



CHAPTER 1

To Feel or Not to Feel

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

—ANAÏS NIN

LISA SLIPPED OUT OF WORK A FEW MINUTES EARLY to get to the airport in time to pick up her boyfriend, Greg. She stopped by the store to get a couple of last-minute things for the special meal she had prepared to welcome him back from his business trip. “That sounds great,” Greg said to her as he settled into the front seat a few minutes later. “I should have enough time to eat with you and meet up with the guys later for drinks.” Lisa’s jaw started to tighten as she thought, *I haven’t seen him for how long, and he’s planning to see his friends the first night he gets back? Jeez!* She started to stew inside, but hid it behind a cool smile. “So how was your trip?” she asked.



Alex hit the scan button on the car stereo to find something to listen to. It landed on a station playing Christmas carols. “Oh, Short line
I love this one, honey, let’s listen,” his wife said as the familiar Optimal
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melody of “Silent Night” filled the car. Alex felt something catch inside him. It was almost a year to the day that his parents were killed in a car accident on the same road he was now traveling. His mind flooded with holiday memories of his youth, happy times he had spent with his parents. He could feel the tears coming to his eyes and turned his head away from his wife, not wanting her to see. He thought to himself, *Come on, guy, get a hold of yourself. You need to be strong.* He gripped the wheel and struggled to push the feelings down.



Kate had been planning this vacation with her friends for months. Finally, a break after working overtime for far too long. The group got up early and set out on one of the hikes they’d been so looking forward to. As the friends reached the first look-out point, they paused for a moment to take in the view from the mountain. The rising sun cast a gentle orange glow on the arid desert landscape, and the air smelled fresh. *What a perfect day,* Kate thought to herself as she took a deep breath. Suddenly a wave of anxiety came over her, seemingly from nowhere. She turned away, fidgety, unable to be still, and took off up the hill, leaving her bewildered friends behind.



As different as they may seem, these three people are all very much alike. They’re afraid of their feelings.

Lisa’s afraid of her anger. She holds the anger she feels toward her boyfriend inside. She tries to dismiss it. But as hard as she tries, it eats at her. She ends up feeling resentful, and her anger doesn’t go away.

Alex is afraid of his sadness. He’s afraid of being vulnerable, of letting his grief over the death of his parents show. He’s afraid that if he does, he’ll lose all control and become an emotional mess, and his wife will think he’s weak.

Short line And Kate is afraid of her happiness. Something about relaxing,
Optimal enjoying herself, and just being in the moment with her friends
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makes her anxious, makes her nervous. How sad—to look forward to a vacation for so long and then not be able to really enjoy it.

How sad for all of them, really.

If Lisa felt more comfortable with her anger, if she were able to allow herself to be in touch with it and feel the power of it, maybe she'd have the courage to speak up to her boyfriend, to tell Greg how she feels.

If Alex weren't afraid of his sadness, maybe he'd feel some relief in letting himself grieve more openly for his parents. Maybe he'd share his feelings with his wife, feel closer to her, and not be so alone with his pain. He might even discover—odd as it may seem before the fact—how good it feels to share his pain with another.

And if Kate felt comfortable feeling pleasure with her friends, maybe she'd . . . but wait a minute. Shouldn't it be easy to have feelings that are enjoyable? Yes, it should be, but for many of us it isn't. The vast majority of us experience some degree of discomfort with our feelings, sometimes even the pleasant ones. We start to get close to our emotions, and waves of anxiety stop them dead in their tracks. Or we become fidgety and, rather than feeling what we're feeling, embark on a laundry-folding or house-cleaning marathon instead. We change the subject; distract ourselves with work, television, food; withdraw into silence. We're masters at doing whatever it takes to stay in control.

Simply put, we're *feelings phobic*. We're afraid of our feelings.

