOW YET"

- "I don't know what I feel yet. Can I get back to you?"
- "I'm still learning to find the words. Give me a minute."
- "I notice a tight chest, but I can't name the feeling yet."

ASKING FOR HELP OR SUPPORT

- "I'd like some help with this. Do you have a few minutes?"
- "I'm having a hard day. Could you just listen?"
- "I don't need you to fix it. I'd like some company."

LETTING SOMEONE KNOW YOU ARE CHANGING

- "I'm trying to talk more about how I feel. It's new, and I may be clumsy."
- "If I go quiet, it isn't about you. I'm learning to tell you what's going on."
- "Thank you for being patient with me."

SETTING A LIMIT

- "I can talk for twenty minutes now. After that I need to go."
- "I'm not going to discuss that. Let's talk about something else."
- "I understand you see it differently. My decision is the same."

TALKING WITH A PARENT ABOUT THE PAST

- "I've been thinking about when I was little. I realized that we never talked about feelings. I'm not blaming you. I wanted you to know I'm thinking about it."
- "I know you worked hard and cared for me. I also needed someone to ask how I was."
- "I don't need you to agree. I wanted to say it."

WHEN SOMEONE DISMISSES YOU

- "I hear that you remember it differently. This is how it was for me."
- "I'm not asking you to agree. I'm telling you what is true for me."
- "I'm going to end this call now. I'd like to try again another time."

WITH A CHILD

- "You look sad. Do you want to tell me about it?"
- "That sounds really hard. I'm here."
- "I wasn't listening well earlier. Can you tell me again?"
- "I'm sorry I rushed you. I want to hear how you feel."

REPAIRING A DISCONNECTION

- "I went quiet earlier. I was overwhelmed. I'm sorry."
- "I got defensive. Can I try again?"
- "I need a break, and I'll come back in twenty minutes."

APPENDIX E: THE 30-DAY PRACTICE PLAN

This plan turns the book into a daily habit. Each day takes five to fifteen minutes. If you miss a day, simply continue with the next one. Progress matters more than perfection.

At the end of each week, pause to reflect on what you noticed and what you want to carry into the next week.

WEEK 1: UNDERSTAND

- **Day 1.** Draw your Emotional Memory Timeline (Chapter 1).
- **Day 2.** Write one sentence: *When I felt something as a child, I learned that...*
- **Day 3.** Complete Understanding Without Excusing for one caregiver (Chapter 2).
- **Day 4.** Practice slow breathing, four counts in and six out, for three minutes.
- **Day 5.** Do the body scan and write down three sensations (Chapter 3).
- **Day 6.** Count how many times you say "fine," "good," or "okay" today.
- **Day 7.** Review the week. Write what surprised you most.

WEEK 2: RECOGNIZE

- **Day 8.** Complete the Feelings Check-In three times today (Chapter 4).
- **Day 9.** List your five hidden rules and choose one to work on (Chapter 5).
- **Day 10.** Write a believable alternative for that rule, and one tiny action.
- **Day 11.** Do the tiny action. Write what happened.
- **Day 12.** Complete the Adult Pattern Map (Chapter 6).
- **Day 13.** Complete the Two-Truths Page (Chapter 7).

- **Day 14.** Review the week. Choose one pattern you want to change.

WEEK 3: RECOVER

- **Day 15.** Build your Calm Plan (Chapter 8).
- **Day 16.** Practice one calm tool for five minutes while you are calm.
- **Day 17.** Read the feelings list slowly and circle five words that fit your week (Chapter 9).
- **Day 18.** Complete Daily Emotion Notes, including the need beneath the feeling.
- **Day 19.** Write your Letter to the Child Who Was Not Asked (Chapter 10).
- **Day 20.** Offer yourself one thing that child needed.
- **Day 21.** Write your Compassionate Reply to your inner critic (Chapter 11). Review the week.

WEEK 4: LIVE DIFFERENTLY

- **Day 22.** Make one small promise to yourself, and keep it.
- **Day 23.** Make a One-Sentence Request to someone safe (Chapter 12).
- **Day 24.** Share one small feeling with a trusted person.
- **Day 25.** Choose one boundary and write the sentence you will use (Chapter 13).
- **Day 26.** Rehearse the boundary aloud, alone or with someone you trust.
- **Day 27.** Practice the Noticing Habit with a child, or with yourself (Chapter 14).
- **Day 28.** Complete your Support Circle card: write who is in your circle and one step to strengthen it.
- **Day 29.** Write a paragraph about what you hope to pass on to the people who come after you.
- **Day 30.** Review the month. Write what changed, what did not, and what you want next.

