

The Key to Emotional Healing

By Deborah King

You can run as fast as you can. You can try to numb or blot out the pain, you can move across the world . . . but you can't outrun your emotions.

I certainly tried to run from the emotional pain I had buried deep inside from a childhood of abuse . . . and ran right into alcohol and Valium addiction, promiscuity, an eating disorder, ill health, and by my mid-twenties—cancer.

It was through the intense inner work I did in the years following my diagnosis—with a 12-step program, counseling, meditation, journaling, and seeking the help of alternative health and healing practitioners—that I discovered the direct connection between my emotions and my physical health, repaired my marriage, and went into remission from the cancer. Oh, and I found an entirely new direction for my life, going from stressed-out corporate attorney to a teacher of health and wellness and a master healer.

Many of the practices I started during my recovery I continue to this day. I know that staying aware of my emotions, maintaining an eagle eye on my inner truth, and releasing stress and negativity on a daily basis is the way to stay both healthy and happy.

I wrote a national bestselling book about the process, called *Truth Heals: What You Hide Can Hurt You*. As I say in the book: “As my story and the stories of thousands whom I have treated make clear, everything that happens to us is stored in our bodies and the energy fields surrounding them. Ultimately, health and healing happen only when a body/mind/soul wants, needs, and is ready to face the truth. Even after a lifetime of suppression, a body/mind/soul that is willing to release painful secrets can heal itself, a family, even a nation. What ultimately saves us is what we were certain would kill us—the truth.”

I watched Mackenzie Phillips do just that. She was interviewed on numerous television shows as she started a promotional tour for her book, *High On Arrival*. Mackenzie, who starred in the television series “One Day At A Time” as a teen, is the daughter of Papa John Phillips of the iconic 60s band The Mamas and The Papas. The truth she revealed to the world at large is one of the most difficult to speak about: incest. The reaction to Mackenzie’s revelation ranged from

vehement denials from some family members to a general “ick” response to support from the many others who believe her because it’s happened to them. She bravely put herself out there as the public face of incest.

Many wondered why she couldn’t let this family skeleton simply rot in the closet, but I know why she had to do what she did—for the same reasons I had to write about the sexual abuse I experienced. Because speaking her truth is setting her free. In order for Mackenzie to maintain her sobriety from drug addiction and head into her fifties as a more emotionally healthy woman, she had to express her truth. Read my blogs in the [Huffington Post](#) and [Psychology Today](#) about Mackenzie and incest.

Of course, not everyone needs to tell the world their painful secrets. When celebrities do so, they benefit all of us by bringing taboo or difficult topics out in the open. When Michael J. Fox tells the world about his battle with Parkinson’s, or Rock Hudson comes out of the closet and becomes the face of AIDS, or the deaths of Michael Jackson or Heath Ledger from combinations of prescriptions medications hit the news, the attention allows for more information to be disseminated and makes it more possible for us to recognize and acknowledge our own problems—at least to ourselves.

You don’t need a dramatic story of pain or abuse in order to seek and claim your truth and heal your emotional wounds. We all have experienced being hurt, whether it’s from the neglect of a busy or sick parent, financial loss, a difficult divorce, a car accident, the betrayal of a business partner, a natural disaster, the death of a loved one or pet, or whatever your story is. It’s what you do with the hurt that counts.

Victim Mentality vs. Self-Responsibility

As a victim of sexual abuse, I had a great opportunity to believe that life was against me. After all, being sexually assaulted for years by my father and also by a Catholic priest gave me multiple reasons to stay in victimhood. There was ample justification for me to blame my family and the Catholic church for everything that went wrong in my life. It’s easy to get stuck in victim mentality—where we blame all our problems on others.

Let's be clear about the difference between being a victim and having victim mentality. Many people are victims of terrible ordeals and traumas—physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, assault, or violence. These are terrible crimes and terrible experiences. It is *how we respond* to these situations and process our feelings that determine if we remain victims throughout our lives.

I understand the dynamic of how someone finds reasons to stay in the feeling of self-pity—*oh, my life is so hard, no one gives me a break, my family ruined any chance I had of success in life*. I could have continued to blame others for my ill fortune and spent my time soliciting others to feel sorry for me.

Was your home blown away in a hurricane and you lost all your possessions? Did your mother beat you black and blue every time she got drunk? Did your brother and his friends gang rape you when you were ten? Were you laid off in this rotten economy? Did you get a really bad diagnosis?

