

# On Relationships

A photograph of a brown dog sitting on a wooden chair outdoors. In the foreground, a wooden table holds a coffee cup and headphones. The background shows a building and a fence.

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# Emotional Responsibility 101

Emotional responsibility is like so in right now. It's the hot new craze in... emotions. Everyone who's anyone (who thinks too much about feelings and communication) is talking about it. The miracle drug, the cure-all, healing everyone from the horrors of emotional projection... but also causing horrors of its own.

The emotional responsibility "movement," so to speak, emerged as a remedy to a pattern of behavior that plagues so many interpersonal relationships, that of emotional projection. Projection is the pattern of believing, You are responsible for how I feel, or alternately, I am responsible for how you feel.

The behaviors that typically emerge out of emotional projection include blame, bulldozing, control, demanding, unhealthy attachment, unhealthy dependence, trying too hard to please, guilt tripping, and self-blame.

Emotional responsibility's answer to this pattern is for individuals to step back and step up, saying, I take responsibility for how I feel. Rather than saying, "You make me miserable," the emotionally responsible thing to say is, "I feel misery as a result of this situation." What a wonderful trick, right?

Sometimes... sure. But not so fast. Like emotional projection, emotional responsibility has a helpful side and a harmful side.

### Emotional Projection

At its best: You punch me in the face and I say, "Stop hitting me."

At its worst: I grab your hand, punch myself in the face with it and say, "Stop hitting me."

*I am responsible for how you feel.*

Helpful: I care about you. Your happiness matters to me. I will take actions that make you happy.

Harmful: It is my job to constantly make you happy and alleviate your pain. I will do this even at the expense of my own needs. Everything you feel is my fault. I do not believe you are capable of meeting your needs yourself.

*You are responsible for how I feel.*

Helpful: I understand how your actions impact me, and will be open and honest with you about what I need and how I want to be treated.

Harmful: My happiness is your job and you are the only person who can alleviate my pain. Meet my needs before

your own. Everything I feel is your fault. I am not capable of meeting my needs myself.

### Emotional Responsibility

At its best: I punch myself in the face and you say, "Stop hitting yourself."

At its worst: You grab my hand, punch me in the face with it and say, "Stop hitting yourself."

#### *I am responsible for how I feel.*

Helpful: I understand that my feelings come from all kinds of sources, not just your actions. I have the agency to change my own feelings.

Harmful: No one can help me to feel happy or alleviate pain. I don't need anyone, and no one will be there for me. Everything I feel is my fault. If I can't meet all of my needs, my needs will never be met.

#### *You are responsible for how you feel.*

Helpful: Not everything you feel is something I can change. You have the agency to meet your own needs, and I am not at fault for every single thing you feel.

Harmful: Making you happy or alleviating your pain is not my problem. I can do whatever I want, and whatever you

feel about that your problem. My actions aren't responsible for your pain. Everything you feel is your fault.

## A Reaction to Dependence

Emotional responsibility is really just a belief in emotional independence: my emotions are wholly independent of your actions. Emotional projection is really just a belief in emotional dependence: my emotions are wholly dependent on your actions.

When looked at from this view, it becomes obvious both of these models are sometimes true and both are sometimes false.

It is frightening to me that we've started to dub emotional independence as emotional responsibility. This is so indicative of our time: ours is the era of individuality and figuring out your identity. Ours is also the era of atomization and isolation.

Independence is an understandable and necessary step towards growth from total dependence, but it is a step. It is a movement in the direction of a healthy equilibrium. Healthy balance is the goal.

If you blame others too much, or you take blame for others too much, the helpful side of emotional independence can help you. If you feel isolated and alienated and alone, the helpful side emotional dependence can help you.

Ultimately, independence is no more responsible than dependence, and actual emotional responsibility is interdependent — sometimes independent, sometimes dependent, and almost always a mix of both.

Actual emotional responsibility comes from understanding two things: emotions, and responsibility.

### What Are Emotions?

Emotions are feelings. We typically think of them as distinct from physical feelings, but they are feelings all the same. Feelings arise due to unmet needs. Needs arise due to feelings. The two arise together.

*Example A: I feel cold; I need warmth. I feel cold because I do not feel warm enough. I need to be warmer because I feel too cold.*

*Example B: I feel shame; I need acceptance. I feel ashamed of myself because I do not feel accepted. I need to feel accepted because I feel shame.*

When we talk about emotional feelings, we're talking about emotional needs. The two are inseparable. Needs are only ever feelings or states of being.

“Desires” are tools we use to meet our needs. We often confuse desires and needs. Desires can be interchangeable; needs cannot.

*Example A: I feel cold. I need warmth. I desire a blanket.*

*Interchangeability: A campfire could also work.*

*Example B: I feel shame. I need acceptance. I desire being told I'm accepted.*

*Interchangeability: A comforting smile of approval could also work.*

Emotions are feelings. Feelings arise from needs. Needs arise from feelings. You cannot just stop needing something you need. You cannot stop feeling a feeling without meeting the unmet need. You can usually find multiple methods of meeting your need.

Some needs are easier to meet for yourself than others. Some of us know better than others how to meet our needs for ourselves. Some of us know better than others how to get our needs met by other people. No, none of it is "fair."

### What Is Responsibility?

We usually use responsibility as a synonym for fault. When we say "You're responsible for this," we tend to mean, "You did this. You caused this. Only you can fix it."

Fault doesn't really exist. Everything is interdependent. Everything comes from everything. Everything is influenced by everything. Simplistic cause-and-effect relationships are never the whole truth. Fault is a myth we made up to



justify a world of punishment and reward. Punishment and reward are only useful as far as they change behavior going forward. You cannot undo the past. That isn't how time works. Ultimately, fault is a fantasy.

Responsibility is not the same as fault. Responsibility actually just means "ability to respond."

A thing happened. I cannot make the thing unhappen. That isn't how time works. Now, in this moment, what ability do I have to respond to the thing?

Have you heard the phrase, "With great power comes great responsibility?" It is not that with great power comes being at fault for more stuff. What comes with great power is a heightened ability to respond to things.

True emotional responsibility is about relinquishing questions of fault and looking only at ability to respond to feelings and needs.

### Who Has the Ability to Respond?

As a general rule, we usually have a greater ability to respond to our own needs than we do the needs of others. We usually have a greater ability to respond to our own needs than others do to our needs. However, this heuristic is broken by two things: power imbalance, and lack of conscious power.

## Power Imbalance

If I have power over you in some way, I may well have a greater ability to respond (responsibility) to your needs than you do. For example, parents and children — a parent has a greater ability to respond to their baby's needs than the baby does.

## Lack of Conscious Power

In cases where my ability to make conscious decisions is inhibited, you may have a greater ability to respond (responsibility) to my needs than I do. For example, in the case of addiction — by definition, an addict is someone who does something to the point of their own detriment with no ability to stop themselves from doing it. Other examples include phobias and trauma triggers.

But it's not always this obvious. Sometimes, situations that keep us from being able to respond to our needs are very subtle. For example:

## Subtle Power Imbalance

John is confident. He's handsome, charming, smart, funny. Everyone seems to like him, women fawn over him, and he's never had any problem finding a loving girlfriend. Jane is kind of insecure. She's great in a lot of ways, but she's

dated a lot of assholes, felt used by a lot of men, and she doesn't feel confident in her ability to find a loving boyfriend.

John and Jane start dating. Instantly, there's a kind of power imbalance. If Jane breaks up with him, John believes he'll find love again, no problem. If John breaks up with her, Jane believes she'll never find love again. Jane's insecurity is a problem for John. John's insensitivity is a problem for Jane. Who has the responsibility for (read: ability to respond to) which emotions and needs? To what extent?

#### Subtle Lack of Conscious Power

John's mother was emotionally abusive to him growing up. She repeatedly made him feel unloved, guilty and ashamed of himself, and it always started by her sighing and shaking her head at him. Oh yeah, John's mother was abused by her parents too, by the way.

John is now dating Jane. Jane explains something to John, but he's not getting it. Jane sighs and shakes her head, then begins explaining again. John instantly reacts with anger and fear and snaps at her. Jane gets upset, and now the two are in a big fight. Who has the responsibility for (read: ability to respond to) which emotions and needs? To what extent?

...Not so simple, is it?

## How to Actually Be Emotionally Responsible

There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is Your Feelings.

Ultimately, you are responsible for deciding what you are responsible for. Only you can know what you are able to respond to.

But even your ability to respond to the question, “What am I able to respond to?” may well be limited by power imbalances and/or lack of conscious power. You may be conditioned to think that things are “not your problem” when you very well could help. You may be conditioned to think that you “have to do something” when you very well can’t help. There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is Your Feelings.

What we need to understand from “emotional responsibility” is that we feel things because of situations, not just because of other people’s actions. What we need to understand from “emotional projection” is that people’s actions are integral to creating situations, and a change in actions going forward can lead to a change in the situation. There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is Your Feelings.

Actual emotional responsibility looks like this:

Accept that a situation happened, and now you feel something. Accept what you feel. Accept that you feel it. Accept that you are allowed to feel that way.

Ask yourself what you can do to change the situation going forward. What ability do you have to respond? Ask others for ideas if you need help.

Ask others what they can do to change the situation going forward. What ability do they have to respond? Give them ideas if they need help.

Do the work of working on it.

Yes, this is complicated and difficult. Coming up with simplistic ideas for how emotions work won't make them any less complicated and difficult. There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is your experience itself.

“Emotional responsibility” is not a miracle cure for pain and interpersonal conflict. You will always come across pain. You will always come across tension. You will always come across conflict. Stop trying to avoid them by taking on blame or casting off blame. Blame lives in the Fault paradigm; it is not based in reality.

No one is at fault. Fault doesn't exist. What ability to respond does each person have?

The past cannot be changed. Nothing can be undone. Focus on Now to build the future. Moments of pain, tension and

conflict can become a chance to understand yourself and others better. Do the work of working on it.

So once more, with feeling: There is no consistent right answer. There is no map. There is only ever a compass, and that compass is your experience itself.

## How to Care About People

People in general don't grow up being taught how to care for each other — how to receive each other's feelings, how to hold space for each other, how to make others feel cared for, how to meet our own emotional needs and assist others to meet theirs in mutual aid. So, as someone who really, deeply prioritizes giving care to others, and has been told time and again that I'm pretty good at it, I'm offering a free lesson.

First, I was not born knowing how to care for people. I'm still learning, and I still screw it up a lot of the time. But I want to hit home the point that *this is something I've learned how to do because I've actively tried to*. I've made learning how to care for people well a priority, because I believe it is the most important thing I can do. I know it is, because I've felt firsthand the pain of not feeling cared about by the people in my life over and over and over again, and seen on more macro- levels how a lack of centering care at all levels of social relationships leads to brutality around the world.

So, without further ado, I've written you all a lesson.

Step 1: Don't have people in your life that you don't care about.

This is so obvious that I laugh at even having to say it, but it's actually something not all people understand, or do. I forget it all the time.

If you don't care about someone, don't have them in your life. If you only talk to them to get something from them, don't have them in your life. If you feel obligated to them but don't actually want to be around them, don't have them in your life.

Limit your sphere of association to the people you actually feel caring feelings towards, and focus on caring for those people better. Spoiler alert: you don't have to care about everyone. You won't be able to care about everyone. Quit making time for the people you don't care about, so that you have time for the people you do care about.

*"But what if I need this thing from them and pretending I care is the only way to get it?"* Congratulations, you suck. The new way of being starts with you. Do better.

Step 2: Understand that care is a thing you *do*, not just a thing you *feel*.

As ye olde Massive Attack adage goes, "Love, love is a verb. Love is a doing word." The same is true for care.

You can like someone all you want, but if you don't spend your thoughts or words on them, you don't care. You can



want someone to be happy all you want, but if you don't try to facilitate their happiness, you don't care.

Care without action is emotional masturbation. It's telling yourself you're a caring person but not putting in the work to *be* one. Action is our interface with this world: our movement, our thoughts, our speech, our silence. Other people cannot feel your feelings for you. They can only feel *their* feelings, which are influenced by *your actions*. Use your actions to care.

Step 3: Ask others how they are doing, and listen to their answers.

Ask from a place of genuinely wanting to know. If it's not clear to them whether you're honestly asking or just asking to be polite, make it clear. Go out of your way to make sure the person you're talking to knows that you actually want to know what they are feeling, what their emotional landscape is like in this moment.

If you are asking just to be polite, don't ask. Refer to Step 1.

Step 4: Understand that everyone's feelings make sense.

Even if they don't make sense to you right now.

Regardless of whether or not a feeling is *rational*, it is always *logical*. Rationality does not apply to feelings. A person's feeling is always the result of some cause. There is no such thing as an incorrect feeling. Feelings simply are or are not felt.