A PHOBIA OF SORTS

In psychological terms, a phobia is an exaggerated, inexplicable fear of a particular object or class of objects—spiders, heights, close quarters, and so on. But as Harvard Medical School psychologist Leigh McCullough, PhD, proposed, we can also be afraid of our feelings or emotions, what she called “affect phobia.”¹ Someone who is afraid of his or her feelings behaves like Lisa, Alex, and Kate in the stories that opened this chapter.

How would you describe what happens to you when you get close to your feelings? Do you start to feel nervous or uneasy? Or would you describe it as feeling anxious or apprehensive? How about uncomfortable? All these different adjectives have to do with fear. Something is making us want to step back or retreat,

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and that's how we naturally react to a threat, to something scary. We don't want to have anything to do with it.

With feelings phobia, we want to run from our feelings.



My own struggles with feelings phobia couldn't have been more apparent than on my graduation day from my doctoral program. I had fantasized about this moment for what seemed like an eternity. And there I was, finally about to cross the finish line, about to receive my medal—nothing to do but stop and drink in the sweetness.

As I stood in line waiting for the festivities to begin, I tried to think about all that I had accomplished in the past few years. All the hard work, all the hurdles I had jumped over. I wanted to stop and let myself really savor the moment, to bask in the glory of it all. Hard as I tried, though, I couldn't. I felt agitated and edgy.

I pressed my feet against the floor, forced myself to stand still, and tried to make some space.

A tiny flutter of pride began to come to the surface. *Here we go*, I thought. Just as I was about to make contact with it, a wave of anxiety washed it away.

Damn! What happened? I wondered in dismay. *Let me give it another shot.*

I took a breath and tried to summon up some good feelings, tried to will them into being. Another deep breath, and a slight murmur of happiness sputtered forward. But before I could grab on to it, it was gone, reined in by a strange sense of guilt. As though I didn't deserve to be happy. As though, if I really let myself feel good, something terrible would happen.

This doesn't make sense, I thought. *This is the moment I've been waiting for. I should be thrilled!*

Suddenly a blast of trumpets sounded. My heart quickened as the line in front of me started to move. I walked down the long stretch of the aisle; the cavernous room was filled to capacity with proud parents, relatives, and friends, the air buzzing with anticipation. I scanned the audience for a familiar face, trying to find my family, trying to rise to the occasion. I spotted my two sisters

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standing in the distance. Their eyes met mine and opened wide with recognition. We smiled and waved with excitement. I could see that they were wiping tears away from their eyes.

Just as I reached my seat, I was suddenly overwhelmed. I started to cry. It was if the floor beneath me were cracking and a giant wave threatened to break through and overtake me. I sat down and braced myself against this torrent of feelings. I pulled myself together and tried to remain very still so that no one would notice the shaking inside me.

What was that about? I wondered. *And why the tears?* Was I moved by the love I saw in my sisters' eyes? By my accomplishments? In part. But these were also tears of pain, tears I didn't understand, tears I couldn't make sense of. So I pushed them away, banishing them to some far-off place.

Later, after managing to get through the ceremony unnoticed, I pasted on a smile and went to find my family. But when I came upon them standing in a group amid the crowd, my mother could see that something was wrong.

"What? What is it, honey?" She asked nervously.

Tears filled my eyes again, and I shook my head. "It's been hard. A lot of work," I offered. I tried to smile, but it was no use. I started crying again, overwhelmed by this deep and confusing sadness.

My family stood there with quizzical looks on their faces. My sister rolled her eyes, my aunt looked perplexed, my father looked away. I felt embarrassed, and looked down, pushed it back, swallowed hard, and tried to act the part of the happy graduate.

On the way home in the car I felt no sense of relief, no satisfaction, certainly no joy. Hardly the delight I had expected. I stared out the window numbly as the buildings passed by in a blur. All I felt was very much alone.

This should have been a joyous moment for me. I should have been filled with pride and a deep sense of satisfaction; grateful for the love of my sisters, my family; happy to the core of my being; and pleased to share these feelings with them. In retrospect, I can see just how powerfully feelings phobia was thwarting my experience, suffocating me and keeping me at a distance. Years and years of stuffed feelings were clogging my system, making it practically impossible

for me to be present and to connect, to take in all that was good.