APPENDIX F: GLOSSARY

These short definitions explain how terms are used in this book. They are not clinical definitions.

Affect labeling. Putting a feeling into words, which appears to reduce its intensity.

Alexithymia. Difficulty identifying and describing feelings, and distinguishing them from bodily sensations.

Ambiguous loss. Loss without clarity or closure, such as grieving a parent who is present but emotionally unavailable.

Boundary. A limit that describes what you will do to protect your wellbeing.

Chosen family. Friends, mentors, partners, and communities who offer consistent care and respect.

Co-regulation. The process of calming through another person's steady presence.

Compulsive self-reliance. A pattern of insisting on managing alone and avoiding dependence on others, often learned early.

Disenfranchised grief. Grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported.

Display rules. Cultural norms about which emotions may be shown, to whom, and when.

Emotion coaching. A parenting approach that notices emotions, treats them as chances to connect, listens, names feelings, and then problem-solves.

Emotional granularity. The ability to make fine-grained distinctions between emotions.

Emotional neglect. A persistent failure to notice and respond to a child's emotional needs.

Expressive suppression. The deliberate effort to hide or inhibit emotional expression.

Feelings vocabulary. The set of words a person has for naming emotions.

Grounding. Techniques that bring attention to the present moment through the senses.

Hidden rules. Unspoken beliefs about feelings and needs absorbed in childhood, such as *Don't need anything.*

Inner critic. A harsh internal voice, often absorbed from earlier experiences.

Interoception. The sense of the body's internal state, including heartbeat, breath, and tension.

Numbness. A muting of emotional experience, often protective.

Parentification. When a child takes on adult responsibilities or emotional caretaking.

Repair. Returning after a conflict or mistake to acknowledge impact and restore trust.

Reparenting. Offering yourself the care, structure, and attention you needed in childhood.

Self-compassion. Responding to your own pain with kindness, a sense of shared humanity, and mindfulness.

Shame. A painful belief that something is wrong with you as a person.

Titration. Approaching difficult material in very small doses, returning to safety in between.

Toxic stress. Prolonged activation of the stress response without the buffering presence of supportive adults.

Trauma-informed. An approach that recognizes the effects of trauma and prioritizes safety, choice, and collaboration.

Window of tolerance. The zone of arousal in which you can feel emotions and still think clearly.

APPENDIX G: RESOURCES

Information changes, so please verify phone numbers and websites before relying on them. This list is a starting point, not a complete guide.

SUPPORT AND CRISIS RESOURCES

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (United States): call or text 988.
- Crisis Text Line (United States): text HOME to 741741.
- SAMHSA National Helpline (United States): 1-800-662-4357, free and confidential treatment referrals.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (United States): 1-800-799-7233.
- findahelpline.com: a directory of crisis lines in many countries.
- Psychology Today therapist directory: search for therapists by location and specialty.
- Open Path Collective: lower-cost therapy sessions.
- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness): education, support groups, and family programs.

FINDING A THERAPIST

Therapies that may help with the effects of emotional neglect include emotion-focused therapy, schema therapy, attachment-based therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and trauma-informed approaches. When contacting a therapist, you might ask:

- What is your experience with childhood neglect and emotional development?
- How do you set the pace so that I do not feel overwhelmed?
- What does a typical session look like?
- How will we know whether therapy is helping?
- What are your fees, and what options exist if cost is a concern?

FOR FURTHER READING

- *Running on Empty* by Jonice Webb: an introduction to childhood emotional neglect.
- *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* by Lindsay C. Gibson: understanding and healing from emotionally immature parenting.
- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk: how trauma affects the body and brain.
- *Self-Compassion* by Kristin Neff: research and practices for self-kindness.
- *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown: a guide to the vocabulary of emotion.
- *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* by Nedra Glover Tawwab: practical guidance on boundaries.
- *Parenting from the Inside Out* by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell: using self-understanding to parent.

APPENDIX H: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

These are questions that many readers ask as they work through this book. If one applies to you, take the answer as a starting point, not a final word.

"HOW DO I KNOW IF I EXPERIENCED EMOTIONAL NEGLECT?"

There is no test that settles it. Many people recognize themselves in the descriptions of numbness, difficulty naming feelings, hidden rules, and loneliness inside relationships, and in the memory of a home where feelings were rarely discussed. The most useful question is not "Was it bad enough?" but "Was it enough to matter?" If the descriptions in this book ring true, they are worth taking seriously.

"MY PARENTS WERE LOVING. DOES THAT MEAN I WAS NOT NEGLECTED?"

Not necessarily. Love and emotional attunement are different. A parent can love a child deeply and still not know how to notice, name, or respond to the child's feelings. Both can be true.

