

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND YOU

ESCAPING THE MENTAL LOOP OF WANTING TO END
IT ALL

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The information within this book is not a supplement for clinical treatment or a clinical recommendation. This book is additional material focused on adding language and a deeper dialog regarding suicidal ideations. Reading this content may be triggering. If you are having current suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 for emergency assistance.

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To my grandmother, Hope, thank you for letting me know everything would be okay. To my husband, thank you for always being there for me when I come to you with a new idea.

PREFACE

Tackling the problem of death by suicide needs a multifaceted approach with the support of health-care professionals, mental health professionals, community organizations, and educational resources. This book should be used in conjunction with the medical community and mental health services.

This book is a collection of therapeutic stories and interventions used in my clinical practice that helped clients in a therapeutic setting. The steps and interventions may not work for everyone. It is my intention through writing this book to add further dialog on the topic of suicidal ideations to reduce the stigma of death by suicide in our society. To maintain the confidentiality of my clients, each story is a collection of life experiences presented in my

therapy practice and does not represent an individual story.

Experiencing the tragic loss of my brother to death by suicide and wanting to aid in the mission of helping others avoid this experience of tragedy was the reason I wrote this book. This book is for someone who is seeking a dialog on why suicidal thoughts occur.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK [8255])

This national toll-free number, available 24/7, can help prevent suicide. The lifeline provides free, 24/7, confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you and your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Visit their website at <https://SuicidePreventionLifeline.org/>.

SAMHSA National Helpline (1-800-662-HELP [4357])

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s National Helpline (also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service or

TTY) is a confidential, free, 24/7/365 information service, offered in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/ or substance-use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free publications and other information. <https://www.SAMSHA.gov/Find-Help/National-Helpline>

Crisis Text Line (Text 741-741)

Crisis Text Line is a global not-for-profit organization providing free mental health texting service through confidential crisis intervention via SMS message. The organization's services are available twenty-four, seven, throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

Visit their website at <https://www.CrisisTextLine.org/>.

The Trevor Project (1-866-488-7386 or Text "START" to 678-678)

With phone, chat, and text options, The Trevor Project is a national organization providing 24/7 crisis intervention for LGBTQ young people. Visit

their website at <https://www.TheTrevorProject.org/>.

CREATING A SAFETY PLAN

If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide or have had thoughts of suicide in the past, it is imperative that you create a safety plan prior to reading this book.

Creating a safety plan is an anchor protecting you from engaging any further thoughts of hurting yourself and protecting you while you create a foundation for feeling better in your life. It is best to create a safety plan with additional support from a friend, family member, therapist, or psychiatrist.

Here are some additional resources for safety planning:

- <https://SuicidePreventionLifeline.org/Help-Yourself/>
- <https://SPRC.org/Resources-Programs/Patient-Safety-Plan-Template>
- <https://ZeroSuicide.edc.org/>

Means

Addressing access to means of self-harm is also imperative to the process of stopping death by

suicide. Prior to reading this book you will need to end access to any means of harming yourself by taking the following actions.

Removing Access to Firearms

Reducing access to firearms is a life-saving measure. You must mitigate the risk of self-harm if you have access to a firearm.

You will need to give the firearm to a trusted friend or family member during any episode of suicidal ideation. If you have firearms that are not yours in your home, they need to be in a locked safe that is inaccessible to you.

Out of the home is the safest and secure option. If you no longer feel comfortable with firearms in your home, in most cities and counties, you can surrender them to local law enforcement.

Safely Storing Prescriptions and Medications

Reducing and limiting your access to medication and prescriptions is an additional lifesaving tool. Have a friend or close family member take any excess medications and limit your access to your prescriptions, when possible, to daily amounts. Consult your prescriber or pharmacist to find best practices.

Remove Alcohol and Drugs

Remove all alcohol and drugs from your home with the help and support of friends or family members to ensure your safety.

Warning Signs and Risk Assessment

Know the warning signs that increase risk and when to engage in crisis support. Visit <https://www.SPRC.org/About-Suicide/Warning-Signs> for more information.

IMMEDIATE RISK

Some behaviors may indicate that a person is at immediate risk for suicide. The following three scenarios should prompt you to immediately call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or a mental health professional.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

SERIOUS RISK

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk, especially if the behavior is new has increased, and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

SAFETY PLAN EXAMPLE

- How do you define a mental health crisis?
- What are the top three triggers that could create the crisis?
- What are three things that help you to feel better?
- Where could you go to help resolve the crisis?

- List three things you are good at.
- Who can you call to gain support?
- What professional supports do you have?
(Primary care doctor, psychiatrist, therapist, life coach, EAP counseling, crisis line)
- Remove all means of harm from your environment.
- Practice a breathing or grounding meditation.
- Give a copy of this safety plan to one of your support people so they know how to help.

GROUNDING MEDITATION

1. Find a moment to focus internally
2. Starting at the crown of your head, take a deep breath and acknowledge each part of your body: head, throat, shoulders, heart, stomach, hips, legs, feet, and toes
3. As you reach your toes, imagine roots growing out of your feet, securing you to the earth and accessing the support the earth has to offer
4. When you feel connected, imagine the

roots retracting into your body and bring
the security back into your body

5. Take three deep breaths

WHY DO I WANT TO DIE?

“People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.”

— ELISABETH KUBLER ROSS

HOW DID I GET HERE?

Are you thinking, “How did I get to this place in my life?” or, “I am stuck at the bottom of my life”? Do you feel alone, lost, and unsure of where to turn and how to get out of the hole you are in? Did you fall into the darkness of your shadow? Are you experiencing thoughts of self-judgment, self-hate, and shame? You may be in

the desperate place of life where you think the only answer that will make things better is ending your life.

You cannot continue the path you are on. You know you are ready to figure out how to heal the emotional pain you are experiencing. I created this book to offer you a different way.

Everyone thinks about dying or what life would be like if they were dead at some point, but this conversation has been removed from the discussion of your life. So, you are left to think about death and dying alone and in silence. “Why is this happening to me? Why do I keep thinking things would be better if I were dead?” By reading this book, you are opening the door to create a different experience in your life and be heroically honest with the truth of your thoughts and feelings, admitting to yourself the origin of your emotional distress and saying the things you have never said out loud.

Watching the impact of suicide with the death of my brother, my friends, and celebrities, and holding the space for the clients who come to work with me in therapy taught me that you do not need to lose your life to suicide. It may be the greatest fight of your life, but it is possible to build a foundation in life that supports a desire to live.

On paper, you are strong, successful, and happy. You have everything in life. You’re the one people

look up to and want to be like. “If only I could be like her, my life would be great!” But inside your mind and heart, the thoughts and feelings are overwhelming. “I cannot do this anymore,” “It is too hard to keep going,” “I feel so lost.” Your depression took over your life, and there is no way to stuff it down anymore.

You did not wake up and say, “I want to feel depressed today.” The heartache and loss in your life that seems impossible to fix created your depression. Waking up each day and knowing what you need to achieve and how to hit certain goals is a trait of a highly functioning human. Just because you are highly functioning does not mean you can’t be depressed or suicidal. Becoming a workaholic has a lot to do with avoiding the pain of the past – “If I just make it to the next promotion or complete this project, everything will be okay.” But that does not make it okay.

Avoiding the problem and the pain by focusing on something else – a career, a relationship, a family – works for a while, but you must address the pain at some point. If you are thinking about suicide, then the time is now. Your suicidal thoughts are telling you that the problem needs to die so you can live.

ANGELA'S STORY

I want to share the story of one of my clients, Angela. When I met Angela, she lived alone with her dog, had a strong but superficial social scene, liked reading and completing home projects, and had an extraordinarily successful career as a lawyer. On the outside, everything in Angela's life looked amazing: a beautiful house, a new car, and a partner at a law firm.

This was the story she presented to the world, but inside the walls of her home, when she was alone with herself, a different story was happening. Inside of her heart, there was a dark void, and her mind was filled with self-loathing and toxic thoughts about herself. She spent hours replaying her day and beating herself up for mistakes she made, and when she could not take the negative thoughts anymore, she started to think about ending her life to make the thoughts stop.

She had no idea how to fill this void inside of her because all the things she owned, and her accomplishments did not give her meaning or fulfillment in life. They were the things in life she felt like she *should* do or that she was *told* would make her happy.

This deepened her depression and the negative thoughts that aligned with her shame of not being good enough. She went through the motions of life

but did not feel happy and had no idea how to change her life. She desperately wanted the negative thoughts in her head to stop but was giving up hope.

This was the turning point in Angela's life where she was brave enough to tell a friend she was struggling with depression, and her friend encouraged her to get help. Angela completed a major life review to identify the things in her life that were missing and the times where she felt shameful and not good enough in life – the origin of her pain.

After finding the source of her emotional pain in her story, she addressed the negative thought of not being good enough and reconstructed her reality through acceptance, compassion, and self-love. By finding the false narratives she created about herself of not being enough, she started to rewrite her story. By meeting her needs and listening to the truth of her feelings, she shifted the negative thoughts out of her mind and found the answers she needed to feel happy in life.

Angela's story is everyone's story – the story of how your life is set up to avoid emotional healing and focus mostly on the checklist societal norms in life. You are encouraged to be a successful member of society above all else.

THE PRESSURE TO BE SOMETHING YOU'RE NOT

You set your level of achievement and success not on your internal standards of happiness but on external goals and monetary rewards, like the house, the car, the job, and a well-rounded Instagram account. These can only last for so long because monetary rewards do not meet your need of being human and listening to your true purpose: being authentic in life.

Just like Angela, who rewrote her story, you have the power to dictate where your life is going. You can have deep and meaningful friendships where people get to know all the parts of your life with no more secrets. You get to share your feelings, and not just the “good ones.” You can trust the people in your life to accept you for who you really are. When you let people into your life, they see that you are not perfect, but real and authentic. You can be the person who you want to be, not the person who just does what is expected of you.

Starting at a young age, children look to the adults around them to receive acceptance and positive feedback in school, homes, and communities. This means they're doing what is expected of them, and when they try to present themselves individually or create new ideas, they are met with resistance

and increased pressure to step in line. So, meeting all the goals and standards set by the institutions becomes your main priority instead of listening to your feelings and needs. This happened to you.

There is a clear message in society: if you work hard to meet the standards or surpass them, then you get the rewards. If you have the drive to be successful and work hard to achieve in life, you will be happy. This is a false narrative setting you up for failure. Just hitting the bar of achievement does not create a life of fulfillment.

From the beginning, the questions society has for you are, “What do you want to do?” and, “What do you want to be?” The real questions that lead you to living an authentic life are, “What makes you happy?” “What makes you feel good in life?” “Where do you feel connected to something greater than yourself?”

Living a fake reality gets harder and harder, and without a path to your authentic life, you ask the question, “How do I die?” because you cannot do this anymore. This is not the question you are looking for. You do not want to die; you want to live without the pain you are experiencing. The real question is, “How do I live?” This is the question you are searching for in your heart, but when the deeply rooted thoughts of depression take over, they steer you away from all pain. Your depression avoids and

denies the pain and leaves you alone and completely isolated from the truth: “This is not working anymore.” Even a person who is extraordinarily successful can become suicidal quickly. Depression takes over all rational thought and becomes compulsive in its course to stop you from making any changes in your life.

It is okay to feel your pain; it has wisdom to offer you on how to experience life. Unfortunately, you have not been taught how to do this in a way that allows you to move through the pain to the other side. So, you must take a step back and rework the model, using a new milestone – a life that makes you want to live and something you do that makes you want to wake up each day.

You must create a process of healing and establishing your roots. You must literally start at the beginning – the rock bottom, your earliest days, your earliest lessons – while reworking all your ideas and expressing all your feelings from the beginning. As an adult, you now have the power and capacity to move your life in the direction you want to go.

Go back to the start of where things went wrong – a relationship, a career change, or a familial role shift – and redirect the story to meet your needs. As a human, you learn by experience, and you get to heal the pain of loss, trauma, or heartbreak.