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And when the pressure got so intense that these stored-up feelings broke through, they were completely overwhelming and perplexing. I couldn't differentiate one from another.

At the time, I didn't have a clue.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS

Most of us are inhibited, to some degree or another, from freely experiencing and expressing our emotions. But many of us aren't aware of what's going on. We might notice feeling fearful, but have no clue about what's causing it: we're too focused on managing our anxiety to be able to see what lies beneath. More often than not, though, we're so cut off that we're barely aware that we're even uncomfortable at all. The full extent of our distress is hidden just outside our awareness, lurking behind the scenes, but controlling our every move. We're so disconnected, so adept at avoiding our emotions, we don't even see what's going on. We don't see how masterful we've become at shutting off our feelings before they even get started. In fact, we've gotten so good at steering clear of our emotions, we're not even aware that there are feelings inside us at all! Although the first step to my four-step approach is *becoming aware* of your feelings and the specific defenses you use to avoid them, let's begin by first doing a bit of consciousness raising about our general relationship with our feelings.

Are You Afraid of Your Feelings?

Even though you may not be aware of being uncomfortable with emotion or what's going on behind the scenes, with a little thought you can uncover the signs of feelings phobia. Take a moment now to stop and consider how you react to your feelings. These lists of the common signs of feelings phobia are not meant to be exhaustive, but they should help you begin to get a good idea of just how comfortable you are with your emotions.

Afraid of Feelings in General

- Short line • Avoiding situations that might be emotional (for example, visit-
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leaving a job, being acknowledged for an accomplishment, addressing a conflict or disappointment with a loved one)

- Smiling or laughing when you're actually feeling something else (such as sadness, anger, or fear)
- Finding it difficult to be still and stay present with yourself
- Overthinking what you want to do, turning thoughts over and over in your head and not being able to take action
- Perpetually complaining about a situation, but not doing anything to change it
- Always needing to be in control
- When faced with questions about your emotions, feeling at a loss to identify how you feel

Afraid of Being Emotionally Close or Intimate with Others

- Physically turning away from others when any emotion starts to stir inside you, perhaps even with people you feel close to
- Feeling discomfort or nervousness with sharing a silent moment with someone
- Feeling embarrassed or ashamed for feeling a particular way
- Feeling uncomfortable with prolonged eye contact
- Getting anxious when someone else expresses his or her feelings
- Not being able to acknowledge or openly express what you feel inside

Uncomfortable with and Avoiding Sadness or Grief

- Not wanting to cry in front of anyone, holding back tears
- Feeling afraid of being or seeming vulnerable, not wanting to appear weak, acting as if you're unaffected
- Worrying that you won't be able to stop crying, that you'll lose control or go crazy

Afraid of Anger or Assertiveness

- Never allowing yourself to get angry
- Stewing over something and feeling resentful for a long time

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- Avoiding angry feelings until it's too late, and they end up coming out in a messy explosion or temper tantrum
- Expressing your anger by being passive (for example, showing up late, not returning a phone call, "forgetting" to do something) instead of being direct
- Having difficulty standing up for yourself or voicing a position that's different from others'
- Feeling obligated to be nice or good, but feeling resentful inside and then accusing yourself of being a bad person

Afraid of Happiness or Pleasure

- Not being able to feel a real sense of pleasure or joy for very long
- Dismissing your accomplishments or putting off the good feelings to a later time
- Not being able to share a sense of pride or happiness with others
- Feeling uncomfortable accepting compliments and praise from others
- Having difficulty being spontaneous

A Matter of Degree

Do any of these signs seem familiar to you? Maybe you identified with several of them, or perhaps with only a few. That's because the degree to which we're afraid of our feelings can vary. It all hinges on just how much anxiety or fear we experience when we get close to our feelings.

