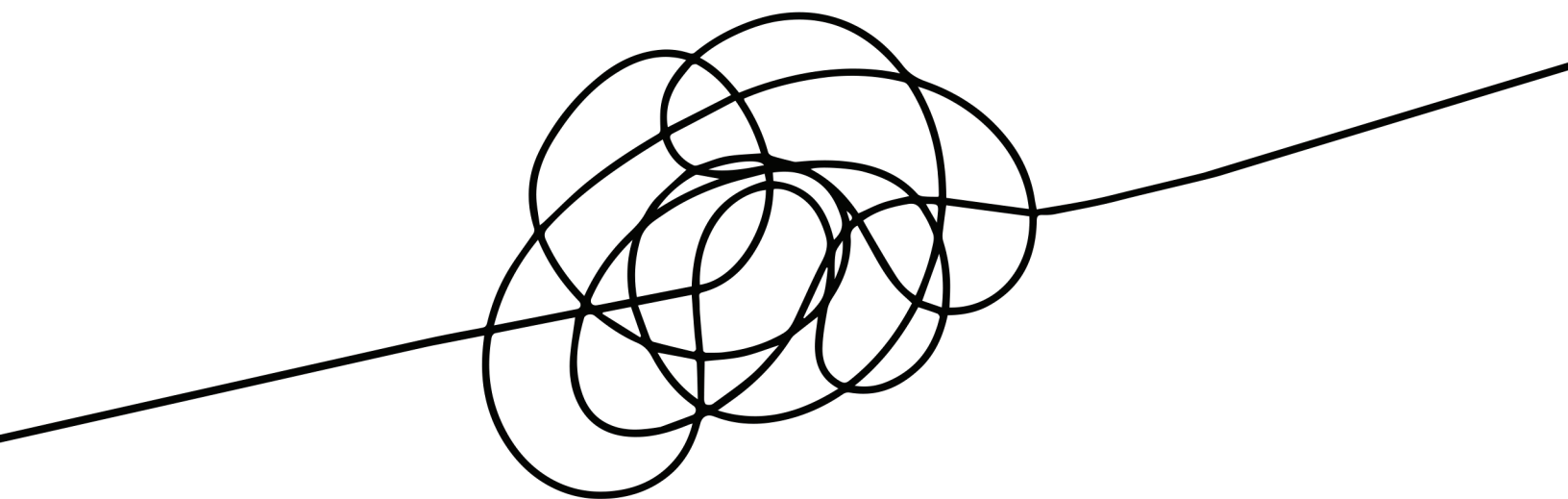
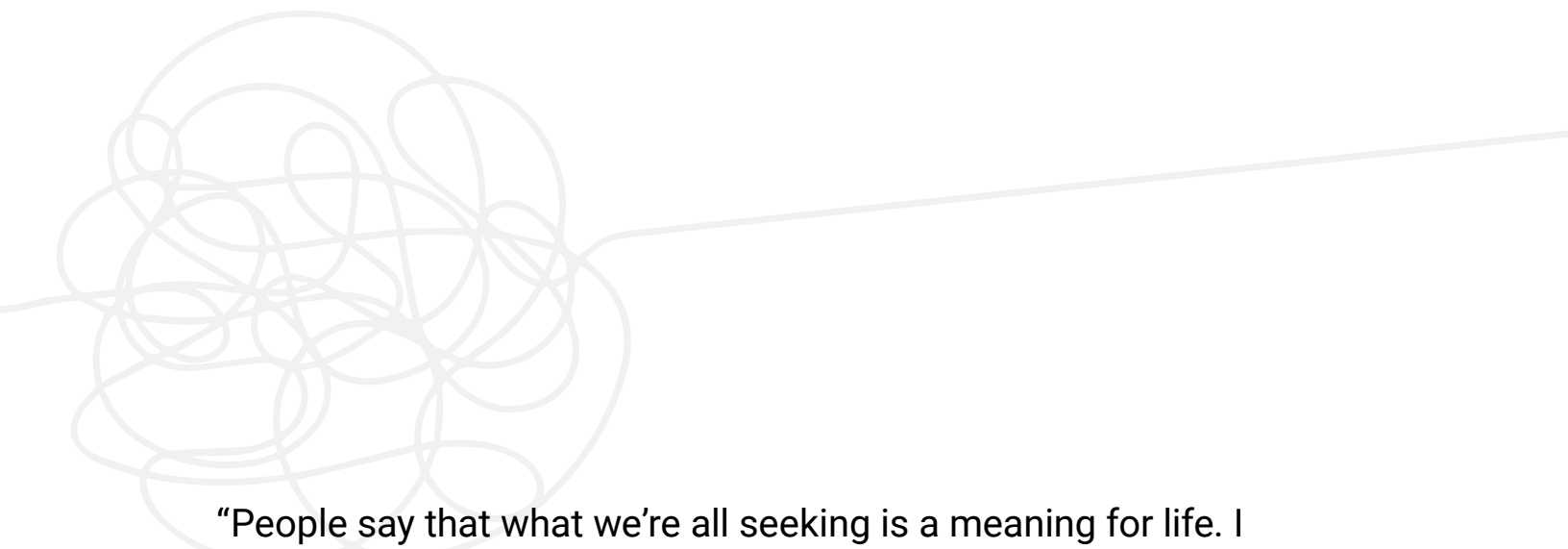


Emotional Clutter

T.K. COLEMAN





“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

—Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

The Rapture of Being Alive

Minimalism isn't scarcity; it's abundance healthfully expressed.
Life's deepest gladness isn't found in the absence of stuff, but in the presence of intentionality.

Emptying our cabinets, decluttering our closets, and ridding our lives of excess are means to an end. The end is the freedom and fulfillment that come from filling those newly found spaces with creative energy, healthy relationships, meaningful activities, thrilling adventures, unburdened relaxation, and other things (or non-things) that breathe vitality into our everyday lives.

There are many words to describe this end: happiness, joy, fulfillment, meaning, inner peace, eudaimonia, the flow state, or as Ken Wilbur describes it, "the simple feeling of being."

The purpose of this book isn't to prescribe a single or superior term to use.

Words are like labels in a grocery store. They can help us identify the things we're looking for, but what matters is the actual experience of what's on the shelf.

One of our minimal maxims regarding language is that "when the words get in the way, be willing to give them away." So if words like "joy" or "happiness" or "inner peace" don't resonate with you, feel free to let them go and use whatever labels you prefer.

What we're aiming for isn't a word, but a relationship to our feelings and experiences that transcend language and analysis. We'll use some language and analysis to get there, but our hope is to avoid confusing the proverbial "finger pointing to the moon" with the moon itself.

The moon in our analogy is that radiant quality of life that begins to emerge in the absence of clutter. We'll use stories, concepts, and maxims as the fingers with which we point, but ... allow your spirit to roam freely among the words, releasing any notion of superiority in labeling your emotions. These terms are invitations to the feast of existence, but they are not the feast itself. Select the flavors that resonate with your soul, and embrace the journey with an open heart.

What Happens After Minimalism?

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**T**here's an old Buddhist proverb that says, "Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water." That might sound like an underwhelming promise for the seeker of enlightenment, but there's a deeper meaning beyond the surface:

**Enlightenment isn't about escaping life; it's about engaging life with mindfulness.**

Even after a student has spent hours learning how to meditate, the mundane challenges, quirks, and trivialities of everyday life remain.

What happens after enlightenment? The same stuff that happened before enlightenment, but with one notable difference: the center of experience is no longer the stuff that happens, it's the realm of consciousness and intentionality that surrounds the stuff.

If we were to rewrite the proverb in a way that captures this deeper meaning, we might say the following:

"Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water with a sense of inner spaciousness, congruence, and wisdom that brings meaning, creativity, and gratitude to every experience no matter how seemingly mundane it is."

A similar exercise can be performed with minimalism.

We could ask ourselves: "What happens after minimalism?"

What happens after we empty our closets, recycle old items, and purge our clutter coffins?

We could answer this question with our version of the Buddhist proverb:

Before minimalism, chop wood and carry water. After minimalism, chop wood and carry water.

Here, the deeper meaning would be: "Even though minimalism helps us purge our lives of the things that hold us back, weigh us down, and crowd our spaces, it doesn't save us from having to live in a world where we deal with things that seem to push our buttons, throw a wrench in our plans, make demands on our time, and get in the way of our joy."

Before minimalism, we engage the challenges and responsibilities of life. After minimalism, we still have to engage the challenges and responsibilities of life.