"I FEEL GUILTY READING THIS. AM I BETRAYING MY FAMILY?"

Many people feel this. Understanding a pattern is not accusing a person. You can honor your parents' efforts and still acknowledge what you needed. Guilt often appears when an old rule, such as *Don't make a fuss*, is being broken. It does not prove that you are doing something wrong.

"I FEEL NOTHING WHEN I DO THE PRACTICES. IS IT WORKING?"

Probably, yes. Numbness thaws slowly, and the early weeks can feel flat. Continue gently, keep the practices short, and notice small changes: a word that fits, a sensation you did not notice before. If you feel stuck, a therapist can help.

"WHAT IF THE FEELINGS COME ALL AT ONCE?"

Slow down. Use your calm plan from Chapter 8, keep sessions short, and reach out to someone you trust. Feelings returning in a flood is common, and it becomes manageable with pacing and support. If you feel overwhelmed or unsafe, please contact a professional or a crisis line.

"DO I HAVE TO TALK TO MY PARENTS ABOUT THIS?"

No. Whether to speak with a parent is entirely your decision. Some people find it healing. Others find it unnecessary or unsafe. Letters you do not send, therapy, and rituals of your own can also bring relief.

"WHAT IF MY SIBLING REMEMBERS OUR CHILDHOOD DIFFERENTLY?"

That is common. Temperament, role, timing, and the way each child fit into the family can lead siblings to different experiences of the same home. Your account is a legitimate record of your own experience.

"CAN I RECOVER WITHOUT THERAPY?"

Many people benefit from the practices in this book on their own. If your history includes serious abuse or trauma, if you experience flashbacks, panic, or persistent depression, or if the work feels too heavy to hold alone, working with a trauma-informed therapist is strongly recommended. Seeking support is part of recovery, not a sign that it is failing.

"I THINK I AM REPEATING THIS WITH MY OWN CHILDREN. WHAT CAN I DO?"

Awareness is the most important step. Notice, name, and respond to your child's feelings; use emotion coaching; and repair after mistakes. Research suggests that how well you understand your own history matters more than how difficult it was (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Be gentle with yourself, and seek support if you are struggling.

"WILL I EVER FEEL 'NORMAL'?"

Many people find that the sense of being fundamentally different fades as they learn the skills they missed. You may not become a person who feels everything vividly all the time, and that is not the goal. The goal is to know what you feel, to be able to say it, and to be known by people you trust.

APPENDIX I: GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS AND PROFESSIONALS

This book can be read alone, but it also works well in support groups, book clubs, classrooms, and professional settings. This guide offers suggestions for those who wish to use it with others. It is not a substitute for clinical training.

SUGGESTED GROUP AGREEMENTS

- **Confidentiality.** What is shared in the group stays in the group.
- **Choice.** Everyone may pass, pause, or step out at any time.
- **Respect.** No fixing, advising, or judging unless asked.
- **Safety.** Members are encouraged to seek professional support when needed.
- **Pace.** No one needs to share more than they choose. Silence is welcome.

A SAMPLE SESSION STRUCTURE

A session of about ninety minutes might look like this.

- **Arrival and grounding (10 minutes).** Begin with three slow breaths or a short grounding exercise.
- **Check-in (15 minutes).** Each person shares one feeling word from Appendix A, or says "pass."
- **Reading and discussion (30 minutes).** Review one chapter's key ideas, and discuss using the reflection prompts.
- **Practice (20 minutes).** Try the chapter's healing practice together, or in pairs.
- **Closing (15 minutes).** Each person shares one word or phrase about what they are taking with them. Offer a reminder of crisis and support resources.

A TWELVE-WEEK READING PLAN

- **Week 1.** Introduction and Chapter 1: The Wound of What Did Not Happen
- **Week 2.** Chapters 2 and 3: How neglect happens, and how it shapes mind and body
- **Week 3.** Chapter 4: The Feelings You Cannot Find
- **Week 4.** Chapters 5 and 6: Inner rules, and neglect in adult life
- **Week 5.** Chapter 7: "But It Wasn't That Bad"
- **Week 6.** Chapter 8: Safety and Starting Slowly
- **Week 7.** Chapter 9: Learning the Language of Feelings
- **Week 8.** Chapter 10: Grieving the Unseen
- **Week 9.** Chapter 11: Becoming Your Own Emotional Caregiver
- **Week 10.** Chapter 12: Letting Others In
- **Week 11.** Chapter 13: Boundaries, Family, and Hard Conversations
- **Week 12.** Chapter 14 and the Conclusion: Raising children who feel seen