Some people are afraid of having any feelings at all. Their fear is so strong that they completely clamp down on what's going on inside them, obliterating any possibility of allowing their feelings to come to the surface. But if you look closely at these people, you might be surprised. Although they may seem emotionless, more often than not they're incredibly anxious. And somewhere beneath all their anxiety, outside their awareness, are feelings. They're just too uncomfortable even to see that there are feelings there.

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On the other end of the spectrum are people who are highly emotional and unable to consistently modulate and make their feelings work for them. Their challenge is not to open up to their feelings but to find a way to turn the dial down and regulate their emotional experience. Although some of the techniques I'm going to share with you could be helpful to people who struggle in this way, this book is primarily intended for those of us who need help to be more fully in touch with our feelings.

Most of us seem to be more comfortable with certain feelings and less so with others. For instance, you may be someone who has an easy time letting your hair down and laughing with friends, but have a difficult time with feelings of anger. Or you might not have a problem being angry, but are very uncomfortable with the "softer" feelings, such as sadness, tenderness, and closeness. Or you might be fine with feeling sad, but don't feel comfortable with taking the time to enjoy yourself, to feel satisfied, or to feel a sense of pride in your accomplishments.

Here, though, is a case of things not always being as they seem. When we have difficulty experiencing one particular feeling, our ability to be really comfortable with other feelings is hampered as well. When we suppress even one feeling, they are all affected. Our discomfort with anger affects our experience of joy; our fear of sadness affects our experience of love. And so on, and so on, and so on.

Take Lisa, whom we met earlier.

It's All Connected

When Lisa first came to see me, she described herself as normally "happy-go-lucky," able to enjoy herself, laugh, and have a good time. As far as she was concerned, the cause of her frustration and dismay was her boyfriend. If Greg wasn't so selfish and insensitive to her feelings, she wouldn't be feeling so unhappy. Right?

Well, possibly.

There's no doubt that it would help if Greg were more attuned to Lisa. But Lisa's inability to experience and deal with her anger is also a problem.

When Lisa avoids and stuffs down her anger, she's left feeling resentful and annoyed, and these feelings permeate her life.

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She feels disconnected from Greg, is distracted when they're together, doesn't fully enjoy being with him, and has lost interest in having sex. Moreover, she feels depressed; she's not happy at work and has little energy for things she used to enjoy doing. All these different aspects of her life are affected by her inability to deal with her anger. It's as though there's no room for any other feelings as long as that unresolved anger is still inside her.

When Lisa and I got to work on her feelings phobia, she was eventually able to overcome her fear and accept and handle her emotions. We started by helping Lisa develop emotional mindfulness. She needed to become aware that underneath her actions, she was actually quite angry with Greg. This is step one in the four-part process: *becoming aware*. In addition, I helped Lisa identify the ways in which she had been avoiding her anger. She began to recognize her tendency to dismiss her feelings, rationalize them away ("I'm just tired," "I'm being too hard on Greg," and so on), and try to stuff or swallow her anger. Next, I helped Lisa learn how to ease the discomfort she felt when she would get close to her feelings. This is the second part of the process, what I've called *taming the fear*. She learned how to tune in to the tension she felt in her body, relax her muscles, and breathe into her experience. With practice, she was able to safely open up to an internal experience of her anger—the third step, *feeling it through*—and then make use of the positive energy she discovered in its wake. Once Lisa became more adept at handling her feelings and sharing them with Greg—in the fourth step, *opening up*—she experienced improvement not only in her relationship with him but also in all the other areas of her life. She felt happy, was enthusiastic about her job, and felt a renewed sense of energy for life. As she described it, she felt as if "an essential life force had returned."

As we neared the end of our work together, Lisa shared this experience with me.

She and Greg had recently gone away for the weekend to have some alone time. They drove out to a resort in the mountains after work one Friday, arrived late in the evening bleary-eyed, and collapsed into bed, relieved to have a few days off after a long, hard workweek.