The goal of this book, however, is to add one notable element to that rule: to help us engage life's challenges and responsibilities with a sense of play and possibility.

Before minimalism, chop wood and carry water. After minimalism, chop wood and carry water with an uncluttered heart, an undivided mind, and a liberated spirit that imbues every moment with the magic of simplicity.

# The Art of Being (a Cork)

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**H**ow do you teach a cork to float? The answer is simple: you don't.

Teaching a cork to float is like trying to teach a bird to fly.

A cork floats by its very nature.

You don't need to buy batteries or build an engine. You need only to let it be.

A cork's ability to float is a beautiful example of nature's design. It's a reminder that not everything in life requires intervention or manipulation. Sometimes, the best course of action is to simply trust in the inherent qualities of things and let them unfold naturally.

But suppose I had a piece of cork that kept sinking every time I put it in the water. If that were the case, my job would be to figure out what's obstructing the cork's natural buoyancy. Perhaps the cork has absorbed too much water, or maybe some foreign substance is interfering with its ability to rise to the surface.

Once I've identified and removed the obstruction, I can expect the cork to float again.

In a similar fashion, our soul knows how to be well. Like a cork, we can float through life's experiences and even ride the waves of turbulence that alter our course in unpredictable ways.

Like a cork, we can get temporarily overtaken by waves and still find a way to rise to the surface, keep our heads above water, and continue sailing along.

Like a cork, this is a natural ability that can be compromised when we become attached to things that don't amplify who we are.

And like a cork, we can become free again and return to our natural state when those attachments have been removed.

Just as a cork can lose its buoyancy when laden with weights or entangled in debris, we too can lose our natural ability to float when we become ensnared by emotional clutter.

Emotional clutter is the accumulation of all that weighs us down. It manifests in countless forms—a tangle of unresolved emotions, the heavy baggage of past traumas, toxic relationships that hold us down, and the ceaseless din of self-doubt. These are the weights that threaten to pull us beneath the surface, drowning our spirits in a sea of despair.

Emotional decluttering is the process of unloading the self-defeating narratives and practices that hinder our natural ability to float.

As a way of remembering and reinforcing this natural cork-like ability, let's use the word "float" as an acronym that captures the qualities we have the innate ability to embody and express.

Imagine each letter of FLOAT as a guiding star on this expedition towards emotional clarity.

**"F"** represents the Freedom you'll gain as you shed the emotional baggage that weighs you down, setting your spirit free.

**"L"** symbolizes the Lightness that will fill your heart and mind as you let go of what no longer serves you, experiencing newfound ease.

**"O"** is for the Optimism that will brighten your outlook on life as you embrace each day with hope and enthusiasm.

**"A"** stands for Authenticity & Alignment, leading you to discover your true self and live authentically, aligned with your deepest values.

**"T"** signifies the Transformation that awaits—a journey that will empower you to evolve into a healthier version of yourself.

The path of emotional decluttering isn't a promise of an effortless, perpetually happy life where every moment sparkles with joy. Life will always present its challenges. And emotions, both positive and negative, are an integral part of the human experience.

What this path offers is a compass, a guiding light that will show you how to stay in touch with your natural ability to FLOAT. It's about equipping you with the tools to navigate life's ebbs and flows with grace, resilience, and authenticity.

Through the journey of emotional decluttering, you'll discover the profound capacity within yourself to rise above, to find lightness, optimism, authenticity, and transformation even amidst life's complexities. This is not a promise of perfection but a path to reclaiming your innate emotional buoyancy and living a more fulfilling and authentic life.

Let's get started!



# Unpacking the Baggage of Positivity & Pessimism

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**M**ost journeys begin with deciding what to pack. The journey of emotional decluttering begins with determining what to unpack.

Let's unpack some common conceptual baggage that often gets in the way of emotional clarity.

This is not a booklet on positive thinking. At no point will I ask you to "be more positive."

This is also not a booklet about how you should give the middle finger to positive thinking.

Everything has its place ... including positive thinking.

My aim is to make sure that "positive thinking," or certain ideas and feelings associated with the phrase, do not get in the way of something more fundamental: maintaining emotional well-being, even in situations where our thoughts wouldn't earn us accolades for "the most positive mindset."

One of the more common concerns people have about optimistic-sounding philosophies (i.e., "Follow your bliss," "You can feel good again," "Happiness is an inside job," etc.) is the fear that one must choose to be delusional in order to be joyful.

To be fair, this concern is rooted in the fact that some people do seem to approach conversations on health and happiness in this sort of way.

Many of us are all too familiar with self-help gurus, motivational speakers, television personalities, and pollyanna friends who tell us to "be positive" in response to a sincere expression of sadness, struggle, or sorrow.

You have every right to be leery of any message that explicitly says or implies that we should never admit to feeling bad or that we should never acknowledge our problems.

There are, of course, many different views that have become associated with "positive thinking." Some of those views can be helpful. Others, not so helpful.



Without making any negative assumptions about what anyone means when they use the phrase “positive thinking,” let’s start by unloading some unproductive views associated with this phrase.

## Positivity Symptoms

1. **Forcing yourself to smile no matter how you feel.** Authenticity should always be valued over a forced facade of happiness. It’s okay not to smile when you’re hurting.
2. **Forcing yourself to speak triumphantly regardless of what you truly think.** Genuine expressions of your thoughts and feelings are more valuable than superficial positivity.
3. **Using the power of affirmations to override your real feelings and beliefs.** While affirmations can be useful, they should complement your authentic beliefs instead of being used as a form of self-denial or emotional suppression.
4. **Treating honest statements about your difficulties as if they will magically attract more difficult circumstances into your life as punishment for your negative speech.** Expressing your challenges isn’t a recipe for attracting more problems; it’s a way to seek support and solutions.
5. **Refusing to ever say things like “I need help” or “I’m not doing so well” because of a belief that your problems will become bigger simply by acknowledging their existence.** Seeking help and acknowledging your struggles is a sign of strength and mindfulness, not weakness.
6. **Expecting that being positive will magically solve all problems.** Positivity is a valuable tool, but it’s not a panacea for life’s challenges. Some issues require practical solutions and hard work.
7. **Believing that constant happiness is the only acceptable emotional state.** Life is full of ups and downs, and it’s entirely normal to experience a range of emotions. Striving for perpetual happiness can create unrealistic expectations.
8. **Blaming yourself for having negative thoughts or emotions.** Self-blame can exacerbate negative feelings and distract from possible solutions. Furthermore, some feelings and challenges are not easily or exclusively traceable to failures on our part. Reflexively saying “it’s my fault” is not always positive, nor is it always true. It’s possible to take initiative towards finding help without attacking, blaming, or disparaging yourself in the process.

Sometimes, in an effort to avoid these unhealthy manifestations of “positive thinking,” it can be easy to seek a solution in the form of “negative thinking.” Here I’m referring to the mindset that says “I don’t want to get hurt, look gullible, or be unrealistic, so I’m going to protect myself by making sure I adopt a pessimistic view on everything. Then I’ll either be pleasantly surprised or at least I’ll be free from disappointment.”

Here are some common manifestations of self-protective negative thinking.

## Negativity Symptoms

1. **Catastrophizing.** “If I even try, I’ll probably fail miserably. It’s better not to attempt it at all to avoid embarrassment.” Even if you fail, perhaps you could learn something that would increase the possibility of greater success in the future. What if we treated our efforts as a process of discovery rather than as an enterprise whose value is solely determined by outcomes? What if we found a way to try new things that doesn’t feel so risky? What if we tried with smaller goals, smaller steps, smaller expectations, a smaller investment, a smaller downside, and a smaller audience?
2. **Discounting the positive.** “Sure, things went well this time, but it’s just luck. It won’t last, and I’ll eventually be disappointed.” Even if it was pure luck, is there something we can learn from it? Even if there’s nothing we can learn from it, can we still give ourselves permission to enjoy the fruits of our luck? Even if we can’t enjoy the fruits of our luck, can we somehow use those lucky fruits as a foundation for creating something worthwhile? And what if it wasn’t luck after all? What if it was the result of talents and strengths you’ve overlooked? What if your “lucky” result is just an invitation to look and see how much unnoticed potential you have?
3. **All-or-Nothing thinking.** “I have to be perfect; anything less is a failure. I can’t afford to make any mistakes. If I allow myself to be happy with small successes, it will make me less motivated to pursue perfection.” Who told me that anything less than perfection is failure? Why should I believe them? Is there anything I’ve ever enjoyed in life that wasn’t perfect? Is there anyone I’ve ever loved or liked who wasn’t perfect? What if I can afford more mistakes than I’m assuming? What if my mistakes were just a natural part of the learning process? What if my small success didn’t de-motivate me but instead helped me to build momentum? What if there’s something better than perfection?
4. **Emotional filtering.** “I received all these compliments, but I know they were just being polite. They probably didn’t mean it.” What if they meant it? What if some of those compliments were true even if they didn’t mean it? What if it’s possible to be flawed and still worthy of a compliment at the same time? What becomes possible in a world where you simply say “thank you” or “that’s very gracious of you” instead of debating the compliment?
5. **Fortune-telling.** “I can already tell that this won’t work out. I’ve seen this pattern before, and it always ends badly.” What strengths and insights are indicated by my keen ability to recognize

patterns in the way I do? I seem to be really good at knowing what won't work. How might this skill be helpful to others? What sorts of things are worth trying even if they don't work out? What does "working out" mean for me personally? Are there other possible ways to define what it means for something to work out?

