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Heart, Hope, Healing

How to Empower Your Healing Story (Claim Your Emotional Genius)

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | AUGUST 27, 2019



We. Must. Feel.

Look at those words again. And again. Let them sink in. *We. Must. Feel.*

How do you feel as you read them, think them, say them?

Numb? Indifferent? Super-charged? *Emotional?*

Whatever you feel—*honestly* feel—is one-hundred percent okay. We have complicated relationships with our feelings. We shame and blame ourselves for having them even though they're here to keep us alive and help us thrive.

It's not the emotions, themselves, that trip us up. No, it's the stories we tell about them.

Here we are once again, healing our stories, empowering our stories with the wisdom we must have. The wisdom of our emotions.

Let's claim our emotional genius.

Trust Your Emotional Wisdom and Find Your Truth

In this article we explore the wisdom of our deepest, wisest selves—our emotional genius.

To heal, we must learn to honor our emotions, feelings, and sensations of our bodies as pure unadulterated feedback about the truth of us—who we are, what's going on in our environments, the people around us, and the conditions of our lives.

Taught by our culture to cut ourselves off from our emotions in favor of our more rational minds (and stories), we may be entering unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory.

Yes, we'll squirm, but we must step into our fear to claim the raw truth of our emotional wisdom.

Emotions—the Flow of Life

The flow of life. It's why we're all here. It's what we all aspire to: the flow of our strength, resilience, and presence ... ourselves.

Emotions are the current of this flow, the rhythm of our interior lives. Carried by primordial waves of energy, our feelings bring us the innate, intuitive, primal, noncognitive wisdom we must have to decode our lives, to grow, and to survive.

Feelings are Scary

While often pleasing and exhilarating, our emotions can also confuse and befuddle us, scare and destabilize us. Our feelings—the ways we instinctively perceive and discern our world—are also what make life seem so hard!

Pause

Now, pause here. Breathe. Tap into your strong center. Breathe into your core and feel your strength. Be present right here, in your body. We're entering territory that may feel treacherous. But we're born to do this. We've come prepared.

Emotions Challenge Us

Nothing exhilarates or challenges us quite like what we feel. But for the challenges, it's not really our emotions themselves that throw us off.

No, it's *the stories we tell about them* that twist their true meaning. How we judge and condemn them, shut them down, and fail to understand their unadulterated truth.

We Must Become the Witness to Our Emotions

It's absolutely critical to our own emotional intelligence to understand that our emotions are not *us*. What throws us off balance and makes life seem so hard, is how we identify ourselves as our emotions (*I am guilty, I am unlovable*), rather than as the witness to them (*I feel guilty, I feel unlovable*). Only as the witness are we prepared to receive what we need to know.

Pause

In no other arena of our lives are we asked to be so brave in calling our power back. To step up to our feelings. To feel. Then let go of the tenacious stories that blame, belittle, and deny our true wisdom.

Yes, we feel. We know.

Breathe deeply. Trust your strong center, your anchor. Let's explore what our emotions have to teach us. To do this we must be present within our bodies.

We Must Show Up for Our Feelings

We have to show up for this flow of life we aspire to. We want it. We crave it. But there's a price. To *really* show up, we've got to go slow and pay attention.

And when we go slow and *really* pay attention, we feel.

No longer will the intensity and distraction of our fast-paced lives block us from feeling. This is our challenge, perhaps the greatest challenge of our lives: to allow ourselves to experience the full range of our emotions and learn to trust the wisdom and intelligence they deliver.

But I Do Feel

“But I *do* feel,” you say.

You’re probably like so many of us—yes, we do feel, but we’ve learned to control and restrict our feelings, choosing only what’s pleasing and comfortable, not scary.

After all, why would we want to feel bad or scared?

With Joy Comes Pain

But the problem is that we can’t choose one without the other. When we shove down pain, we also lose joy. The best we can do is some lukewarm approximation of the true glory that is possible. Our emotional censorship invariably comes with that price.

But by showing up, going slow, and paying attention, we get it all: truly feeling. The suffering that is our genius, that brings the truth, that leads to mind-blowing transformation. The joy that lifts us up and lights the world.

Yes, We Will Squirm

Feeling will inevitably take us into discomfort we’d rather avoid.