Short line The next morning, they awoke to the sun streaming into the
Optimal room. Lisa got out of bed and pulled the curtain aside. The view
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was magnificent. The morning sun danced on the lake, and the majestic pine trees seemed to touch the sky.

“Greg, you have to see this,” she said.

He ambled over to the window and put his arm around her. “Man, how beautiful!” he said.

They stood together in silence, holding each other, the hassles of the workweek gradually melting away. *This is just what we needed*, Lisa thought to herself as a warm glow came over her.

After breakfast, Lisa ran back to the room to get her camera. As she stepped off the elevator into the lobby, she could see Greg in the distance on his cell phone, pacing back and forth.

Something stirred inside her. *He must be talking to someone about work*, she thought, and started to feel irritated. *We had agreed to let go of work for the weekend*. Greg spotted her and quickly got off the phone.

“Who was that?” Lisa asked him as she approached him.

“Oh, no one, just checking my messages. Come on, let’s get going.”

As they headed out to the trail, Lisa could tell that Greg was distracted, clearly wrapped up in thinking about some work issue. She felt a burning sensation growing inside her, which she now understood to be her anger. For a moment, she thought of letting it go. But then she caught herself.

“I knew where that would lead,” she said to me with a smile. “I would have been fuming the whole weekend.” Instead, she tried something different.

“Greg,” she said to him. “I’m feeling angry. We had agreed to put work behind us for the weekend.”

“I wasn’t talking to anyone. I was just checking my messages,” he said defensively.

Lisa felt the anger rise up in her again, but stayed the course.

“It doesn’t matter whether you were checking your messages or talking to someone,” she asserted. “Now you’re thinking about work. Now you’re distracted, and it’s affecting our time together.”

Greg looked away and was quiet for a moment. He seemed to be wrestling with something inside him. Then he sighed, looked back at Lisa, and said earnestly, “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just so hard for me to let go sometimes.”

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She could see the regret in his eyes and felt the anger inside her ebb. A sense of relief quickly replaced it. *Wow, this is different*, she thought to herself, and felt the warmth inside her return. They took each other's hand and started off on a walk together.

Lisa looked at me, her eyes moist. It wasn't sadness. No. She was moved.

"We had a really great weekend," she said. "I felt so close to Greg."

"How was that?" I asked.

"Wonderful," she said.

I looked over at her, sitting up straight, looking pleased and proud of herself for the way she handled that moment with Greg—for all the work she had done to now be able to express herself.

"Yes, this certainly *is* different," I said to her, and we shared a smile of deep understanding.



That's what it can be like for people who are more able to be with and share their feelings. They have a healthy sense of self; they are able to be assertive and get their needs met, feel pride in their accomplishments, and experience deep moments of joy. They're able to cry when sad, grieve when there's a loss, and feel the fire of anger when threatened or attacked. They enjoy being close with others; are able to experience warm, loving feelings; and can make love with abandon.

Sounds great, doesn't it?

Why Bother?

Maybe not. Maybe you still have doubts. Maybe you've come along for the ride so far, but there's a part of you thinking, *Don't our feelings just get in the way? They're so irrational! Don't they just make things worse? Mess things up? Won't I just end up wallowing in*

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If you're asking yourself questions like these, I'm not surprised. They're common beliefs; many of my clients say the same things when they first come to see me. When I initially encourage them to explore their emotions, they ask me "What good will that do?" or "Where will that get me?" Often my response is this: "How has *not* paying attention to your feelings worked for you so far?"

If avoiding your feelings is working fine for you, stop reading. Keep doing what you're doing. Don't mess with it if it's not broken, right?

Chances are, however, that if you chose to pick up this book, avoiding your feelings is not working, and you're stuck. You'd like to move forward, but you also have some reasonable questions.

So let me take a moment to address some of your concerns.

The Old "Make Things Worse, Mess Things Up, Get in the Way" Argument It's not your feelings that make things worse; it's what you do to try to deny them or make them go away that's causing you problems.