Keep this in mind when you talk to people. Validate their feelings. Try to chart back their feelings in your own mind, and express to them that their feelings make sense. If you don't understand where the feeling came from, ask them. Maybe they don't fully understand, and taking the time to ask them will likely make them feel more cared about.

But please, never, ever, ever, say, "Well if I was in your situation, I wouldn't feel that way." Because you're wrong. If you had that person's biology, that person's upbringing, that person's history, that person's experiences, that person's tendencies, and you were in that person's situation, you would feel the same way. Because you would *be* them.

Just because you've experienced something similar *does not mean* you have been in the same situation, because what we feel in a situation includes the whole of who we are and what we have been through up to and including that point.

Step 5: Care for yourself.

Put on your own oxygen mask first.

Think about all the things that other people do that make you feel loved, seen, valued and cared about, and do them for yourself, too. Things like: genuinely asking yourself how you feel, because you want to know. Not giving emotional energy to others when you don't have it to give. Giving time to yourself, giving energy to yourself, giving love to yourself in whatever form that takes.

We often seek support from others when we feel we cannot give it to ourselves. Some pains require external help. You don't go to the hospital for a cut you can treat at home, but when it's a broken leg? Yeah, you'll want a doctor.

One of the best ways to learn how to give care to others is to learn how to give it to yourself. What do you feel? Ask yourself. Be present in what you feel, and validate yourself. Now, what do you need? Help yourself to get it, just as you would for someone you care about.

Step 6: Be present with others in their pain.

Take the phrase "Cheer up" out of your vocabulary. "Cheer up" is the cat-calling of emotional advice. Just as no one has ever gotten a "*Heyyyy mama you look so fine*" and thought "*Wow, I would love to date this person,*" no one who is feeling pain has ever been told to "cheer up" and thought, "*What a great idea, why didn't I think of that?*"

You cannot work your way out of a feeling without going through it. If emotions are a hole, the only tool you have is a

shovel, and that shovel is feeling your dang feelings. You cannot climb out of a hole with a shovel. What you can do is dig until the hole becomes a tunnel. You can ignore your emotions, or distract yourself from them, or drown them in substances, but your feelings will invariably come back, usually as misplaced hostility towards others, or addiction, or hip pain.

You cannot help someone through their pain without being present with them in it. This does not mean taking on their pain as your own; it means directing your attention, your energy, towards the person in the moment and receiving them as they are. Rather than thinking about what to say next, listen. Rather than talking about yourself, listen. Rather than letting your mind wander to what you're eating for dinner tonight, listen. Actively. Watch their face.

Once the pain has been felt and met with presence, then could be the time for advice.

Step 7: Shut up about yourself for a second.

If you've asked someone how they're doing, listen. Don't talk about yourself. If someone's coming to you in pain, listen. Don't talk about yourself.

If you need to set boundaries, like "I can't handle this right now," or, "I'm not the right person for this," then talk about yourself. Please, *please* do so.

But if someone you care about says, “I’m in crisis right now” or “I’m in pain,” or “I’m really sad,” stop saying things along the lines of, “Oh, I was sad yesterday,” or, “When I’m sad is listen to Jordan Peterson” (actual quote from today, and I can’t vomit enough).

If you’ve asked someone how they’re doing, then *this isn’t about you*. It’s about them. There are lots of ways to relate to someone and show that you empathize by talking about yourself, but these come *after you’ve listened*.

Step 8: Find out how others receive care, and care for them accordingly.

There’s a thing I talk about a lot, I call it “language of care.” (Note: since writing this, I’ve learned of the term “Love Language,” which is a similar concept.)

Languages of care work like this: everyone has had a different experience up until this point, and everyone has different associations, and everyone has different things that make them feel cared about. Everyone has different things that make them *not* feel cared about. I have a thing about birthdays. People not doing things for my birthday makes me feel uncared for. People telling me openly and honestly how they feel makes me feel cared for. For others, presents or surprises make them feel cared for. For some, certain words feel caring, and certain words don’t.

Mismatched languages of care are one of the easiest ways to leave the people in your life feeling unloved. You may do things for them that would make you feel cared about, but for the other person, these things fall flat.

How do you know what makes someone else feel cared about? *You ask them.* Maybe they don't even know, but if you ask them, they'll have to think about it and find out. Then, within your own boundaries, show care for them accordingly.

Step 9: The best apology is changed behavior.

If you do something that hurts someone, and they tell you it hurts them, maybe don't do it again.

If you do something that hurts someone, and they tell you it hurts them, and you apologize, promise not to do it again, and then do it again, you suck.

Pro tip: hurting someone's feelings is not the same as doing something wrong. Don't apologize for anything you don't genuinely feel bad about doing.

If you actually feel bad about something, try your hardest to not do it again. Seek help in not doing it again. If you are not putting in the work to change your behavior after hurting someone, any apology you give is hollow lip-service at best, and at worst, an abject lie that just keeps the other person

in a cycle of pain believing things might be different this time.

Step 10: Give care because you care.

Not because you expect immediate reciprocity. Not because you think you “should.” Not because you’re tired of dealing with a crying friend, or a depressed roommate, or a despondent lover. Do not care for people because you want to change them. If you’re just trying to change them, you don’t actually care about them, as they are now. You’re just trying to be rid of them as they are now.

Instead, give care *because you care*.

Make the people in your life feel cared about because you *feel care for them*. Make the people in your life feel loved because you *love them*.

The point of this all is to have your actions reflect your authentic feelings — to stop things from getting lost in translation between feeling and action — so that the people in your life know that you care about them. If you don’t care about them, refer to Step 1, and apply the rest of these steps for the people you *do* care about.

Because God damn it, y’all are precious, and beautiful, and so, so special. So please, treat each other accordingly. Don’t let a day go by that someone you love feels unloved. Don’t

let a day go by that someone you care about feels uncared for.

Start prioritizing learning how to give care. Learn how to care more, and care better. Lives depend on it.



## How to Meet Your (Real) Needs

A few months ago, I replaced cigarettes with rock music. These days, when I get in the car or go for a walk and I'm feeling a little low, I throw on some aviators, blast Dorothy or All Them Witches and let the waves of electric badassery wash over me until my nerves are sufficiently cooled. That's what cigarettes always did for me: they cooled me off. They gave me this cloud of protection from vulnerability. If I felt stressed or emotional or claustrophobic, I could go outside, light a cigarette and wall myself off from the world behind a hazy barrier that left me feeling, well... cool.

There's a song I've been listening to a lot called "[The Marriage of Coyote Woman](#)," because it feels just like smoking a cigarette. The sound of the music curls around me in charcoal gray wisps, with a dry, sleek ruggedness I can only describe as the musical equivalent of a light blue American Spirit. But more than the song itself, listening to it makes me feel protected, wrapped up in a cloud of that same dry, sleek ruggedness. I feel cool. I feel less vulnerable, less exposed, more protected.

This isn't just about music, of course. The [ability of wearing sunglasses to create a sense of power is well-documented](#). Wearing certain clothes can make us feel confident or vulnerable, professional or relaxed, secure or embarrassed. The view of Yosemite Valley tends to inspire a rather different emotional response than, say, a Walmart parking

lot on Long Island. Certain foods might not do much to physically nourish us, but they remind us of childhood or a tropical vacation or a holiday. As mammals, we live by [conditioned](#) associations. We tend to like and seek out the things we associate with happiness, safety, connection or enjoyment, and avoid those we associate with less-desirable emotions.

Many of our problems arise when we start pursuing the things we associate with positive feelings, regardless of whether or not they still produce positive feelings. This blurring of the line between what we associate, and what we associate it with, is arguably the main source of suffering in our lives. This act of confusion produces cravings for certain things and the corresponding belief that we need those things in order to experience satisfaction.

The truth is, what we actually need is only ever a state of being, either physical or emotional.

If you are too cold, you do not need a blanket, or a campfire, or a heater, or the sun. You need warmth. You need to be in a state of experiencing more warmth. If you are too isolated, you do not need a girlfriend, or a night out, or a kitten. You need connection. You need to be in a state of experiencing more connection. Even the need for a particular vitamin is a need for a state of being; holding a bottle of Vitamin D supplements in your hand won't help you if you're deficient. You need to be in the state of having adequate Vitamin D in your body.

Depending on the need, we might be more or less able to see it clearly for what it is. For instance, when it comes to cold, or hunger, or the need to pee, I'd wager most of us are more adept at understanding those needs directly as physical states. I may prefer a sanitary toilet, but if I'm on a long drive and there aren't any of those around, I'll squat in the woods no problem.

We tend to be less adept at this when it comes to more emotional needs, like respect, self-worth, belonging, connection or trust. For example, how many of us have found ourselves miserable because our need for love and connection wasn't being met by the one specific person we had in mind? How many of us have stayed in jobs we hate because the paycheck gave us a sense of self-worth? How many of us have denied our authentic selves to conform for a sense of belonging?

Everything we do, we do to meet our needs. The problem comes in when we think that what we're doing is the need, rather than a strategy to meet it.

The second Noble Truth of Buddhism typically gets explained as, "The root cause of suffering is desire." The original words are *dukkha* (suffering, anguish, unsatisfactoriness) and *tanhā* (thirst, longing, craving), so a more precise explanation would be something like, "The root cause of the anguish of never being satisfied is craving." Craving is what you do when you have an addiction. To me, it is simply the act of believing that the strategy you use to meet your need is the need itself.

When we understand that our needs are simply states of being, they become far easier to meet. Rather than limit ourselves to one or a few options to meet our needs, once we understand what state it is that we actually need to be in, we can open ourselves to far more possible paths to get there. Likewise, when the strategy we have chosen to meet our needs is harmful to us, understanding what we actually need can help us find healthier strategies.

Coming to this understanding is not always easy, because it's so alien to how most of us typically go through life, but it is a very simple process. The spiritual teacher Teal Swan says, "To heal is to experience the opposite." From a biological perspective, understanding need as a state of being, this becomes obvious: when we are too far to one side of our ideal state of homeostasis, we need to move in the opposite direction to reach homeostasis. So, whatever state of being you find yourself in that feels "bad" tells you that you need to move towards the opposite state of being in order to feel "good."

Simply put: What kind of bad do you feel? What's the opposite of that feeling? You now know what you need. Now, come up with as many strategies as you can to meet that need, focusing on strategies that are healthy for you and your community, and that you can take action on now. It really is simple. Again: just because it's simple does not mean it's easy.

This practice can be difficult first because we typically have several needs at a given time. We might be feeling bored,

hungry, lonely and worthless all at once, and so, we might think going out to dinner with a cute new date is the only way to meet all of our needs. But what if we ate a sandwich, did an interesting activity, called a friend and learned a new skill instead? Then, we might feel full and nourished, inspired, connected and worthy too.

The second thing that inhibits us from meeting our needs is our conditioning: we are used to certain patterns of behavior, certain ways of framing problems, certain thought habits, and so we may not notice that there are other ways to meet our needs. We may not even be able to notice what our needs are. The process of dislodging yourself from unconscious, conditioned patterns of thinking and behaving does not typically happen overnight. It can take years (some yogis would say lifetimes), but making the commitment to chip away at it, bit by bit, to come to greater consciousness is probably the single best thing you can do for yourself.

Finally, some of our associations come along with physical withdrawal symptoms, from the kinds of relationships to substances we'd scientifically diagnose as addiction. In quitting smoking, or alcohol, or heroin — the process is going to be difficult and physically painful. However, the physical withdrawals for most addictions pass quickly, in a matter of weeks at most. It's the psychological craving — the emotional state that we used to meet with that habit continuing to go unmet— that's what reels us back in.

What I know from experience is that nicotine withdrawals are tough, but the worst is really over after a few days. After two weeks, any craving left is psychological, and from there, the emotional needs that smoking was meeting for me can be understood, assessed, and met. The truth is, I never needed a cigarette; I just needed to feel safe and confident. So it's out with the American Spirits, in with the sunglasses and rock n' roll.

No matter what our addiction, no matter how little it looks to us like an addiction, this pattern holds true: the less we fixate on the specific things we crave, the easier our needs are to satisfy. The act of freeing ourselves from addictive relationships to ideas or forms — it's also an act of reaching homeostasis, moving us away from states of powerlessness and suffering and towards states of satisfaction, agency, consciousness, abundance and flow.

Whatever our craving, we're all in recovery, taking it one step at a time. It's not easy, but it is simple.

## The Distorted Mirror Phenomenon

As much as I say I love my body, I'm a former bulimic and 20-something woman in America, so let's get real: my body-love is not yet unconditional. In the past few months, between Covid and winter and general existential malaise, I've put on a bit of weight. Not much, I don't think... or didn't think, until I went to stay in an apartment with a full-length mirror.