6. **Minimizing achievements.** "Even though I accomplished this, it's not a big deal. Anyone could have done it." What if it doesn't need to be a big deal in order for it to make a difference? If anyone could have done it, why hasn't everyone done it? What does it indicate about my potential or my priorities for me to have become one of the people who actually stepped up and did it? Even if this is no big deal, how might I build on this accomplishment?
7. **Overgeneralization.** "One bad experience means I'm destined to have a lifetime of bad experiences in this area." Have there been instances where a single negative event did not predict the future outcomes in other scenarios? What could one instance of a bad experience teach me for future experiences? Is it possible to break the chain and create a different outcome next time? How can I turn this bad experience into a learning experience that shapes better future outcomes? What would it look like if the next time was just a little bit better?
8. **Fear of rejection.** "I won't express my feelings or opinions because I know people will just reject or mock me." What if some people value my opinions and feelings? Have there been times when my opinions were appreciated? What would happen if I was rejected—could I handle it, and how might I respond? What is the best-case scenario of expressing my feelings or opinions? Is it possible that expressing my feelings and opinions might lead to finding a community or individuals who share similar thoughts and emotions?
9. **Avoiding risk at all costs.** "I'll never take any risks; it's too dangerous. I'll just stick to what's safe and familiar." Have there been instances in the past where taking a risk resulted in positive outcomes? How can I prepare or plan to mitigate the dangers associated with a particular risk? Is sticking to what's safe providing me with the life and experiences I desire?

These thoughts represent the negative thinking patterns that can emerge as a defense mechanism to shield oneself from disappointment, rejection, or failure. While they may provide temporary relief, they often lead to missed opportunities, decreased self-esteem, and a restricted, fear-driven life.

In many ways, negative thinking and positive thinking are two sides of the same coin, both rooted in a common desire for certainty and security in the face of life's inherent uncertainty. These two seemingly opposing thought patterns often serve as our psychological defense mechanisms, shielding us from the discomfort and responsibility that come with embracing the unknown.

Negative thinking often emerges as a shield against vulnerability. It's a way of preemptively preparing for disappointment, rejection, or failure. When we adopt a pessimistic outlook, we convince ourselves that the worst will happen, not because it's a factual certainty but because it offers a false sense of control. By expecting the worst, we believe we can protect ourselves from the emotional turmoil of unmet expectations or potential rejection. Negative thinking becomes a buffer against the raw unpredictability of life.

Conversely, positive thinking can also be a form of self-protection. It provides us with a comforting illusion of control by convincing us that everything will always work out for the best. In doing so, it shields us from the discomfort of acknowledging our limitations and the genuine risks that exist. Positive thinking, when taken to an extreme, becomes a way to sidestep the need for critical thinking and contingency planning. It allows us to accept easy answers and avoid the challenging task of grappling with complex problems or making tough decisions.

In both cases, these polarized thinking patterns attempt to replace the nuanced reality of uncertainty with the allure of certainty. They provide us with a sense of safety, albeit a fragile one, by simplifying the world into black-and-white terms. However, this forced certainty comes at a cost. It limits our ability to adapt, grow, and navigate the complexities of life effectively.

When we liberate ourselves from the relentless pressure to "be positive" and abandon the crutch of negativity as a protective shield, something profound occurs.

In the space once cluttered with forced and false certainty, a new clarity emerges. This clarity isn't rooted in rigid judgments, labels, or dogmatic opinions but rather in a deep sense of awareness. It's a space where we no longer pretend to know all the answers or to have life neatly categorized as either great or terrible. Instead, we stand on the precipice of the unknown, ready to explore what lies beyond our preconceived notions.

This state of mind allows our inner self to stand naked in the open fields of possibility. Here, we shed the heavy armor of artificial positivity and pessimism, and we're left with our authentic selves, vulnerable yet unburdened. It's a place where we embrace life's uncertainties with curiosity rather than fear.

This inner spaciousness of curiosity is a profound reservoir of creativity, wisdom, and resilience. It's the place from which innovative ideas spring forth, where empathy and understanding thrive, and where personal growth flourishes. In this space, we become more open to learning, to the richness of human experiences, and to the diverse perspectives of others.

Here, we can engage with life's challenges and triumphs without the weight of preconceived notions. We are free to adapt, change, and evolve as circumstances demand. We welcome each moment with an open heart and an open mind, ready to explore, question, and learn.

This is where our true selves reside, and it's from this place that we can embrace the full spectrum of human existence with grace and resilience, unencumbered by the need for artificial certainty.

# The Way of Curiosity

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**I**n the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the character Joel Barish, played by Jim Carrey, finds himself in an unconventional predicament. After a painful breakup with his girlfriend Clementine, played by Kate Winslet, he decides to undergo a medical procedure to erase all memories of their relationship.

In one memorable scene, as the procedure is underway, Joel realizes that he doesn't want to forget Clementine after all. He begins to relive and revisit the memories they shared within his own mind. But here's the twist—instead of simply letting these memories play out, he gets curious.

Joel starts asking questions about the nature of his emotions, the reasons for the ups and downs in their relationship, and the significance of their time together. In the midst of this inner exploration, he discovers a deeper understanding of himself and the complexities of love.

Joel's curiosity-driven introspection showcases the transformative power of curiosity in understanding and embracing our emotions.

The memory-erasing procedure offers an intriguing parallel to how many of us approach our unpleasant emotions in real life. Just as Joel seeks to erase the memories of his past relationship, we sometimes attempt to erase or suppress our negative feelings through the positive thinking and negative thinking paradigm.

Positive thinking can be likened to the memory-erasing procedure where we try to sweep our unpleasant emotions under the rug. We put on a facade of happiness, convincing ourselves that everything is fine when, in reality, it might not be. Much like Joel initially trying to forget Clementine, we attempt to forget or deny our negative emotions by forcibly injecting positivity into our thoughts.

This forced happiness can be like a temporary fix, but it masks the underlying issues and prevents genuine growth. Just as Joel realizes the emptiness of erasing Clementine from his mind, we may discover that suppressing our emotions only leads to a sense of disconnection from ourselves.

On the flip side, negative thinking can be likened to the technicians overseeing the memory-erasing procedure. In this approach, we become overly cautious and pessimistic, anticipating the worst to protect ourselves from disappointment or pain. We create a mental defense mechanism, attempting to prevent negative emotions from ever arising. In an effort to wipe away pain, we also wipe away our healthy capacity for pleasure and deeper meaning.

Curiosity breaks us free from the self-defeating paradigm of positive and negative thinking.

# Getting Curious About Curiosity

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**I**n the spirit of curiosity, we could ask the following question: What are our feelings for?

Imagine being at home, minding your own business, when suddenly your phone rings. You answer, and the person on the other end delivers some incredible news you never saw coming. It's the kind of news that fills your heart with elation and gratitude. Perhaps a remarkably generous individual, with no apparent reason, has decided to perform a random act of kindness by paying off all the debts of ten people, and you're one of the fortunate recipients. Or maybe it's a close friend, someone who's struggled for years to start a family, calling to share the joyous news that they're expecting a baby, and they want you to be the godparent. In this moment, you feel deep gratitude and excitement for the news your friend is sharing with you.

Now, let's imagine that a bearded philosopher spontaneously appears. Observing your jubilant state, he poses an intriguing question: "I can see that you're very happy right now. Hmmm. What do you think all that happiness is for?"