Of course there are times when you may need to modulate your feelings, to hold them in and not act on them, depending on the situation you're in. But, in general, when you try to cut your feelings off even to the extent that you don't allow yourself to experience them inside you, you're working against a natural process. As humans, we're *wired* to feel and to connect emotionally. Our feelings are actually a part of our neurobiological make-up—they're signals sent from our brain in direct response to something in our environment. When you try to ignore your feelings, push them down, or hold them back, you're short-circuiting an innate process, one that was designed with your best interests in mind.

Think about it from an evolutionary perspective. Emotions played a key role in ensuring our survival as a species. Prehistoric humans wouldn't have lasted very long in the wilderness if they had had no emotional reaction to a ferocious animal charging toward them. It was the emotion of fear that got their hearts pumping faster, caused the blood to rush to their legs, and prompted them to run. Nor would they have lasted very long without close emotional bonds with others, which helped them feel safe and protected so that they could prevail despite enormous challenges.

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Quite simply, our emotions developed and endured over millions of years because they're essential to our existence.

Think about the significant ways in which our feelings help us in our lives today.

Excitement and joy encourage us to open up, get involved, or stay engaged in activities that already have our interest. Love urges us to move closer, to be nearer to a loved one, to open up and share more deeply. Anger motivates us to protect or defend ourselves, set boundaries or limits when necessary, raise our voices and be heard. Disgust prompts us to pull back, turn away, and avoid something that may be potentially harmful. Grief and sadness alike prompt us to slow down, to take the time to address whatever is making us sad—losses, disappointments, hurts—to cry and talk about our pain, to seek solace from others, to do what we need to do to take care of ourselves, let go, and move on.

Aren't these all healthy things?

In this very basic way, our emotions mobilize and guide us to deal with life and the different situations that come our way in a positive, life-enhancing manner. As neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux wrote, “[Emotions] chart the course of moment-to-moment action as well as set the sails toward long-term achievements.”² And they help us communicate what is going on inside us and adaptively connect with others.

Feelings, when dealt with in a healthy way, don't make things worse, they make things *better*.

Wallowing in Feelings Like Alex, who was afraid to mourn his dead parents, you may worry that opening yourself up to your feelings may cause you to wallow in them. But, plain and simple, wallowing is not *feeling* our feelings. Wallowing is what happens when we're stuck. It's what happens when we're *not* feeling our feelings all the way through to completion, when we're not going with the energetic flow of our emotions and with where they're wired to take us.

When Alex told me he was worried that he'd “just end up wallowing” in his sorrow, I seized the opportunity to address this common misperception that feelings are never-ending (which, by the way, is a typical defense against sadness). I explained, “All feelings have a natural flow to them. Like a wave, they rise up, crescendo,

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then dissipate. When feelings are fully felt, they really don't last very long—sometimes minutes, sometimes only seconds.”

“Really?” Alex looked at me with some disbelief, but I could see the wheels turning.

I told him, “It's only when the natural flow of our feelings is thwarted—often by fear, anxiety, or depression, when we get defensive, or when we don't have the support we might need to face something overwhelming—that we become caught in this in-between place, not going fully in one direction or another. Really feeling our emotions is what puts an end to wallowing and allows us to move forward.”

He nodded with recognition, and tears came to his eyes, a sign that he was beginning to allow his feelings to run their natural course



It's not that it wasn't scary for Alex to open up to his feelings after that, or that my words radically shifted things for him. Still, knowing that his sadness wouldn't last forever and that there was actually something good that came from the process allowed Alex to feel a little less anxious and more able to begin to move in a healthy direction. Taking one's fears out and holding them up to the light of reality can often help reduce them. We'll talk more about how to address your anxiety and fears in Chapter Five, “Taming the Fear.”

