

Why Our Fear of Feeling Bad Is Creating More Psychological Distress

*If people would only learn not to be afraid of their own experience,
that alone would change the world.*

—Sydney Banks

Society holds a deep-rooted conviction that we need to be more aware of mental illness, lest it be swept under the carpet or stigmatised in any way. This approach may be informed by compassion and a worthy aspiration to alleviate suffering. But it is also based on an easy-to-miss, critical misunderstanding that is a huge pitfall for us. Consequently, without intending to, society is innocently contributing to the very problem it seeks to alleviate.

We need not be afraid of our own experience. The implication of this statement is enormous and challenges one of the most fundamental psychological dogmas inherent in the world today.

Society often reverts to extreme measures in an attempt to rectify a perceived oversight or “wrong”. We overcorrect past mistakes like we overexert on the steering wheel when we feel the car skidding out of control. This is true of many of the current prevailing views regarding emotional and psychological distress.

For generations, it seems that many parents were not aware that their children had an emotional life (at least, that’s what my parents told me!). Resources for understanding the human dimension field were limited; there were very few psychological or parenting books around at the time. The predominant attitude of many who grew up during or post-war was that people should “dig deep and get on with life no matter what”. Yet I have often heard parents and grandparents lament about

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feelings of guilt and regret regarding how they understood, or more accurately, misunderstood the inner worlds of their children. They were not cognisant of their children's pain or sufficiently responsive to their emotional sensitivities. This omission carried significant consequences.

In response to this oversight, a new intense scrutiny emerged, characterised by iterative questions such as, "How are we doing?" and "How are our kids doing?" The pendulum has swung violently in the other direction. Now, we all notice and deal with emotional upset. The overarching aim: to avoid any so-called "signs of psychological damage". Protecting children from psychological distress has become a number-one priority.

As someone who has devoted my professional life to working in the mental health field (and not to mention, mother of six children), I absolutely endorse the societal shift towards greater awareness and prioritisation of mental well-being, especially in young people. But this shift had also come at a great cost: fear of our emotional experience. And fear of our children's emotional experiences. Many of us, me included for the first thirty years of my life, have become paranoid when we seem not to be doing well or feel bad. Our tolerance for psychological discomfort and hardship has gone way down.

Meanwhile, we have made up for our previous "sins" (or those of our parents) by buying an army of parenting and self-help books, most of which imply something along the lines of, "If you are aware and careful enough, Johnny won't suffer." The emergence of a plethora of psychological theories, therapeutic approaches and personal development methods has bolstered our efforts. These conscientiously promote the core theme: we can stop you feeling bad and help you feel better if you talk through your problems enough or try these techniques.

An insidious message has seeped in, becoming deeply ingrained in our upbringing and our culture. If you feel anxious, down, insecure, stressed, disappointed, rejected or hurt – well, this could be the start of something really serious! Every time we begin to feel as if we are struggling, our internal alarm bells start ringing, as well as the bells of our loved ones. Uncomfortable feelings become intolerable. Refusing to address these feelings is labelled "denial" or "unhealthy". And not

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dealing with being upset by talking about or medicating it means you may never “get better”. Despite the noble intent, this is a vicious circle, not a virtuous one.

So we have lost sight of our inherent capacity to get over emotional upset, even when those feelings are extreme. We have forgotten that there is nothing that needs to be healed. We have lost faith and confidence in our own innate, psychological immune system – commonly called resilience. We have naively bought into our own emotional vulnerabilities and fragility. We have forgotten that we were born whole, not broken.

And then we innocently pass this belief on to the next generation. “Don’t worry if you are not feeling good, we will help put it right.” We misguidedly give our children these messages:

“We will control your environment as best we can, to help you avoid feeling bad.”

“We will sort out your school, social and academic life to protect you. Without this assistance, you cannot cope.”

“We will send you for help so that you feel confident, happy and immune to emotional upset.” (As if that is possible – to develop immunity from feeling bad!)

“We will get you the meds and therapy needed to take away the pain you are feeling.”

I want to stress that there may be times for psychiatric medication, professional support and practical assistance. However, there is a prevailing belief that maintains that these approaches are ultimately *the* answers to psychological distress and to finding a healthy emotional equilibrium.

This is way off the mark. Yes, meds may be helpful, if not advisable at times. But far too often, this is a knee-jerk response to our own discomfort with feeling bad. We project this onto our children and the rest of society – and it quickly becomes a dangerous and slippery slope.