Feeling *will* make us squirm, *will* make us suffer, *will* ask us to face up to difficult truths.

Feeling is the Only Path to Growth

But feeling is the only path to deep learning and discovery of ourselves. It’s the only path to growth. It’s the only path to the grace and magic of our humanness. It’s our connection to the people and world around us.

We must have our emotional genius to be in the true flow of our lives.

The Emotional Realm—Truth, Intuitive Guidance, and the Intelligence of the

Body

Enter the realm of the emotions. They're wild. Spontaneous. Unpredictable. Forces to be reckoned with, they find their way into our consciousness in spite of our best efforts to shove them away, numb them out, or deny them.

Our emotions can be so scary! Why? They bring us the truth. Truth we may not want. Truth that may disrupt the comfortable status quo of our lives. Be warned—but also celebrate—that emotions represent the energy of our deepest wisdom.

We must become savvy about the common ways we manage discomfort about our emotional truths: how we tame them, blame them, numb them, disconnect from them by playing “nice,” and polarize them into “good versus bad.” We must call back our truth, intuitive guidance, and intelligence of the body. Our power.

We Tame Emotions

We're taught to tame our emotions from an early age. In our culture we downplay the value of our emotions in favor of the more factual, logical, and rational inputs of our minds. We fear emotions' raw, wild, and untamed nature and how they might lead us to danger and destruction.

We fear their power and unpredictability. We fear the way they operate outside the bounds of our conscious control. We are trained to resist, control, and cast them off, but this leads to the loss of emotional intelligence.

We Blame Emotions

Emotional information is very pure, but our lack of emotional fluency makes them seem cryptic and difficult to understand. Because our logical brains don't always trust our emotions, we scrutinize them with deep skepticism, *interpreting* their meaning through rules and rationality, and disbelieving them when they don't tell us what we want to hear.

By filtering our emotions through our dominant intellects we lose the nuance of their raw data. We see them, instead, through our stories—engendering blame, judgment, fear, shame, guilt, mistrust, and confusion. We all know these stories: “It's all my fault.” “It's all your fault.” “I don't belong.” “I'm a terrible person.” “I'm crazy.”

We Numb Emotions

We're terrified to feel our “negative” (yet entirely normal) emotions. Fear, guilt, shame, anger, and jealousy are particularly scary.

We numb ourselves to them in the many creative ways we know all too well: perfectionism (we're never enough), excessive work (idle hands are the devil's playground), compulsive, pleasure-seeking behaviors (like shopping, gaming, social media, sex, television watching, gambling, and so forth), drugs (alcohol, stimulants, sedatives, opiates), or adrenaline-seeking behavior (going fast, creating drama, gossip, danger).

We're Nice

On the other end of the spectrum, we become obsessed with experiencing only "positive" emotions. We do this through addiction to exhilaration, seeking experiences to engender connection, excitement, and bliss, even when we're not genuinely feeling them.

Or we may only allow positive emotions, so we force them—we act "nice," pretending things are good when they're not.

This is not to say that we shouldn't cultivate positive emotions, like love and gratitude, or act with kindness, empathy, and compassion toward others. We need strong neural networks for love, and our relationships, communities, and planet need more kindness and empathy.

But life and the world aren't all good. We need to know and accept that. Our emotions bring us this essential wisdom from all our experiences, which we use to learn, and make discerning and wise choices.

Nice is distinct from kindness, compassion, and empathy. Nice is dangerous. Nice disguises our authenticity. Nice shuts us down and shuts others down. It keeps our relationships, interactions, and experiences superficial by closing the door to the truth we all desperately need. Truth that must be heard and will find its way in, one way or another—like the anger, resentment, jealousy that Isabella felt. We've all been there. We all know this.

We Polarize Emotions: Good versus Bad

Our discomfort with the subterranean energy of our emotions leads to polarizing them as "good versus bad." But emotions themselves are value neutral, so these judgments only apply to the stories we tell about them. Many of these "good versus bad" stories are learned from our families and tribes. They're born from anxiety about the intensity of the emotions, concern for our stability and survival, and fear about grappling honestly with what's not working.

Some of these stories are about power. The family structures and social institutions we were born into are often built on outdated notions of power—their dogmatic, hierarchical foundations deny and disempower true feelings seen as threats to the status quo. In this way, many of our voices, experiences, and innate wisdom are crushed through the "good versus bad" story. That means we lose this precious resource that would help us understand ourselves better, grow wiser, and strengthen our social structures.