Not surprisingly, beneath Alex's fear was, among other feelings, a deep well of grief. Grief not just about losing his parents but also about the lack of closeness he experienced with them when they were alive. As we began to examine his feelings, Alex became increasingly aware of just how much emotion he had been avoiding. To make the process more manageable and not so overwhelming, we spent some time clarifying and disentangling the different feelings Alex had—sadness, anger, guilt, and love—and mindfully giving each some room to breathe. With each emotional experience Alex allowed himself to have, he also experienced a deep sense of relief and renewal. He found himself feeling more alive, more connected to himself, and more connected to others in his life. And he stopped worrying so much about wallowing.

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Better to Rely on Thinking? The rational mind—having the ability to think things through and exercise reason—is a good and necessary thing. But for a long time, thinking was seen as the be-all and end-all to our mental health. Now we know better. Now we know that our *emotional* mind also plays a fundamental role in our well-being.

Think about it for a moment. If our rational mind were so powerful, how is it that our feelings are often able to override our thinking? How is it that we can know one thing intellectually—such as, “there’s nothing to be afraid of”—but our feelings can convince us otherwise?

Take Kate. She had been dreaming about her vacation for months, but now that it’s finally here, she can’t enjoy herself. She’s overcome with anxiety, feels guilty about enjoying herself, worries that if she does let go and have a little fun something bad might happen.

Kate’s worries are irrational. She’s fully aware that she has the time off coming to her. She knows there’s nothing wrong with enjoying oneself. And she knows that even if something bad did happen, she could handle it. Yet her worries and fears keep overpowering her thoughts.

Clearly there’s something more going on below the surface for Kate, but why isn’t she able to get on top of it? Why can’t she just be rational about it and refute her feelings with reason?

Part of the answer lies in how our brain operates.

Recall what I said in the Introduction about how feelings can be more powerful than thoughts? In recent years, technological advances have enabled scientists to understand more precisely just how the brain functions. Joseph LeDoux, in his fascinating book *The Emotional Brain*, clearly illustrates how the neural connections that run from the emotional parts of the brain to the thinking parts of the brain are actually much stronger and more numerous than the connections that run in the other direction.³ This helps explain why at times emotions are able to overwhelm our thoughts and dominate our thinking and why it can be difficult to control strong emotions through rational thought alone.

Sometimes, trying to dictate our feelings with thinking is like trying to swim against the current. We’d be better off learning how to accept and work with our feelings rather than in fighting the tide.

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The Valuable Information We Get from Our Feelings

Here's a little test: imagine trying to make a decision without your feelings to guide you. Try to decide where you would like your life to be in five years. How about ten years? Think about what it would be like to choose a partner or spouse without consulting your feelings. Go ahead. Give it a try. It's practically impossible. Without our feelings, we have no idea of how we'll be affected by our decisions once we make them.

This is one of the reasons those of us with feelings phobia end up making bad decisions or end up staying stuck in relationships or situations that are not good for us. We're too afraid to listen to and trust the feelings inside us, to trust that gut sense we get. Of course, relying solely on our emotions to make a decision without acknowledging relevant data can also be a problem. The trick is to be able to consult with our feelings and use them to guide us, while also incorporating other helpful information into our process. If we could find the courage to truly be with our feelings, to pay attention to them and heed what they're telling us, we would probably have a clearer understanding of what we should do. We might also discover the motivation and energy we need to move forward and make a change.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Your personal identity—the core of who you are—is largely formed by what you feel and how you react. Your likes and dislikes, what makes you happy, what makes you sad, what excites you, what brings you pleasure, what annoys you, what frustrates you or gets your blood boiling—all say so much about who you are as a person.

It's in our feelings that we find our true authentic self. When we avoid or deny our feelings, when we suppress them, we are in a way denying who we are, squelching our individual voice and sacrificing our true potential and power.



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Have you ever heard a song a hundred times over and then one day, seemingly out of the blue, it speaks to you in a totally different way? This very thing happened to me at a difficult time in my life, a time in which I was painfully struggling to figure out whether the five-year relationship I had been in was really right for me.