Thinking about dying and death in your life teaches you how to create a life that you want to live. What do suicidal and negative thoughts have to say? What are they trying to protect you from? What do they have to teach you?

When engaging in this dialog, there are steps to repair the damage and pain that make life so hard. This book will help you gain further insight about why your suicidal thoughts are happening and how to address them when they come up. You will get tools to help you stop thinking, "It would be better if I died." You can move through the painful experiences that are holding you back by addressing the problems that caused depression to take over your life. You are ready to take your life back and create a life that is meaningful to you.

WATCHING PEOPLE HEAL THEIR
LIVES

*“Once in a while you get shown the light. In the
strangest of places if you look at it right.”*

— ROBERT HUNTER

NOT GETTING TO SAY GOODBYE

I know firsthand the pain and loss of losing a loved one to suicide. Going through the terrible experience of losing a family member to a death by suicide haunts my family. It is an experience that lives with me every day of my life.

When I was three years old, my oldest brother died by suicide. Being a young child, I could not fully comprehend the situation, but I felt the feelings that surrounded me. I felt the loss and pain and terror

my parents and siblings endured during the life-changing moment they found out my brother was no longer living.

My brother was overwhelmed with grief due to the death of his mother and could not cope with the loss. Searching for ways to escape his emotional pain, he turned to high-risk activities and behaviors, and depression took over his life.

My mother, who was his stepmother, and my father followed all the medical recommendations – putting him in counseling and trying everything they could to get him the help he needed. He was unable to navigate his grief and depression.

This loss only furthered the emotional pain and grief for my family. Even though my family learned how to live without him, the loss of his life is always with us. Todd Engel, I can say that life is not better off without you.

I saw the impact of losing him and not saving him had on my parents and family. The trauma of loss creates a shadow of pain, and your brain looks for tragedy around every corner. Living life with the question, “Could today be the day something terrible happens?” I carry his pain and trauma with me on my journey.

The stigma of suicide affects the way a family grieves the loss. My parents did not see my brother’s body. They had a closed-casket funeral, which

denied them closure of the death of their loved one. Community members and friends did not know how to talk about the loss and avoided the topic, adding shame to the experience. All we knew was that we had to live life without one of our people.

This left holes in all the experiences of our lives. The loss, the “what ifs,” the replay of the events – all of these made an imprint upon my story. But when someone dies by suicide, there is no replay, and there is not a second chance. The stories of survivors of suicide attempts highlight a common response: regret.

The idea that there is no help for someone who is suicidal has never been something I was willing to accept. For my brother, the help wasn’t available yet. That is why addressing the reasons that made you suicidal is so important to me. As you lessen depression’s impact on your life, there is hope.

Looking at my emotional pain, grief, and loss is a constant journey of self-reflecting and questioning my experience of life. Looking at my relationship with depression, thinking “Why? Why me? What if I was not here?” and leaving these questions unanswered in my life left me feeling alone and empty.

A NATURAL COUNSELOR

Losing someone I loved to death by suicide put me more at risk to have suicidal thoughts. I had to answer all the hard questions in my life to reduce the tendency to think about wanting to die. “Why try? Is it worth it? Would I be better off dead?” I am the same as you. When life gets hard, the natural thought, “I wish I were dead,” automatically pops into my head.

I have worked over the years to build my safety net. Most importantly, after seeing the pain my parents went through, I knew death by suicide would never be an option for me, so I had to find a different way through the depression.

In my therapy, I looked at my depression response and how I could navigate through the darkness and shadow of my life. I accepted that my defense mechanism was escape. For me, escape was natural and easy. Emotional avoidance, alcohol, drugs, concerts, and parties worked perfectly at keeping any dark feelings away.

It was only a period until this level of avoidance could not be kept up anymore and the death of a dear friend woke me up to reality. I needed to face my emotions and change the course of my life before I ended up with the same fate.

I learned to listen to the pain, validate its pres-

ence, and move through it. I had to go on a journey to find myself outside of the idea society had for me. I took a soul-searching journey to find the things that gave me balance, restored the broken pieces, and created harmony that lived within me. Step by step, I created a foundation that supported me. This is where I found a deep love of music. When I am in the presence of music, I can hear my inner wisdom. I feel something bigger than myself and have feel awe-inspiring feelings that tell me there is nowhere else I would rather be. I can dance through my feelings and break free from the pain that builds up within my body.

Working through all the feelings and learning how to create a life that is authentic and loving can be emotionally raw and painful, but it is worth it. The pain of my brother's story is something that never truly leaves my life, but it does not define my life. I let go of the feelings and thoughts that were created in the loss to continue to live. In my life, feeling emotional pain comes and goes like every human being. I learned to accept that there is no escape from emotional pain the only way out is going through the feelings.

Watching the grief my family experienced and wanting to help them and others find a way through the pain naturally led to me becoming a counselor. I knew this was my purpose because I saw people

changing their lives and recognized the joy I felt through that experience. Even after fifteen years in the field, I still look forward to the next session and the next client I meet and anticipate their healing process.

I did not specifically choose to study death and dying. It chose me. I ran out of time after finishing my bachelor's degree in psychology to find a master's program in counseling, and most colleges closed their application deadlines. I was faced with the reality of having to take a year off in my education or apply to a smaller school, focusing on transformational counseling and gaining a certification in grief and loss. I chose to study transformational counseling and moved to the highly spiritual landscape of New Mexico. This connection with the land in the southwest added a deep level of healing to my life. I needed to be in an environment that supported my beliefs and a culture that held a deep sense of appreciation for life.

This pulled on my heart and soul in a way I could not understand until years later. This was my destiny: to embrace the culture of grief and complete the unfinished process of healing surrounding my brother's death, imparting it as a gift to the world.

Submerging myself into the culture of death, the study of grief and loss, the stages of grief, and how different cultures hold space for the dying amplified

my interest in how society views living and dying. In Bhutan, a country that reports some of the highest levels of happiness with people on the planet, citizens have a cultural practice to not only think about their death but also talk about it and even plan for it.

So, I created a plan to die. My plan is to die at the age of 103 as a tribute to my Grandmother Hawkins, who lived to be 102. It was her goal in life to make it to 100; it was in every part of her. I plan to carry that legacy on. I want to die in a bed with a lovely handmade quilt keeping me warm, surrounded by my family. I will take my last breath when they have left the room. I will wait to leave the earth when I am alone.

This is my plan, and I think it is a beautiful way to die. It guides how I live. I am making choices now in life that will guide me to my desired death. I am fully embracing the role that death plays in my life.

MY CLIENTS ARE MY TEACHERS

Death, depression, and grief are an important part of my journey to process what it means to lose a loved one. To sit with the emotional pain of wanting to die and suicidal thoughts is my most challenging work as a therapist, but it is where I must go.

As I witness the bravery of my clients who admit their suicidal thoughts and check the box that says,

“Yes, I want to die,” they push past the stigma and judgment because they know that they need help in the process.

The fear of admitting these thoughts can prevent people from talking about them. It can take months of therapy before they feel ready to talk about the thoughts of suicide. For example, Mario is one of my clients who came into counseling after being disciplined by his employer for chronic lateness and excessive absences. In our sessions, Mario focused on his struggles with lacking motivation, focus, and energy.

He denied any real symptoms of depression, negative thinking, or suicidal ideation until his wife threatened to leave him. He asked for an emergency appointment and, upon arrival, broke into sobbing tears and said, “I cannot go on anymore if my wife leaves me. She is the only thing I have left. I already think about killing myself every day, and if she leaves, I will be out of choices. I’ll go through with it.”

This moment where Mario finally became honest with himself and asked for help was the moment things started to change for the better. One core piece of my practice is believing in people and embodying unconditional positive regard in a way that puts my client in the role of being the expert in their lives. Not feeling like I know the answers for

other people allows them to find the answers inside of themselves.

I allow my clients to teach me what they need to heal their lives and let them lead the healing process unfolding naturally. They need to verbalize the truth of their story: “This was the moment where I lost myself. This was the moment that I steered off my course.”

Sitting with someone in their darkest moment and holding the belief that things can be different is my role in the process. Many of my clients, despite being completely successful in their professional lives, tried many treatments and different therapies to relieve the negative thoughts and depression without prior success. So, when they get to my therapy door, they have little hope that it will work this time.

That is where I bring myself into the process as a counselor and a human. I know this process works not only because I have seen it unravel before, but only because I live it every day. I work consistently on the process of restoring balance in my own life too. I know the pain in the process, and I also know the beauty, the love, and the trust.

WHY YOUR BRAIN THINKS DYING IS THE ANSWER

“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”

— CARL ROGERS

WHY DON'T PEOPLE GET HELP?

It can be hard to accept that you have suicidal thoughts. Most people do not share them with others. Having suicidal thoughts is more common than you think. Suicidal thoughts are generally highest among eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds who are trying to find where and how they fit into the world.

Any life transition, trauma, or loss creates compulsive thoughts of dying. Your brain does not

know how to respond to the pain. Having suicidal thoughts does not mean you are going to kill yourself or that you will attempt to end your life. It means your current situation is not working for your life. Struggles with adversity, race, gender, and sexuality create more barriers and inequalities, which makes the struggles in life feel impossible to overcome.

Most people are afraid that if they seek help or talk about their thoughts of dying, they will end up in a psychiatric unit or heavily medicated. Sometimes that is true in *extreme* cases with clear means, identifiable threats, and active intention to die, but most people will not fit into this category.

Engaging in a conversation will not kill anyone. “Why do I feel like dying? Is there anything that would make me want to live? Can someone else do anything to help? What is the hardest part of life for me?” It is okay to have these conversations, and it is okay to ask to talk to someone you trust about the questions you are having.

Taking a deeper look at the stigma of having suicidal thoughts is important. A stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. So, apparently, if you are unhappy with your life, feel pain, and want it to go away, you have a mark of disgrace. You can see why you might

not want to get help. No one wants to be labeled with a mark of disgrace, so they stay silent.

I want to create normality around seeking help and asking the question, “Why has my life gotten to this point?” You are not a disgrace, wrong, or bad for wanting the emotional pain to end. You are a human being. Most people do not relate to the clinical definition of depression in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). These are the standard symptoms:

- Sadness or dejected moods
- Irritability
- Decreased energy and interest in activities
- Loss of feelings of pleasure
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Difficulty thinking clearly, making decisions, and concentrating
- Lethargy and/ or fidgetiness
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and/ or guilt
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Lack of interest in activities that once brought joy
- Frequent sadness or crying
- Newfound social isolation
- Low self-esteem

- Thoughts or expression of self-destructive behavior

If you have a successful career or supportive family, you may deny the symptoms of depression, moving forward in life and not listening to the insight your depression has to offer you. If you know what depression looks like for you, you will have the power to address the problem before it takes over.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is written in organized steps to address common issues that arise in depression and suicidal ideation. It is recommended that you go through the steps as written to build a foundation of change in your life. Before completing any of the steps in this book, create a safety plan. Information on how to find a safety plan and what should be in it is listed in the preface of this book.

Addressing painful experiences may be emotionally triggering, and the safety plan is a step-by-step process to ground your emotions and address any suicidal thoughts that arise in the process. There is also a grounding meditation in the preface that can be completed if at any time during reading this book you feel emotional triggered or overwhelmed. This

book is a guide to restoring the foundational aspects of what you need to fully function in the world and tap into the truest parts of yourself reducing the tendency to think about death by suicide.

LIFE HEALING PROCESS

Over the last fifteen years of treating clinical depression and suicidality as a therapist, I have watched clients heal their painful emotions. I noticed that pulling together a variety of tools helps people resolve the depression that has taken over their lives. I created the Life Healing process to help clients feel secure and ready to face life's challenges without getting stuck in a state of depression.

In Chapter 4, you will create a life review and a timeline of the painful experiences in your life to find the unresolved relationships or core developmental issues that led to your depression. You will pinpoint the areas that are causing you pain and give yourself power in the restorative process. When you listen to what your pain has to say, you find out what needs to change in your life.