I realized it was the first time I'd looked in a full-length mirror in months, and what I saw staring back at me was not what I'd hoped to see. I knew I'd gained a few pounds, but this reflection was well over the edge of what my body-insecure psyche found acceptable. Try as I might to just shrug it off, the image of my now-ballooning thighs infected me. In unrelated moments, I'd find myself wracking my brain for what I could've eaten so wrong. Was it just bloat? How had the miles and miles of cycling led to this? Why hadn't I done enough to stave off the worst?

As I was preparing to leave that apartment, an idea occurred to me. I stood up on a stool and looked at my body in a different mirror, and I laughed. There, staring back, was an entirely different reflection. Not quite my perfectly-toned biker bod of the autumn, but something more what I'd expected: a bit of extra fluff, but otherwise still pretty hot by my standards. The full-length mirror was just distorted.

And it hit me like a rubber chicken to the face that this was all, y'know, a metaphor. Bear with me:

Every person we meet reflects us back to ourselves. We compare ourselves to them. We measure our qualities against theirs, analyzing how our desired traits and our shortcomings match up. Other people's reactions to us are our cues for how to behave. We see in their responses where we might want to tweak our behavior, or where we want to tweak theirs. We assess ourselves through our relationships. It's natural, and I'd say it's inevitable until such a time as we've all fully disidentified from our Egos and reached Nirvana.

The problem with this, of course, is that no person is going to show you an honest reflection, not through any fault of their own, but because the human experience is fundamentally subjective and conditioned. Every person you encounter will see you filtered through their own past experiences and corresponding judgments. To make matters worse, you will see your reflection in them through your own past experiences and judgments, too.

The distorted mirror in that apartment did not reflect back to me that I was a worthless sack of mold. It didn't even say whether or not I was physically attractive. It was my own judgment that saw an unexpected wideness of the thighs as an obliteration of my own value. I believed in that bizarre judgment like it had something to do with reality. It didn't. It never does.



The thing is, not one of these relational reflections — either the judgments and behavior of others, or your own interpretation of those judgments — can ever be objective. Anything anyone says about you is a filtered perspective, which you are then filtering through your own perspective. Ultimately, all of it means what you decide it does. What you decide it means is conditioned, too.

So often, we spend quite a lot of time staring at ourselves in mirrors that distort us negatively. Rather than gravitate towards reflections of ourselves we enjoy being around, we'll get hung up on the ones we don't, as though through sheer force of will we can negotiate with them into showing us something different.

When we talk about this phenomenon with literal mirrors, it's clear how absurd it is to try to change the reflection. When it comes to relationships, though, we take the reflections personally, especially when those reflections come from the very people we're supposed to be able to rely on for unconditional positive regard. In my experience, very few people engage in truly unconditional love, and fewer still can sustain it long-term. Everything about us is conditioned; our love is conditioned, too. Bit by bit, we can start to disentangle ourselves from our harmful conditioning.

To clarify, that process does not begin with berating yourself for trying to change your reflection in an unflattering mirror. Why wouldn't you have tried? It's perfectly natural to want to be regarded positively, or at

least accurately, and the accurate truth of your character is never that you're some kind of hideous swamp creature. Your intentions always come from love, for yourself or others, and you are always doing your authentic best in each moment. That does not absolve you of responsibility for how you impact others, but it does mean that any judgment of your core essence as inherently bad is just plain inaccurate.

Instead of using all this mirror talk as another excuse to punish yourself, you can use it as an invitation to start shifting your relationship to the mirrors in your life. This practice typically takes two forms: you can change what you do in response to a negative reflection, and you can reallocate the time you give to different mirrors to improve the overall quality of your reflections.

First, understand that most of our judgments are unconscious. We're not often aware when we're making judgments, or why, and we easily mistake our subjective judgments for objective reality. We also didn't consciously consent to have most of the judgments we have. They were ingrained into us from infancy, by our families, cultures, media, schools, countries, religions — in sum, they could've come from anywhere. An unconscious judgment always comes from somewhere other than you. While you can't necessarily snap your fingers and change the distortion in the mirror, [you can start the process of changing what that distorted image means to you.](#)

Second, you can consciously practice looking in different mirrors. Some people won't get you. They won't like you. They literally just won't vibe, and it literally has nothing to do with you. But if they're the mirror you're looking in every day, you're almost certainly going to start thinking it has everything to do with you. Many of us take an unflattering mirror as an unconscious motivator to change the reflection, rather than an obvious sign to walk away. This is normal, but like any unconscious habit, it can be broken with conscious attention and effort.

If you struggle with this, I recommend making the act of walking away from unflattering mirrors a conscious practice, and prioritize it the way you might prioritize quitting an addiction. Commit to changing the habit, remind yourself about it every day, reward yourself for progress, and adjust your other habits and relationships as needed to make breaking this habit easier on yourself. You probably aren't in the position to ditch every unflattering relational mirror you have right now, and that's okay. Start practicing it when and where you can now, and let the process build slowly over time.

Last, only after you've gotten some distance from the most distorted and unflattering reflections is it time to start assessing whether you might want to change what you're putting in front of the mirror. You are not going to make any accurate assessments of your own behavior while you're fully immersed in other people's negative judgments of you. The changes you make to yourself from this place

will almost invariably hurt you, because they'll be driven by self-loathing and a desire to appease someone else's unrelated trauma.

After you've walked away and done the healing to revisit yourself without someone else's filters in mind, that is when you might see where they could've had a point or two. Changes you make from this space just feel different. Changing your own behavior becomes about creating joy for yourself; cultivating positive responses in your relationships becomes an act of self-love, rather than an act of self-flagellation.

You likely have people in your life who reflect you in ways that help you to love yourself more. Their reflections of you are just as accurate as any reflections that look a bit more critical. If you take but one thing from this article, let it be this: no one's opinions of you can possibly be objective, so you might as well stop using those as your gold standard.

Your response to other people's negative judgments isn't going to shift overnight, but with time and attentive practice, it will. The sooner you start making the change, the sooner the change will be made. Then, the point of mirror-gazing can be seen accurately for what it is: to experience art, rather than to obey subjective and arbitrary judgments. When we stop believing that judgments can be accurate, the panoply of relational mirrors in our lives feels more like a funhouse, and relating gets a lot more fun.

## Emotional Responsibility 201

What we call “emotional responsibility,” or saying, “I take responsibility for how I feel and don’t blame you for it” is rooted in a belief that our feelings are independent of someone else’s actions. What we call “emotional projection,” or saying “You take responsibility for how I feel and I do blame you for it” is rooted in a belief that our feelings are dependent on someone else’s actions.

Both are true. Neither is the point of emotional responsibility. Responsibility just means “ability to respond” to a given situation. We cannot change the past. All we can choose is how we respond to what is happening now, and we all have different abilities to respond to a given situation. Having power over others creates a greater ability to respond. Circumstances that cause someone to be out of control of their own emotional responses — such as being triggered, phobic or addicted — limit one’s ability to respond.

We typically think of “responsibility” as two things: fault, and duty. But neither fault, nor duty, actually exist. All that exists is ability to respond.

Fault Doesn’t Exist, Because We Are Dependent

So here's the thing... fault doesn't actually exist. No one is completely at fault for causing anything. At all. Ever. Everything causes everything.

Let's say a man murders a woman in cold blood. Pre-meditated, the whole kit and caboodle. Cut and dry, right? But that murderer faced years of traumatic childhood abuse, and never had health insurance and therefore couldn't go to therapy, and was conditioned by a system of patriarchy that, combined with other factors in his life, made him hate women and blame them for his own pain. The guy who cut him off in traffic on his way to the woman's house didn't crash into him and kill him. A hundred thousand circumstances arose along the way that, perhaps if they had been responded to differently, would have averted the murder.

*Whose fault is it?*

We create, or at least curate, our own realities. We are also *not* in complete control over them. Sometimes we are victims of circumstances, and sometimes we are conscious creators of our circumstances. Even if you chalk up poverty to an unconscious resistance to abundance, as long as that resistance remains unconscious, you might as well call it capitalism.

On an emotional level, a victim is someone who feels disempowered and unable to change their circumstances.

We are all, in some ways, victims of circumstance. We didn't even consciously choose to be alive. We didn't consciously choose where we were born, we didn't decide our families, we didn't choose to be abused, oppressed, starved, imprisoned, raped, beaten, or impoverished.

There are some in the spiritual world who would say we do choose into our incarnations, to which I can only say: maybe? but as long as that choice remains *feeling* unconscious while we're in these incarnations, you might as well call it random.

Everyone is, in some ways, a victim: out of control, powerless, helpless.

### Duty Doesn't Exist, Because We Are Independent

Everyone is, in some ways, an agent: in control, powerful, responsible. Response-able. Able to respond. That's all responsibility means.

Duty doesn't actually exist either. You are not actually obligated to do anything, at all, ever. No one can completely force you to do something in exactly the way they want you to. Even if someone grabs your arm and punches you in the face with it, they cannot control what you're thinking or looking at while they do it. Nobody has complete power over anyone else. No one is entirely dependent.

No one is actually obligated to do anything. Laws and rules just make it more difficult to do or not do things, so they condition our behavior towards doing certain things and not doing others.

But we still *feel* obligated. We still *feel* duty. The feeling of it is real, even if the thing itself isn't. The closest thing we actually have to obligation is to meet our own needs. We are not independent of our urges to meet our needs. When starving, we cannot just stop trying to eat. When cold, we cannot just stop trying to get warm. When isolated, we cannot just stop trying to find connection. If we stop, we'll die. No one is entirely independent.

You're probably thinking — *slow down, Ayn Rand! You're only responsible to your Rational Self-Interest, is that what you're getting at here?*

No! What I'm getting at is an actual understanding of power to meet needs, and what that says about responsibility. We are not independent; we are interdependent. We do not always have the greatest ability to respond to our own needs. We can be limited by power and by consciousness.

## Power and Consciousness

People have different levels of power over each other. Parents have more power than children. Governments and rich people have more power than citizens and poor people.



People have different levels of consciousness in their actions. Not every action is taken deliberately from a reasonable frame of mind. Some people have strong emotional responses to certain triggers, some people have strong phobias, some people have compulsions or addictions. Everyone has some form of trigger that causes heightened responses, and everyone has some form of power over another person, even if the situations aren't as cut-and-dry as the examples above.

### The Bugs and the Beez

Many of my neighbors in Oakland live in tents on the sidewalk. Many of them want houses but can't afford them. Many of them lost housing due to rising costs of living in the East Bay and houseless people being driven out of San Francisco and the situation may have been compounded through mental health difficulties or addictions or other factors, and at the end of the day: houses cost money. They don't have very much money.

Jeff Bezos has more money than anybody else. Jeff Bezos has a greater ability to respond to their want for houses than they do. Jeff Bezos could buy every unhoused person in Oakland a house, in Oakland, and still have plenty of money left over to clone his penis and express ship it to the moon or whatever it is he's doing now. To my knowledge, Jeff Bezos has yet to buy any of my neighbors a house. He probably doesn't feel like it's his duty to, but duty doesn't

exist. He hasn't bought anyone a house, and neither has Warren Buffett, and neither have the Koch brothers, and neither has the City of Oakland, and the harm done by precarious living situations continues.

My old roommate had a phobia of bed bugs: an irrationally strong fear of a particular stimulus. This was in Brooklyn, and she's had three disgusting bug infestations to date. It makes sense, even if it now has become irrational. I bought a bunch of used furniture because it was cheap, but it was a bit gross. I checked it for bed bugs and there weren't any. All the same, she had an anxiety attack and refused to let me bring it in the house.

At first I was angry at her for being so irrational, until I realized that she was not able to consciously control her response. It's a phobia, it's not supposed to be rational. Instead of punishing her, I left the furniture outside, let her calm down, and asked if she'd help me pay for new furniture at Ikea as she had more money than I did. She said yes, we had a lovely trip to Ikea together, and the situation was resolved. It wasn't her duty, and it wasn't her fault, and we both accepted responsibility (our ability to respond) and the harm was remedied as we moved forward.

What these examples have in common is that they focus not on fault or duty, both of which don't exist, but on ability to respond to the situation.

Jeff Bezos has more money, and therefore, more power to take actions. He is more able to respond. My roommate had a phobia, and therefore, less ability to be conscious in her actions. She was less able to respond.

## Beyond Punishment and Reward

Responsibility is ultimately about relationships: who responds to whom, and how. Society is a whole bunch of relationships. Societal “rules” and “systems” arise from, and also condition, these relationships. You could think about systems and personal relationships like gravity and mass — with mass arises gravity, and gravity influences the behavior of mass. When lots of personal relationships arise, so do systems, systems influence the behavior of people across those relationships. Like planets, I don’t think people are always conscious of when and how they create systems. Unlike planets, people have the capacity to become aware of what the systems are conditioning them to do, and to use their actions to unlearn that systemic conditioning and work to build something different.