When we assume it is not OK to feel bad, or even feel *really* bad, we are missing the fact that we are connected to a Mind that is healthy and whole. Every second we are alive, this Mind via the power of Thought creates “in the moment” thinking that we experience and

feel. These sensory manifestations of Thought cannot damage us, no matter how extreme they feel nor what traumatic event they have been connected to. Although it often looks otherwise through the eyes of misunderstanding, these feelings cannot hurt us. There is no dent that requires repair.

This is so simple that it's overlooked. We are merely caught in the illusion of misunderstanding – of mistakenly assuming that our feelings are coming from something other than Thought in the moment.

But the logic doesn't work this way. Our feelings are only ever coming from our thinking. From the inside-out. Knowing this, we can settle into a deep, unshakeable confidence. The constant river of Thought means that whether we will it or not, new thinking will arise for us. New cells have new memories. New thoughts have new feelings. Insight is the antibiotic of the mind.

Due to our misunderstanding of where fear comes from, we overlook this self-evident truth. I continue to do so. But each time we remember, we can share it with our children so that they too can learn the folly of looking outside in order to fix what was created by their own minds in the first place. Emotional and psychological pain originates from the Mind; its resolution can therefore only come from the Mind. If we don't realise this, we will forever be selling ourselves and the next generation short.

A good measure for parents is: are we OK with our kids not being OK? Are we willing to give our children the message that it is OK to feel bad? That it is actually normal. That it is nothing to be afraid of. That it is part of the natural ebb and flow of their psychological system.

We are not being neglectful if we fail to panic when our loved ones are not doing well. It's OK to grieve and feel bereft. It's OK to wake up with a feeling of anxiety and dread. It's OK to be overwhelmed and stressed. It's OK to feel self-conscious and lacking in confidence. It's OK to be confused. And it's OK to feel really down.

Yes, there are times when we need support and there are different ways to get this. We have a creative and responsive mind to help us discern which support is necessary and when. Our common sense

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is designed to help us determine how to deal with our challenges as they emerge. But common sense operates best not when it is dictated to us by outside theories or fears, but rather from a secure and well-functioning mind that is in sync with a deeper order of reality.

To the extent that we have a correct understanding of where our feelings come from – the thinking we are having in that moment – we are more likely to be considered and thoughtful about how to deal with ourselves. Consequently, we will act responsibly and appropriately.

But if we have not yet learned about how the human experience works, we will reach outwards rather than inwards. And the results will be different. At worst, we will generate more of what we are trying to run away from. At best, we will stick on a plaster that will inevitably peel off a short while later. Unless we begin to educate ourselves and future generations about the origins of psychological distress and emotional upset, we will continue to further destabilise ourselves, our families and our society.

By overprotecting ourselves and our loved ones, we are insidiously cultivating a dangerous message: human beings are mentally fragile. We thereby smother the innate, natural resilience we were all born into.

Insightfully seeing this will take care of the so-called stigma.

In fact, it makes it a non-issue to begin with.

BLOGSIGHT: *When we assume it is not OK to feel uncomfortable, we are failing to recognise that our feelings are always coming from our thinking. This one error in logic compels us to attempt to avoid or change these feelings. But our innate resilience axiomatically implies that these sensory manifestations of Thought cannot damage or hurt us, no matter how extreme they feel.*

We Are All Equally Disabled – And Abled

My friend Brett Chitty was born profoundly deaf. Understandably, this physical disability challenged him immensely. Brett movingly describes living as a recluse for eight years, suffering throughout that time from severe depression. By his own admission, he spent years feeling extremely alienated from those he considered more “able” and less “disabled”.

Last week I heard Brett speak of how, in the past, he was terrified every time he attended the all-too frequent hospital appointments that his hearing disability necessitated. These visits left him feeling disadvantaged, destabilised and vulnerable. Disabled.

Consequently, Brett always made sure his father accompanied him to these medical appointments, to be his ears and voice. While that seemed to work out practically, emotionally, it felt less than satisfying.

Brett speaks about the numerous powerful insights he generated from what he calls the *logic of the single paradigm*.

To put it simply, the mind works one way. We only ever experience our thinking in each moment. We only feel what we think. However, when we forget this crucial psychological fact, we innocently split Thought and feeling. When we fall into this illusion, we cannot help but assume that our feelings are coming from our circumstances or something other than Thought in the moment.

In Brett’s case, he assumed that his feelings were a direct result of his lack of hearing and his inability to carry a coherent dialogue with the doctors. He was convinced that the entire hospital experience was responsible for his overwhelming feelings of fear and insecurity.

But that all changed when Brett arrived at a radically different understanding of the cause of his emotional “reactions”. He describes an extremely powerful insight that occurred to him in the hospital

when he suddenly realised he was making a huge mistake, illogically living as though there were objects outside of Thought that were creating his feeling. And as the misunderstanding fell away, he found himself conversing fluently with the doctors and consultants.