FACILITATION TIPS

- Expect numbness. Many members will say they feel little at first. Normalize this, and do not pressure anyone to feel.
- Keep the vocabulary list on hand, and offer it when members struggle to find words.
- Invite curiosity rather than competition. There is no "worst" or "most neglected."
- Allow silence. Not everything needs an immediate answer.
- Keep an eye on pacing. If the room becomes flooded or flat, pause and ground.
- Share a list of local crisis and mental health resources at every session.
- Facilitators who are not clinicians should have a plan for referring members who may need professional support, and should not attempt to treat trauma.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY PART

- **Part I.** What did you learn about feelings in your family? What was never said?
- **Part II.** Which signs, rules, or adult patterns feel most familiar? What does the doubt "It wasn't that bad" sound like?
- **Part III.** What helps you feel safe? What are you beginning to grieve, and what are you beginning to offer yourself?
- **Part IV.** What is one request, boundary, or conversation you are preparing? Who notices you?

APPENDIX J: COMPANION WORKSHEETS

These worksheets give you space to write inside the book. You can also copy them into a notebook and reuse them as often as you like. There are no right answers. Write whatever is true, in your own words, and go at your own pace. If a worksheet stirs strong feelings, pause, use your calm plan, and return later.

WORKSHEET 1: MY DAILY FEELINGS LOG

Use this worksheet once a day, ideally in the evening. Appendix A may help you find words.

What did I notice in my body today?

The word or words that fit best:

What happened today that might connect to this?

What might this feeling be asking for?

One small thing I can do for myself:

WORKSHEET 2: MY HIDDEN RULES

Hidden rules are the unspoken instructions about feelings and needs that you absorbed as a child. Seeing them is the first step toward loosening them.

Rules I recognize in myself (for example: Don't need anything. Handle it yourself. Be strong.):

Where I learned the rule I most want to change:

What this rule protected me from:

What this rule costs me now:

A believable alternative, kinder than the rule and honest enough to accept:

One tiny action I will try this week:

WORKSHEET 3: NEEDS AND REQUESTS

Needs are not a burden. This worksheet helps you notice what you need and practice asking for it.

What do I most need from the people close to me?

How do I usually ask for it? (Directly, indirectly, silently, not at all?)

What happens when I do not get it?

A need I want to ask for this week:

My request, in one or two sentences:

WORKSHEET 4: TWO TRUTHS

Hold gratitude and grief on the same page. Write as generously and as honestly as you can.

What I am grateful for in my family and upbringing:

What I needed and did not receive:

My two truths, in one sentence each. "I am grateful for... And I still needed...":

WORKSHEET 5: LETTERS

Letters give grief and care a place to land. These letters do not need to be sent.

A letter to the child I was. Begin with "Dear ____ at ____,"

WORKSHEET 5 (CONTINUED): A LETTER TO A PARENT

A letter to a parent, saying what I needed, what I understand now, and what I hope for. This letter does not need to be sent.

What I want to remember when I read this again:

WORKSHEET 6: MY SAFE BASE INVENTORY

Care is made of many things: people, places, practices, and memories. Use this worksheet to see what you already have, and what you would like to build.

People who notice me, even a little:

Places where my body relaxes:

Practices that help me settle (breath, movement, music, nature, prayer):

Memories of being noticed or comforted:

One thing I would like to add this month:

WORKSHEET 7: MONTHLY REVIEW

Once a month, take twenty minutes to look back. Small changes are easy to miss unless you write them down.

What changed this month, even slightly?

Feelings I found words for:

What was hard? What helped?

What am I proud of?

My intention for next month:

APPENDIX K: TWELVE-WEEK PROGRESS TRACKER

Once a week, write one line in each column. Small entries add up to a clear picture of change.

Week	Feeling I noticed	What I needed	What I did
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Week	Feeling I noticed	What I needed	What I did
11			
12			

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ABOUT THE SOURCES

This book draws on research and clinical literature in developmental psychology, attachment science, trauma studies,

emotion regulation, and couple and family therapy. The works listed here represent selected sources that informed the concepts and frameworks discussed in these pages. Readers who wish to explore these subjects further are encouraged to consult the original sources.

This book is educational in nature and is not a substitute for professional mental health care.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hanz Yiglix creates practical educational resources designed to help mental health professionals, educators, and individuals better understand trauma, emotional regulation, and the healing process.

Through research-informed tools, worksheets, and guided exercises, his work focuses on making complex psychological concepts easier to understand and apply in real-world settings.

His goal is to provide clear, accessible resources that support greater awareness, resilience, and meaningful progress on the journey toward healing.