If such a question were asked of you in such a moment, your immediate response might be, "Who cares? I feel great, and I just want to enjoy it!"

It's interesting to note that it's typically during encounters with unpleasant emotions like sadness, jealousy, or anger that we find ourselves pondering the "why" behind what we feel. And even then, our inquiries are often directed at identifying the cause of our emotions rather than exploring the fundamental reasons feelings exist in the first place. We ask, "Why am I so sad?" because we perceive sadness as a problem, an obstacle to our pursuit of happiness. If we can pinpoint the cause of our sadness, our hope is to remove it, thereby returning to the cherished state of happiness.

But what if we paused to consider the philosopher's question in the midst of our elation or happiness? What if we explored why we feel happiness, not just what made us happy? What if we explored not only questions like "Why do I feel sad or jealous or angry?" but also questions like "Why do I feel anything at all?"

There's an old phrase often attributed to Zig Ziglar that says, "emotion is energy in motion."

The word "energy" isn't just a term that applies to the work of nuclear physicists and climate experts. It also applies to us ... at every level. As living creatures, we are energy beings.

Scientists generally define life as "a system capable of performing functions such as eating, metabolizing, excreting, breathing, moving, growing, reproducing, and responding to external stimuli."

If you're reading this, you are not only alive, but you are the by-product and on-going manifestation of the energy produced by living organisms that existed long before you could say the word "organism."

We're not computers with the ability to talk. We are not brains in a vat. We're not lifeless meatsuits with batteries that make us move around. We are living ecosystems, complex webs of interconnections that are maintained by flows of information and energy.

And the coolest part is that we have this mysterious quality—some might call it a gift—called "consciousness." We have centuries worth of theories and speculations about what consciousness is, but we're still just beginning to understand.

Our goal here isn't to figure all that out. We can leave that to the scientists and the bearded philosophers for now. The thing to keep in mind, however, is that our feelings are first and foremost a reminder that we are alive, that we have this precious, improbable, and fragile gift that we call awareness. Without this gift, we would be nothing more than sophisticated looking boxes being pushed around by impersonal forces. But we get to be boxes that can celebrate or complain about how we're being pushed around. We get to be boxes that can say "this is fun" or "I don't enjoy this." We get to be a life. We get to be alive. And everytime we feel something, no matter how pleasant or painful it is, that feeling is life-energy.

At commencement speeches and motivational talks, we hear phrases like "let your life speak," but perhaps we could start saying "listen to your life," because your life is speaking to you all the time in the form of your feelings. It's saying "I'm here. I'm an entity in this world. I do not merely observe, but I feel. I feel because I am connected to a universe that is immeasurably larger than my sensation of being a separate self. I feel because I am made up of tiny little universes that live within me and through me. I feel because the energy that makes me who I am is just as real as the energy that makes up all the matter and lifeforms in the cosmos."

To despise our capacity to feel is like despising the dimensions of space. Our feelings aren't a problem to be solved. Our feelings are the playing field, without which there would be no problems to solve or speak of.

This doesn't mean that our relationship to our feelings is incapable of creating problems for us. It does mean, however, that the key to decluttering those problems begins with a way of looking at our feelings that creates room for play and possibility.

Emotional decluttering is driven by a simple observation:

*Our feelings are not here to be cast out or conquered. They're here to be engaged and expressed with imagination and intelligence.*

It might help to go back and substitute the word "time" or "space" for "feelings" in order to get an appreciation for this perspective.

*Our time is not here to be cast out or conquered. Our time is here to be engaged and expressed with imagination and intelligence.*

*The dimensions of space are not here to be cast out or conquered. The dimensions of space are here to be engaged and expressed with imagination and intelligence.*

We all get the absurdity of trying to make life better by destroying time or destroying the dimensions of space. If you were in a sci-fi movie and you had a technological device that allowed you to wipe out the entire space-time continuum, you would definitely solve our problems. But you would also wipe out the playing field that makes it meaningful to solve problems. The same is true of our feelings.

Why do we care so much about problems anyway? We care about problems because we care about possibilities. And problems are simply things that seem to get in the way of the possibilities we feel passionate about. Sometimes it's helpful to redirect our passions to things that are healthier and more constructive. If I feel passionate about being a billionaire, my passion might be an indicator that I'm using the fantasy of having a billion dollars as a proxy for something more fundamental that I truly want like security, affirmation, creative power, and so on. When we can do it without attachment to the outcome, it's healthy to pursue our passions. And sometimes it's healthier to redirect them to worthier pursuits. But when we treat our capacity for passion, our capacity to feel deeply, our capacity to be aroused out of our slumber, as if it's the enemy, we uncouple ourselves from the very source of wisdom that makes life meaningful, sensible, bearable, and sometimes thrilling.





# The Hell of a Problem-Free Life

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In the *Twilight Zone* episode “A Nice Place to Visit,” a character named Rocky Valentine is a career criminal who meets an untimely demise during a robbery. To his surprise, he wakes up in what appears to be a paradise—a beautiful city where every desire is instantly fulfilled. He’s given a lavish apartment, unlimited money, and the freedom to do whatever he pleases.

Initially, Rocky revels in his newfound paradise, indulging in every pleasure imaginable. He lives a life of luxury and excitement, but something starts to gnaw at him. He becomes increasingly bored and restless because, in this perfect world, there are no challenges, no consequences, and no sense of achievement.

He shares his feelings with his enigmatic guardian, Pip, who tries to convince Rocky that this is his reward for a lifetime of crime. Rocky should be eternally happy here, but he finds himself unfulfilled and empty. He realizes that there’s no point in having everything he wants if there’s no struggle or personal growth.

At this point, Rocky assumes that his unhappiness is due to the fact that bad guys like himself aren’t a good fit for heaven. Reasoning that he’s not boring or good enough to enjoy the perfection of paradise, he expresses a desire for an environment that’s more fit for those who are a little rough around the edges. “Take me to the other place.”

Pip reveals that Rocky is, in fact, in the “other place”—a version of hell tailored specifically for him. Rocky’s punishment is to get everything he desires, but there’s no challenge or adversity, making his existence entirely dull and meaningless. The episode ends with Rocky in despair, realizing that he’s stuck in a never-ending cycle of getting what he wants but never finding happiness or fulfillment. And that, my friends, is hell (at least in the *Twilight Zone*).

When we pursue a life of uninterrupted positivity without facing challenges and embracing our full range of emotions, we become like Rocky Valentine: trapped in a hellish life without mystery, curiosity, and the adventure it brings.

If you’re breathing right now, you probably have some conflict you’re dealing with. This is the norm.

Conflict isn’t evidence that you’re doing something wrong—it’s evidence that you’re doing *something*, period.

To live is to know the tension that ebbs and flows between our longings, fears, hopes, setbacks, and disappointments.

As long as your heart is beating, you’re going to experience circumstances and conditions that contrast with your desires. And this experience will show up in, through, and as your feelings.

This tension isn't just some fact about life that we have to begrudgingly accept. It's the wellspring of creative ideas, self-discovery, and personal growth. Conflict and tension isn't just a thing that gets in our way. It's the thing that makes us go ... and it's the way.

The curious response to conflict and tension then, is to see them as an invitation to evolve in a new direction. When we make ourselves available to the lessons beyond the pain, our troubles become our deepest source of transformation.



# Psychological Choreography

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Curiosity leads to creativity. By “creativity,” I don’t mean “having an eccentric personality and getting lots of compliments from your friends about how stylish or artistic you are.” By “creativity,” I mean “that childlike sense of wonder that inspires us to experiment and explore with a genuine appetite for the kind of knowledge that comes through the felt presence of immediate experience.”

Creativity is something we all have. Your creativity isn’t defined by your job, formal education, professional occupation, or experience in the fine arts. It’s defined by your spirit of inquiry. The ability to let go is intimately related to the ability to say “I don’t know.” Our unhealthy attachments are rooted in narratives, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations. When we accept what we think we know as the final answer, our view of the world becomes a prison.

When we cultivate a strong sense of “I have lots to learn because I haven’t tried all the solutions, researched all the ideas, heard all the stories, visited all the places, met all the people, and considered all the options,” we have an easier time letting go of our physical and emotional clutter because we’re not equating “the way it is” or “the way it’s always been” with “this is how the universe works.”

When we drop the positive/negative thinking paradigm, curiosity arises. And as our curiosity grows, it blossoms into a vortex of creative energy that begins to color and contextualize every aspect of how we think, feel, process, and act.