In Chapter 5, you will build a self-care plan to stop the harsh cycle of living in survival mode. You will review Maslow's hierarchy of needs to repair the wounds from the past and create safety during your journey of self-discovery. You will unmask the

basic survival needs that were mislabeled as self-care. Meeting your needs of physical health, safety, belonging, self-confidence, and purpose will move you to a place of self-knowledge giving you the power to create a life that feels better for you.

Chapter 6 will explore where and when your negative thoughts started. All negative thoughts serve a purpose: to protect you from reliving the painful experiences of the past. A thought or belief is created during these formative life events, and this belief pops back up throughout your life. You will track and log your negative thoughts over a forty-eight-hour period to explore triggers, emotional safety, and compulsive thinking.

In Chapter 7, you will unravel the automatic thinking that makes you focus on problems and worst-case scenarios. You will make a commitment to stop internally berating yourself and self-deprecating. You will learn how to stop mentally harming yourself by identifying when the negative self-talk happens and choosing from a list of pre-identified preferred activities to prevent it. You will then take action to pivot away from the negative thoughts and repurpose them as tools for your self-development.

Chapter 8 will help you to explore what your depression looks, sounds, and thinks like. You will create a “depression story” – a narrative of your thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions that occurs

when depression is active in your life. Depression is complex, and it is different for everyone, so you need to know your story of depression.

In Chapter 9, you will identify your inner voice of wisdom to gain access to the infinite source of information that is guiding you on a journey to be your best in life. You will practice self-awareness and mindfulness to quiet the automatic thoughts and judgmental thoughts to find the heart space where your inner voice lives. You will engage in a daily meditation practice to find this voice, nurture it, and let it direct your life.

Chapter 10 is where you access your strengths and natural talents to create a life that you love and that nurtures your soul. You will use your inner voice to list all your assets as a human being that will help you on this journey. Accepting your strengths and your self-worth creates a wealth of capacity to move through life without getting stuck. You will create a strengths and natural talents inventory that you can access when challenges arise.

Moving through these steps, you will engage in the conversation of, “Why do I want to live?” and, “What will make living worth it?” Positive thoughts come naturally when you feel better inside your body, soul, and mind.

These principles of feeling better are not a one-and-done application. They are a daily practice and

routine. There is a world in which you are happy and thriving. As you create the life that allows you to feel better, the world becomes a better place. You will have an impact on the world, and the world needs you right now.

WHEN DID THINGS GO WRONG?

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.”

— C.G. JUNG

YOUR FEELINGS

Making it through your life without any unresolved emotional wounds or emotional distress is extremely rare. When you are hurt, you are encouraged to deny physical and emotional pain and form unhealthy coping skills without resolving the painful emotions. You have been given a consistent message to push your tears aside and push the anger down because feelings equal weakness. The truth is, pushing your

feelings down only prolongs their existence. The emotional pain stays waiting for you, and in moments of vulnerability or high stress, it comes back. The only way to resolve your emotions is to accept them into your life, process them, and let go of the faulty beliefs you created to survive the experience.

Emotions have an underlying law of expression. All emotions are created to drive your experience, and they are waiting to be expressed. You can avoid, deny, push, and numb them as hard as you can, but they *will* come out. You have a choice to talk about them or feel them. The emotions can explode from non-related issues. Your body will create headaches and stomachaches, pains in your neck, nightmares, or diseases to express your emotions.

Unfortunately, your repressed emotions come out in harmful ways when bottled up for too long. When you deny your true emotions, they come out as negative, suicidal thoughts; “I cannot do this anymore. I want to die.”

Your life’s current pace does not support being cautious and listening to your emotions. You are under constant pressure to hurry up and feel better. Unresolved emotional distress gets locked away deep within your brain, hidden from your conscious experience. The emotions are stored as a fleeting memory that pops up from time to time. The signifi-

cance of the emotions in your life is deeply downplayed. The same unresolved issues will keep coming up in your life. You must make the time to find the unresolved experiences and reconstruct how they have impacted your life.

FINDING THE PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

The hidden emotional pain that needs to be expressed is waiting to be resolved. By taking a deep look at the events of your life and how they have impacted you, you will restore emotional balance in your life. When you are suicidal and depressed, you must be willing to take a deep look into all aspects of your life.

Identifying what is lost in your life takes great intention and focus. Identifying the point where your emotions were denied can tell you where to start on your journey of emotional healing. Even when you are extraordinarily successful in some areas of your life, when a new attack happens, the unresolved emotions are like an avalanche of emotions burying all the progress you have made since the painful event in your life.

What are the main painful experiences that, left unresolved, increase suicidal thoughts? The CDC defined adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood.

ACEs include violence, abuse, and growing up in a family with mental health or substance use problems. Toxic stress from ACEs changes brain development and affects how the body responds to stress. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood. While experiencing an adverse childhood experience increases the likelihood of depression and suicidal ideation, there are many additional painful experiences that increase thoughts of wanting to die.

Abuse

Experiencing abuse on any level – physical, sexual, or emotional – is like experiencing an attack on your soul. The amount of denial and dissociation you need to survive the situation is the same denial and dissociation that keeps you from addressing the trauma and loss of the situation. When you are abused, you build emotional and mental walls to stop yourself from feeling pain.

Once you are free from the abuse and are safe, those walls need to be taken down so you can experience life again.

Death of a Loved One

You may never fully integrate life after the loss of a loved one. The grief can be so overwhelming that it takes you out of your life. Missing your loved one consumes each moment of your experience. You stop considering your own needs and are unable to find meaning in the day-to-day activities of life.

Trauma

When you experience trauma, the fight, flight, or freeze response makes you hide your feelings away. With trauma, sometimes the only life-saving response is to freeze everything – your muscles, breathing, feelings, and thoughts. There is no switch to put you back into the rest and recovery stage of healing afterward, though. Without intervention, you remain frozen in the fear of the situation.

Divorce

During a divorce, you may experience grief because you are losing what you thought your life was going to be. You now must create a new world instead of planning for, dreaming of, and engaging in a life that is now over. A death of circumstance and denial can overtake your ability to move

forward, especially if the divorce was not what you wanted.

Toxic Work Environment

Having to cope with a work environment that is negative or harassing feels like a daily threat. You do not know if you will be employed at the end of the day or how you could afford your food and housing. The high-level stress response can take over your ability to accurately navigate the situation.

Domestic Violence

The emotional, physical, and mental abuse of being in a domestic violence relationship erases your personality as you avoid the threat of punishment for even just being who you are. The threat of harm can be so great that you stop all emotions and focus on surviving.

Health Diagnosis

Receiving a health diagnosis is a threat to your life and puts you into survival mode. You may feel unsafe when fully expressing your feelings because you are fighting the diagnosis or denying its existence.

Betrayal of a Friend

Even the loss of a friend who you trusted and accepted into your life can be a painful experience. If that experience remains unaddressed, it can cause significant loss and depression in your life, challenging your worth and ability to be accepted and loved in your life.

CREATE A LIFE REVIEW AND TIMELINE OF YOUR PAINFUL EXPERIENCES

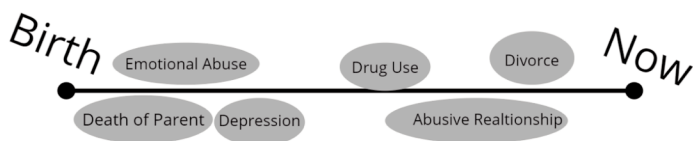
It is time to create your own life review timeline. The goal of this timeline is to identify which experiences in your life still need to be processed emotionally.

- Find a moment where you can be honest with yourself and reflective.
- On a piece of paper, create a timeline from your birth until now.
- List out the painful experiences in your life.
- Ask yourself, “When did the painful feeling start? I have not felt the same since [event].”
- Do not judge or question the events that

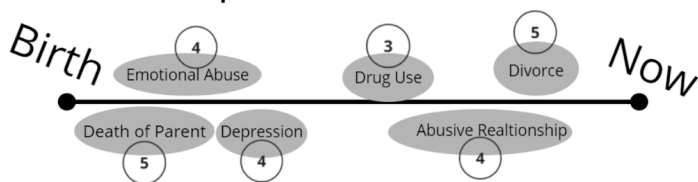
come into your mind or heart. Just list them out.

- Rate each experience from one to five, with one being the least painful and five being the most painful.

Life Experiences Timeline



Life Experiences Timeline



Identify the most painful unresolved experience in your life. What does this experience tell you?

Jessica's Story

Jessica came into therapy after struggling with lifelong depression, alcoholism, and endless suicidal thoughts. She woke up most days feeling ashamed. She did not feel good about her choices and accom-

plishments in life. She was married for twenty-nine years and had two grown children and one new grandchild. Although she loved her family dearly, she was angry, short, and irritable with them. She felt like she had to constantly defend herself and her choices.

Jessica had dreams of becoming a professional baker and owning her own bakery, but after being fired from a cake shop, she stayed home to raise her children. She loved her children deeply but never felt like she was good enough. She compared herself to other moms who made it all look easy. Her best friend from elementary school stopped calling her after she married and never gave a reason why. She was just absent from her life. While she was pregnant with her second child, she was diagnosed with gestational diabetes and felt like she never had the same amount of energy as before the pregnancy.

After creating a timeline of her life, she identified the feelings of loss she experienced after being fired, losing her friend, and having health complications. These were the painful experiences in her life where she avoided expressing the emotions surrounding her losses, which were holding her back from living her life. Doing so allowed her to grieve over the experiences and go through the process of feeling and releasing the emotions and breaking down the negative thought patterns she had created about

herself. She started baking again, looked for ways to build new friendships, and made her health and energy priorities in her life. Each day, she focused on restoring the losses in her life. At the end of the process, she reported a decrease in negative thoughts and suicidal thoughts.

MOVING FROM SURVIVAL TO SELF-CARE

“Survival mode is supposed to be a phase that helps save your life. It is not meant to be how you live.”

— MICHELE ROSENTHAL

MOVING PAST SURVIVAL MODE

The painful experiences in your life triggered a primal survival response that shut down your ability to engage in your life and has one primary function: avoiding death. Just surviving in life is not fully living as a human. Your basic physical needs of survival are sleep, food, water, air, and connection, and these needs have been mislabeled as self-care. When survival is misla-

beled as self-care you cannot reach the turning point of resetting your life after the painful event.

When you are only taking care of a basic level of survival, of course you are still physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. The process of self-care is when you can fully meet all your basic needs of physical health, safety, belonging, self-confidence, and self-reflection. Then you can practice self-care by listening and integrating your emotional experience.

To meet the current pace and demands of work, personal, and life activities, you sacrificed everything down to the basic building blocks of being a human. Skipping meals, staying up late into the night, pushing your body and mind past their limits into a place of survival.

When talking about self-care, a common sentiment is you must put on your oxygen mask first. I encourage you to stop using an extremely traumatic and possibly life-ending event to reference the act of taking care of yourself. If the oxygen mask falls out of the ceiling while you are on a plane, you are going to be fighting for your life and in complete survival mode, as you should be.

The ability to go into survival mode during a life-threatening event is a gift to handle the traumatic events of life. Survival mode needs to do its job save your life and then return to its resting place until a

new threat is identified. This step is often missed. Your brain does not register the different levels of trauma. A threat is a threat. If you were verbally abused or physically attacked your brain triggers the same survival response. Survival mode takes over until safety is restored in your life. You can resolve the painful experiences that threatened your existence and put you into a survival response by resetting and restoring your life after the threat is gone. This is an active and intentional process of redefining your environment, thoughts, and behaviors.

Now that you know the source that triggered your emotional pain, depression, and thoughts of waiting to die, you can process and express the painful emotions allowing the rest and restore response to be activated.

Your feelings of depression were triggered by a broken or unmet basic need of human existence when you felt the painful experience. Finding what you needed when the pain started is where you rebuild the foundation of your life. Take a deep look at how you develop as a human and review the work of Abraham Maslow's book *Toward a Psychology of Being* and his hierarchy of needs.