Yes, bad things do happen to good people. Victim mentality is seeing whatever bad thing happened to you as an insurmountable obstacle in life instead of seeing it as a challenge to be overcome, a foundation for inner strength and compassion.

Here's the nasty little secret—staying in victim mentality gives a person a feeling of power. The poor victim! Look how much she's suffered! Oh, let me help you! Instead of feeling completely disempowered by the bad experience, there's the hidden benefit of capturing others' attention. The victim gets stuck in a cycle of negative pleasure. *Look at what bad shape I'm in. I need your help*. What the victim is saying subconsciously is: *This is my way of controlling you and feeling a sense of personal power*.

Take Susie. She was married to a man who verbally abused her so badly that her self-esteem was in shreds. When he suddenly left her for another woman, instead of feeling relief that her abuser was gone, she couldn't stop repeating her sad tale to anyone who would listen. Maybe some day she would find that perfect person who would hear her story, wave a magic wand, and free her from her emotional pain. But chances are she'll keep wallowing in her misfortune because Susie, in some way, is deriving a perverse sense of pleasure from the attention it brings her. Why should she recover from her bad marriage and lousy divorce?

No matter how difficult it is to let go of the status of being a victim, there's always a choice, a way to do something constructive. Susie would have to be willing to

leave behind her pattern of negativity and get counseling, do some form of martial arts to release her anger in a healthy way, and take responsibility for how she's feeling. She'd have to stop telling her sad story to everyone she meets and learn to greet the world with a more positive attitude.

At some point, she will have to forgive her ex, not for his sake, but for hers. She'll also have to forgive herself for having stayed in the abusive relationship for as long as she did, for not being the one who finally stood up to her abuser and left, for maybe still loving him in a way. She'll have to face her truth, admit to being human and making mistakes, and get on with her life.

If you're living in victim mentality, the little power it gives you is keeping you from expressing your full potential. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop making other people feel sorry for you. It won't make your emotional pain go away just because someone listens to your story. Who could possibly feel sorry enough for you to solve all your problems? When people feel sorry for you, it strengthens your victim mentality. Everything that happens gives you another reason to feel sorry for yourself, to wallow in resentment and the feeling of helplessness.

If you are the friend or relative of someone who is stuck in victim mentality, you'll have to practice some "tough love." You can't let a victim's self-pity control the family or the workplace.

Why do some people rise above the traumas in their life and others succumb to victim mentality—constantly blaming others, or sinking into self-pity and inertia even after the trauma or abuse has been over and done for years? They take responsibility for themselves.

Louise L. Hay could have been stuck in victim mentality. Her childhood was a nightmare of living with a violent stepfather, being raped by a neighbor at the age of five, getting pregnant at 15 and giving up the child on her 16th birthday. Later, she was devastated when her husband left her for another woman after 14 years of marriage. Fortunately, Louise heard some say, "If you're willing to change your thinking, you can change your life." And so she did, becoming one of the best-selling authors in history and the founder of Hay House, the publishing house of many esteemed self-help and self-empowerment authors. When she was diagnosed with cervical cancer, she used forgiveness, therapy, nutrition, and some alternative methods to heal herself, including giving up any resentment

over her childhood abuse and rape. She expressed her basic philosophy when AIDS hit her hometown of L.A., and Louise started her famous “Hay rides.” She said: “I have no idea what we’re doing, but I know what we’re not going to do. We’re not going to play ‘Ain’t it awful.’”

If you get stuck in the “awful” and do not deal with your feelings and release them, you will always be a victim. Moving beyond victim mentality towards self-responsibility does not mean that we forget our pain or that we are “over” it. It means that we acknowledge that we have the power to heal. Our lives are not in someone else’s hands; they are in our own. We need to recognize our emotions, process and release them.

Identifying How We Feel

It can be very difficult at times to know what we feel, much less why we are feeling it, but knowing what we are feeling is a very important step. Absolutely every transformation in life starts with greater awareness

Here are a couple of powerful ways to help you identify what you are feeling:

1. One of the best ways to start recognizing your emotions is by answering the question: *What do I feel right now?* Are you lonely, jealous, resentful, stressed, angry? Pick a word that describes what you are feeling in the moment and write it in a little notebook. When I was a young attorney starting to connect with my emotions, I used to write in the margins of my briefs. Most of the time I was writing *jealous, jealous, jealous* because that’s how I felt. All the other lawyers around me seemed so competent and self-assured! (By the way, a really handy place to keep a notebook is in the kitchen if you want to identify your triggers for overeating.) If you can’t seem to find the words for what you’re feeling, Google “list of emotions” online and you’ll find plenty.