But That's Not Us

None of this is us. None of this is what we aspire to. We've shown up here for a different experience.

We're changing and going after our true potential.

We're rising up.

We're healing.

We're stepping over those social and tribal ideas that stifle us.

We're claiming our emotions as our own, as our birthright, as the wisdom within us.

We're removing the value judgments and inviting it all.

No more nice. No more dishonesty. We've built a strong center. From this core we have the strength to reckon with *all* our emotional wisdom.

Permission Slip: Permission to Feel

"I am so blessed by so much in my life, but I feel miserable."

"I've accomplished so much in my life, but I never feel like I'm enough."

"Everyone loves him, but he makes me feel uncomfortable."

"If I speak up about what I feel, I will be persecuted."

"I am suffering, and feel I have no right to."

"I am in pain, and for this I feel shame."

So many feelings! Too many of these feelings we judge ourselves for and feel uncomfortable about, letting them drive us to complete distraction.

If we go slow, we will feel.

Going fast is often a strategy we use (often unconsciously) not to feel. For example: If I go fast, striving for more and more accomplishment and success, I may not realize that guilt and shame are what drive me. I know I'm never satisfied, but I just keep going. By going slow and paying attention to my feelings, I get close to them. I feel them. I feel the guilt and shame for not being enough.

Feelings that are never sufficiently soothed by the hard work I do. When I slow down, I come face to face with the truth that drives me. To claim my freedom, I must reckon with these feelings. To reclaim my present-moment life I must slow down, stop working so hard, and feel.

See how that works? Once more, we're called to action—to show up, go slow, and pay attention. We can passively live our emotional lives and never know who we are, or we can actively call our power back, feel our feelings, and step into sacred knowledge and freedom.

We start with permission to feel. Remember our permission slip from the last section? Let's write another one:

Dear [your name here],

You have my full permission to be your whole, true self, with all your feelings. Every. Last. One. All your feelings are sacred, essential parts of you. Each one will tell you something you must know to help you heal, to help you become whole, to lead you to freedom.

Let your feelings be exactly what they are. Let them flow. Let the uncomfortable ones have their space. You must hear them all!

And remember, you are not your feelings. You are awareness. You are the simple presence that sees and feels. The witness. The compassionate observer. Breathe into this knowledge and slow it all down. Be in your body and breathe.

No shame. No guilt. No need to hide. Only love. Let those sacred feelings fly. Let them rise up and be your truth. Let us look at them in the light of day and find the beautiful truth of who you are. For whatever you feel, no matter how dark, lonely, or lost, you are also love. However you may be suffering, you are love. You have my permission to do this. And I will always be at your side. Protecting you. Cheering you on.

Love, Me.

The Intelligence of Negative Emotions—Navigating the Storm

“Not all storms come to disrupt your life. Some come to clear your path.”

-Rumi

The Human Negativity Bias

Why are there emotions that make us squirm? What is it about them that feels so uncomfortable?

We have a strong attraction to negativity. Negative information, negative stories, and negative feelings take up a lot of space in our minds. This trait, known as the “negativity bias,” is a survival strategy of our brains. We glom on to thoughts, feelings, and experiences posing potential threats, allowing them to take priority space in our minds.

This negativity bias drives a physical stress response, flooding us with energy, anxiety, and discomfort to get our attention and mobilize us to action. It may keep us alive at times, but more often, the negative experiences crowd out the rest—the good and the beautiful. Our negative stories and uncomfortable feelings get way more credit for power and significance than they deserve.

Emotional Navigation: It’s All about Balance

But we need *all* our feelings. Good and bad. It’s not either/or, good versus bad, brave versus fearful, sad versus happy. No. It’s a mess. Our human mess. A mess that, if we’re present for it, is the beauty of our lives.

We’re living real lives. We’re challenged. We must be at the helm of our ship, with our hands poised on our ship’s rudder, ready to change course as we heed the navigational intelligence of our emotions. Without *all* our emotions, we’re just drifting. We’re nowhere. We need our strong center to achieve balance. To be present. So let’s look at the big ones.