We have an intelligence that hears for us, sees for us, thinks for us and knows for us. As Brett says, “I have learnt that we don’t hear with our ears. We hear through our thinking.”

Upon learning this from Brett, I realised something I had often wondered about. How could Helen Keller (the famous early 20th century American author and political activist who was deaf, dumb and blind) learn to speak, when she could not see or hear? She had virtually no outside stimulus. She was essentially locked in. How was meaningful communication with other people remotely possible?

When we understand that we are seeing, hearing and experiencing the world of our minds, hearts and inner consciousness, Helen Keller’s incredible story finally makes sense. This remarkable and inspirational woman learned to speak from Thought in the moment. From within her soul.

Once Thought and feeling are united, outside circumstances such as illness, “difficult” people, hospitals and so on, cannot ever create feelings within us.

As human beings, we will inevitably have many feelings about these and other events: sadness, fear, stress, calm, ambivalence, paralysis, anger or hopelessness, to name a few.

But whatever those feelings are, they will *always* be a manifestation of Thought.

When we fall asleep to this deeper truth, we feel like Brett – disabled. Not just physically, but psychologically as well. Sometimes we *are* temporarily disabled. But in truth, just like Brett found out, we are always equally able. It’s a level playing field. The same rules apply for everyone.

Waking up to this deep spiritual logic brings us back into its bosom where we feel unified rather than isolated. Some people call this living in wisdom. Some call it going inside. Some call it living one’s best self. Some call it resilience.

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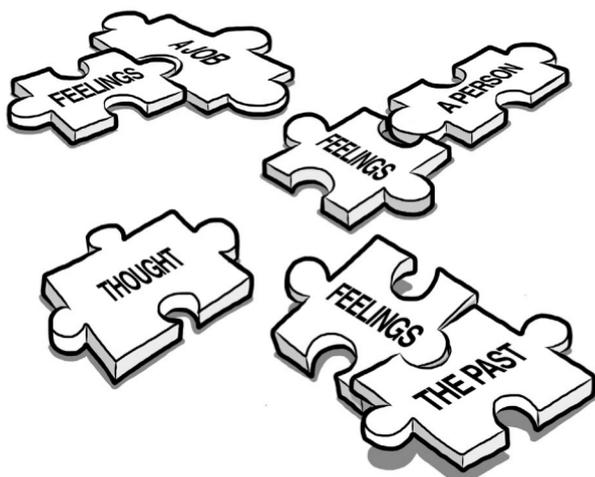
Brett's story is our story. It is a story that has been around throughout history. Moses thought that his inability to articulate himself through speech would render him an ineffective leader. (The Bible conveys that Moses had some form of speech impediment.) In response to his concerns, God reassured him that his apparent speech limitation would be nothing of the sort. His so-called "disability" would turn out to be one of his greatest abilities – the vehicle through which Moses would educate, inspire, prophesise and lead.

Amazingly, Brett is now a speaker, mentor, website-creator and inspiration to many people who know him directly or have heard his story. His story is evidence to the powerful fact that as one becomes more psychologically unified, one discovers the capacity to actually do away with supposed disabilities.

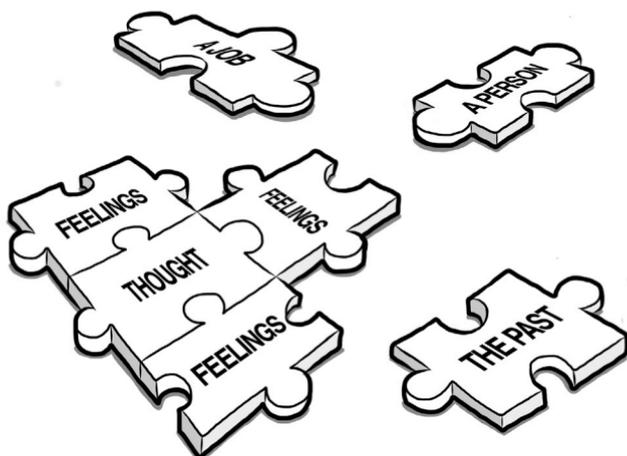
Brett's story also helps wake us up to our own misunderstanding of where our limitations and barriers originate. He teaches us that each time we align ourselves with the wholeness of our moment-to-moment psychological experience, we get in touch with a deep spiritual intelligence that is "able" beyond our wildest dreams. And then we get to surprise ourselves by discovering that what we previously assumed to be impossible is actually very possible.

Spiritually and psychologically, the disabled becomes abled.