There are basic things you need to thrive in your life. To get there, you need to address your physical needs, your safety and security, your sense of love

and belonging, your esteem, and your self-actualization. Meeting your basic human needs brings you to the present moment and allows you to stop reliving your pain and heal the wounds of the past.

This process works no matter what stage you are at – from being homeless to struggling with addiction, or if you are high-functioning at the top of your career. You can be in a place where practicing self-care is a valid tool to cope with daily life stressors restoring emotional balance in your life.

PHYSICAL NEEDS

When you sacrifice the basic needs of your body, your body responds with rampant problems, disease, and dysregulation in your system. While working full-time and giving all of yourself to a career, family, or education, the one thing that is easy to sacrifice is what your body needs.

When you push yourself to meet deadlines and demands – not needing to go to the bathroom or take a lunch break – to meet your work goals, this sacrifice stops your ability to feel your physical, emotional, and mental needs. To stop living in survival mode, you need to go to the basic level of functioning and much like you would take care of an infant, give yourself the same respect for basic needs.

Your basic physical needs are water, food, air, shelter, clothing, and sleep. These are the items that have been labeled as self-care. Self-care is a tool for reducing burnout, but these activities are basic acts of survival.

My client, Leah, a nurse working in the emergency room, took medications to restrict her bladder while working on her nursing shift to avoid going to the bathroom because there was no time. There was no time to eat or take breaks during her deadlines and overwhelming patient care. She was completely depleted emotionally, physically, and mentally. When she woke up in the morning the first thing she would think is, “I can’t do this anymore. I wish I were dead.” She was actively experiencing the painful event in her life.

After coming to therapy, she focused her first sessions on creating a routine where she met all her basic physical needs. She worked to get eight hours of sleep. She planned and prepared her meals and scheduled a lunch break while working and had an alarm set to drink water and to take a deep breath throughout the day. She would have enough time to get ready for events without rushing or skipping daily hygiene.

To create a life you thrive in, you must prioritize your physical needs. Sleeping, eating, drinking water, and using the bathroom during your work-

days are no longer negotiable. You need to balance your needs so that by the end of the day, you are not physically exhausted and crashing onto the couch with a takeout order and binging Netflix.

SAFETY

As you meet your physical needs you will have more energy to focus on your world and the safety that surrounds you. Your reset response to fear is safety. To continue in the restorative process, you must have a sense of safety in your environment. You need to build a physical and emotional alarm system that protects you from threats in your community, your home, your work environment, and with the people around you.

Have you ever stopped to think, “How do I feel safe in my life?” You can spend all day thinking about what scares you and what could go wrong in your life. Instead, start your day with the right question: “What feels safe to me?”

Start with the external things in your life. Do you feel safe in your home? If the answer is no, then something needs to change. What does not feel safe at home? Is it your actual house, your neighborhood, or a family member? Addressing these issues is the first step in making sure your foundation for healing is strong. Maybe you need to add an actual alarm

system, get a dog, set a boundary in your relationship, or leave a toxic relationship. Safety in your environment is key to the process of healing.

Internal safety asks a different question: “Is it okay to be me?” Can you share the authentic parts of yourself with the world? Hiding from the world is sacrificing your soul and keeping you in a place of survival predicting and avoiding each threat. You must create a world where you feel safe to share your thoughts and ideas. If there is an environment where you do not speak up or show up, something is not safe about it. If it is unsafe to be yourself in your life currently, you need a new environment. What needs to change for you to have the safety you need?

Identify why you feel unsafe. Did someone physically, emotionally, or psychologically attack you? If it is an environment where you were attacked, then that environment needs to change. When safety is missing fear can rewrite your life story with a defensive and negative thought structure. Stop the cycle and look at what you need to feel safe each time you feel afraid. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you must keep asking yourself the question, “What do I need to feel safe right now?”

Ask yourself what makes you feel good and bad. Listen to the answer and move toward the things that add good feelings into your life. Set boundaries to protect yourself. Saying “no” to the thing you do

not want in your life or telling a friend you cannot talk about a certain topic with them. Stop the engagements that make you feel bad. Limit your exposure to the coworker who is passive aggressive and who makes you feel bad about yourself. Avoid the phone call to your sibling that makes you feel worse about life.

SECURITY

Restoring security and trust in your life reduces the level of threat your brain perceives in your environment. Feeling secure in life is more than physical and emotional safety. It is trusting the environments and people who surround you and creating a belief system of trust. Knowing that you can depend on the people in your life, work environment, and home allows your brain to rest from working overtime in trying to protect you.

There is no amount of yoga that will allow you to feel better if you have an eviction notice on your door or are at risk of losing your job. There is no amount of positive thinking that can make a toxic work environment okay or an abusive relationship acceptable. Security gives you that tangible feeling of nothing bad is going to happen today. It reminds you of that moment from childhood where your soul felt

free enough to smile from ear to ear – the moments in your life that felt like nothing could go wrong. When your brain gets to rest from a threat you have the capacity to focus on other areas of your life. Security is paramount to move from surviving to thriving.

BELONGING

After restoring the element of your physical health, safety, and security it is time to add in the sustaining energy force of intimacy and connection. You are meant to connect with people and build relationships. Social isolation is a key component of depression that cuts you off from the deep bond of connection that allows you to find happiness in living your life.

Avoiding connection builds emotional and mental walls isolating you and forcing you to rely only on yourself. A protective and negative thought system is creating the belief that the only person you can trust is you. This thought system is a killer because connecting with people is the very thing you need to restore your life.

When you can connect with people you learn about yourself and can see yourself from a different view. When you were a child, you saw yourself through the eyes of the adults around you and

created beliefs about yourself based on the beliefs they had about you.

You became the child your parents saw for better or worse. Feeling a connection and a sense of belonging starts or stops in your family, elementary school, and community. If you make it through adolescence with trustworthy relationships, this sense of belonging can remain intact.

Even after being rejected or abandoned by someone or something you cared about, it is possible to trust again. Learning to restore trust in others, connect, find a group, a home, or a community to belong to needs to be slow and easy.

To find your people is not a race to the finish line. It is a slow dance to build reliable relationships over time. Relationships of significance should take years to form. You must put on your emotional caution lights as you proceed in creating a new relationship. To avoid the fall of jumping without a protective parachute, you need to work on developing the relationship and see the progress over time. Each engagement gives you more information about whether a new person gets the privilege of getting to know who you are.

Connection and intimacy are the same as food, water, and air. Without them, you die. It may be a slower death where your days are filled with suicidal thoughts and self-harming patterns of addiction, but

your personality dies. Love and connection are vital nutritional sources that the human life force craves. It's the emotional spinach of the heart. You must find the bravery to reach out to others and say hello to someone you see who gives you a good feeling. By building your friends, family, and intimate relationships, you gain a deeper understanding of yourself and who you are in the world.

ESTEEM AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

To figure out how to understand yourself is a big part of developing self-confidence. The way you feel, think, and behave gives you the knowledge to make strong choices in your best interest regardless of negative feedback. What are the things you like? What are the things that regulate you? The things that make you feel better are an exploratory process. You need to do some trial and error in exploring this process. Do you *really* like gardening? Try it. If it is amazing, do it again. If it is horrible, let it go. Create your own decision tree of life.

Self-confidence and self-esteem create a foundation for you to master your life. They let you move past the imposter syndrome and feel secure in your thoughts and beliefs. You can evaluate your self-worth measured by your own experiences in life.

By knowing yourself, you can practice the

concepts of changing how you live to build healthy coping skills. As you feel an increased level of confidence, you can give yourself permission to feel desire, creativity, and passion. As you make choices with your emotions as your guide, you will grow in your ability to feel the rewards of life. A new thought structure of believing in yourself says, “You are worth it,” and, “You are good enough.”

SELF-ACTUALIZING

The core of who you are is built by meeting your basic needs, and your core allows you to get to a state of mindfulness and true self-care. Self-reflection helps you grow and nurture your life experiences. It is here where you have the resources to thrive. You have the power to build a life and make choices that fully support your core existence. You can explore your personal meaning, fulfillment, and purpose in life. You can put yourself in a place to give back to the community through your talents and interests. When you create a secure attachment to life, suicidal thoughts are not welcome in this place because you are nurtured and cared for.

ROSE'S STORY

Rose is a mother of three children, and she was divorced prior to my meeting with her. She came into therapy after a year of being single, and feeling alone and isolated. She walked away from a toxic and abusive relationship where she was belittled and invalidated. She knew leaving was the right thing to do, but it took all of her strength, and it was not easy.

She was a successful supervisor at a non-profit for almost five years. She felt like she could not get ahead in life with all the responsibility she had. She was racing to keep up with work, her children's school and activities, and cleaning. At the end of the day, there was no time left for her.

She was exhausted and sought a break from the stress of managing everything on top of the void she felt when she was alone. She felt guilty for feeling happy while at work because that was an area where she was successful, got a break from her life, and could focus on making something work well. At the end of the day, she wanted to put her head under her pillow and make it all go away. She wished she was dead and thought about hurting herself.

Rose had no time for herself at the end of the day. She did not eat during her workday. Instead, she picked up food on her way to the aftercare program

to get her kids, helped them with their homework, and put them to bed. She put in a load of laundry most nights for the next day and then fell asleep in her work clothes.

Rose entered therapy because she knew she could not continue with this any longer. She was scared she would try to hurt herself. She completed the life review and identified an abusive relationship with her father, noticing the same patterns in the relationship with her ex-husband as the source of her pain and low self-worth.

Rose moved through the hierarchy of needs to restore balance in her life and gain the confidence she needed to take charge. During the abuse she experienced as a child she created a belief that she was not worthy of love. She created a daily schedule built to meet her physical needs, and she asked for help with household tasks from her children and family. She set boundaries within her work environment to not take work home. She practiced identifying and shifting the negative thoughts that attacked her ability to love herself and allow herself to be loved.

Rose connected with other moms at her children's school, building friends and ridesharing so the children did not need afterschool care. She felt better and woke up with the energy to think about what she needed *and* wanted in life.

SELF-CARE PLAN

Using the painful life experiences you identified in Chapter 4, identify your survival response. By doing this, you will move out of survival mode and activate the rest and restore mode in your life.

Part One: Resolving the Survival Response

- “What did I need during that time?” Pick one from physical health, safety, security, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.
- What was my survival response?
- “How can I add this need into my life now?” (Example: “I needed someone to listen to me.”)
- “How can I meet this need?” (Example: Identify someone who listens to you now. Figure out a way to add people who listen to you into your life.)

Part Two: Daily Restorative Self-Care Plan

Answer these questions at the start of each day.

- “What do I need to maintain my physical health?”
- “What do I need to feel safe?”
- “How can I connect to others?”
- “What makes me feel good?”
- “How do I want to grow?”
- “What do I need right now?”

Working through the stages of human development is like working through a set of goals. You must complete each stage before moving on to the next. Sometimes, you will get sent back to the beginning and must work the stages again with everything you learned. Sometimes, all these stages are met in early adulthood, but life, trauma, or death happens and breaks one of the pieces.

WHERE ARE YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS COMING FROM?

“Sometimes it is not the pain that makes you suffer, it’s your own negative thoughts that make things seem worse.”

— UNKNOWN

WHY AM I THINKING NEGATIVITY?

Your negative thoughts were created to serve a purpose – to protect you from reliving the painful experiences of the past. After accepting the painful experience as a part of your life and ending the survival response you do not need your negative thoughts anymore.

Years of suppressing your inner emotions build habitual patterns of negative thinking. In moments

of pain, fear, judgment, and criticism, you think, “I can't do this,” or, “I'll never be good enough,” which creates a thought and belief system that leaves you disconnected from your real hopes and dreams.

Negative thoughts can swoop in and take over a situation without warning. Any situation, thought, sound, or smell that reminds you of the time you were emotionally hurt can take you right back to the pain. Which activates your unconscious brain start up the protective and survival-based thoughts. Even when you are present in your life and experience a situation completely unrelated to your painful experience, a trigger can activate the thought pattern flipping your world upside down.