2. Our bodies provide great clues to our emotions. What is going on when we walk around with tension in our shoulders and backs? What are we feeling when we feel tightness in our chests or are short of breath? Try this: The next time you are experiencing an uncomfortable sensation in your body, don’t distract yourself

by heading directly to that pint of Ben and Jerry's. See if you can identify the emotion behind the signal your body is giving you. Did you just have a fight with your husband before you devoured that bag of chips? Did you get off the phone with your mother and immediately have a stomachache? What in that commercial on TV made your eyes well up with tears?

Don't suppress what you are feeling. Find a place where you can be alone and quiet. Breathe deeply and become aware of your body. Gently bring your attention to each area of your body in which you feel tense or uncomfortable. See if you can consciously relax that area, and let yourself experience the feelings that come up. Keep in mind that you may need some practice at this before you arrive at any deep insights. Above all, just let the feelings be and don't try to change them.

Releasing Difficult Emotions

What we want to do after we identify our emotions is to acknowledge their power and then release them—to let them flow through and out of our body rather than boxing them away some place inside. You can feel anger, sadness, anxiety, and fear without succumbing to hopelessness and despair.

*It isn't necessary to revisit or remember the traumas we have forgotten or suppressed in order to heal. Simply learning to acknowledge and release the emotions we are experiencing *in the present* can effectively release old wounds.*

I have used three main tools for identifying and releasing my feelings:

1. Write in a journal. When you let your internal editor go, the subconscious takes over and feelings pour out. Start by spending five or ten minutes describing how you feel right now. Or write about something that happened to you today, and then just let go and write whatever comes up. This can take practice, as we are not used to giving up control of our emotions, especially if we have been suppressing them. Writing actually processes your emotions; they are out of your head and heart and onto the paper (or computer file). This is a more in-depth

process than the little notebook with one-word descriptions of the moment. And as you write about how you feel, you may find that your feelings start to change.

2. Meditation or other contemplative practices. Learning to sit in a quiet internal space of peace is a great way to develop clarity and anchor yourself in the present moment. It gives you the spaciousness to view your emotional reactions from different perspectives and to release them in a safe way.

3. Counseling. If you become fearful or very anxious about memories that may be surfacing, please get professional help from a therapist, physician, or other qualified practitioner.

Emotions Connect with Thoughts and Beliefs

Our emotions are usually based on the beliefs and perceptions that we developed in childhood. For example, if you were raised by parents who believed that money is hard to come by and that there is never enough to go around, you may also have a belief in scarcity—a cup that is always half empty. If you can become aware of the beliefs you've inherited that no longer serve you, you have more choices available to you in life instead of being at the mercy of your automatic knee-jerk emotional reactions.

Have you ever found yourself lost in the swamp of depressed, miserable thinking? Like, I'm never going to find a mate because I'm unlovable, or It's impossible for me to lose weight (get a job, leave my abusive partner, be a good parent . . .). Don't try to suppress your negative thoughts. Let yourself feel them and then ask yourself: *Why am I saying that to myself?* This is part of being aware of your feelings, and it is a useful step towards emotional healing.

Drew Barrymore is now a very successful producer as well as being a movie star, but she easily could have drowned in self-pity and negative thinking based on the chaos of her upbringing. If we grow up with chaos or abuse, we tend to believe that we are not capable of love or success or are not deserving of it. As a young child, Drew was under intense pressure to bring in money. She says, "I was always afraid if I didn't work we wouldn't eat and we'd lose our house. ... I had that 40-year-old male mentality of needing to provide for my family -- when I was three years old."

She was also raised with the belief that she should bury her problems with alcohol, drugs and sex, which led her to become a “wild child,” in and out of rehab by the time she was 12. In an interview in *Parade* magazine, Drew said:

You want to place blame on people, but I don't think it's fair. You're dealt the cards that you're dealt. You can let that be your downfall or a springboard to become something better. For me, I just thought, 'What a waste of time to be angry at my parents. What a waste of time to feel sorry for myself.' The best thing I can do is learn all the things I've learned from them, good and bad, have my own family someday and just keep on going.

As Drew Barrymore demonstrates, it is possible to change our misguided thoughts and beliefs and begin a journey of healing.