As we grow more conscious of our thoughts and actions, we have more power to shape ourselves and our surroundings.

Not only is our legal system of “justice” a system, but our ideas about what justice is are also a system: a pattern of behavior that goes on to shape behavior. Our systems condition, but do not entirely control, our behavior.

The question is — What kinds of behavior do we want our systems to encourage?

If one of my unhoused neighbors stole an iPad from a car, should they go to jail? They cannot stop needing to meet their needs. Those needs include things that require money, times being what they are. They don't have much money. Their housing precarity vastly reduces their ability to get a steady, paying job. Perhaps the iPad was their only tool to get their needs met. Perhaps the iPad was in a Tesla that belonged to Jeff Bezos, who could lose that iPad but still have enough money to buy millions of iPads, upload photos of his penis to all them, and express ship them all to the moon.

*Who is able to respond, and in what ways?*

Our fallacious belief in fault and duty has given us a fixation on punishment and reward. We believe that responsibility lies in the past, in what we should have done differently, instead of where it actually lies: here, in the present.

The deed is done. The harm has been suffered. Now zoom out to look at the greater picture. Where did the harm come from? What was the harm? Who was harmed? Was it only the "victim," or is it more complex than that?

But most importantly: what can be addressed now to reduce the impact of that harm and prevent it from continuing or worsening in the future?

This is the philosophy behind “transformative justice”: *transforming* the harm done to the betterment of all, rather than laying fault at the feet of one point in an infinite data set, slapping an arbitrary punishment down and calling it justice.

If we must have laws and rules, then why do they focus so strongly on further punishing those already disempowered by an unfair crapshoot incarnation lottery? Which is a better use of our property laws: housing, feeding and caring for all people and the planet, or ensuring Jeff Bezos can maintain enough money to send his penis to the moon (or whatever else he may want to do with more money than half of the planet combined)?

## Why We Play the Victim

There are exactly two reasons why a person views themselves as “the victim” in their own life story:

Reason One: They’re Ego-driven, immature, sniveling cowards who cannot take responsibility for themselves or how their thoughts and actions are shaping their circumstances. If only they’d do a Law of Attraction meditation, read *The Secret*, get off of the couch and go to 6 AM Vinyasa Flow, they’d quickly learn they have complete control over their reality and all of this victimhood nonsense is a coping mechanism for their Ego. But not you, Brenda — you are fully in control of your life, Brenda. You are not a victim.

Reason Two: They’re actual victims who aren’t in control of their circumstances. They’ve genuinely been dealt a tougher hand by the crapshoot incarnation lottery. Decisions over which they had no control caused some parts of life to be much harder for them than they might be for you. Big or small, most of their pain directly stems from capitalism, racism, sexism, childhood trauma, etc., and there’s absolutely no hope for their lives because they have no agency whatsoever to shape society at large or change

what happened to them, so we might as well lie down and wait for climate change to kill us all, Brenda.

Look, Brenda: Both of these attitudes towards victimhood are bullshit, because both of them are true.

We are all subject to forces beyond our control, many of which have the power to profoundly shape our own lived experiences. We are also the primary curators (if not outright creators) of our lived experiences, and we too have the power to profoundly shape our own lived experiences. At any given moment, both statements are true.

This does not mean that, in any given circumstance, both statements will be equally helpful to someone's feelings.

Let's play a game:

Your friend Brenda just got fired. Her landlord wants to raise her rent. Her grandma is terminally ill. Her dog just ran away. And worst of all, her boyfriend wants to move to Portland.

Which of the following responses will help Brenda cope with the situation?

Option A: I'm so sorry for you, Brenda. I don't understand how this can all be happening to you. You don't deserve

this. It's so unfair. I mean getting fired was bad enough, and now Portland? I don't know how you deal with it. I wish the universe would cut you a break; you've dealt with enough!

Option B: I can't wait to see how you turn this around, Brenda. You're so strong, I know you'll pull through. You have so much power to make your life the life you want it to be. You take action against that landlord and organize your neighbors into a tenant's union! You've got the power to make something awesome out of all of this!

The answer is, obviously, that both responses are obnoxious and Brenda has every right to punch you for trying either one verbatim. But the point is, which direction Brenda should be encouraged to go right now depends entirely on where Brenda is right now.

The downside of feeling empowered is that it's easy to also feel at fault for one's situation. After all, if we have the power to change our situation, that means that if our situation continues to be painful, we are (at least in part) responsible for making it so. We may have the power, but we also have the responsibility.

The upside of feeling disempowered is that it's easy to also feel innocent of one's own pain and absolved from causing it. After all, if we have no power to change our situation, that means that if our situation continues to be painful, at



least it isn't our fault, so we don't have to add guilt on top of this. We may not have the power, but at least we don't have the responsibility.

A harmonious human psyche, like a harmonious human body, is one in equilibrium. Whenever we have feelings and needs, we are out of equilibrium, and we pursue the meeting of our needs to put us back in equilibrium. Feeling hunger? Eating food moves us towards equilibrium. Feeling shame? Experiencing unconditional acceptance moves us towards equilibrium. We are constantly moving in the direction of equilibrium, then getting knocked out of it again, then moving once more in the direction of balance. This is, as they say, "life."

Naturally, the direction we must move in to reach equilibrium depends entirely on where we start in relation to equilibrium.

When it comes to questions of agency, victimhood, and responsibility, the truth is always both. We are, in some ways, powerful, and in other ways, powerless. We are the creators of our own experience, just like everyone else, and their experiences tend to bump into ours from time to time and thus change our experience, and vice versa.

Within, Without, Within, Without

This is where I tend to differ from some strictly “spiritual” thinkers, especially those who have a resolute view that we create our own reality. Yes, we do create our own reality, but our reality also creates us. Our reality includes all kinds of structures and systems that shape our experiences, structures and systems that we did not consciously create or consent to be conditioned by, and over which we alone cannot exercise total control.

Maybe we do fully create our realities, but if that process of creation is not wholly conscious, who, really is doing the creating? Not our conscious selves. We can exercise as little control over our unconscious selves as we can over forces outside of us. Until such a time as we apply our direct attention to understanding how those forces shape us and work to change them, we are powerless relative to them.

You can chalk up the root of your poverty to an unconscious resistance to abundance all you want, but if the source of that resistance remains forever unconscious, you might as well call it Capitalism.

In sum:

Yes, it’s all in your head.

External reality is all in your head too.

Your head is also all in external reality.

Like an infinite loop of Russian dolls.

Where you position yourself within the loop changes what it looks like to you, but ultimately, it's always still the same loop containing everything and nothing.

Everything is you.

Nothing is under control.

Don't panic.

The point is — which story you tell yourself depends on what you're lacking. If you're lacking power, and you need a feeling of empowerment, acting as though you're the creator of your own reality will move you in the direction of equilibrium. If you're stuck in guilt and shame, and you need a feeling of absolution, acting as though you're the victim of external circumstances will move you in the direction of equilibrium.

Victimhood: It's About Time

What if I told you that you are both able to change your situation, but you can never stop it from having been what it was?

The “negative” aspects of the victim / change agent dichotomy come from a misunderstanding of time and responsibility. You can always change your situation. You can never go back in time and stop your situation from becoming what it now is. Your situation happened because

it happened. An infinity of variables went into creating a universe of circumstances so that your situation happened the way it did. It's also entirely possible that linear time doesn't exist, the past is a constructed memory, the future is a constructed fantasy, and all that exists is Now.

We mix up responsibility with fault. Responsibility means nothing more or less than "ability to respond."

Whether or not time exists, you cannot be responsible in the past. You have no ability to respond in the past. You can only respond Now. Right now, you have the ability to respond to your circumstances. Nothing you do now can change what happened then that led you to Now.

You-in-the-past is always a victim.

There's nothing you-in-the-present can do to change the past.

Right here, now, you do have the ability to respond to your situation. You may not be able to fully stop some massive mental or emotional pain, but you can always choose how to respond and shift something in your experience, or your thoughts, or your actions.

Sitting around heartbroken? Not anymore! Now you can be heartbroken while standing on one foot. You can be heartbroken while eating a carrot. You have that ability.

It may seem trite, but taking small responsibilities can go on to teach us greater responsibility and increase our ability to respond, like the ability to shift our thought

patterns, to change our habitual behaviors, and ultimately create for ourselves completely different life outcomes. All possible circumstances we face in the future come from what we do right now in the present.

The only time you can be responsible is Now.

*What do you do with Now?*

Well, the question is, where do you need to go? What side of equilibrium are you stuck on? Too much guilt or too much powerlessness? Too much self-blame for the past or too much disempowerment about the future?

You are a victim, in the sense of a powerless object of external forces, in every single moment but one: this one. In this moment, the only thing you can do is respond to your circumstances. You have the ability to respond. You are responsible. You are creating change.

Your response is just that: a response. What feeling are you responding to? What need are you trying to meet?

It's a compass, not a map.

## The End of Guilt

Being blamed for a problem is a painful experience. Blaming ourselves for a problem is also a painful experience. We sometimes seek acute respite from those pains by blaming someone else for our problems — though, doing that usually ends up with us feeling more pain. Why? Because we can't control other people; just because we blame them for the problem doesn't mean they'll fix it.

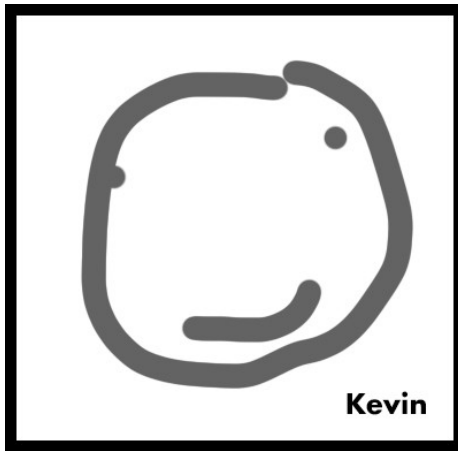
The only way to get out of this kind of pain is to stop casting blame altogether, and that's... easier said than done.

I am not writing this because I think casting blame is wrong. I am writing it because casting blame is painful. Just because something is painful doesn't mean it is objectively or morally wrong, but all the same, being in an experience of pain can often inhibit us from making something right. Beyond this, let's temporarily suspend our attachment to right and wrong for the duration of this essay.

One of the main reasons we don't release blame at other people is that we think that unless they are at fault, we must be at fault. The other person has to be wrong or bad or evil or sinful or something — because if they aren't, then we are. This all stems from the fallacy that, for something to be painful, it needs to be somebody's fault. Even though this is a fallacy, telling a wounded mind to just release all

conception of fault or guilt has this tendency of not working whatsoever.

Fortunately, there is another way. Allow me to introduce Kevin:



This is Kevin. Kevin is the ultimate avatar of guilt.

Look at his stupid face. His eye is practically falling off of his head. He doesn't even have a nose. You can tell he's never had a thought in his life, certainly not one about your wellbeing. That face just screams the kind of blasé evil that isn't even aware of how evil it is. It is pure, unrepentant guilt.

Everything bad that has ever happened is Kevin's fault. That's the rule of Kevin, because Kevin is guilt itself.

Now, when you have a conflict that causes pain, you know who is truly to blame: Kevin. You're not at fault. The person you're in conflict with isn't at fault. The totality of the Universe isn't at fault. It's Kevin's fault. Kevin is guilt incarnate.

Because Kevin is the only entity in the universe that can truly be guilty, you can send Kevin to jail. Out of the picture. Rot in hell, you vapid, noseless bastard. Be gone with you. With that, triumphant, you have solved the pain of the situation: Kevin, the very essence of guilt, is gone.

Now, without Kevin clouding up the picture with his guilty, faulty ways, you have some chance at actually resolving the conflict. The reparative, transformative, empathetic healing process can begin. You can see the loving intentions in your own actions. You can see the loving intentions in your counterpart's actions. You can begin to empathize, with yourself and with them, and create connection and communication out of what before had been a microcosm of war.

Instead of flinging guilt back and forth at one another like meatballs in a food fight, instead of casting it upon yourself or upon another like a magical curse, you can put guilt right where guilt belongs: on Kevin's stupid face. Really, it's Kevin's fault. Kevin is guilt itself. Your mind still has someone to blame, but it's not you, and it's not the person you're trying to resolve a conflict with.



It's just Kevin. Damn you, Kevin. It's all your fault. But now you, and whoever or whatever you find yourself in conflict with, can begin the process of healing.

Now, this is not to say that nothing is ever right or wrong. We are temporarily suspending our attachment to right and wrong, just for the duration of this essay, remember? Without right and wrong, and guilt or fault for doing wrong, the real essence of justice can be seen as healing. Injustice is a break, a wound, a fracture, causing pain like a broken bone. Without guilt, we see that injustice is mended with healing. There is no healing in vengeance. Healing is transformation through empathy and inclusion. Empathy is the act of truly understanding, inclusion the act of love.