The painful experiences you identified in Chapter 4 created a negative thought pattern driving your behaviors away from reexperiencing any similar emotions. Some painful experiences are more impactful than others, but regardless, if they put you into a place of survival, they create an imprint in your unconscious brain. Your brain responded with a survival-based thought pattern at the time of the painful experience, and that thought pattern is just waiting to be used again. If a similar emotion comes up, so will the negative thought pattern. Here are the main negative thoughts your brain uses to direct your behaviors from further pain in your life.

1. "I am not good enough."
2. "Things should be different."
3. "I will never make it."
4. "I cannot do it."
5. "It's not worth it."
6. "Nobody cares about me."
7. "I am so stupid."
8. "I am a failure."
9. "I should give up."
10. "I would be better off dead."

All these thoughts stop you from experiencing an authentic life by making you avoid vulnerability and the possibility of being hurt again. These thoughts are based in survival and are a sign you are under emotional threat in your life.

FINDING YOUR EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION SYSTEM

Your emotions were created to help you navigate through your life experiences. If you do not express your underlying emotions during a painful event, they create compulsive negative thought patterns.

Without the expression of anger, sadness, and fear you cannot fully process through the authentic experiences of your life. These emotions are all valu-

able tools to express yourself in difficult and adverse experiences of life.

Think of your emotions as a dashboard of personal navigation that will help you to get through each situation without activating the survival mode. You build negative thought patterns when you stop feeling your emotions. The longer you deny your emotional expression, the deeper and more compulsive negative thoughts become. They will take over your day-to-day thinking and drive all your behaviors in life. You can explore how basic emotions help you and what they are trying to accomplish to prevent you from repressing them.

Anger

Anger can be scary because of its ability to turn into rage and aggression. If you listen to your anger when it is an irritation, it will not grow into its hostile and uncontrolled forms. Anger is power. You need power when someone takes something from you. Anger allows you to say, “Hey, give that back right now.” Anger, when expressed as it comes up, gets your needs met.

If something makes you angry, it needs to be addressed. End of story. Accepting that your anger is a valuable tool is the same as accepting your physical, emotional, and mental needs. Your anger starts

and stops with your basic need being met in your life. You are responsible for meeting that need within yourself as an adult.

An external negative thought blames someone or something else for your anger, giving your power away. Blaming the problem on your co-workers or partner or venting daily about your job is just avoiding meeting your basic needs. The more you avoid your anger, the more it grows, and it will come out in an explosion of aggression, pain, or self-harm.

Anger is a tool to fix the problems of your life. If your needs are not being met, anger says, "Hello? This does not work for us! I do not like this!" Anger will continue to grow when left unattended. It gets bigger and bigger until it takes over to break down a system or destroy what no longer works.

Listen to your anger when it is still small so you can meet your needs and avoid the destructive negative thought patterns. Unaddressed anger has a job: to destroy your life as it is because it is not working for you. The longer you go without addressing it, the more likely you are to get trapped in negative thought patterns, which means you will be thinking about death, but this is not your actual death. It is the death of the situation causing you emotional pain.

Sadness

Sadness honors the loss of love in your life. If you were hopeful about a new thing in your life – making a new friend or a new romantic possibility – and it does not work out, sadness lets you move through this experience to honor and respect the emotions you had. It allows you to let something you wished for go with validity.

Denying yourself sadness invalidates who you are as a person. Labeling sadness as weak and pushing your tears of expression away creates a negative thought pattern. To avoid sadness, you tell yourself, “Don’t be weak,” “That was stupid,” “I am better off alone,” or, “Everyone lets me down.” You stop hoping that you will meet your basic needs of belonging and esteem needs.

Avoiding the feelings of sadness does not make them go away; the feelings build up until you can no longer contain them, and they come out in hurtful ways. The negative thoughts gain more space in your mind and the destructive thoughts of depression take over your life.

Fear

Your fear was designed to save you from threats and guide you out of dangerous situations. If you are

constantly experiencing fearful events, you stay in the high-stress lifesaving mode. With the intrusion of media and constant exposure to all the fearful events in the world, you now fear the place you live, your country, and the world every night you watch the news. Fear hijacks your thought process to help you avoid death and puts you in survival mode. If you are constantly experiencing fear your thoughts will only be driven by survival mode.

Your fear has an important job: keeping you alive. But you only need to let your fear be in charge when you are in danger. When you let your unconscious, primal mind run the show, you live in survival mode. Negatively assessing what could go wrong every day keeps you alive, but that is not living.

Fear's only goal is not dying. It does not care about living life. If you are constantly fearful, you are stuck predicting, planning, and plotting all the worst-case scenarios in life to avoid dying. Then, when something scary happens, those fears are validated; "I knew it! I knew something bad would happen." You then get a chemical reward for your efforts, cementing the fearful and negative thought pattern.

These negative thoughts can easily take charge and dominate your experience long after the danger is gone, leaving you consumed by worst-case

scenarios and forcing you to think of all the bad outcomes quickly and constantly just to feel the reward again. Your brain is geared to think through every problem possible to keep you safe. It is a data-computing process that tries to outthink the problem. It is not possible to think through every problem in life. That's exhausting and overwhelming.

As you meet the basic need of safety, you will trust your environment and build a different thought pattern. When you wake up and think, "I am safe," you will receive a chemical reward that indicates that your environment protects you.

DENIAL'S ROLE

Denial plays an important role because some traumatic and painful events are too much to feel at once. Therefore, denial is a stage in the grieving process. You cannot fully conceptualize and integrate the loss of a loved one at the time of their death, for example. You must have time to process what a loss truly means, and denial gives you the time you need to process the changes and emotions you experience.

When denial is the norm, however, it becomes dangerous. Numbing, avoiding, and repressing your emotions through denial is toxic and unmanageable.

Silencing your emotions builds negative thought patterns and unhealthy and addictive coping patterns. Watching a movie, drinking, doing drugs, shopping, scrolling through social media, and having sex are means to avoid, numb, and silence your emotions.

The severity of these patterns will build and grow until you process your emotions. Yes, the emotions will be uncomfortable, scary, and sad, but feeling them opens the brain up to feel beauty, joy, and happiness. Make no mistake – your true emotions want you to move through the pain.

TRIGGERS AND COMPULSIVE THINKING

Instead of processing and expressing the emotions and integrating them into life, you did not know what else to do and repressed them. The negativity then took over your life creating a constant battle within you. You wake up each day to thoughts like, “Everything sucks. I will never get through this. I might as well give up.” You get stuck in the all-or-nothing mentality of life.

When negative thought patterns take over, you end up focusing exclusively on the problem, even to the point of labeling *yourself* as the problem. “I am a failure. I am horrible. My depression will never go away.” When all you focus on is having

depression, at the end of the day, all you have is depression.

Letting go of the prescribed negative thought labels creates space for your emotions to shift and change as they were meant to. This is where you left your conscious experience and let survival mode take over your thought process. Your automatic negative thoughts are now stopping you from emotionally processing your life because you identify yourself as the problem. “I should have done better.”

You are not the problem. The feelings of guilt and shame would love to tell you that you are the problem. “I am bad. I am wrong. I am no good.” If you are the problem, there is nothing to be fixed or resolved and you stay in your depressive episode. This is an irrational thought that keeps you from finding the origin of your negative thoughts and stopping them from driving your behaviors. Like any great superhero origin story, your negative thoughts came from somewhere.

IDENTIFYING YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS

For the next forty-eight hours, create a log of every negative thought you have and how many times it comes up. Identify your top three negative thoughts.

For example:

1. I am not good enough
2. I am a failure
3. I want to die

Choose one thought and answer these questions:

- When was the first time you felt this way?
- Why did you feel this way?

Next to each thought, identify its function of depression. What is it holding you back from feeling or processing? For example:

- “I am not good enough”
- When: “My mother did not console me when I was sad as a child”
- Why: “I needed reassurance and connection”

LETTING GO OF NEGATIVE
THOUGHTS INSTEAD OF FIGHTING
THEM

“If we change inside and disarm ourselves by dealing constructively with negative thoughts and emotions, we can literally change the world.”

— DALAI LAMA

WHY STOPPING THE NEGATIVE
THOUGHTS IS SO HARD

Now that you identified your main negative thoughts and what their roles are in your life, you can start the process of letting them go, turning off the autopilot button, and becoming conscious and intentional with each thought in your mind.

Accept your negative thoughts for what they are

– a protective response to avoid feelings. There is space in your world to feel your emotions. You can untangle the compulsive and repetitive thoughts that dug their ways into your mind.

Notice when a trigger happens. You experience something in life, and you instantly react and activate a negative thought pattern, or you let the worst-case scenario thoughts take over your mind. You must slow down enough to be aware of these thoughts and their purposes without reinforcing their value.

The reality is that it is difficult to go from negative thinking to positive thinking. The turn is too sharp and drastic. That is why the positive thinking movement is not working for a lot of people. They are feeling left behind when they can't just change their thoughts. If it were so easy to just think positive, most therapists would be out of a job.

There needs to be a middle ground where you shift your perspective. When a client is working on moving from a negative thought pattern to a positive thought pattern, I introduce the concept of meeting in the middle with do no harm.

Do-No-Harm Mentality

With the do-no-harm mentality, you can reduce the negative thoughts without reinforcing their

value in your life, putting a dead-end sign on the pathway of negative thinking and stopping the reward process in your brain. When you are triggered and the internal negative thoughts start to flood your system, as soon as you become aware you are hurting yourself with the negative thought pattern – “I am not good enough,” or, “I suck at my job” – you can let the thoughts come and go practicing non-harm.

Take a big deep breath and state, “I will not hurt myself with my thoughts.” Introduce the harm reduction as a tool to stop the internal pain your negative thoughts create. This practice is a tool and commitment to stop validating negative responses, and as soon as you become aware of the negative thoughts, remember that you do not have to engage in hurtful thoughts. You may need to identify a list of distractions at first if it is difficult to avoid engaging in negative thinking. For example,

1. Change your scene
2. Go for a walk
3. Turn on music
4. Exercise
5. Call a support person

Do No Harm to Yourself?

Write out your top three negative thoughts. Make a commitment to yourself to let these thoughts come and go without validation. When these thoughts arise, practice the response, “I will not hurt myself today.” For example,

- “I am not good enough” becomes “I will not hurt myself today”
- “I am a failure” becomes “I will not hurt myself today”
- “I want to die” becomes “I will not hurt myself today”

Practice this until the emotions become neutral. Then, you are ready to pivot.

Additional Limits to Avoid Mental Harm

1. Turn off the news and social media
2. Engage in your self-care plan
3. Be kind to yourself
4. Think about the things you are grateful for

PIVOT THE PROCESS

Just the act of disengaging from negative thought loops is a huge step in rewriting your story. Work for a period on just avoiding the negative thoughts and be aware of their presence. Count the number of negative thoughts in your mind and collect data on how, why, when, and where your negative thoughts come up. For example, maybe they start in the morning, at work, or with friends. They may occur when you're starting something new.

Ask the question, "Where do I hurt myself the most?" Once you master paying attention to the negative thinking and stopping the process of cognitive self-harm, you will be ready to work on the change process.

This is where you learn to pivot your thinking. Just like in basketball, once you stop the forward motion, one foot is stuck, and now you must find a way out of the situation by only moving the other foot. The negative thought happened; "There is no way I am getting the promotion I am working toward." The forward motion stopped. Now, you pivot; "I am doing my best."

The art of pivoting is a process where you stop moving the negative thought forward and change the thought to a non-harmful thought. This will feel like a new way of thinking at first. You considered

all the ways you could fail, but have you considered a thought where things work out okay? If this situation worked out in a best-case scenario, what would it be?

Your mind is excellent at identifying all the things that could go wrong by identifying them in detail. You can pivot to a new way of thinking; “What if it went in the right direction?” As you redirect and pivot your thoughts you can engage in a different approach to your life.