One of my favorite quotes comes from a book by Zora Neale Hurston where she writes, “I love myself when I am laughing ... and then again when I am looking mean and impressive.”

What Zora describes is a state of being in which her curiosity and creativity allow her to dance with the entire range of the emotional spectrum.

Let’s talk about dancing.

# Learning to Dance

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**R**umi wrote, “Dance, when you’re broken open. Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you’re perfectly free.”

Happiness is like a genre of music that nearly everyone knows how to dance to. Happiness has a very simple tempo, catchy phrasing, and memorable lyrics. It’s the song at the school dance that makes everyone excited to run to the dance floor.

Imagine a wedding. When the DJ plays classic “feel good” dance songs, it doesn’t matter if it’s from the ’70s (think “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees or “Celebration” by Kool & The Gang), the ’80s (think “Don’t Stop Believin’” by Journey or “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” by Whitney Houston), the ’90s (think “Livin’ la Vida Loca” by Ricky Martin), you get the point ... people from all ages and background eagerly hit the dance floor and move with excitement ... even the uncle who can’t dance. How can this possibly work? How can untrained dancers from all ages and backgrounds groove so effectively on the dance floor to songs that aren’t even from their generation?

The answer is simple.

Some genres of music are so accommodating that it doesn’t really matter how you dance to them. Nearly everything works. Wanna jump up and down? That works. Wanna break dance on the floor? That’s pretty impressive. Wanna just stand there and clap your hands while you laugh about how awesome it is to be celebrating with family and friends? It totally works. You can be off-beat, on-beat, good with your feet, or even one of those people with two left feet. You can detect a good DJ by the number of bad dancers on the floor.

This is what happiness feels like. It’s the song that doesn’t require a complicated dance routine or special skills. It’s the song that transcends language barriers, cultural differences, and age.

In the same way that no one runs around searching frantically for a dance instructor when a song says “lift your hands and shout,” we also don’t typically look for advice on what to do with our feelings when we feel good.

When was the last time you received a call from a friend telling you some good news they received?

Compare that with the following: when was the last time you received a call from a friend who said something like “I feel so amazing right now. I’m happy, healthy, and content. Should I jump up and down, or should I do a fist pump?”

When we feel good, it's almost as if we instinctively know what to do. And even when we don't know what to do, it's kind of fun to playfully entertain whatever comes up. It's the wedding dance that's hard to get wrong.

Now, let's go back to that wedding.

Imagine that our DJ starts to feel a little eccentric. In a surprising twist, our DJ stops playing the easy party music and chooses to switch things over to some other more complex or unfamiliar form of music. Instead of '70s disco music, for instance, the DJ switches over to polka or jazz. What happens then?

Some people will just keep on dancing as if nothing has changed. Some people will stand around looking awkward. Some will complain about the DJ. Some will leave the dance floor until an easier tune comes back on.

This is analogous to what happens when we begin to feel unpleasant emotions.

We gradually shift from a state of playfully or freely expressing our "positive" feelings to complaining, giving up, pretending like nothing has changed, or ...

... doing the hard work of figuring out how to cope.

When the music demands something that the dancer is untrained to do, the dancer will either quit or commit themselves to navigating the challenge.

This latter choice is the art of psychological choreography. It is the art of finding a way to groove across the entire emotional spectrum in a way that feels aligned with who you are and how you want to show up for your life.

When we learn physical choreography, we become good dancers. When we learn psychological choreography, we become emotionally versatile.

# Emotional Versatility

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Our emotional clutter is largely due to the fact that we have not learned how to “dance” to a large part of the emotional spectrum. Being emotionally versatile is like being a good dancer. Just as dancers must challenge themselves to master new moves with their body, we must challenge ourselves to learn new forms of psychological choreography.

We each have to find our own ways, however quirky and unsexy those efforts may be, of moving to the unorthodox rhythms of anger, sadness, jealousy, or any other style of emotion that tends to trip us up or throw us off.

The problem with feelings is neither that our moods fluctuate nor that our emotions seem to fail us. The greater dilemma is that most of us have only learned how to dance to one type of feeling.

Emotional decluttering is less about feeling good and more about learning to develop a healthy and harmonious relationship with the variety of emotional states you’re likely to experience over the course of a lifetime.

It’s about making peace with the entire emotional spectrum by honing your capacity to channel various feelings along creative and constructive lines. It is not about controlling or condemning your feelings. It’s about conducting your feelings in a self-edifying way. That’s the dance.

In contrast to philosophies that encourage us to passively accept whatever we feel as “good,” emotional versatility says “make friends with your feelings by actively integrating all of your psychological experiences into the larger context of your life as a creative process.”

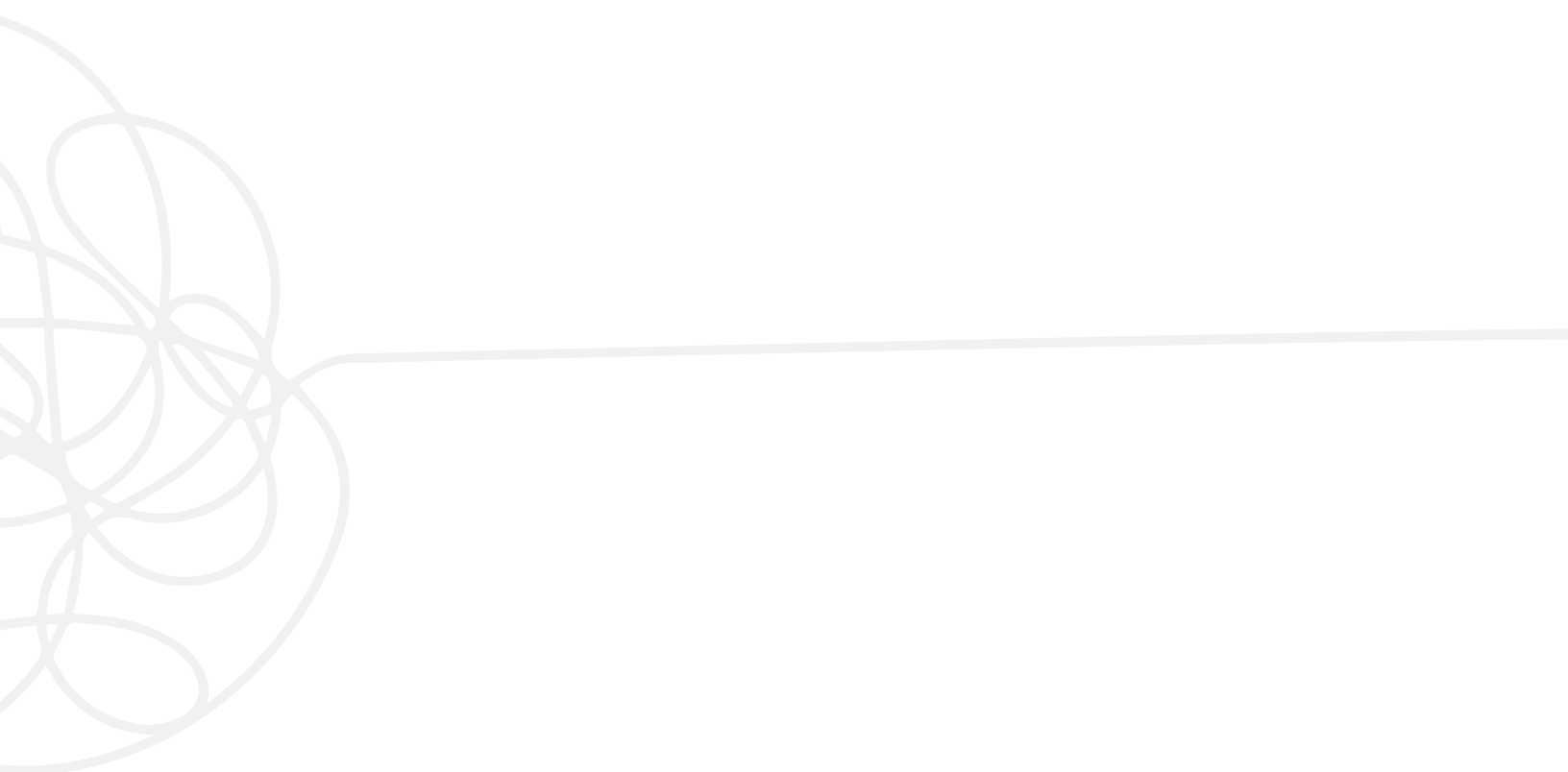
Instead of viewing yourself as a static repository waiting for the universe to deposit “positive” emotions into your soul, you can approach life from the orientation of a dynamic creator who is constantly involved in an ongoing process of building, innovating, and altering their unique world of experience.