I think it truly is possible to create reparative transformation without guilt, fault or blame — at least, not on any person. But Kevin isn't a person. Kevin is guilt incarnate.

So if you find yourself in a conflict, and you can't get out of the spiral of guilt and blame, powerlessness and shame, stick your foot out to catch yourself before you drown. Stick it out right onto Kevin's stupid face, and shove his guilty ass down so you can leverage yourself back up. It's really all guilt's fault.

# When Someone Says “You Create Your Own Suffering”

This essay is for people who don't understand each other. Specifically, it's for people who are going down a path towards seeing themselves as the cause of their own pain, and anyone else who feels pain about someone doing that. The lessons of this essay can be applied to any relationship where understanding and empathy have broken down, but they certainly don't have to be applied to anything. All of this is voluntary.

## Introduction: So You Had A Bad Day

To start all this off, we need to talk about validation. My understanding of validation comes from dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT); it was one of the first things I learned in therapy, and it's the cornerstone of creating genuine understanding between people. Validation is the act, the active practice, of explaining to yourself (and perhaps the other person) why that person's experience is valid.

Why does their perspective make sense? Why do their feelings make sense? Why does their personal experience of the situation make sense for them to be experiencing?

Rather than judging whether or not someone's perspective, emotions and experience are right, you are understanding why they are valid.

Invalidation is essentially the pain of feeling like you live in like a different reality from someone else. It's like they're telling you, "Your feelings aren't okay. They're not allowed. You're not allowed to be feeling them. Your perspective is wrong, and you're not allowed to have it. Your experience of reality is incorrect." And it happens all the time, in major and minor ways.

For example, you know that feeling when you've just had a bad day? When in general, life might be totally fine, but today was just bad? And you tell a friend about all the things that went wrong today, and they say, "Oh come on, your life is great. Cheer up! You've got nothing to be upset about." They may say this with the kindest of intentions, just wanting to help you feel better, but it comes across as pretty damn unhelpful and invalidating. So you're left thinking: "I just told you all the things I've got to be upset about, and yes, I am perfectly aware that my life is otherwise fine, but at the moment, I'm feeling crappy about a crappy day. Is that not allowed?"

At best, their reaction doesn't help you feel better, and at worst, it's another reason to feel worse, because on top of your crappy day, you're now being invalidated about it.

## Part 1: Two Guys Walk into an Old Catholic Lady

To understand why someone else's experience is valid, there are two places you can look. The first is in understanding that person's history: their particular past experiences, beliefs, traumas, treasures, and patterns. The second is in understanding that behavior and emotions always come from somewhere. In order for someone to be feeling what they are now, there had to have been something that caused it, or it wouldn't be happening. No emotion comes from nothing; emotions are responses.

For example, let's say Bill had an abusive mother who was Catholic. Later in life, Bill talks to an older woman who's Catholic, and experiences her as mean and judgmental, her overall demeanor as threatening. Bill's friend Kevin meets this same woman, behaving the same way in the same situation, and views her as perfectly nice. Kevin might not understand whatsoever why Bill would have the reaction he's having. To Kevin, Bill's perspective on this woman is downright wrong. But understanding Bill's history with his abusive Catholic mother might explain why he's having such a negative response to this Catholic woman now.

Regardless of whether or not this Catholic woman is actually nice, it makes perfect sense that Bill might be perceiving her as mean and threatening, because he's associating this current situation with past trauma. The feelings he's having right now, of fear or discomfort or

wanting to get away from this woman — these feelings make perfect sense. They're valid. And to add insult to injury, let's say that nobody believed Bill as a child when he told other people that his mother was hitting him. They told him that his experience of what was happening wasn't really happening. And now, Kevin, you're gonna say that his experience of this Catholic woman is invalid? Did you listen to her? She was clearly mean, and cruel, and scary. Do we even live in the same reality, Kevin?

In a way, no. Even though Bill and Kevin were in the same conversation with the same woman, they were in entirely different experiences of it. The particulars of the situation meant entirely different things to each of them, impacted them in entirely different ways, led to entirely different emotional experiences. Both of their experiences are valid.

In DBT, the next step after validation is to “check the facts.” After you validate someone, and their physiological and emotional response calms down, then you're supposed to look at what's really happening now without the cloud of reactive pain confusing it. I find that this approach can sometimes be unhelpful, because people, by and large, aren't great at telling the difference between fact and judgment.

The facts of the situation are: this Catholic woman exists and said stuff. The fact of the situation is not that she's nice, or that she's mean. She is, she acts. Those are the facts.

The judgments that those facts indicate that this woman is nice, or that she's mean — those are interpretations of the facts. They are perspectives to have on a situation whose meaning we can't say for certain. How do we know that the meaning isn't certain? Because we've already got two different people experiencing it in two different ways, giving it two entirely different meanings, both of which feel completely real to them.

Rather than try to determine which meaning is correct or better, we can say that they are both valid.

The question to ask Bill and Kevin (once they've both calmed down a bit) is this: Is there another possible perspective on the situation that can be valid too? Bill, can you understand why it is that Kevin views this woman as nice? Can you validate Kevin's experience and perspective? Can you see it, too, Bill?

Kevin, can you understand why it might be that Bill views this woman as mean and cruel? Kevin, can you understand Bill's perspective without judging it, even in your own mind, as wrong? If your view of Bill's perspective is, "Yeah, it makes sense that he misjudged this woman as mean because he's projecting his past trauma," then you're not really validating Bill's perspective, are you? Remember: the facts are just that the Catholic woman exists and says things. Your perspective is that she's nice. You're working on validating Bill's different perspective: actually understanding why it actually makes perfect sense. You can

come back to judging it later, but for now, we're just validating it. So, let's try again, shall we?

## Part 2: If the Shoe Fits

Validation is ultimately an act of empathy. It is about stepping into someone else's shoes for a moment, trying to see the world through their eyes. Sometimes, stepping into someone else's shoes makes you reflect on your own shoes and want to change them. Sometimes, it's just an act of empathy with someone else, and you can carry on afterwards with having your own different perspective, saying, "Well, to each their own." Sometimes, stepping into someone else's shoes feels impossible, because how could you possibly want to wear those shoes? Even want to step into those shoes? Those shoes could never possibly fit! It's entirely possible that they don't, but have you ever tried them on to check?

When we love people, we tend to want to understand where they're coming from, and want them to understand us. We typically want to make sense of them, and we want to make sense *to* them. We want to be able to relate to one another, have shared experiences, so that we don't live in the continuous pain of mutual invalidation.

Validation can be applied to any interpersonal conflict where there is no shared understanding. You do not have to apply it to anything. All of this is voluntary. There may be

conflicts in your life that just don't seem worth resolving, or perspectives that don't seem worth validating.

For example, to obey Godwin's law as we all seem to invariably do, I don't personally particularly want to spend my time empathizing with the perspectives of Nazis. However, if I were a therapist whose job was focused on de-radicalizing and rehabilitating white supremacists, you bet your ass I'd be doing that. Why? Because the only possible way someone is going to step into a shared reality with you is if they believe that it's possible for them to do so. The only reason they'd have to take that step is if they start thinking that your perspective might be better for them than the one they're currently having.

You can't really explain to someone how to get from where they are to where you are, let alone why they might want to, until you understand where they are. At least, you won't be able to explain it in a way they'll likely believe. And for good reason, because from their view, you clearly don't get where they are, you clearly don't understand their perspective, you clearly don't validate their experience, so how on earth would you be able to tell them that their experience can or should change?

What would you know about it? Why should they trust you?



### Part 3: Becoming the Cause of Your Own Pain

Now that we've dug into validation and invalidation, trust and empathy, let's pivot back to what happens when someone's perspective on the world changes so dramatically that, to even entertain the idea of viewing it as a hypothetically valid perspective, feels invalidating to your own experience.

Particularly, today we're talking about when one person starts experiencing themselves as the cause of their own feeling, and another person doesn't experience that — when one person sees their mind as creating all of their own suffering, and another person sees suffering as happening to them from the outside.

To be clear: I am really not talking about any semantic difference between pain and suffering. I am talking about all of it: anger and grief, shame and loneliness, misery and stubbed toes, fear and trauma, lower back pain and cancer.

I also want to clarify that I am not debating any facts. I am not saying that the mind does, in fact, cause all pain and all happiness. I am not saying that pain and happiness do, in fact, happen to you from external causes. I am not debating facts. I ask that, just for the rest of this essay, you put aside determining which one of these is "right."

What we have here are two different perspectives.

We have one perspective that says: “I experienced pain and suffering and trauma at the hands of people and events in my environment. My pain is caused by those external circumstances. My pain is not my fault; it’s the fault of what happened to me. Yeah, sure, whatever, maybe I could have hypothetically done this or that differently, but that completely misses the point by pinning blame on me where it does not belong. I obviously didn’t know any better at the time, or I wouldn’t have ended up in an experience of trauma. You really think I’d cause trauma to myself willingly? Please stop blaming me for my own trauma; it’s bad enough as is having been a victim of it.”

Is this perspective valid? Of course it is. Listen to the damn perspective. You suffered pain and trauma, and it was not your fault. That’s completely valid. Of course you’d have that perspective. Of course your perspective is allowed. Of course you’d never bring that trauma upon yourself, and yes, it really is bad enough, and I would never add insult to injury by blaming you for it.

We have another perspective that says: “I’m experiencing myself causing my own pain and causing my own happiness. My perspective is changing from what it used to be. I used to experience pain and suffering as caused by people and situations beyond my control. What I experienced in the past hasn’t changed, it can’t be now... but what’s happening now is that I am finding myself able to make different choices. I can now think different thoughts, and notice that those thoughts change my

feelings. It does not seem at all like the external factors cause my pain... or, when it does, I notice that. I notice the patterns I fall into, and I can begin, here and there, to pull myself out of them. I have experienced releasing myself from emotional pain by changing my judgments. I have experienced releasing myself from physical pain by changing my judgments. None of this has anything to do with blame, or even with the past. It's a present, current experience I am having now."

Is this perspective valid, too?

Remember, the question is not, "Is this perspective correct?" We're not assessing if these are the facts. The question is, "Can you validate this perspective?" Even if you don't share the experience, can you understand that someone else is authentically experiencing it? Can you take, in good faith, that they are experiencing it for valid reasons? Truly, can you? Are you able to? There isn't a wrong answer here; it's an honest question.

Part 4: Oui, et...

Okay, rewind. Instead of talking about the experience "I cause my own pain," let's talk about the French. Specifically, the French language.

Now, I believe that the French language exists. I read about it as a child, and I heard people speaking it. Well... I'd

heard *of* people speaking it. I really wanted to learn French, so I put my mind to it, studied all the vocabulary, learned the grammar, and many years in, I made some strange gurgling sounds that sounded a bit like French. I tried them again. I said: *Je suis*. And I recognized it— oh my god! I just spoke French. I tried another sentence: *Je m'appelle Anna*. Ya, I think that was French too! It definitely is!

Day by day, I learned more French. Finally, after a lot of work, I was able to go through a whole morning in French. When the sun rose, I saw *le soleil*. I heard *les oiseaux* chirping in an *arbre* outside my *fenêtre*. When I spoke to myself, I spoke to *moi même*, and actually, I didn't speak; *j'ai parlé*. From a morning in French, it became a day, then a week. The more I practiced, the longer I could sustain it.

Now — can you speak French?

In the hypothetical “you” then yes: it is possible for a person to speak French. At least some people clearly have the capacity to learn French. Will all people learn French? Probably not. Does the fact that it is possible for a person to learn French mean that you personally can speak fluent French right now? Not on its own, no. Maybe you can speak French right now, but the simple fact that speaking French is a possibility does not alone make you able to do so right now.

I had certain experiences in my life that made learning French fairly easy for me, at least compared to some

people. I started learning it fairly young. I liked French stuff, so learning the language made me feel good. I had the great privilege to study French in high school and college, to travel to French-speaking countries and prioritize my French studies. There are people without my same privileges who have also learned French, and people with those privileges who haven't, but for me: I have privilege, and I speak French.

Are you a bad person if you don't speak French? Of course not. It's just a language, a way of labeling the world, describing experiences, speaking and acting differently. English, Spanish and Wolof are all languages too. I'm learning French because I prefer the way my life feels when I live it in French. I'd like to be a French teacher, to teach other people who want to learn French how to speak it.

Learning French is obviously not the only thing a person can do with their life. You can learn to fix cars or tend gardens, heal the sick or care for animals or do brain surgery or trade stocks or write books or sell drugs. These are all possible things a person can do in their life. Does the fact that I'm learning French right now have anything to do with what you do with your life?

I'm really asking: does it?