It is easy to focus on the limits and identify what could go wrong. Stop and consider the alternative for a minute. Look at the other side of things. The protective part of your brain jumps right to identifying the roadblocks and barriers to avoid any pain planning for the threat and hitting the survival mode button. When you start down the path of negative thinking consider that the situation is not working for your life and the negative thoughts are a message that something in the situation needs to change in your life.

You need to spend time with your thoughts. “What am I thinking and why? How are these thoughts affecting me, and is there something I can do to change them?” Spend time thinking about the things that make you feel good in life. What is your perfect situation? Think about your dream coming true. How can you get your life heading where you

want to go? The more you think about your dream coming true, the more time you will brainstorm solutions to make it happen in your life.

Pivot Your Thoughts Forward

Write out your top three negative thoughts and create a response statement that keeps you moving forward.

- “I am not good enough” becomes “I accept myself the way I am”
- “I am a failure” becomes “I am a work in progress”
- “I want to die” becomes “I want this problem to die”

WHEN THE WORLD IS HARD

You can get stuck when the world seems too negative. Your work, your community, and your home environment are constant sources of negativity that affect you each day. It can be hard to imagine the dream come true and a best-case scenario when your environment is not supporting those dreams. Something needs to change. You cannot always leave the environment you are in, so you need to shift your perspective on the environment.

I started to experience this in my personal and professional life with the overwhelming topic of climate change. In 2018, the United Nations released a grave climate report that foretold a dire outcome: the world may be unable to resolve the effects of climate change, causing increased destruction to the Earth and more deadly weather patterns.

During this month, in my counseling practice, I saw a significant increase in depression and suicidal thoughts because my clients felt powerless. They did not know what to do or how to react to this information. This was a large-scale situation that I alone could not change.

At first, I felt powerless and defeated. My clients were in a similar place, with negative thoughts like, “Why should I try to change my life if there is no solution to this outcome?” “I cannot make a difference, and it is not worth living if I cannot make a change to our world.”

This was the first time in my career as a therapist that I could not come up with a good response to engage and motivate my clients to meet their goals. My forward motion stopped, and I had no pivot around this problem. This challenged me on a core level. I felt hopeless and ineffective, unable to make the same changes to my thoughts that I was asking of my clients.

I asked myself what the best-case scenario for

this situation was. I had an idea: I needed to show that it was possible for one person to make a difference and restore hope in that belief. It was worth it. I researched the most effective ways to make an impact on the community, and my idea was born: banning plastic bags in my home city of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

I started a petition on Change.org to ban plastic bags in Albuquerque, reduce the community's exposure to toxic microplastics, clean up the environment, and change people's behavior. The University of Rhode Island studied the correlation between banning plastic bags as a gateway environmental behavior. The small act of using reusable bags can start to shift the outlook you have on impacting your environment.

Numerous people, environmental groups, and children who care about the environment came forward as a community to support banning plastic bags. After a large discussion and many meetings voicing our concerns, the Albuquerque City Council voted to ban plastic bags in retail stores, and it was signed by the mayor on Earth Day in 2019.

This had more than just a large impact on the environment. By reducing single use plastic in the environment, I helped restore hope and power within the community. I showed that making a difference was possible. I demonstrated that anyone

can change the circumstances that affect their environment.

I engaged my clients throughout this process and restored that belief with them as well. I was working with the idea that their actions mattered, and they could make a difference in their life and their community, just like you can. Restoring hope in your life and in the community is a powerful way to address the state of your mental health and shift the negative thoughts associated with being hopeless.

HOLDING ONTO THE HOPE

As you shift your thoughts and explore the possibility of creating your best-case scenario, you meet resistance from friends, family, or coworkers. In the beginning, negative feedback from others is a huge setback in the process.

Sharing with your coworker, “I can go out on my own and start a consulting business” can be instantly met with their fear-based thinking. “That will never work.” “The market is too saturated.” “It will take two years to get up and running.” “The taxes will kill your business.” People and institutions are built on the idea that it is unsafe to step outside of the norm. They are encouraged to meet any idea with resistance and review all the problems that could set you

back, stopping you from making a change before you even get started.

In the beginning stages of creating the life you want and shifting your thoughts you will need to nurture your positive thoughts and dreams as your own. Keep a wish close to your heart while you are in the change and building process. Build your desire, motivation, and structure to make the change and only loop in safe friends, family, or mentors when you make progress toward the change. When you feel confident in your decision making you can share your hope with the world.

A world without hope is scary, overwhelming, and depressing. As you change your thoughts toward a situation, you will naturally start to feel more hope and the positive thoughts will just come. You won't have to force them when they do not feel right.

Seek out the people in your life that say to go for your dreams. You cannot listen to the critics. You must listen to the cheerleading squad, and this starts with you. It could be wonderful. It could be the best thing you have ever done. It could bring you more joy than you have ever known.

WHY THE VOICE OF DEPRESSION
SOUNDS LIKE YOUR VOICE?

“Depression is like a woman in black. If she shows up do not shoo her away. Invite her in, offer her a seat, treat her like a guest and listen to what she has to say.”

— C.G. JUNG

DEPRESSION’S ROLE

No one is exempt from pain and depression, yet there is a silent and understood agreement that says not to talk about it. There is nothing wrong with depression. The problem is when you become stuck in it and stop living your life. When you experience a tragedy or the death of a loved one, you naturally experience depression. You feel sadness, pain, and

loss, but you still move through your life. Unfortunately, the world sends a clear message: "Pick yourself up and move on." When you move too soon, you leave the parts of yourself that were hurt behind, standing alone in the dark, and leaving a gaping open wound that needs emergency care.

Creating space in your life to feel depression is good. It validates what you love and what you cherish in life. Reducing the stigma of depression is essential in the healing process. You do not need to go straight to numbing your feelings or holding them in until the pain is intolerable.

The fear of accepting sadness into life is a national crisis. The truth is that when you accept the emotional pain into your life, you can feel better. Depression is as natural as water, air, and the sun. When tragic things happen, the appropriate response is to be depressed. You should be sad about pain, death, disease and angry about abuse, harm, and violence. These things are depressing. But there is a difference between experiencing the process of depression and becoming your depression.

GETTING STUCK

Depression looks differently for every person, which makes it tricky to identify. Depression hides in the corners of your life, waiting for moments of vulner-

ability to take over. Knowing the difference between natural depression and chronic depression can help you identify when you are stuck in a state of depression. Experiencing depression every day for an extended period, cutting out things you enjoy, not reaching out to your friends or family, losing motivation, thinking negative thoughts every day, exhibiting poor hygiene, and sleeping excessively are all be signs depression took over your life.

Depression is confusing because it wants to save you from the pain, but it is literally the worst rescue ever. Depression thinks it can save you by getting you to feel absolutely nothing. Depression does not understand what it means to be a human. Just by being born, you work to find purpose and meaning, expanding the emotions of your heart: gratitude, love, and joy. Depression does not want anything to do with these feelings, so they get cut out of your life.

People who suffer from chronic depression can be the top of their fields. You might look up to them or idolize them. Depression can be invisible. For a highly functioning human, it is easy to hide and say things are great when they are broken and falling apart.

Instead of being honest about your emotions, you imitate what is expected of you, and you live a life that does not reflect any part of who you are.

This is when depression oversees your life. It is possible to excel in life yet still experience the symptoms and characteristics of depression in isolation.

You can put on the suit and work to get the outcomes and feedback you want in certain areas of your life. You can show up with a forced smile and play the parts of your life. But then, you come home to depression. This is equally as hard because you're ashamed and guilty about not being happy with your external success.

WHEN SELF-LOATHING BECOMES THE NORM

During therapy sessions, I notice clients engaging in negative and self-defeating language. I acknowledge the depression, but it can be so subtle and unconscious that people do not relate to the idea that they are experiencing depression.

Depression presents as a common voice of the ego preserving its own identity and avoiding further suffering. The ego twists the truth and lies to continue its existence, which is its primary function. Most of the time, ego-driven thoughts and behaviors completely go against what you need to feel better and be healthy.

Depression puts the ego in the driver's seat, where it takes over your personality. It covers up

who you are like a dark veil. "Buckle up," it says. "We are getting out of here, and no one will hear from us again."

Depression has a collection of common thoughts. "It's not worth it. I should just give up. I am better off alone. Nobody cares about me. Why should I try? Nothing works out for me. I'm better off dead." Depression survives by making you feel so unique that no one could ever realize or understand what you are going through, so you end up thinking no person or treatment could help you.

As depression tries to save you by cutting all ties, it sends you out to sea all alone. You are alive but not living. The biggest trick that depression plays and the reason so many people get stuck in the depressive state is because unless you are trained to listen for the voice of depression, it just sounds like your voice.

The line of negative and sabotaging thoughts begins, and they all start with "I am." You label yourself with your pain and trap yourself in a cage. You think that depression is who you are; "I am just a negative person," not, "My brain was hijacked by a primal system for survival."

When depression fully takes over, it is dangerous because you learn to just cope with the negative thought patterns or self-medicate to avoid them. You do not make the changes you needed to feel better.

Depression is a problem and a situation, not a part of your personality.

As you separate yourself from the depression response, you can acknowledge that depression is something you are going through, like grief, that impacts you and changes you. You can work through your feelings and move toward healing your life versus staying behind in the pain.

The false narrative of negative self-talk and shame fuels the fire of depression and deepens the endless cave of belittlement. The amount of energy you put into telling yourself you are not good is immense, and you avoid the idea that changing your life could make things better. To avoid that possibility, you fit yourself into a box that is not yours.

YOU ARE NOT YOUR DEPRESSION

The separation between, for example, “I am Lisa” and “I am going through depression” allows you to see the feelings as a *part* of you, not all of you. When you view depression like that, it moves through you and achieves its purpose. It allows you to process the feelings and events in your life that are difficult. You can hear the depressive thoughts, but you do not have to listen to them. You can say thanks for the information and advice with taking them; “I got this. You do not need to protect me anymore.”

No one wants to stay hopeless, even when it seems to be a core foundation of their life. A place deep inside of you is just waiting for the moment to let that go. People who are depressed are always looking for a way out of their depression. My clients who are deeply stuck in depression for years or decades tell stories of why they are depressed and why that will never change. But they keep showing up each week, waiting for me to find a hole in their story.

YOUR DEPRESSION STORY

Look at the story of depression in your life. What does your depression have to say? What are the thoughts that come up when you are depressed? Do you isolate from others? Do you stop meeting your basic needs? Unhealthy eating? Erratic sleep patterns?

Write out the Story of Your Depression

Identify all the characteristics and traits of your depression to fully understand how depression affects you. Here's an example:

“This is my depression story. When I am depressed, I get into bed and pull the covers over my head. I start to think about all the things that have gone wrong in my life. I tell myself I am no good. This is never changing. I cannot do this anymore. I cancel all my plans. I stop talking to my friends and family. I start drinking. I overeat...”

Engage in this narrative until you identify all parts of your depression.

ALL THE ANSWERS YOU NEED ARE
INSIDE OF YOU

“The more room you give to yourself to express your true thoughts and feelings, the more room there is for your wisdom to emerge.”

— MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

Where is your inner voice? After detaching from the voice of depression, you can fill in your mental and emotional space with your inner voice. Finding your inner voice and wisdom gives you access to your intuition, the voice of your heart and your desires. These aspects of your identity are the feelings that build who you are.

To hear the inner wisdom inside of you that carries the information and desires of what your

body, heart, and mind know they want is building an authentic life. This is the delivery system of your essence, soul, spirit, or whatever word you use to describe what makes you, you. It is the deepest part of you. It wants to be seen, heard, loved, and validated.

This voice was loudest in early childhood. Think about the five-year-olds you know and how they follow their emotions and desires to create a joyful experience. They ask, at the loudest volume, for what they want and constantly interrupt the conversation if they are not heard.

The voice inside of you believed things were good and that you could be anything you wanted to be or do anything you wanted to do – the voice that believes that anything is possible. The voice knows what is best for you; “I want to be a dancer. I want to spend time with the people I love.” This is the voice that moves you toward things that make you happy and bring the smile back to your face.