Suppressed Emotions Can Make Us Sick

Burying emotions without processing them in a healthy way can cause a host of problems. Our minds and bodies really are interrelated, something the Western medical community is finally coming to believe. More and more evidence is mounting that our emotions have a direct effect on our bodies. For example:

- Researchers at Duke University Medical Center looked at patients with atherosclerosis and found that those without emotional support from a spouse or friend had a 50% mortality rate over 5 years compared with a 17% mortality rate for those with this crucial support.
- Researchers at the Montreal Heart Institute found that heart attack patients with depression had a 6-month mortality rate of 16%. Those who didn't suffer from depression had a 3% rate.
- A major study of 17,000 people found that those who had experienced one or more adverse childhood events (over half the participants!) were four to 50 times more likely to have physical illnesses, ranging from heart disease, fractures, alcoholism, and diabetes to obesity or eating disorders, and more.

In *Truth Heals*, I say it this way: “Life experiences, emotional upsets, surgeries, accidents, and trauma of any kind can shock and impair our energy systems. If these experiences are not processed and released over time, a lack of energy flow in some area of the body may manifest as illness or other problems.”

Not everyone who has experienced a trauma becomes ill at some point in life. It is not the anger, grief, or fear itself that causes illness. It is when the feelings that were generated by the traumatic event or abuse are buried or suppressed in our bodies and minds—unresolved, unexplored, and unreleased—that we develop physical and/or emotional problems.

Our Relationships Mirror Our Emotions

Another avenue to explore along the way to emotional healing is by becoming more conscious about our interpersonal relationships. Taking care of an aging parent, dealing with a rebellious child or a straying spouse or the boss from hell—all our relationships bring up our own issues. Not only can we learn what we’re feeling by how we react to others (where did that anger come from when you slammed down the phone on that poor telemarketer?), but we can also see how our emotions affect our relationships.

Often, people who have been abused as children unconsciously seek out abusive relationships as adults. Emotions that stem from the original abuse—shame, fear, anger, sadness, insecurity, low self-esteem—are normal and comfortable in the present relationship since they are familiar. People who suffer abuse sometimes become abusers themselves. Ninety-five percent of people who commit child abuse were abused as children. They take out their emotions of self-hate, worthlessness, anger, sadness, and confusion in their relationships.

In our day-to-day lives, it’s our nearest and dearest that hold up a mirror to our emotions. We tend to be attracted to someone who will mirror back to us our unresolved issues. You have a hunch that your husband is having an affair, so what do you do? Do you confront him outright and demand to know the truth, plot revenge scenarios, or do bury your anxiety and jealousy in a box of Oreos?

Here’s a tip on handling your relationships in a way that will help whenever you’re really upset with some else: Instead of pouncing on what they did or said that was

hurtful, start every statement you make with *how you feel*. Instead of saying, “You always say [or do] ...”, try saying, “I feel horrible [or whatever] when you say [or do]” Practice doing this with a friend so you learn how to change your standard response pattern into an “I feel...” response.

Moving On

Heartbreak is a universal experience. We all have our hearts broken by rejection, betrayal, loss of trust. If we shut our hearts down, put walls around our hearts, and try to run from our pain, we lose our connection to our emotions. Let yourself feel your emotions. It is time to stop hiding from them. Amazingly enough, you won't break. You can go through the pain and come out the other side into strength and joy.

Part of this process is learning to forgive. Forgiveness does not in any way imply forgetting. It doesn't mean we have to become best friends with whoever wronged us. Indeed, we may never see or speak to this person again. But when we hold hatred, bitterness, and resentment in our hearts, our health and well-being suffer.

Forgiveness is something that you do for *you*, not for the other person. You are not accepting that what they did was right. You are not excusing it. You don't have to like the person you are forgiving or reestablish a relationship with them. You don't even have to tell them you forgive them. Forgiveness simply means that you are letting go of the negative feelings. It means that you have felt the emotions, processed them, and released them. This is letting go of your victim mentality; the abuser no longer has any power to hurt you, and neither do your emotions.

Eli Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, writer, and Nobel Peace Laureate, suffered immensely under the Nazi regime. Taken to Buchenwald, a concentration camp, Wiesel's parents and younger sister were killed before he and his two other sisters were liberated. If anyone had reason for resentment and hatred, it is this man. Instead, he has written about his experiences (thus processing and releasing them), and he has worked to make people aware of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing throughout the world. He has also shown tremendous courage in

forgiving. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Oprah asked if he hated his oppressors. His reply:

I had anger but never hate. Before the war, I was too busy studying the Bible and the Cabala to hate. After the war, I thought, What's the use? To hate would be to reduce myself.

To continue to hang onto our pain and fear reduces us. It keeps us always as the victim. For your own sake, for your health and well-being, drop victim mentality.

It is never too late to learn how to get and stay healthy emotionally.