## Part 5: Couldn'ta, Didn'ta, and Therefore Shouldn'ta, but Perhaps, Now, Could?

Let's get back to our two perspectives. In the first, someone has experienced pain that they did not cause. In the second, someone is experiencing that they personally have the power to cause or end their own pain. The second perspective does not actually make any judgments on the first. Nowhere in the second perspective has it been said that, if you don't share this perspective, you're evil and bad. You're not being blamed for your own suffering.

And yet — I really could understand why it might feel like you are. It makes sense to me that that might be your perspective on it, because in general, most people don't view "ending pain" the way we view "speaking French."

We typically view pain, and ending pain, with judgments in mind. We take certain perspectives on pain, for completely understandable reasons. We don't want pain. Pain sucks to experience. That's kinda what pain is, what makes pain *pain* — this experience of bad, unwanted, toxic, unhealthy, awful, horrible, maybe even traumatizing. A painful experience is, by definition, painful.

So if someone says, "Your mind creates pain, and can therefore stop pain," it makes perfect sense how that might translate as, "Your mind can stop pain, and therefore, should stop pain." It makes perfect sense that the statement, "You can end your pain with your mind"

might translate as, “You should end your pain with your mind.” In light of the way most people experience pain, the way we tend to view pain, the meaning we give to pain, the perspective we have on pain — it makes sense that we’d receive a declaration of ability about ending it as a judgement. That perspective is valid to me.

It also makes sense to me that someone could take it a step further, and turn the judgment into a self-worth judgment. If your mind should stop pain, and you can control your mind, then you should stop your pain, and you can, so if you’re not, then you’re doing something wrong, right?

This perspective is valid too. It makes perfect sense to me, in light of everything we know about how most people view pain. It truly is valid, and I’ve just validated it to prove that it can be validated.

Now, let’s check the facts. The statement is, “Your mind can stop pain,” not, “Your mind should stop pain,” and certainly not, “You can and should stop your own pain right now and if you don’t you’re bad.”

And yet — it makes perfect sense to me why the first statement would be interpreted as the second and the third. How could it not be? How could there possibly be any other way to take that? Pain feels bad. Feeling pain feels bad. Ending pain feels good. I want to feel good. Everyone wants to feel good. So don’t tell me that the reason I don’t feel good is that I’m doing something wrong here, because I’m not.

You're right — you're not. You're not doing anything wrong.

But how can I say that, when I could end my pain right now? That's what we're talking about, right? The ability to just snap your fingers and not feel pain anymore? Anyone would want that ability. I wouldn't possibly keep myself in this pain, this suffering, this misery, this trauma, by choice. How dare you suggest I would. So how can it be possible that I cause my own pain?

I don't know. I've just been speaking French these days. I spent years studying French, and eventually, I started living in it. I know that's what I'm doing, because I studied it, I learned what it was— it's this language I'm speaking. I'm speaking it now. I learned because I had great teachers and a lot of practice. I had the privileges of great teachers and a lot of time to practice.

## Part 6: Asdfilése Grammar and My Pet Bunny

Imagine you'd never heard of the French language. In fact, I'm not speaking French, I'm speaking Asdfilése. What, you haven't heard of it? You haven't heard of Asdfilése? It's this language I'm studying. Yes, it exists — I'm studying it. I've heard of people speaking it. I've spoken it. It's real.

So you want to know how to say "How are you" in Asdfilése? Well, it doesn't exactly work like that... see, in



Asdfilése, we define things by the energy of spaces between them. So in English you could say, "I stand beneath the tree," but in Asdfilése we'd talk about the experience of the space made between me and the tree which changes based on my relationship to it, so I guess the closest cognate might be... "*flibijiboot Rarf raf Gersnuffins*"? But that doesn't really capture the essence of it, y'know?

I might sound to you like I'm insane — I'm delusional, crazy, hallucinating. You know... maybe I am. Maybe my perspective on this is a hallucination. We can take that as a metaphor, too.

The question is — what am I hallucinating, and how is that changing my experience? Well, let me tell you, I'm definitely not hallucinating that I'm being hunted by aliens who want to kill me every night. It's more like... I'm hallucinating that I have a Flemish giant bunny who sits on my shoulders and helps me be happy.

When people say mean things to me, my pet bunny nuzzles my face and I don't mind the mean things so much. I'm able to respond to the mean things by being nice now. When I see people in pain, I feel more able to care for them because I have my bunny by my side. All those things I was so afraid of? Well, I don't feel so afraid now, thanks to my bunny. All those hurtful things I did that I couldn't take responsibility for? I don't feel so much shame now, so now I can actually be accountable. All that pain of my past? It's healing. It's really, really healing. My bunny helped me.

Maybe my bunny is a hallucination. Maybe I'm crazy. But if the only impact my bunny is having is to make me healthier, happier, kinder, more compassionate, more peaceful, and more loving... well, what, exactly, is the problem with it?

Maybe the problem is that I believe my bunny is real when it's just a figment of my imagination. If I understood that it isn't actually real, then sure, I can go forth and enjoy adventures with my imaginary bunny, no harm done. But the thing is... the bunny power only works for me when I believe it is real. Maybe someday, I'll be able to call it imaginary without that limiting its power to positively impact my experience, but right now — I need the damn bunny, okay?

Is that okay? Is that okay *with you*?

For me, the problem with my bunny is that look you get in your eyes when I talk about it. The fear you have for me — Am I crazy? Am I going to hurt myself or others? The fear you have for you — Should you have a bunny? Are you bad and wrong for not having a bunny, for not speaking fluent Asdfilse, for not speaking French? The judgment in your eyes — that you must be bad. Or I must be bad. It must be my privilege. It must be your fault. How dare I invalidate your experience of not having a bunny?

And how dare I equate having an imaginary bunny and speaking a made-up language to your real experience of real trauma?

I understand why you could feel that way. Your experience of pain at this, at that, at all of it, is perfectly valid. Your perspective makes sense. It even makes complete sense that a part of your perspective is, “This is the only perspective a person could possibly have.”

So yes, it is falsifying to that claim about objective reality, and therefore probably invalidating to your perspective when I say mine is actually different. I can imagine that would be painful, confusing, and maybe even capital-T Triggering to your very real and valid experiences of very real and valid trauma. I know. I really know how that feels; I’ve been triggered to. Capital-T, PTSD Triggered, too. I’ve felt pain and anger, powerlessness and guilt, shame and loneliness, eating disorders and bipolar disorder and so much lower back pain. It wasn’t long ago that I felt that way, too. I still feel like that sometimes, here and there. It’s happening less frequently, though. I feel much more able to stop it from happening.

Conclusion: Maybe We’re All Just Bad at This

Most people aren’t very practiced at explaining themselves while also empathizing with and validating other perspectives. The journey from judging everyone all the time to not judging anyone ever... let’s just say, that journey does not happen overnight. It happens in steps and

jumps, back steps and meandering paths, and most people haven't reached the end of the path yet. I know I haven't.

As a result, when some people talk about their experience of ending their own pain, they might do so in ways that are actively judgmental of you. They might be blaming you for your pain. They might think that your pain is your fault because you could be ending it. They might think that you're bad and wrong for not ending your suffering right now, in this minute, because they ended their pain. From their perspective, why the hell won't you do it?

Wow. I mean — look at them. This person who says they can end their own pain themselves — they are clearly in so much pain about this. They're seeing you in pain, when they think you don't have to be, and that's putting them in pain. They want to have the power to stop your pain, because it hurts them to see you in pain. They believe that ending your pain would end their pain, so they believe that they must end your pain.

What's actually happening for them is this: they want to get out of their own pain, but they feel powerless to do that, so they blame you for it. They want you to change so they don't have to feel so much pain. It's sad really, because if they really are so adept at stopping pain, then why don't they snap their fingers and get out of this one? They're taking their own feelings of powerlessness out on you, and they authentically believe right now that *their* pain is *your* fault. They think they can't get out of pain unless you do something that just isn't going to happen.

I know. It's infuriating, isn't it? Your feeling of fury at that judgment... it's valid. But hey, you've read this article now, so you know that their judgments aren't really about you; they're about them. From that perspective, maybe it's kind of tragic instead. They're so mad at themselves for feeling powerless, and so, they're pinning that all on you. It's so unfair, I know. The unfairness of it all is causing everyone involved such pain.

Right now, maybe you can't stop them from having that perspective. So, do you need to feel pain right now because that person feels pain? Their pain here blatantly is not your fault, so you'd be doing nothing wrong to leave it behind you. Do you want to leave it behind? Can you?

I don't know if there's anything I can say that will help you feel less pain about this right now, but we could try one more time:

We have two perspectives here.

In the first perspective, you are bad and wrong for not ending all of your pain. I'm truly crazy when I say it's possible to cause and end all pain, because it isn't, and also, you're terrible for not having the same crazy delusion that I do. In our own ways, we are both bad and wrong and invalid and awful, and there's no way to ever get out of this pain.

In the second perspective, your experience is completely and utterly valid. None of your pain is your fault. None of it was ever your fault. I'm just learning a different language,

and I'm happy about the language I'm learning. I'm happier because I'm learning it. I'm happy because life feels better when I speak this new language, because I have the power to make life feel better by speaking it. My learning this language is not a value judgment on you. You are valid. You are valued. I have a different perspective now; that's truly all.

Now, which of these perspectives causes you less pain?

## What is Healthy Masculinity?

The fragile masculine: you've seen him or you've been him. The cat-caller who turns to threats when ignored. The boss who turns to domineering when questioned. The nice friend who turns to rage when rejected. The man whose "masculinity" spirals into vitriol and violence when it feels threatened in any way.

If you haven't heard, this phenomenon is called *fragile masculinity*.

In an age of rising feminism, of #MeToo, and of the Internet allowing us to share our previously private stories and experiences widely, many men are left wondering what it means to be healthily masculine. There's a lot they know they're not supposed to do anymore, but not enough they seem to know *to start* doing.

Those of us who are *not* men are often left confused and disgusted by the men who are so fragile. In truth, I often am too. I find compassion hard to muster when on the receiving end of someone's shattered Ego trying to stab me with their own brokenness. I don't believe this pattern of behavior is excusable, even if it's understandable, and I do kind of understand it. It's conditioning, it's pressure, it's lack of awareness, all rolled up into one.

This essay is for anyone struggling to understand masculinity, but especially for men. I don't claim to know

what life is like when you're brought up or identify as a man in our culture. I wasn't and I don't. I also know, in my personal life, you guys don't always listen to what I have to say about feelings, but *maybe if I wrote it out?* Well, here goes:

To answer *What is the opposite of fragile masculinity?* requires understanding two things: masculinity, and the opposite of fragile.

What is masculinity?

Masculinity, like femininity, has been made a complicated phenomenon. I reject definitions too caught up with adjectives like *strong* or... *strong* or... is there anything other than *strong*? These may be correlations, but specific ideas or identities are still not the thing itself. Amidst all kinds of ideas about what it means to be masculine, I can only raise my hand and offer my own perspective:

- Masculinity and femininity are just energies: ways of engaging with the world.
- "Masculine" energy just means directed, forward-moving energy.
- "Feminine" energy just means open, receptive energy.



Both energies exist across all genders, but our *ideas* of manhood and masculinity live entirely in masculine energy. The “unhealthy masculine” kind of strength is about *only* resisting obstacles and pushing ahead, and resisting yourself when you experience feelings of pain or vulnerability.

Do you resist in order to change, or embrace in order to understand? Do you listen and receive, or advocate and defend? Do you allow things to be, or seek to change them? Both energies can be helpful and harmful. We all balance them, and both always come out in our responses to everything. For everything you change, you’re accepting something too.

Though I am a woman, I have a great deal of what I’d call masculine energy. My main way of dealing with life is primarily forward-moving. I wish to change things — push them ahead — myself and the world included. I advocate and improve. My fragile masculinity is impatient, angry and domineering.

At its weakest, this is how this energy reacts to threats. It bites. At its strongest, it builds and catalyzes.

A man I once loved had a great deal of what I’d call feminine energy. His way of dealing with life was primarily in openness and allowing. He wished to be seen and embraced, and he saw and embraced others in turn. He listened and accepted. His fragile femininity came in deflection, indecisiveness and inertia.

At its weakest, this is how this energy reacts to threats. It wilts. At its strongest, it nurtures and empathizes.

I used to shame myself for operating in the world like I do, and especially not like this man did. My mother had the embracing and nurturing thing down pat. *Why couldn't I?* I thought it was a bad thing — immature or egotistical — to push instead of to embrace. But I've learned that it's not; it's just a different thing. Both energies are vital to all life. In realizing it was okay that I liked to change and improve more than embrace and allow, I embraced and allowed myself.

In leaning into my masculine energy, I've expanded my feminine energy. In sticking to what I know I like, I've grown my comfort zone. In advocating for myself, I've become more accepting of others. In supporting myself and those around me, I've come to embrace and understand them. I feel so much healthier in myself, growing in a new way, expanding out the more I hone in. By leaning into the side of myself that is more traditionally *masculine*, I've become more authentically *feminine*.