In the positive/negative thinking paradigm, your current emotional state is your life. In the emotional decluttering paradigm, energy is your life, and your feelings, whether “good” or “bad,” are a form of fuel that can be used to amplify, accelerate, or augment the creative process. This is precisely what some musicians claim to do when they report on experiences involving the use of a heartbreaking experience as material for a song.

Emotional versatility extends this concept to cover life as a whole. Working with the metaphor of “life as art,” emotional versatility presupposes a concept of personal freedom that says “as a personal agent, you are a creative force. You are free to the extent that you are able to be intentional with your focus, channel your feelings, and conduct your actions in a manner that is conducive to creating the experiences that matter most to you.”

In the emotional decluttering paradigm, you don't merely react to feelings; you compose with them.

As we delve deeper into this concept, let's shift our focus from the conceptual to the visceral, from theory to practice. Our aim here is to take these ideas from the realm of theory into the realm of lived experience, where you'll engage with your emotions in a tangible and transformative way by exploring a few carefully selected reflections and exercises that will empower you to navigate the landscape of your feelings. This is where we learn some new dance moves.



# Emotional Exercises

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**A**s you explore the following exercises, try to avoid thinking of them in terms of assignments, graduation dates, or to do lists. When it comes to our relationships with people, the goal isn't to be finished. The goal is to be connected. Relationships aren't transactional, they're relational.

Even when we do all the "right" things, those things will fail us if we approach them in a formulaic manner. If I read a book about the power of saying phrases like "Thank you" or "I appreciate you" or "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong," it would still be possible for those statements to make no difference in my life if I approach them in a robotic or legalistic way. It's the same in our relationship to our own soul. We have to take the risk of dating ourselves, dancing with ourselves, and delving into deep conversations with ourselves in a way that's open to the uncertainty of how things might unfold.



## EXERCISE ONE

# Diving into the Ocean

## Reflection

**I** magine yourself standing on the shore of a vast, restless ocean on a windy day.

The waves crash and froth, and the surface of the water seems turbulent and chaotic. It's as if the ocean itself is concealing its secrets, hiding its depths from your view. All you can see is the constant movement and agitation, making it challenging to discern anything beneath the surface.

You return to this same spot on another day, but this time, the scene has changed dramatically. The air is still, and the ocean is serene and calm. The water stretches out like a vast, tranquil mirror, reflecting the clear blue sky above. It's a moment of perfect stillness, where even the tiniest details are visible. And as you peer into the depths, you notice something remarkable: the ocean is teeming with life. Colorful fish dart gracefully through the water, seaweed sways gently with the rhythm of the tide, and a myriad of creatures thrive beneath the surface.

This ocean, with its hidden abundance of life, represents something profound within you: your soul. Just as the chaotic surface of the ocean on a windy day conceals the vibrant world beneath, our restless minds and busy lives often hide the richness of our inner selves. When we are caught up in the whirlwind of daily activities, worries, and distractions, it's challenging to connect with the depths of our being.

When we intentionally create moments of stillness and solitude, it's as if we're returning to that calm day by the ocean.

In those quiet, reflective moments, our soul begins to reveal itself. Like the ocean teeming with life, our inner world comes alive with wisdom, creativity, and understanding.

We begin to realize that we're not merely a cork that knows how to float, but that we're also a beautiful and mysterious ocean of immeasurable depth and potential.

## Exercise

**F** ind a quiet space and sit comfortably. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to center yourself. Imagine that you're standing at the shore of the calm, reflective ocean within you. As you listen closely, try to hear the gentle, soothing sound of this inner ocean. This sound represents the wisdom and peace that reside within.

As you listen, remember the importance of doing so without judgment. Treat your emotions and inner experiences with the same compassion and curiosity you would offer a close friend. Your emotions are neither good nor bad; they simply are.

Now, shift your focus to your current emotional state. Listen to the sounds associated with your surface emotions. Are they turbulent and chaotic, like crashing waves, or are they relatively calm and harmonious? Approach these surface emotions with non-judgmental awareness. Avoid labeling them as right or wrong, good or bad. They are a natural part of your emotional landscape, signaling your current state of being.

As you continue to listen, notice any changes in the sounds of your inner ocean. Be open to the idea that your emotional state can shift and evolve, just like the ocean's surface. Embrace this process non-judgmentally, knowing that self-awareness and inner peace arise from acceptance rather than criticism.

Practicing non-judgmental listening to your inner ocean allows you to connect with your emotions in a compassionate and constructive way. It empowers you to navigate your emotional landscape with greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

Just as an ocean can reveal its hidden treasures when we pause to gaze beneath the surface, this exercise invites you to connect with the richness of your inner world. Now, let's transition from this meditative experience to a more structured practice that will serve as the map for your emotional landscape.



## EXERCISE TWO

# The Map

## Reflection

**I**magine you're at an amusement park, surrounded by countless rides and attractions. You have a specific destination in mind, perhaps the food court or a particular rollercoaster. You consult the park directory, which provides a map with labels and arrows pointing you toward all the different attractions and amenities. There's an essential part of this map that often goes unnoticed: the little marker that reads "You are here." This unassuming indicator is your starting point, your current position in the grand scheme of the amusement park.

Now, imagine that your feelings and emotions are like this park. Life presents you with an array of choices, experiences, and goals. You may want to find happiness, contentment, or inner peace. These emotions and states of being are akin to the rides in the park—they are your desired destinations.

But here's the catch: much like the park map, understanding your feelings begins with acknowledging where you are emotionally—the "You are here" of your inner world. Self-honesty serves as the compass that pinpoints your emotional location. Just as you need to admit that you're standing by the directory at the park in order to navigate to your chosen ride, you must honestly assess your current emotional state before you can progress towards your desired emotional destination.

This is where self-awareness comes into play. It's your ability to recognize and label your emotions accurately, like identifying your position on the park map. Are you feeling joyful, anxious, angry, or perhaps a mix of emotions? Self-awareness involves peering into your emotional landscape, even when it seems complex and challenging, and acknowledging the various emotional signposts that define your "You are here" in your journey toward inner fulfillment.

Once you've located yourself on the emotional map through self-honesty and self-awareness, you can then trust your inner guidance, much like you trust the park directory to lead you to your chosen ride. This self-trust allows you to chart a course towards your emotional destination with confidence and clarity, making informed decisions that align with your genuine feelings and desires.

## Exercise

**J**ust as you would consult a map to find your way in a mall, amusement park, or on a trip, this exercise invites you to create a map of your emotional landscape via emotion journaling.

Emotion journaling is like marking your location on this internal map, helping you become more self-aware, honest, and trustworthy with yourself.

## Materials Needed

- A notebook and pen—or a digital document
- A few minutes each day

## Instructions

1. **Start your emotional journey.** Find a quiet and comfortable space where you won't be disturbed. It's time to embark on your emotional journey.
2. **Set aside time.** Allocate a few minutes each day to engage in this practice. It could be in the morning, during lunch, or before bedtime—choose a time that suits you.
3. **Express yourself descriptively.** Instead of merely stating “happy” or “sad,” dive deeper into your emotions. Use descriptive words to paint a vivid picture of how you're feeling. For example:
  - Today, I'm feeling a sense of joy and contentment because I achieved a personal goal.
  - I'm experiencing frustration and annoyance due to a challenging interaction at work.
  - There's a mix of excitement and nervousness in anticipation of the upcoming trip.
4. **Date your entries.** Ensure you date each journal entry. This helps you track your emotional journey over time.
5. **Consistency is key.** Stick to your commitment of journaling regularly. Even on days when emotions seem mundane or routine, jot them down. It's these details that build your emotional map.
6. **Reflect and observe.** Periodically review your entries. Notice any patterns or changes in your emotions. This reflection allows you to understand where you are emotionally at different points in your life.

Remember, just as knowing “you are here” on a physical map is essential for navigation, knowing where you are emotionally is fundamental for your journey towards self-discovery and personal growth. Emotion journaling is your compass for this inner exploration.

# A Brief Pause: Trusting the Journey

As you engage in these exercises and explore the depths of your emotions, you might find yourself wondering, “What in the world are we doing here, and where is this taking me? Shouldn’t I just get back to work or do something where it’s easier to measure my productivity?”