Anger, Rage, and Hate

The energy of anger is powerful. Whether our own or someone else’s, it feels unpredictable and dangerous. Where might it lead us? How might it destroy us? We throw anger under the bus, misconstruing it as “meanness,” “loss of control,” or “irrational.” We take the anger of others personally, whether it is directed at us or not.

But anger has a purpose. Anger is about fairness, justice, and where our boundaries have been breached. We must find ways to express this vital information and to receive it with the keen eye of a compassionate observer.

Repeatedly denying the message of anger by subjugating ourselves to the control of others, allowing unacceptable circumstances, or casting blame where it doesn’t belong, will take its toll. Suppressing anger will always lead to the amplification of its message, escalating to resentment, rage, hatred, explosive behavior, and physical symptoms—fatigue, depression, headaches, and insomnia.

Denying the truth our anger brings leads us to the toxicity of powerlessness and resentment toward others. Denying the truth of others' anger closes the door on them and gets in the way of what we may need to learn about ourselves within those relationships.

Exercise: How Do We Reckon with Anger?

Own it. Know that anger is an entirely normal, necessary, and healthy human emotion. But receive anger as the messenger and don't make it personal—no blame or shame.

Breathe. Tap into your strong center. Soften. Anger will rise up from your strong center to help you see the personal energy, perimeter, and fairness violations that inevitably happen in our everyday lives. Anger is always a call to reflection and action. It doesn't have to be destructive.

Get into your body. Anger rises up from the root and core of the body with strong energy to mobilize us into action. Move your body—walk, run, do yoga, do chores. Get into a power pose—strong, receptive, open stance. Engage with anger in a positive and constructive way by allowing its energy to move rather than get stuck, escalate, or explode.

Affirm: I am safe. I create strong personal boundaries.

Consider: What does your anger have to say? What's the message?

Fear

Fear, like anger, has been socially maligned and misinterpreted.

We've been taught to think feeling scared means we are "weak" or "wimpy." We polarize fear from bravery, thinking we must contain one or the other, rather than both. As a result, fear makes us feel vulnerable, unsafe, inadequate, and easily overwhelmed.

We work hard to hide our fear, depleting our energy, and making our lives feel unsafe.

Fear is often a constructive response to real danger, which we should heed for our safety. It is an innate response to change, feeling uncertain, and taking risks.

Fear can be tricky to work with because it comes with the discomfort of stress hormones that heighten our anxiety and trigger our innate impulse to fight or flee. This can muddle our perceptions about what we fear, making it difficult to discern the true message.

Exercise: How Do We Reckon with Fear?

Mark Twain once wrote, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear."

So, in that spirit, first step up to fear. Recognize that fear is a call to action. Know that we can be both afraid and brave at the same time. We can be firmly in our strong center and still feel fear.

Breathe. Find your strong center. Breathe here. Feel the strength within you. Feel your courage.

Get into your body. Fear is a call to action but can also be overwhelming and befuddling. We must have a way to manage the intense stress, anxiety, and physical energy that can arrive with fear. Jump right into your body—walk, run, work out, do chores. Become completely engaged in your full-body movement and mental concentration on the task at hand.

Affirm: I am safe. I am strong. I am guided and protected.

Consider: Trust your inner wisdom and guidance. Fear is a teacher, guide, and energy source to power your actions. Ask your fear, "What do you have to teach me?"

Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are the most toxic of emotions, particularly when allowed to persist. Still, in small doses guilt and shame may be valuable as internal signs that we've done wrong. They get our attention and guide us to take responsibility for our actions, to make amends, to say we're sorry, and to help heal wounds we've caused. The challenge is in claiming our bad deeds, without sliding into the toxic cesspool of guilt and shame.

Persistent guilt and shame are self-condemning stories that sap our strength and stomp on our souls. They're not *our* stories—we've learned them. We've learned how we're to blame for how others have behaved. Or how we're unworthy for not meeting others' expectations. Guilt and shame weaken us in the face of the important work of our lives.

Exercise: How Do We Reckon with Guilt and Shame?

Breathe. Tap into your strong center. Breathe deeply here.

Get into your body. Engage your strong core. Stand straight. Shoulders back. Be in your strong core center. Move or hold your body from this place of strength.

Affirm: I am enough just as I am. I am strong.

Consider: How have you taken others' actions or words personally? What assumptions have you made about yourself that aren't true? What blame, judgment, or social/family "rules" have you unfairly imposed upon yourself? On others?