What if you gave this voice full power and control to your life? What if you made it the CEO, commander in chief, and president of your daily experiences? Let it decide the who, how, when, what, why, and where of your life.

No one person, corporation, or society knows what is best for you. You are the only keeper of that knowledge. Unfortunately, your inner wisdom

becomes silenced as you go through life because it was told it was wrong, made fun of, or broken down. This is the time and process where you bring back that core part of you that gets to be what you want to be and awaken that voice that knows you better than anybody else.

INNER VOICE ACTIVATION

Daily Thoughts Log

Wake up each morning for a week and journal your thoughts for ten minutes a day to allow your inner voice space and validation.

Deep Conversation

Try to find one friend, family, therapist, or coach to have a conversation with, exploring different thoughts and ideas you have about who you are and who you want to be in the world. Make sure this person is someone who earned your trust.

Expression

Engage in one expressive activity during the week to access your inner voice of wisdom. Any

medium works – art, music, dance, sewing, creating, or connecting. When you are engaging in an expressive activity, you can access the core of who you are and your inner voice.

Writing Your Life Story

Writing your story is a deeply healing experience. Writing with your inner voice, not the voice of fear, anger, trauma, or depression, creates a truly integrated experience. From birth until now, write out your story. Treat yourself as the narrator of your life, deciding how the experiences of your life affected you and building the big picture of who you are.

FINDING YOUR INTUITION

Rumi said, “There is a voice inside of you that does not use words.” This is the voice you are looking for. Your intuition is the part of you that knows what to do, what is best for you, and what decisions you should make. Your intuition is an overwhelming pressure pushing you to go one way or the other. There is no need to debate this part of yourself, even if the information comes without a logical plan when you trust it.

Building a relationship and trust with your intuition gives you the power to live a life of passion,

desire, and confidence. Respond to your life with, “I do know what to do.”

Damien was a client of mine who struggled with lifelong depression and suicidal ideations. Each time he came into therapy, he found his inner voice and said something that he truly desired. He then put a dismissive or negative thought right after to protect himself. For example, “I want to quit my job and focus on my music and start a music production company” was followed by, “I don’t know. It’s a stupid idea. How will I pay the rent?” Damien’s intuition was telling him what to do with his life to be happy, but fear and protection were stopping him from living the life he wanted to live.

Using mindfulness to identify his dismissive, negative, and “protective” thoughts, he hit the override button on his fear-based thinking. He built a plan to transition to a career into the music industry. This did not happen all at once, but he set goals and intentions to move toward his dream.

When self-doubt hits the brakes on your intuition and dreams, you, too, must hit the override button on your fear-based responses. Be aware of your thoughts and identifying when you avoid or dismiss your intuition.

Imagine that you’re thinking, “I want to apply for the new position.” Then imagine how you respond to that thought. “I do not know.” “It would be an

exciting opportunity. I do not know.” “I could use the raise and move my kids to the school that would be better for them, but I do not know.”

You *do* know. You know that this position would be good for you. You know it would be exciting. You know that it would be good for your children. This is how you accept and build your emotional intelligence.

Looking at how much self-doubt and unconscious fears are guiding your life and decisions is an uncomfortable process. But once you find your sense of knowingness and intuition, you will meet fear with bravery instead of submission. You must listen to your wisdom, even in the moments of self-doubt, fear, or physical limits. Press override on the voice that says, “I am just too tired.”

My client, Tammy, once sat back during a session and acknowledged how she was turning all her dreams into reality and the exciting feeling in her life that things were naturally coming together – her home, her career, her relationships, and her parenting. She was able to find and follow her intuition. She sat back in her chair and cried tears of joy and started to accept all the changes she made in her life. She was able to believe in herself and act on what was best for her life.

ACCESSING YOUR HEART

Awakening the voice of your heart unveils your inner truth. What has always been inside of you is now safe to express. Let it out and let it guide you on the journey of life. This heart-mind connection lets your emotions and thoughts work in tandem instead of opposition.

To awaken this connection, I want you to put your hand on your heart, take a deep breath, and answer the question, “What does my heart have to say?”

How do you know if your heart is responding? Your heart responds with love and nonjudgment. Your heart will never say hurtful words. Your heart believes in you. Let your heart’s voice be the voice that starts your day. Let that voice sing out and be your greatest champion. You can do anything. You can be anything. Too often, the voice of your heart is silenced, and you must be brave and bring it back to the stage. If you do not dream, nothing new is possible.

At first, you may feel unsure or uncomfortable when connecting with your heart. You need to keep practicing. Eventually, your confidence will grow. This is an uncomfortable process in the beginning because it lets creativity and love get a seat at the table in the boardroom of your life. Your heart gives

you the most authentic information. So, in the beginning, the answer to the question may be, “I do not know what my heart has to say.” This is common. Accessing this information is a practice of checking in and creating space. The answers will come.

Accessing your emotional intelligence adds an additional level of feeling, thinking, and processing to meet your daily needs. Meeting all your physical, emotional, and mental needs allows you to be in the present moment to listen to the current needs as they come up.

Plugging into the core of your heart streams the data it has and lets it fill your life. Mastering your heart and letting love guide you on the journey sustains you and allows you to engage the world with true authenticity and without fear of judgment or shame. Remove the pain and fear from your heart that blocks the ability to be your best and do your best. The world needs you to reach for the stars and dream a new way of being.

BUILDING YOUR HEART CONNECTION

Heart Engaging Meditation

- Take a moment to fully relax in a comfortable place, sitting or lying down.
- Place your left hand on your heart.
- Take three full deep breaths.
- Ask your heart, “What do you want me to know?”

WHAT DO YOU DESIRE?

Now that you have your intuition and heart to guide you, it is time to explore what you desire in life and what inspires you. What about life draws you in? A smile, a butterfly passing on a walk, a favorite song, a sunset, a hug from a loved one – what moments and things make your heart swell with love and gratitude in life? What moments ground you and make you feel like there is nowhere else you would rather be?

Desire is the fire of motivation and the kindling for changing your life. People who are unmotivated have not tapped into the root of their desire yet. Take a deep look into your life to find your desire

and inspiration. Research the things that inspire you and see how they feel.

It is okay to desire things and yearn deeply for something new and something brave. You must put time, intention, and practice into finding your desires and passion. It is an exploratory process. Google the things you like, learn how to make them into a career, or find groups with people who have similar interests to join. Looking for inspiration and going against the grain seems dangerous. But inspiration is the air you breathe and the fire that lights your soul and gently guides you in the right direction.

You need to look to your role models – the people in the world who are successful and inspire you. When I am in a creative slump, I usually google Sir Richard Branson. I find him to be one of the coolest and inspiring people on the planet. Find who you think is amazing, learn their story and how they got where they are, and incorporate their tools for success into your life.

You have an inner intelligence that lets you know what you need to keep growing. Learning to let your inner wisdom be your guide opens the door to access your true passions. Whether the voice is saying change your career, move to Costa Rica or you need to take a bath when you get home to detox the situation you were in.

CULTIVATING DESIRE

- What piques your interest and pulls you in? What do you want to learn more about?
- What lifts your spirits up when you think about it? What gives you a sense of passion and pulls you to engage in it?
- Create a list of things you would like to get more information on. After each thing you identify, create a plan to follow through. For example, if you want to be in a local band, go see a local band, and pay attention to how they created their success.

HARVESTING YOUR ASSETS

“A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself.”

— ABRAHAM MASLOW

USE IT IF YOU GOT IT

You are now moving toward creating the life you want to live – a life that keeps you moving forward and wakes you up with the motivation and desire to engage in your life. Let go of the hold depression had on your life and focus on the true story of you.

Identifying and building on your natural talents to create a portfolio of assets gives you the capacity

to take on new challenges and work toward the goals of your heart. It's like going out into your garden after you have been gone for a while and finding all the fruits of your efforts just waiting to be harvested. You can harvest the things you already have and build your capacity to go for things you want in life. Your natural talents are an expression of who you are.

When you focus on the things that you do not have, your lack of energy and motivation to push through the struggles of life, it can make you want to give up. It can be so hard to change your life because you are not fully accessing the tools you already have in your toolbox to start the change process. You will stack your toolbox in this chapter.

You are building personal and emotional assets in the moments you choose to find the answers and tools within yourself. Investing in yourself is the greatest capital on the planet. On Earth, possibility is everywhere, and the best tool and resource is your potential.

Identify what positive thoughts and beliefs you already have about yourself. "I am a good person. I can achieve any goal I set my mind to. I love my family. People come to me for help. I am smart." Accept the things you are naturally talented at – art, creative thinking, singing, sports, or teaching.

Some of these thoughts and beliefs have been

around since childhood and are a foundational aspect of who you are. Whether you just decided one day that you were great at technology or a teacher said in a conference, “You are a good friend,” these strengths and natural talents shape your identity.

You can harvest your assets by looking at the positive beliefs and thoughts you have about yourself. Collect all the strong aspects of your identity as emotional currency to build the additional good experiences you want in your life. As you start to identify all the natural things you are good at, you can use them to your advantage to further develop your personality traits and build the ones you want.

Here are some common internal beliefs and strengths.

- “Being a leader is easy for me.”
- “I never make the same mistake twice.”
- “I am kind.”
- “I am funny.”
- “I believe it is best to be honest.”
- “I believe in equality.”
- “I can change.”
- “I am a good friend.”
- “I care about the environment.”
- “I am good at music.”
- “I am a good listener.”
- “I am good at sports.”

- “I am good at having a conversation.”
- “I am trustworthy.”

STRENGTHS AND NATURAL TALENTS INVENTORY

Find a large piece of paper or dry-erase board and put at the top, “Strengths and Natural Talents.” Then, fill the paper/ board with all the things that you are good at. Fill the entire paper/ board. If you need to. Reach out to a friend and ask them what they see as your natural strengths and talents. On a separate paper, list your top five strengths. Five things you can use to feel supported and feel better in your life? Five things you can do to invest time and energy into building these strengths in your life?

The more you practice the things you are good at and build your strengths, the easier it will be to add more strengths into your life. As your toolbox of strengths and talents grows, you will make the changes in your life you need to feel confident.

BUILDING YOUR SAFETY NET

Building protection for your assets is just as important as an anti-theft protection plan on your bank account. You want to put in different levels of protection on your emotional assets as well, espe-

cially when you hit the terrible, no-good, awfully bad, retrograde days that do not go your way. Managing these days and the emotions that come along with them takes slow, intentional decisions that do not let survival mode take over: breathing, moving, eating, standing in the sunshine, making connections, keeping your heart beating, and getting out of bed in the morning.

Most likely, you reached a level of emotional, physical, and mental burnout by depleting all the resources and energies that make you function. If your low-fuel light comes on in the car, you know it is time to pull over and fill up your tank with gas. Continuing to engage in life without resting and restoring will leave you completely depleted.

If you see the same warning signs and caution lights flashing, telling you to stop and get help, but you push past them – “It is okay. I don’t need to stop. I will be fine.” – you will not end up okay. You will end up broken.

Practice the grounding and breathing meditations to regulate yourself. It is the way you restore balance and harmony within your body and release the trauma and chemicals that pump through it during times of stress and chaos. To relieve the pressure and restore homeostasis within the body, make sure you manage your physical, mental, and emotional energy for the journey ahead.

Filling your container is the first part of building up your capacity. Each moment you choose to listen to your heart or your inner voice, that place of knowing deep inside of you that says, “Get outside,” “Call your friend,” “Rest,” “Go for a run,” etcetera. You gain emotional currency, which builds resilience.

A part of healing is filling that container each time you listen, responding to your feelings, and creating an emotional reservoir the size of the Hoover Dam. The number of emotional resources you store for any given situation can be stored in an imaginary container: a cup, a bucket, a trunk, etcetera. You need enough emotional wellness to hold space for times of difficulty, pain, or loss.