By leaning into the side I've long avoided or shamed, I've stepped into the side of myself I wanted to be from a place of authenticity.

What is the opposite of fragile?

Well... *Antifragile*. While I am not certain that it was [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#) who first coined the term, it is from him that I first learned it.

Antifragility is the opposite of fragility. A thing is fragile if it breaks or weakens from being subjected to challenge, stress, threat or shock. A thing is robust if it remains unchanged from being subjected these forces. A thing is antifragile if it *gains* or *grows stronger* from these forces.

If masculinity is caught up with being “strong,” what could possibly be stronger than antifragile? A strength entirely built on resistance may not always be futile, but it is *fragile*. A strength built entirely on allowing and accepting is *robust*, but only a balance of the two can be *antifragile*. In my view, being antifragile is the both strongest and the healthiest one can be.

This traditional notion of “masculine strength” is far too one-sided to be healthy for anyone, and so it is fragile. It’s forced to be a kind of “strong” no one can always be. Of course it will break when threatened. But rather than channel that into a more traditionally “feminine strength,” a strength that embraces and understands, shutting down one’s own feminine energy causes the masculine strength to spiral out into vitriol and violence.

No one has infinite armor, and continuously trying to build armor can quickly turn to building weapons. We defend ourselves until we feel too threatened, and then we attack. Everything is defensive until it’s not anymore. So maybe...

open your throat for a change. Get vulnerable, to get stronger.

What is antifragile masculinity?

What I've learned is that antifragility is not a quality unto itself. It is the quality that emerges from a space of authentic balance between robustness and fragility. The way ecosystems weaken in small ways to grow healthier as a whole, but obliteration is obliteration. The way some hardship in our lives can make us stronger people, but too much hardship can fracture us. The way some exposure to harmful bacteria can make us immune, but too much can make us sick.

This is the fine line between fragility and antifragility. Antifragility requires a certain amount of robustness and a certain amount of fragility. There is no "one-size-fits-all" balance, no map to tell you what your unique balance looks like and how to get there.

There is a compass, and that compass is found from accepting your feelings (embracing) and meeting your needs (moving forward).

For many men who have for too long ignored the more feminine energy actions of allowing vulnerability, becoming aware of feelings, embracing and accepting, and listening to and receiving others, leaning into this side may help you

reach a harmonious balance. In leaning into something that doesn't come naturally to you, you are both pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and embracing a new option. Both energies are still at work.

The compass that points you towards your natural state of antifragile balance — that dynamic equilibrium of being able to roll with punches, grow from hardship and improve from difficulty — requires a deep connection to your own feelings, an acceptance of difficulty and weaknesses, and usually, an embrace of help.

Antifragility comes from a healthy *embrace* and acceptance of oneself and a healthy movement to *change* and improve oneself. If you're entirely focused on improving yourself without ever embracing yourself for who you are and what you feel, you are leaning too far to one side of a healthy equilibrium. From there, the next step is to tack with the wind and lean the opposite direction: to embrace more. To trust more. To open more.

To be healthy is to be whole, full, in your unique state of authentic equilibrium. But that state is always dynamic. How you choose to react to its changes can spiral you into what is unhealthy and what is fragile. It is a counter-intuitive process: when you feel threatened, to react by becoming vulnerable and trusting others.

All I know is, for me — embracing the aspects of myself that feel masculine have made me feel so much more

authentically and healthily feminine. I would hazard a guess that it works the same in reverse.

What I can say for certain, as a straight woman, is this: I care *far* more about you feeling healthy in yourself, and therefore able to treat yourself and others around you in a healthy way, than I do about your biceps or your paycheck.

If you're unsure how to embrace feminine energy, the energy of openness and acceptance, you can always ask for help, especially from, you know... the kind of people who've been taught to embrace feminine energy all their lives.

# A Comprehensive Guide to Apologizing

Apologizing, like so many aspects of human interaction, can be terrifying, uncomfortable and downright hard.

Apologizing is actually a lot simpler than our minds tend to make it, but just because it's simple does not mean it's easy.

We're conditioned to make all kinds of associations between apologizing and feelings of shame, powerlessness or vulnerability, and because we want to avoid those feelings, we often avoid apologizing. Extricating your mind from its unconscious, conditioned and reactive patterns can take years, but chipping away at those patterns, bit by bit, is probably the best thing you can do for yourself.

Today, let's talk about apologies.

First, what is an apology?

An apology is an action, which means that what it is gets defined by what it does. To understand what an apology is, we need to understand what an apology is for. An apology is for empathizing with the experience of someone who has been hurt by your actions. It is also an expression, an act of communication. So, to put it all together:

An apology is the communication of empathy for someone else's experience of being hurt by your actions.

In order to apologize, you must understand that someone else was hurt by your actions, understand why they were hurt by your actions, and express both of these understandings to that person.

Here's the thing: feeling hurt is an emotion, and emotions always make sense. There is always a reason why someone is feeling the way that they are, even if you think the same reason would not cause you to feel the same emotion. An emotion doesn't need to be "rational" to be valid.

Next, what isn't an apology?

An apology is not conflict resolution. An apology is not forgiveness. An apology is not justice. An apology is not a change in behavior. An apology is not taking full responsibility for someone else's healing. An apology is not believing you were wrong.\* An apology is just an apology, and its purpose is to empathize and express that empathy.

Apologies may play a role in conflict resolution, but sometimes, you can apologize and the conflict still isn't resolved. Apologizing may play a role in being forgiven, but someone can accept your expression of empathy without forgiving you. Calling another person out (or in) on their actions, seeking an apology from them, or asking for



accountability for their own behavior can be deeply important to creating justice, but these are not apologies.

Accepting that your actions caused someone else pain does not mean your actions were “wrong”\* in an objective moral sense. Apologizing for those actions does not mean that you take on the role of clearing out someone else’s entire wardrobe of pain. That means, ye woke folks who are really into personal emotional responsibility: you can apologize too.

The point of an apology is to apologize: to empathize with and validate someone else’s experience of being hurt by your actions.

Why don’t people apologize?

Many of us avoid apologizing like the plague, typically because we fear the way we’ll think about ourselves if we do. Accepting that our actions caused someone to feel hurt, and that the other person’s experience of feeling hurt is valid and legitimate, often makes us think we’re “bad.” Thinking we’re bad makes us dislike ourselves or feel ashamed.

But an apology is not about feeling shame. An apology is about empathizing with someone else’s experience. Shaming yourself, by definition, is not empathetic, because you’re still just thinking about yourself. Try thinking about

the other person instead. Leave yourself out of it for a moment.

Shame serves one purpose: to catalyze a change in behavior. If you are not going to change your behavior, there is no point feeling shame. If you can't stop feeling shame, then maybe change your behavior.

Either way, your shame is worthless to someone in need of your empathy.

Why do apologies matter?

Apologizing is a loving thing to do. It pulls your experience, and the experience of someone else, in closer together. It allows you to see them, and for them to feel seen.

Apologizing does not heal everything, but it is a crucial part of healing anything, because empathy is a crucial part of healing anything.

Getting hurt without getting an apology can feel like being abused, gaslit and rejected all in one. It's a signal that someone else can hurt you and refuse to even consider that your experience of pain is valid, let alone worthy of acknowledgment, let alone worthy of a change in behavior.

Invalidation is a deeply negative experience for a human, on both the psychological and physiological levels. Empathy and validation are important parts of human flourishing. If

you care about someone else's wellbeing, it might be a worthy endeavor to become able to apologize to them.

\*What if I didn't do anything wrong?

Fortunately, we're not talking about right and wrong here. We're talking about pain and empathy.

Even if you did nothing "wrong," you can still apologize for hurting someone. Hurting someone with your actions does not mean you have done anything "wrong." Sometimes, you really did the authentic best, and someone else's life, circumstances, or past experiences led to them feeling hurt by it anyway. You can still apologize to them for causing them pain with your actions.

Someone telling you that they're hurt by your actions does not mean that they're saying you "wronged" them; they're simply asserting a boundary about how they can accept being treated. It is up to you whether you're going to respect that boundary, or not, going forward. Sometimes, you can't, through no fault of your own. Fortunately, we're not talking about fault or guilt here; we're talking about pain and empathy.

Do I need to change my actions after I apologize?

Do you want to? Why or why not? There are no wrong answers, or rather, the only wrong answer is a dishonest one.

If someone is hurt by your actions, you now know a boundary they have about how they can accept being treated without pain. You can no longer say that you don't know the boundary is there — or, you can, but you're lying, in a convoluted defense mechanism to avoid feeling shame. If someone tells you that something you're doing is hurting them, and you keep doing it, what you're doing now is consciously causing them pain. Whether or not you want to call that “wrong” is your own business.

If you are hurting someone, and you cannot or don't want to change your behavior, you can just tell them honestly. There is no real need to defend yourself, attack yourself, or attack them. We're not talking about right and wrong here, we're just talking about boundaries. All people have them. Sometimes they're rational, sometimes they aren't. Sometimes they're flexible, sometimes they aren't. How you are able and willing to act is your own boundary.

Rather than cast blame on anyone like some kind of mystical curse, you can just be transparent about what you're able or willing to do, and why. Perhaps this could be a chance for greater growth and awareness on their part.

If I want to apologize, what do I do?

Before you open your mouth, empathize.

Okay, well, the first step is to decide whether or not you can give an authentic apology right now. The question to ask yourself is, “Can I lay my own feelings of hurt, anger or shame aside for a moment in order to empathize with this person’s experience?” If you don’t think you can, maybe challenge that thought a bit, or maybe don’t apologize yet (or at all).

If you can, then accept that you did something that hurt someone. That doesn’t mean you did “wrong” in some objective moral sense, or even that your actions were objectively hurtful. All it means is that your actions felt hurtful to somebody. Any shame you might feel around that is your own business.

It’s important here to recognize when someone is hurt, and they may not appear hurt to you at first. Hurt does not always (or even usually) show up as crying, visible vulnerability, or the words “I feel hurt right now.” For instance, a hurt person might seem angry, cold, or distant instead. Pro tip: anger is always a mask for pain. Some people present pain first as sadness, some as anger, some as avoidance, and so on. Any aversion you might feel to anger or sadness is your own business.

Now that you’ve accepted that your actions hurt someone, think about that person’s perspective. Validate it to yourself. Start by understanding that it makes perfect sense for them to feel hurt by this, or they wouldn’t feel hurt by

it. Now, why does it make sense that they feel hurt? Why might they be responding as they are? How might this action come across to them?

You could also think about whether you want to keep acting like this in the future, but that's between you and yourself. Your goal right now is to empathize with the other person.

Now you can open your mouth:

First, say the words "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." Just do it.

Next, take accountability for causing them pain. Express in some clear and explicit way that you understand that your actions caused them pain. That means: express that you did those actions, and that those actions caused pain. Be specific.

Then, validate their pain. Tell them that their experience of being hurt makes sense, because it does. You could explain to them, to the best of your own understanding, why it makes sense that they were hurt by your actions. Again, be specific if you can.

If their perspective doesn't make sense to you, you can ask them for clarification. If they tell you, listen to what they tell you, accept it as a legitimate reason to feel hurt, and think about it more. Any shame you might feel is your own business. After you've done this, go back and validate their

pain again. Once you understand, communicate that you understand.

If you are planning to change your behavior going forwards, now is the time to commit to doing so. If you are not going to change your behavior, now is also the time to make that clear if necessary. You can ask for their help or compassion through the process, or seek the help of others.

And that's it.

Forgiveness, justice, conflict resolution, dramatic life changes — all of these are great and all, but they're not apologizing. Because (once more, with feeling): apologizing is communicating empathy for someone else's experience of being hurt by your actions.

# Emotional Consciousness Isn't Armor

## Level One

I'm just gonna say it: your emotions are the single most important thing in your life.

Our feelings are how we interface with the world around us. They are what ultimately determine our experience on this planet, the core of how we take in what happens to us, and determine what it is we do in response, the link between the internal and the collective. As our society slowly emerges from what Teal Swan dubbed "The Emotional Dark Ages," we find ourselves reckoning with emotional awareness in confusing and conflicting ways.

When it comes to our emotions, we're like an entire society of teenagers right now. We're going through massive changes and a deep collective self-discovery, testing these new methods of being in the world. It's a process. We're apt to have hiccups along the way.

The subject of today's article is a hiccup I've made myself so many times, with such ardent fervor, that I didn't notice it as a hiccup until today: using emotional consciousness as armor. Deepening our emotional self-awareness and engaging in conscious emotional communication are tools



for connecting with others, not for protecting ourselves from them.