I was getting ready for work one morning, going about my usual routine, and I popped a CD in the stereo to liven things up a bit. As I brushed my teeth, “Meadowlark,” a song by Stephen Schwartz from the musical *The Baker’s Wife*, started to play. I had heard it many times before and had always loved it. This time, however, the words caught my attention, strangely resonant, and drew me in.

This woman sang the story of a bird, a meadowlark who had a beautiful, angelic voice but was unable to see. One day, the meadowlark is discovered by an old king, who brings her to his castle, showers her with riches, and promises to take care of her for the rest of her life; all she has to do in return is sing for him. Sounds like a good deal. So she agrees and is content for quite some time.

Then one day, while the meadowlark was singing by the river, the God of the Sun chances upon her, hears her singing, and is so taken by her beautiful voice that he grants her the gift of sight. When she opens her eyes, she beholds him, a beautiful young man, standing there before her. He asks her to fly with him to the ends of the earth and live a life filled with all that she’s secretly longed for.

She wants to go with him in the worst way, to live the life she has so yearned to live, a life that she had denied herself. But she can’t bring herself to do it. She’s afraid. Afraid of hurting the old king. Afraid to spread her wings and fly. Afraid to be true to her feelings. She can’t bear the thought of it, so she declines.

Disappointed, the sun god says good-bye and flies away. Later that day, when the king comes looking for the meadowlark, he finds her lifeless on the ground. Dead.

At that moment in the song, something unlocked inside me. I was struck by the most profound realization. I started to cry, a crying that quickly turned to sobbing. Unearthed from somewhere deep inside me, this tremendous grief burst forward through the dam, coming forth in waves, one after the other.

Short line _____ Unlike my graduation day, this time I knew what I was crying
Optimal _____ about.
Long line _____

I was the meadowlark! Her story was my story. I had become so afraid of following my heart, of going with and trusting my feelings, that I had unknowingly cut off an essential part of me—a vital, deep-feeling core that knew what I wanted, what I longed for, what felt right and what felt wrong to me—my truest self. It had been trapped inside me, bound up by fear. Lost. Lost for so long.

But not anymore. I could hear my true voice now, and I couldn't let myself end up like the meadowlark. I knew what I needed to do. I knew that I had to leave the relationship I was in and move on. It wasn't easy. No, in fact, it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. It felt challenging and scary at times, but deep down inside me it felt right. I couldn't sacrifice myself any longer. I needed to listen to my heart.

It takes courage to allow yourself to feel and to let your feelings guide you through your everyday life. By cutting those bonds that keep you locked up inside, you allow your feelings to soar, to be fully felt. So you can soar as well. You can give yourself the gift of your true potential rather than imprisoning your feelings—and yourself—like the lifeless meadowlark.



The next chapter says more about how and why we imprison ourselves every day. Understanding why we're held back is an important step for those of us who want ultimately to be able to experience and share our feelings and ourselves in a full and expansive way. To feel alive and vital, to feel more deeply connected to our loved ones, and to enjoy the richness, fulfillment, and contentedness that come from a life openly felt and lived.

You are already on your way to becoming more aware of and attuned to the emotions inside you. You are on your way to getting to know yourself.

Short line

Optimal

Long line

CHAPTER TAKE-HOME POINTS

- Feelings are a part of our natural make-up and, as such, are a “wired-in” response.
- Our emotions are there for our benefit.
- It’s in our feelings that we find our true, authentic self.
- Most people, to some degree or another, are afraid of their feelings. This kind of fear can be called a feelings phobia.
- Our defenses, not our feelings themselves, can cause us to get stuck.
- Suppressed feelings can lead to a wide range of physical, emotional, and psychological problems.
- Feelings are like waves and have a natural flow to them. They rise up, crescendo, and then dissipate.
- Our brain is wired such that our emotions are stronger and operate much faster than thoughts.
- Feelings are an essential guide in decision making.
- The core of your being is formed by what and how you feel. When you avoid your feelings, you’re squelching your identity and thwarting your true potential.
- Although it takes courage to face your feelings, the rewards are numerous.

Short line

Optimal

Long line