BLOGSIGHT: *When we innocently split Thought and feeling, we feel temporarily disabled. Once Thought and feeling are reunited, we realised we were always equally abled.*



Disabled



Abled

What Are Your False Gods?

I recently had the special opportunity of co-facilitating a retreat in the idyllic setting of a country farmhouse in the Cotswolds. The participants were a wonderful and warm group of Orthodox Chassidic women: kind, generous, open-hearted and full of fantastic questions that sit at the heart of the inside-out logic of the workings of the Mind.

During the penultimate session, I said something new that just popped out of my mouth and instantly silenced the room – because of all things, it concerned idol worship! This is what I shared:

“When we objectify our feelings – another way of saying that we innocently but falsely believe our feelings are a result of some object other than Thought – we unintentionally create a form of idolatry. We are now engaged in idol worship.”

These words not only shocked me, but the ladies listening as well. There was a collective intake of breath. The room fell very quiet. And then they asked me to say it again.

I was a bit surprised at myself. This was not an idea I had planned on expressing – I had actually never said such a thing before. But I felt its impact in my heart and I knew it was true for me. I also create and give power to objects and outside factors, innocently anointing and giving a god-like status to these factors in my mind. (Even the London weather has been given god-like status for crying out loud! I am for sure guilty of this one – especially in the seemingly never-ending dark, wet, days of late February!)

In these specific moments, I am innocently operating with a faulty logic. I worship false gods. I blame them for my distress or give them credit for my good fortune, like the many people who throughout time have blamed their multiple gods of choice for their suffering or happiness.

This may sound extreme. But in truth, in assuming that something other than Thought can be the cause of our feelings, I – we – indeed

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mistakenly appear to give power to something other than the one constant source of all experience. You can call it the Mind. You can call it the force or energy of God. You can call it a higher intelligence. You can call it the power of Thought.

When we split Thought and feeling and believe that something or somebody else has power over our psychological or feeling state, it is as if we are handing over God's power to other multiple gods (capital "G" and small "g" intentional), that do not actually exist. These gods can show up in our minds as people, illness, our boss, our family, our messy house, our critics and even our biggest fans – anyone or anything we attribute to the cause of our feeling state.

In one of my favourite books, *A Thousand Names for Joy*, Byron Katie recalls visiting a dear friend in hospital who was battling cancer. Byron Katie asked this friend, who was understandably fearful of her illness, "Do you love God?"

"Yes, of course!" her friend replied.

Byron Katie then uttered these extraordinary words: "You can't love God if you don't love cancer."

While challenging to hear, it is very enlightening if we push ourselves a little further. Fear – that powerful emotion that we all know well – can only ever come from Thought. And the origin of all Thought is Mind, God-Mind. There is only one source for our all of our felt experience of life, including the fear of a terminal illness.

This, I believe, was Byron Katie's loving message to her friend. You cannot split Thought and feeling. And if you understand the nature and origin of Thought, you will understand the nature and origin of all emotions – even the fear of cancer. But in believing that our experience of this illness is separate from Thought, we attribute to it a power that it simply cannot have. We innocently turn cancer into a false god.

Cancer is something way beyond my experience, but my friend Wendy Saggese inspires me with her relationship to her Stage 4 cancer diagnosis. I am sure she has had many fearful and vulnerable moments, but she has also had deep insight into the powerlessness that cancer has to make her feel any particular way. There was a time when this

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illness was a dominant presence in Wendy's past, when she assumed it was the protagonist of the shadows of her fear. But Wendy now lives more awake to the understanding that cancer has no power to cast such shadows. The shadows, Wendy explains, are made up of Thought. The cancer is the illness she has. The circumstance. She will have many different shadows – a metaphor for emotions – as she lives with cancer. But she knows those are all creations of Thought. And that is how she has found freedom from her previous false god of cancer.

Who and what are your false gods? Who do you give power to?

It has been immensely helpful to know that it is the innocent creation of false gods that holds me back. And it is also so helpful – and hopeful – to know that every time I eliminate or wake up to a false god, I am reminded of the unified nature of my psychological experience. This unified place is where there is no splitting of Thought and feeling. Reawakened to the inside-out logic of how the mind works, I see that my feelings are residing in the home where they belong – in our spiritual home.

For me, this is not necessarily a religious place. It is a place of pure logic. Where potential arises. Where hope reigns supreme. Where resilience always exists. Where truth lives. And where one God resides.

BLOGSIGHT: *When we split Thought and feeling and believe that something or somebody else has power over our psychological or feeling state, it is as if we are handing over God's power to other multiple gods that do not actually exist. In so doing, we falsely assume our feelings to be coming from something other than Thought.*