Know this with absolute certainty: You are enough just as you are. You are love and light. You were born worthy. Period. Nothing that ever happens is personal.

Jealousy

Jealousy. We all know the sting of it and have been smacked down by the shame of it, but it's really a normal part of being humans who thrive on connection. It comes up in a flash, unbidden, and hits us between the eyes. At its worst, it shoots us straight into a primal, painful swamp of sadness and unworthiness.

We hear a lot about the extremes of jealousy, the leading cause of spousal homicides in the United States. Perpetrated by controlling, possessive people who fly into jealous rages, lacking the support or skill sets to find better ways to deal with their feelings of unworthiness.

But that's not us. We're not stalkers or bad people. Jealousy has a purpose. The entire human race is wired for jealousy as a mechanism for keeping us connected. That's right, jealousy is about survival. It's not a character flaw or something we must pay penance for. Jealousy does not mean we have low self-esteem, are mean spirited, or wish others harm for having what we don't.

Jealousy is what we feel when faced with the threat of not belonging, of disconnection, of being left out, or of having our trust betrayed. It's a warning sign that we've been abandoned or are at eminent risk of losing something or someone we value. Jealousy is born from our deeply primal need to belong.

Exercise: How Do We Reckon with Jealousy?

Spend a few minutes tapping into a current or past situation in which you felt jealous. Sink into it. Ugh. Yes, a toxic swamp of confusing emotions. Consider these positive strategies for managing jealousy successfully:

Breathe into your strong center. Be there.

Then, get into your body. Blow out the strong energy of jealousy through intense full-body movement—a brisk walk, run, big chores, or a tough workout at the gym. Disconnect from your stories about it. Let it flow through.

Affirm: I belong. I belong to myself. I am my whole, true, authentic self.

Consider: What assumptions are you making? Do you have all the facts?

Check your self-judgment. You're not a bad person for feeling jealous!

Claim full responsibility for your painful feelings and let their wisdom guide you to constructive change. Learn to celebrate the successes of your friends as well as your own.

And, suck it up! In the end, life is and always will be unfair. There will always be people who have the goods and the successes we wish we had. Who are better at something, more fortunate, born to more privilege, or are bigger, faster, richer, smarter, prettier than we are—always! Why limit yourself? Perhaps there's a bigger, better ship waiting for you right around the corner. Life's unfairness is a simple matter of how we choose to see it (our stories).

Despair and Hopelessness

It's so easy to sink into despair and hopelessness when we're suffering. Persistent fatigue, pain, and debilitating symptoms that go on and on are the conditions that make us vulnerable to losing hope, especially when we are unsupported in our journey.

The antidote to despair is hope. Hope is a decision. It's a practice. It becomes our strength and resilience in the face of despair.

Exercise: How Do We Reckon with Despair and Hopelessness?

As always, first we breathe. We find our strong center. We sit right here in our strong center and breathe.

We get into our bodies. We walk in nature and receive her beauty and energy of the ground, sky, plants, and animals. We hand her our despair and hopelessness. We reach out to our most trusted friends and family, those who can hear us and hold the space (not judge or "fix").

Affirm: Yes. This too shall pass.

Consider: As we breathe into our strong center, we recall that we can do this hard thing whether we believe in it or not. Then, maybe, just maybe, we make the decision to hope. We say "yes" to hope. Whether we believe it or not. Without clinging to a particular outcome, we say "yes." And we persist. And in so doing, we open the gate to our path, and open ourselves to infinite possibilities.

Eight Strategies to Claim Your Emotional Genius

You've learned many strategies throughout this article for strengthening yourself in your pursuit of healing. Let's draw from those now, integrating them to help you learn from this powerful source of wisdom.

Once again, you're showing up, going slow, and paying attention.

You're finding and inhabiting your strong center.

You're employing your breath, your present-moment awareness, and being your own compassionate observer.

You're claiming your power as the true leader of your own healing.

Claim Your Emotions as Your Inner Wisdom

Your emotions are your soul's gift of knowledge and wisdom to you. No emotion is wasted. They are always pure and true and on your side.

Become Grounded and Embodied

This makes you sturdy as you get close to your emotions. They are physical sensations. The only way to know them in their pure form and observe them directly is to get into the body. Use movement as an antidote to anxiety or emotional intensity that makes you feel muddled.