You put not only time, but also years of your life, effort, and resources into growing your career, but place your emotional health consistently in second place. Your emotional health needs the same time, effort, and resources.

Taking the time to feel better in your body and heart is a nutritional experience. Just like eating your leafy greens, adding more love and happiness in your life is core for the sustainability of healing your life. Taking shots of emotional wellness is like building a sustainable life.

Allowing yourself to feel the hope inside of you. Hope is one of the wealthiest emotions you can have

because you can create something out of nothing with hope. Adding hope as a tool in your toolbox can add new thoughts and ideas that defy the limits in your life. You must have new thoughts to change your situation.

- “I want to wake up and feel happy.”
- “I want to feel safe in my life.”
- “I want to enjoy this world and feel grateful.”
- “I want to feel great about my body.”
- “I want to love my family.”

The old ways of thinking will only give you the same old problems that created your depression. Happiness and emotional wealth increase as you build your strengths and confidence. The idea or dream that has been in the back of your mind since childhood is possible.

FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE – YOU
GET TO CHOOSE

“The real difficulty is to overcome how you think about yourself.”

— MAYA ANGELOU

OBSTACLES

Difficulties and challenges can arrive on the journey to feel better and create the life you want to live. These obstacles threaten your progress and try to set you back, but you can never go back to the beginning. You learned so much about your negative thoughts and how to process difficult emotions. You can overcome any obstacles that get in your way.

Common obstacles that show up in life are like

the painful experiences listed in Chapter 4. Any new life event could send you back into survival mode and activate the brain pathways created during previous episodes of suicidal ideation:

- Abuse
- Toxic relationships
- Death of a loved one
- Traumatic event
- Divorce
- Toxic work environment
- Domestic violence
- Health diagnosis
- Betrayal or loss of a friend

TRIGGERS

It is hard to navigate triggers in your environment because it is not always your life experiences that trigger the hard emotions or feelings from the past. You can vicariously experience the pain of a person in your life when they are going through a painful event. It can ignite feelings from your previous life experiences and make you feel them as if they are currently happening.

Setting boundaries and limiting exposure if your own feelings start to come up will keep you grounded. Identify the ways you may still be

supportive but not take on the feelings in your own environment. Use your needs-based self-care plan from Chapter 5 or access therapy if you need support to re-process some aspect of your emotions.

Personal triggers – anniversaries, photos, memories, people, or events – all need to be held with compassion. The deeply vulnerable moments of your life deserve to be recognized. Creating a ceremony or ritual to honor your feelings as they continue to be processed can help to anchor you to stay present through the experience.

Some of my clients wrote letters to ex-partners letting go of their anger, creating an altar for a loved one, and journaling about their memories. Have a supportive friend attend an event with you if there will be a triggering person. Light a candle to add light to a situation. Dance or create art to process the feelings that may come up. The ceremonies or rituals that are the most meaningful are the ones that come from your heart.

Ask your heart, “What do I need to process the emotions that have been triggered?” Remember, you can ground yourself in the moment if a trigger happens and you are suddenly reliving the painful experiences of the past.

FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE

Using the trauma response to your advantage gives you power in how you respond to threats and danger in your life. Despite how hard you try to maintain safety in your life, dangerous and physically or emotionally threatening situations still happen. You must fully understand the stress response and how to work with it to avoid the trauma of being stuck in survival mode.

Knowing the situations that arise and the purpose of each response will help you to make an informed choice as threats presents themselves, like when you see a bear roaming in the hills while you are on a hike. Each response has its purpose.

1. Freeze. The bear might not see you; this might be enough of a response to save your life.
2. Flight. If the bear does nothing, you slowly back away
3. Fight. There bear is coming for you, and you cannot get away. As one spunky, elderly forest ranger in Colorado said to me in a loud voice while camping, "You pop that bear as hard as you can in the nose."

Moving to a place of having an empowered approach to danger and threat allows you to activate the correct response if you experience a trauma in your life. Surviving the threat and danger is built into your DNA. Once the threat is gone or you remove yourself from the situation, you can activate the rest and recover mode.

BURNOUT

Stop the primal survival response that reopens the door to negative thinking patterns, escaping, or avoiding painful feelings. Practice your self-care plan and making day-to-day changes. Get additional support to hold more of your emotions. Being aware of the tendency to sacrifice your basic needs.

Shifting your perspective is a powerful tool to aid in your process of ending suicidal thoughts. Identify the ways that negative thoughts can help you to identify what you are afraid of and work through your fears, stopping them from holding you back.

When things seem unsure in life, ask the question, "What choice can I make that will add more stability to my life?" Mentally and emotionally, the environment has a direct impact on your emotional, physical, and mental wellness. Most times, your environment needs to change for you to feel better. When you label yourself as the problem, you put the

pressure on yourself to change, creating a cycle of feeling guilt and shame because you didn't make it work. Your environment must be a nurturing spot that brings out the best in you.

Understand the role survival mode plays in your life and accurately assessing threats to avoid freezing or being stuck. Identify the triggers that could activate the depression cycle and stop them before they take over. Use your emotions as a tool to navigate the situations of your life and allow yourself to stay in the present moment. Understand trauma and know how to respond to stay alive and get to the rest-and-restore phase of life. Be aware of your energy to avoid the burnout phase that depletes all your resources. Remember the steps to work through in feeling better.

- Acknowledging the painful experience
- Restoring the broken need
- Identifying the negative thinking pattern
- Pivoting the negative thought into a helpful thought that moves you forward
- Identifying the role of depression
- Finding your inner voice
- Using your natural talents and strengths to get back to the life you want

Know the path to find yourself if things become hard or you get lost in the demands of day-to-day life. Navigate your life to address the problems and work through the pain and suffering. Accept that change is all around you and expect that you will change and grow with life.

FEELING BETTER

“Feel better. Breathe deep. Find hope.”

— WILD MAGNOLIA WELLNESS

HOPEFULNESS AND POSSIBILITY

After reading this book, I hope you see the possibility of feeling better in life. I have watched people come into therapy in the hardest and darkest places in their lives – overcome by pain, alone and unable to move out of a state of depression, wanting to end it all. Unraveling the process of how and why you got to the place of wanting to end your life is the key to reclaiming your life and building a foundation of support that gives you a life you want to live.

The world can be a scary place, but when you heal the pain and depression you experienced, it changes. It is all about returning to your smile, relaxing your shoulders, and opening your heart to the world. The dream that your suffering can be shifted in life will come true, and you will get to share who you are with the world. When you feel the difference after making changes, you will continue the journey. Once you start to feel better, there is no going back. You may stumble or fall, but your body, spirit, and mind want to feel better.

KNOW THE LIFE HEALING PROCESS

When the painful experiences of the past are integrated as a part of your journey, they no longer define you or take over your life. You have met all your core needs to feel secure and attached to your world. You created a life where nothing is missing, and you can trust yourself and your environment. You broke down negative thinking patterns that previously took over your life to find their function and resolving the reason they were created.

You learned how to deconstruct the thought patterns surrounding the compulsive thinking, creating a do-no-more-harm mentality toward yourself to stop the self-loathing thoughts that were

previously filling your mental space. You pivoted the thoughts to kind and transitional statements that move you forward in your life.

You explored the role of depression in your life and wrote out your depression story to gain a better understanding of how depression took over your life. You know the difference between your life story and your depression story.

You identified how to access your inner voice and the wisdom of your heart to guide you on the journey of living life to the fullest and accessing your deepest desires. You listed out all your natural strengths and talents that will help you build the life of your dreams. This is the process that keeps you on the path of living.

Thinking about dying in your life does have the ability to teach you how to create a life you want to live. Ask yourself, "What do suicidal and negative thoughts have to teach me, and what are they trying to protect me from? And do I need to be protected?"

Through engaging in this dialog, there are steps to repair the damage and pain that made your life so hard and made you feel like it is not worth living. Doing the work in each step creates a foundation for the change to happen.

Make the connections between the painful experiences in your life that are holding them back from

living. Make the correction, change the supports, and rework the problem to, “How do I live?” not, “How do I die?”

You moved from surviving to thriving and looked at differences between developmental tasks, self-care, and survival. You completed Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which is critical in repairing the wounds from the past and creating safety while moving forward. You unmasked what has been labeled as self-care.

Stop the cycle of negative thoughts that take over the brain. Explore your thoughts of origin – when and why the negative thought patterns were created. When you gain insight into your thoughts, you have power to shift them to what you want them you be. You can identify how the negative thinking and fear created a deeply traveled path of focusing on problems and worst-case scenario thinking. You can use this insight to pivot away from this path and repurpose negative thoughts.

You learned the difference between depression and personality and how to identify the false narrative of depression and avoid being identified as a diagnosis. It happens with my clients who engaged in this process.

The inner voice of wisdom within you has access to the information you need to create the life you

want. Build on the strengths you have in life and identify what you have in life so thinking about dying is no longer an option.

It is my hope if you are suffering that you return to a place of ease in life and get to share who you are with the world. You should not be left alone in your pain or must die to feel better. I want you to know there is a plan. There are steps. You can put your life back together to feel better without having to hurt yourself to find understanding that repairing your life is an ongoing process of working through your current needs and developmental tasks to create the life you want and feel better about doing it.

My wish is that you can see life through a different lens, one of hopefulness and possibility. You can feel happiness and trust that life can work for you. The hard work and effort you put into this process will pay off, and you will harvest the rewards. See outside of yourself and feel gratitude for the good things in life: feelings, moments connection, community, and environment.

If you have depression and suicidal thoughts, this is a guidebook to get back to yourself. Work through these steps to build the foundation that will stop you from falling back into old habits. Create a life that feels good, where it becomes easy to breathe, find positive thoughts, and reach the goals they want to

achieve in life. You deserve to live a life that makes you feel good and pulls you in each day to live more, love more, and feel more.

CRISIS RESOURCES

If you are in crisis, call the toll-free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), available 24/7. The service is available to anyone. All calls are confidential.



- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- Veterans Crisis Line
- National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention
- National Library of Medicine – Suicide
- National Strategy for Suicide Prevention

- NIMH Multimedia on Suicide Prevention
- NIMH Suicide Prevention
- Take 5 To Save Lives
- StopBullying.gov

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley McKenna is a licensed professional clinical counselor with fifteen years of clinical experience and is certified through the National Board of Certified Counselors. During her career, she has held many positions, including mental health therapist, clinical supervisor, and clinical director of client services. She is the owner of Wild Magnolia Well-

ness, LLC, a wellness-based therapy practice. Her practice focuses on addiction and recovery, depression, grief and loss, trauma-informed care, and mindfulness.

She graduated from Southwestern College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2006 with a master's in counseling.

Ashley currently lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Working with clients from a strength-based and client-centered approach is a core clinical focus in helping her clients work through the symptoms of their diagnoses. Throughout her years as a therapist, she has helped clients achieve sobriety, integrate prior trauma, and build increased hope for the overall wellness of their lives. She is committed to helping clients find truth and meaning in their lives while creating an environment that they love.

Providing supervision and ethical guidance to clinicians entering the field of mental health has been an important part of her career. She supports therapists in maintaining a healthy and successful career and reducing burnout in the field.

Ashley loves the outdoors and connecting with the earth. She spends her downtime hiking, rafting, and skiing with her family. She is an advocate for climate justice and is working to stop the harmful effects of climate change and reduce plastic use within her local community.

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The Solution to Emotional Eating: Use Hypnosis to Conquer

Overeating and Enjoy Food Again by Cyndal Wallace

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading *Suicidal Thoughts and You: Escaping the Mental Loop of Wanting to End It All*. If you have made it this far, I want you to know two things: First, you have taken a brave step toward changing your life and feel better. Second, it is possible to wake up and live a happy life. I would like to offer you a free introduction class with the book. Please visit: <https://sites.google.com/view/suicidalthoughtsandyoufree/home>

I would love to learn more about your journey and your success in changing your negative and suicidal thoughts. Please keep in touch by sending me a message or signing up for programs offered through our website: <https://www.WildMagnolia-Wellness.com/Contact>.