Here's what I mean: Have you ever told anyone to "take more responsibility for their own emotions" when they blamed you for causing them pain? Have you ever explained to someone all of your triggers and traumas as an attempt to keep them from reopening those wounds? Have you ever demanded that someone use non-violent communication, or scolded someone for not being emotionally self-aware? Chances are, you've made this same mistake: you've used emotional consciousness as a means of protection.

A practice like non-violent communication exists to transform your own communication patterns, so that you can have more constructive and productive discussions when your emotions are running high. It is a tool for you to center yourself, and approach a conversation with calm, compassion and clarity so that you can be heard, and you can listen. Taking responsibility for your own emotions is a tool to increase your power and agency with regards to your own feelings. By understanding that you have power to transform what you feel in a situation, you can move towards your own healing. Consciousness of your triggers and traumas is important for you to understand how you might react to certain situations, and communicating them can be a means of asking for help in healing.

That is what these practices are for. They are not standards to which you hold others whom you shame for not meeting

them. They are not laws to be forced onto others whom you punish for not following them. They are not tools to avoid conflict, within yourself and with others. They are not protection from pain. Rather, they are invitations to greater connection with yourself and with others.

Emotional consciousness is for you. It is for you to practice on yourself, and invite (not force) others to join you in, if they want to. It's a means to draw ourselves into the light of consciousness, so that we can share ourselves openly and connect more fully. It can also help create a space of emotional safety for others, so that they can share themselves, and then we can connect even more fully. When we use emotional consciousness to protect ourselves, we attempt to control others, rather than to relate to them and build real, empathetic intimacy with them.

If, like me, you've found yourself using emotional consciousness to blame others, judge others, control others, or push others away, then you are misusing it.

## Level Two

When you break everything down to its deepest dimensions, the only energies any action has are these: pulling closer to something to join with it, or pushing away from something to separate from it. Like positive and negative electric charges, all actions are "charged" with

joining and/or with separating. Most of our actions are charged with both, none of our actions can be charged only with separating, and acts of unconditional love are charged only with joining.

The mistake in using emotional consciousness practices as a means of self-protection is the same mistake as the fallacy of perceiving independence as safe. The belief in independence is a fundamental category mistake; we are wholly and utterly dependent on everything around us for survival, and always will be. It is impossible to be independent. It is only possible to mistakenly feel independent. It is completely understandable that we mistakenly believe independence will make us safe. We can save ourselves a lot of time and pain, however, by understanding that this belief is wholly inaccurate.

When we experience not being able to depend on others fully to have our needs met, we believe that others will not meet our needs, and so we seek a pseudo-liberation from dependence on others through moving towards “independence.” In actuality, we cannot move away from dependence. [We can move away from attachment to depending only on certain strategies, people, situations or actions in order to have our needs met.](#)

Safety comes not from independence, but from total dependence on a world that meets our needs. All of our actions ultimately attempt, sometimes quite blunderingly, to move us towards this state. This is what I mean when I say that it’s impossible for an action to be “charged” only

with separating. Every act of separating is an attempt to join with something else. Only unconditional love is properly “charged” entirely with joining.

Joining with an entire world that meets your needs is true safety. Separating from that world and “becoming independent” is a false mirage of safety, and ultimately its antithesis.

### Level Three

What we call the Ego is a belief in ourselves as independent and separate from everything else (e.g. Hi, I’m Anna, and whoever you are, you are Not Me). Because independence is the antithesis of real safety, the Ego lives in fear, and never feels truly safe. Beneath the Ego, we know that we are inseparable from everything.

Separating creates vulnerability. Only in a state of feeling vulnerable could we seek to control the world around us. Trying to control the world around us gives us a false sense of security, but true security cannot come in feeling separate.

The only antidote to separating, and therefore to fear, is joining. Joining means energetically moving towards something and embracing it. You cannot join when you are in an energy of self-protection or self-defense, because in order to protect or defend from something, you must view

yourself as separate. In protecting yourself, you are perpetuating your own separation, and therefore, your own vulnerability. This is why, for instance, *A Course in Miracles* teaches, “In my defenselessness, my safety lies.”

Paradoxical, I know, that the safest you can possibly be is utterly emotionally naked, weaponless, with an open throat and nothing to hide. It seems frightening, I know. Terrifying, even. And I do not expect you to fully embrace it yet. I haven't yet. We're walking this path, together, step by step.

But it might help ease the fear to take a lesson from the Tao: absolute harmlessness, and complete helpfulness, comes from being in right relationship to everything. Right relationship creates flow.

Right relationship is complete embrace, and in completely embracing something, it becomes utterly harmless and entirely helpful. A knife to the throat is only a weapon when the throat and knife push against one another.

## How to Be Emotionally Present

This is a quick and dirty guide to becoming more emotionally present. If you're not sure what to do with that term, for now just know that it means becoming more self-aware, more authentic, more expressive and more empathetic.

If you have any illusions that emotional absence and disconnection aren't serious issues, you need to look again at the root causes of most personal and societal ills. Between [suicides](#), [overdoses](#) and [murders](#) — [all of which would be impossible without emotional disconnection](#) — the epidemic of emotional disconnection killed half as many Americans as Covid-19 last year.

Before you go pinning any of that on specific mental illness diagnoses from the DSM-5, I invite you to name one mental illness that does not thrive in an experience of emotional disconnection, or that isn't profoundly ameliorated with repeated experiences of deep emotional connection and care. Often, I think the specific diagnoses can obscure the more universal root problem: we're traumatized by the cruelties, big and small, of growing up in a culture built on emotional disconnection, and now we're so emotionally disconnected from ourselves and each other that we can't heal.

Emotional disconnection is serious, and we all need to take it seriously.

Now, to improve your emotional connectivity and presence, there are all kinds of researchers and teachers you could learn from. There are countless techniques and skills to practice, not to mention the entire field of psychotherapy. The following suggestions are a few among thousands, and I encourage you to do your own research and experimentation, too. Different approaches to emotional presence will resonate with different people, and it takes time and continuous self-study to figure out what works best for you. Also, taking the time to do your own research helps you to cement the belief that becoming more emotionally present is important and worthy of sustained effort, which it is.

Without further ado, here are my top five tips for developing greater emotional presence:

Tip #5. Chart what you're feeling every morning. Then, journal about why you're feeling it.

Last year, I moved in with a friend who was going through a deep process of emotional transformation, and he was adamant about us circling our emotions on a laminated [feelings wheel](#) every morning. At first, I found the practice a bit campy, but I quickly came to love it. It was such a quick, simple reminder to check in with ourselves

and each other. It gave us all an easy way to understand each other's head-spaces, and it helped us be present with our own.

After circling my feelings, I'd go on to my other morning routine — journaling long-hand for three pages about what I was feeling and thinking, and why. Noticing that you feel “dismayed” or “powerful” today is good, but taking the time to understand where that feeling is coming from is better.

The first step to greater emotional presence with others is always greater emotional connection with ourselves. The more emotionally disconnected we are, the less we even know what we feel at any moment, and the more we need to prioritize and practice checking in with ourselves. Only when we know what we feel can we communicate it effectively to others.

Tip #4. Go to therapy.

I know you don't want to hear it, but I have to say it. Though I have my hang-ups with a lot of contemporary psychology, I absolutely think regularly talking to a therapist is an important part of learning emotional connection for those who are deeply disconnected. If you are not used to being vulnerable, authentic and expressive with yourself or those close to you, having a designated person you know you can talk to who can provide a safe



space for your vulnerability and offer helpful guidance can quite literally be the difference between life and death.

Again, figuring out what kind of therapy and which therapist work for you typically takes time and some trial and error. Personally, I'm a fan of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), because I think they balance internal self-awareness with concrete skills-building the best, but you'll find the approaches that are right for you.

Of course, in the United States, not everyone has the financial ability to see a therapist regularly. If you can afford it, it's an excellent use of money. If you can't, many therapeutic skills are free to learn online and you can still practice those on your own or in support groups. You could also ask some non-judgmental friends (with their explicit consent!) if they're willing to listen to you on a semi-regular about your feelings. If you do that, though, please remember that being your therapist is not your friend's job — it's a kindness they're offering to you, if and as they have capacity.

Tip #3. When you get defensive, ask yourself what it is you're defending. Then, say it.

If memory serves, this next tip comes from the spiritual teacher Teal Swan. We get defensive when we feel attacked. The problem is, we often feel attacked when

we're not really being threatened at all. The way someone close to us is speaking or behaving might trigger negative thoughts and emotions in us because it reminds us of past pain, and we tense up, close down, and go on the defense — regardless of whether there's any threat in the current moment whatsoever.

You know the feeling of defensiveness, and you know how much it sucks. Your face and body get tense. You feel that drop in your stomach. You feel an urge to get aggressive or passive-aggressive, to shout or act petty, and you have this thirst to conquer the other person and defend yourself from them. Can you remember feeling that way in a conversation? Pay attention to it.

Now, the next time you feel that way, notice it. Notice the sensation itself. Then, pause. If you're in a conversation with someone, ask for space and time for a moment. If you need to literally walk away from the interaction triggering your defenses, do so.

Whenever you notice yourself getting defensive, stop for long enough that you can ask and honestly answer the question, *"What am I defending?"*

What you're defending might be a negative thought about yourself. You might be defending a truth you don't want to admit, a painful memory you don't want to relive, or a feeling you wish you weren't having.

The thing is, when you get defensive, you feel attacked. That means you're in need of care and safety. If you keep

defending yourself, you deny yourself the opportunity to receive care and safety in the interaction with another person. Only if you stop defending yourself does anyone else have the opportunity to help you feel safe.

So, as hard as it is, as impossible as it sounds, when you figure out what it is that you're defending: take a deep breath, and say it. Say the thing that you're getting defensive in order to avoid. If you don't, the real emotional truth of the conversation will never be revealed, and the disconnection can only deepen.

Tip #2. Give what you want to receive.

This tip came from, of all places, an episode of *The Crown*. It's simple and utterly brilliant. I'll let the character of Princess Diana explain it for herself: "Anytime either of us feels like we're not getting what we need, we simply need to give that very thing to the other."

Give what you want to receive. This is not just a useful tool for conversations or intimate relationships — this is the key to connection with the whole world. When you feel like you're not getting what you need, give it. Reverse the process by which you're trained to think it must arise.

When you don't feel like you're getting enough compassion, give compassion. When you don't feel like you're getting enough care, give care. When you don't feel

like you're being understood, seek to understand. Every time you give what you want to receive, you increase how much of that thing there is in the dynamic. Giving compassion, care or understanding to others cannot reduce what you get. It can only increase the overall level of compassion, care and understanding in the connection.

This does not mean, "When your partner isn't giving what *they* want to receive, call them out on it." It means, give what *you* want to receive. Take responsibility only for your own behavior. Stop playing "Who's gonna capitulate first?" chicken about your emotional needs, and give what you want to receive.

Tip #1. Show, don't tell, your empathy and understanding.

This is my number one skill for *everyone* wishing to develop greater emotional connection in their relationships.

Emotional connection is about empathy. In order for both people in a relationship to experience empathy and being empathized with, the empathy needs to shine through in the interaction. Just telling someone "I understand" or "I empathize" does nothing to help them feel understood or empathized with. It also does nothing to help you understand them or empathize with them.

I'm sure you can picture it. You're having an argument with someone, and you're obviously hurt or emotionally enervated in some way by their actions. They tell you over

and over again, “I understand, I get it,” but their actions keep demonstrating that they do not understand or get it. On top of feeling upset, you’re now starting to feel almost gaslit. Why? Because they haven’t demonstrated their understanding. They might think they understand, but their actions are not the actions of someone who understands.

Fixing this pattern is very simple, though not always easy. If you want to demonstrate your understanding, you must show it, not tell it. In a conversation, you have to stop, listen to the other person, think about what they said, and then paraphrase to them it in your own words. Explain to them, in your own words, why it makes sense that they feel the way they do.

I repeat: listen to them thoroughly, think about what they said, and then explain it back to them in your own words, in as much detail as possible. If they’re pointing out a pattern of behavior, reflect on your own behavior and see if you can think of other examples of it. Then, say those examples aloud. Ask them if you’re understanding their feelings correctly. Be open to correction.

This applies to your relationship with yourself, too! Validate your own feelings when you have them. Explain to yourself why it makes sense that you feel the way you do.

Remember: as much as it might feel like an attack, listening to someone else’s perspective on your behavior is not an attack. Just because something feels painful for you right now does not mean it’s bad for you. It might hurt your self-

concept in the short-term, but humility and self-awareness will benefit you in the long-term.

Oh, and don't forget: *you have to practice.*

Going through every step on this list once over will not dramatically increase your emotional presence. This is a practice. That means, it takes time and repetition. It takes continuous, conscious practice like learning a language or an instrument. You're going to be bad at it at first, but keep going — you'll improve in due time, and every aspect of your life will be better for it.