These are natural questions, and it’s essential to address them with an open heart and an inquisitive mind. The journey of emotional decluttering, much like a voyage across the vast ocean, can be both fascinating and disorienting. At times, you might feel like you’re sailing without a clear destination, surrounded by unfamiliar waters. You may even question the value of these moments spent in reflection, especially when the pressures of daily life beckon you back to the shore of busyness.

One of the concepts that has the power to radically transform our approach to this journey is the idea of “noble boredom.” It’s been a tremendous help in my personal life. According to Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man, noble boredom means “No anticipation of action. It means having the ability to be present without needing something to happen.”

We don’t need to look very far to discover that busyness is the bearer of many luxuries. Being busy can make us look or feel very important. It can give us a good excuse for avoiding unwanted commitments and it can help us deal with guilt, inadequacy, and the belief that we’re not working hard enough. Busyness can protect us from messy confrontations with the thing we fear the most: boredom.

When you consider the primary form of expressing boredom (“I don’t have anything to do”), it’s no wonder that we seek salvation in the experience of perpetual preoccupation. We dread running up against the fact that we often have no idea where we’re going and why we’re traveling in relation to all the stuff we do. If we stop being busy we’ll be bored. And if we become bored, we’ll see how uninteresting and uncreative our lives really are.

Noble boredom invites us to reconsider our relationship with inactivity. It challenges the notion that stillness and solitude are evidence of our lack of creativity. On the contrary, they serve as the very wellspring of creativity itself.

So as you pause here and ponder the path you’re on, remember the concept of noble boredom. Beware the temptation to rush through these exercises or dismiss them as unproductive. Embrace the idea that in these moments of reflection and exploration, you don’t need to anticipate action or immediate results. Instead, you’re learning to be present without needing something to happen. Trust that these moments of stillness and introspection are essential components of your journey toward emotional decluttering, self-discovery, and a richer, more creative life.

### EXERCISE THREE

## Conversing with Our Friends

### Reflection

**T**hink about your friends. Some are good at making you laugh or coming up with ideas for how to have a good time. These are the ones you want to party with, watch a movie with, go out for dinner with, or simply hang out with when you're feeling low.

Some friends aren't great at making you laugh, but they're reliable. When you need something, they have your back.

Some friends are the kind of people who don't show up often, nor do they need to talk a lot, but when you have a question about some difficult problem, they always seem to have something useful to say.

Some friends aren't going to be the first one to dole out flattering words of praise every time you do something good, but you can trust them to always give you honest feedback even if it's not what you wanted to hear.

Just like friends, different emotions serve different purposes in our lives. Some emotions bring joy, excitement, and spontaneity, much like the friends who are great at making you laugh and having a good time.

On the other hand, some emotions might not be as pleasant, such as sadness, anger, or fear. However, just like friends who provide honest feedback even when it's uncomfortable to hear, these emotions also have their value. They often serve as signals or messengers, telling us something important about ourselves or our situations.

When it comes to your friends, you know they're on your side. And that's why you listen to them. Feelings are your friends. And when you silence or suppress your feelings, you silence and suppress the wisdom they provide.

We build rapport, intimacy, and trust with our friends through communication over time. We don't start off as best friends with everyone on Day 1. Instead, we take our time and get to know one another in ways that forge a deep sense of alliance and connection. We can do this same thing with our feelings.

### Exercise

**E**motions are like messengers, each carrying a unique message or wisdom that can guide us in different aspects of our lives. In this exercise, we'll explore how to tap into the wisdom of your emotions by asking a powerful question: "What's right about my [insert emotion]?"

## Instructions

1. **Identify your emotion.** Begin by identifying an emotion you're currently experiencing or have recently felt. It could be joy, anger, sadness, fear, or any other emotion. Let's say you choose anger for this exercise.
2. **Reflect on the emotion.** Take a moment to sit quietly and focus on this emotion. Allow yourself to feel it without judgment. Notice where you feel it in your body and how it manifests.
3. **Ask the question.** Now, ask yourself, "What's right about my anger?" This question encourages you to shift your perspective from viewing the emotion as a problem to seeing it as a source of wisdom.
4. **Journal about your insights.** Open a journal or take out a piece of paper and start writing your responses. Allow your thoughts to flow freely. Explore what positive aspects or insights this emotion might hold for you. Consider questions like:
  - Is this emotion trying to protect me from something?
  - Does it highlight an unmet need or boundary that's important to me?
  - Does this feeling tell me something about my values or my vision for the world?
  - How can I use the energy of this emotion constructively in my life?
  - What actions or changes does this emotion suggest I consider?
5. **Explore solutions.** Based on your reflections, brainstorm practical solutions or actions you can take that align with the wisdom of this emotion. For example, if your anger is signaling a boundary violation, think about how you can establish healthier boundaries. You don't need to come up with any ideas right away. It may take several days or weeks before you start experiencing brainstorming inspirations. In the beginning, it's simply enough to "listen for it" or "look for it." The mere practice of listening and looking for ideas will help cultivate a deeper awareness of them.
6. **Express gratitude.** Conclude your journaling by expressing gratitude for the wisdom that this emotion has provided. Acknowledge that it's a valuable part of your emotional landscape.
7. **Repeat as needed.** You can use this exercise for different emotions at various times to gain insights and wisdom from each of them.

## EXERCISE FOUR

# Taking a Walk

## Reflection

**T**he simple act of taking a walk creates a bridge from busyness to stillness, allowing us to penetrate the depths of our minds without completely disregarding our strongly conditioned need to “do something.” Some meditation teachers describe walking as a mantra for the body. The purpose of a mantra is to silence reactive thinking and the incessant activities of the reptilian brain. It’s akin to giving a restless dog a bone. The dog ceases to make noise, focusing on the bone instead. Similarly, walking helps you get into a rhythm or groove that calms your reactive mind, making it more receptive to deeper insights and creative ideas. While many people attempt various forms of meditation and find themselves uncomfortable, bored, or falling asleep, it often happens because they associate meditation with physical stillness. However, the true essence of meditation lies in achieving interior stillness.

You could consider walking as nature’s meditation hack. Engaging your body in meditation through casual walking creates a gentle transition to inner stillness. This type of walking differs from purpose-driven walking; it’s the walk of noble boredom. It may appear boring or even aimless in the conventional sense because you’re not rushing to get somewhere, yet it’s noble because this simple act of non-doing holds the promise of infusing greater meaning, creativity, efficiency, and substance into all your activities.

## Exercise

### Setup

Find a quiet, natural setting to take a walk. It could be a park, a forest trail, a beach, or even a peaceful neighborhood street. Ensure you have at least 20–30 minutes of uninterrupted time.

### Instructions

1. **Preparation.** Start your walk at a comfortable pace. Begin with a few deep breaths to center yourself. As you walk, allow your thoughts to flow freely, without judgment.
2. **Rhythmic breathing.** Sync your breath with your steps. Inhale for a few steps, then exhale for the same number of steps. For example, you might inhale for four steps and exhale for four steps. This rhythmic breathing helps anchor your awareness to the present moment.
3. **Observe nature.** Pay attention to your surroundings. Notice the colors, textures, and sounds of nature around you. Let go of any rush to reach a destination, and immerse yourself in the present environment.



4. **Mindful presence.** Shift your attention to your body. Feel the sensation of your feet making contact with the ground. Be aware of the movements of your legs, arms, and torso as you walk. Maintain a sense of stillness within your movements.
5. **Thoughts and emotions.** If thoughts or emotions arise, acknowledge them without judgment. Imagine them as passing clouds in the sky of your mind. Return your focus to your breath and the act of walking.
6. **Inner stillness.** After a while, you may notice a sense of inner stillness emerging. It might feel like a calm lake or a clear sky. Embrace this stillness, allowing it to expand within you.
7. **Reflection.** Towards the end of your walk, find a quiet spot to sit or stand. Reflect on your experience. Consider any insights or creative ideas that may have arisen during your meditative walk.

Remember, this walk is about being present without needing something to happen. It's a practice in embracing noble boredom and allowing your inner world to reveal itself naturally.

If you can, leave your glowing rectangle at home. Besides, your soul is far more fascinating.

## Alternate Exercise: Seated Body Scan Meditation

For individuals facing challenges related to walking due to disabilities, safety considerations, or limited access to suitable spaces, there's an inviting avenue to explore: rhythmic movement exercises that enable the creation of a "physical mantra." This practice isn't centered on working up a sweat, so it's essential to approach it mindfully and considerate of any potential overexertion. Instead, our objective here is to craft a body mantra that doesn't necessitate leaving the comfort of your living space or engaging in conventional walking routines.

By embracing rhythmic movements that involve various parts of your body, we can work towards that same goal of mind-body connection and inner awareness. In this practice, we'll engage in gentle, purposeful movements that harmonize with your breath, fostering a sense of unity between your physical and mental states. Whether you're seated or in another comfortable position, these rhythmic movements will serve as your conduit to mindfulness and well-being.

### Setup

Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit on a chair or cushion with your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands on your thighs, palms facing up. Sit with an upright posture and close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so.

## Instructions

1. **Begin with stillness.** Start by taking a few deep breaths to settle into the present moment. Feel the support of the chair or cushion beneath you.
2. **Body awareness.** Bring your attention to your body. Notice the sensations in different parts of your body, starting from your feet and moving upward. Take your time to scan through each area, from your toes to your head.
3. **Rhythmic movements.** As you scan through each area, introduce gentle, rhythmic movements that correspond to that part of the body. For example:
  - For your feet and toes, you can gently wiggle them.
  - For your legs, you can do subtle rocking movements.
  - For your hands and arms, you can sway them softly.
  - For your shoulders, you can rotate them in a circular motion.
  - For your head and neck, you can nod your head gently.
4. **Sync with your breath.** As you perform these rhythmic movements, synchronize them with your breath. Inhale as you move one way, and exhale as you return to the starting position. Allow your breath to guide the pace of your movements.
5. **Mindful observation.** Pay close attention to the sensations in each body part as you move and breathe. Notice any areas of tension or relaxation. Be fully present in the experience of the movements.
6. **Flow and relaxation.** Maintain a sense of flow and ease in your movements. There's no need to force or strain. Let the rhythm of your breath and movements create a harmonious and meditative state.
7. **Non-judgmental awareness.** Approach this practice with non-judgmental awareness. If your mind wanders or you become distracted, simply acknowledge it and gently return your focus to the rhythmic movements and your breath.
8. **Full body scan.** Continue this practice, gradually moving through each part of your body from your toes to your head, introducing rhythmic movements and syncing them with your breath.
9. **Duration.** Practice the seated body scan meditation for a duration that feels comfortable to you, starting with 10–15 minutes and adjusting as needed.
10. **Closing.** When you're ready to conclude the meditation, gradually slow down the rhythmic movements. Take a few moments to sit quietly, feeling the overall sensations in your body. When you're ready, gently open your eyes and transition back to your daily activities.

This seated body scan meditation with rhythmic movements offers a unique way to engage with your body and cultivate mindfulness. It can be particularly beneficial for individuals with physical disabilities or those seeking a non-walking meditation practice.



# Reinventing Your Emotional Reflexes

## Reflection

**I**magine that you've just been hired as an actor for a major Hollywood film. In your first scene, your character receives a phone call delivering some infuriating news. It's your job to react in a way that makes it clear to the audience that you are totally outraged. What choice do you make? Do you stomp your feet? Do you throw a pillow across the room? Do you yell? Do you verbalize your frustration at all? The brilliant actors are the ones who make interesting choices in moments like this. The most interesting part of this phenomenon, however, isn't the actor. It's what the actor reveals: the possibility of choice. We all have a semantic vocabulary, but have you ever considered the fact that we also have a gestural vocabulary?

Every day, we are all actors to some extent, navigating through various scenes of our lives, making choices—conscious or unconscious—about how to express our emotional and mental states through our bodily actions and reactions.

A smile, a frown, a shrug—these are all gestures that communicate emotions and intentions across cultural and language divides, underscoring our shared human experiences and emotions.

Our gestural vocabulary is a subset of our behavioral vocabulary.

When we use words, we tend to follow patterns based on our influences. The same is true of our emotional reflexes (ie. gestural expressions and behavioral habits). Those instantaneous reactions that seem to spring from the depths of our being often feel like an unchangeable part of who we are. For years, we've grown accustomed to these reflexes, molded by the subtle hands of family and society, picking up habits related to expressing our emotions. It's as if these responses have become the script of our lives, defining our interactions and shaping our relationships. But what if these reflexes, as ingrained as they may seem, are not set in stone? What if we have the power to reinvent them, to reshape our emotional responses over time? What if we are actors who learn to play our roles in a different way?

In this exercise, we'll challenge the assumption that our reflexes define our essence. We'll explore how our conditioned reactions to negative emotions—both verbal and physical—can be altered through practice and intention. Just as a sculptor shapes clay into a work of art, you can mold your emotional reflexes into responses that better serve your well-being and personal growth. By delving into this process, you'll uncover the immense potential within yourself to reinvent, refine, and ultimately, rediscover your emotional reflexes. So, let's begin the work of reshaping the way we respond to life's emotional challenges, both in what we say and how we express ourselves physically.

# Exercise

## Setup

Negative emotions often trigger automatic responses that may not serve us well. In this exercise, we'll work on identifying these reflexive reactions and intentionally creating healthier alternatives. We'll also introduce a system of reinforcement to help you stay accountable in reshaping your emotional reflexes.

## Instructions

1. **Identify the trigger.** Begin by reflecting on a recent situation or recurring pattern where you've experienced negative emotions. What typically triggers these emotions? Is it a specific person, a certain type of situation, or an inner thought pattern? Be as specific as possible in identifying the triggers.
2. **Recognize reflexive reactions.** Once you've identified the triggers, think about how you typically react when these negative emotions arise. Do you tend to withdraw, get defensive, become passive-aggressive, or engage in any other unhelpful behavior? List these reflexive reactions.
3. **Create healthier responses.** Now envision healthier and more constructive ways to respond to these triggers and negative emotions. For each reflexive reaction you listed in the previous step, brainstorm at least one alternative response that aligns with your values and personal growth. These could include active listening, setting boundaries, or practicing self-compassion.
4. **Accountability system.** To ensure you follow through with your intention to respond differently, establish an accountability system. This could involve sharing your commitment with a trusted friend or family member who can gently remind you of your goal. Alternatively, you can keep a journal where you track your responses and reflect on your progress regularly.
5. **Practice mindfulness.** During situations where your typical triggers arise, practice mindfulness. Take a pause, observe your emotions without judgment, and consciously choose one of the healthier responses you've identified. This step is crucial in breaking the cycle of reflexive reactions.
6. **Reinforce positive changes.** Whenever you successfully implement a healthier response, acknowledge and reward yourself. This reinforcement will reinforce your commitment to reshaping your emotional reflexes. You might treat yourself to something you enjoy or simply take a moment to appreciate your progress.
7. **Reflect and adjust.** Periodically review your responses and accountability system. Reflect on your experiences, identify any challenges or setbacks, and adjust your approach as needed.

Remember that reshaping reflexes takes time and patience, so be kind to yourself throughout the process.

This exercise empowers you to take control of your emotional responses, transform unhealthy patterns into constructive ones, and create a positive feedback loop for personal growth and well-being.



# Conclusion: Keeping First Things First

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As you navigate the path of emotional decluttering, remember these core principles:

1. Embrace emotional versatility. Instead of seeking perpetual happiness, aim for emotional versatility. Life includes both highs and lows, and navigating this spectrum with grace and curiosity leads to deeper understanding and creativity.
2. Cultivate curiosity. Curiosity is your compass in the world of emotions. It leads you to explore the depths of your feelings and connect with others on a profound level. It invites you to ask questions, seek answers, and uncover hidden truths.
3. Cherish your feelings. Your feelings are not demons to be exorcized but angels to be engaged. They carry wisdom, providing insight into your inner world. By listening to your emotions, you can gain a deeper understanding of yourself and your needs.
4. Nurture communication. Just as communication with others builds intimacy, communication with your own soul is equally essential. Engage in meaningful inner dialogues, listen to your inner voice, and honor your own thoughts and feelings.
5. Embrace noble boredom. In a world obsessed with busyness and constant stimulation, remember the value of noble boredom. Allow yourself moments of stillness and reflection, for it is in these quiet moments that creativity often flourishes.
6. Acknowledge the vastness within. Your soul is an ocean of creativity, teeming with life and potential. Dive deep, explore its depths, and discover the boundless treasures that lie within.
7. And above all, these principles work best when mingled with a spirit of play.

This journey is not a one-time assignment. It's a lifestyle—a commitment to nurturing the relationship with yourself and those around you.

May your path be filled with the richness of connection, the beauty of self-discovery, and the ever-present hope of a brighter, more emotionally fulfilling future.