Let Your Emotions Speak

Resist the temptation to dismiss, judge, or suppress your emotions. Hear them out. Establish a practice of daily reflection about your feelings through writing, meditation, or contemplation. Let your emotions flow. Let them have their voice. You must create space and get quiet to hear them.

Express Gratitude to Your Emotions

Your emotions bring you wisdom. You may not *feel* grateful. That's okay. But honor this part of yourself regardless. This practice will shift you out of the limits imposed by stories and restricting mindsets and lets you get right up close to your emotions. By seeing them through

a positive lens, the judging stories dissolve, and they seem less scary. Even the anger, grief, fear, and jealousy have something crucial to teach us and will lead us toward healing and wholeness.

Take Charge of Your Emotions

Breathe into them. Observe them. Don't beat them into submission but see them flow from the perspective of the compassionate, neutral observer. Find the discipline to step back from them to give them space to live and breathe. To this end, resist your stories and judgments about them. Let the emotions speak for themselves. Know that your emotions do not own or define you.

Become Discerning about Your Stories

Many of our stories don't ennoble or serve us. Move your body to shake them off and release intensity. Breathe into them. Find the stability and self-awareness to interrupt your stories, no matter how practiced they are. Resist buying into them. Soften. Is there a more ennobling story? If all your emotions are teachers, what are they trying to say? Looking at them through the lens of love or Life School POV, how do they support you?

Recall How the Emotions You Feel May Not Be Your Own

We are attuned to the energy all around us. The more sensitive among us will easily pick up the energy of others. Scrutinize the unexpected anxiety, irritability, or anger: Is it yours? Or someone else's?

Take Solace in the Flow Aspect of Your Emotions

Your emotions will always move along, given the chance. I love to say: "This too shall pass" to reassure myself when in the presence of uncomfortable emotions. It's *always* true.

A Critical Word About Healing Emotional Trauma

Our stories can be quite powerful. As we've learned, they are designed by our brains to protect us. It is important to honor this and work to safely and effectively

release trauma from the body.

It's important to acknowledge that the aftermath of trauma—the persistent stories, fear, and anxiety—has a purpose: to keep us alive. But this trauma can be healed. We can find our strength and learn we are safe again. Even the deepest of suffering can be healed and transformed into wisdom.

For those who have experienced deep emotional trauma and find that high anxiety and intense emotions get in the way of your self-practice, work with a psychotherapist trained in mind-body approaches. They can provide intensive support and guidance in this transformative process and help you learn to trust and feel safe in your body again.

Own Your Emotional Genius

So, my dear ones, let's dive in, shall we? This takes guts, but you've come this far. I see the curiosity that drives your genius!

Name Your Pain

I want you to think about a difficult emotion you're wrestling with right now. Or a challenging situation, experience, or relationship that's making you suffer.

First take three big letting-go breaths. Sigh it out. Be present right here in your body, in each breath, in this present moment.

Then, say "thanks." Express gratitude to yourself for this beautiful attention to your inner guidance and wisdom.

Now, I want you to write about that emotion or situation you've been struggling with. Write fast and without censorship. There is no "correct" way to feel. We must know how you truly feel. Remember this is just for you. No one else will see it.

Spend no more than five minutes on this exercise and just blurt it all out. (My friends and I laughingly call this "vomiting" out our thoughts and feelings!)

Apply Power Tools

Now, remember our [power tools for story mining?]

We need those right now:

- The Lens of Love, and
- The Life School Point of View.

We need these because what's distressing you is not the emotion itself, but the stories you're telling yourself about it (or them). Now that you've immersed yourself in the muck and truth of how you feel, we need to whip you right back into your more neutral witness state of mind.

The Lens of Love

We use this tool to understand our stories in a more positive and ennobling way. We harness the power of neuroplasticity by marinating our nervous systems in love. Because love changes everything: our brains, our genetic expression, our stories, and our futures. Love (the verb) makes healing possible (even if you don't *feel* it).

How to Apply the Lens of Love to Your Story

Breathe in Love

Put your hands over your heart, as confused and in pain as you may be. Place them there, breathe into your heart slowly and deeply. Feel your heart. Breathe in love. On the exhale, expand love throughout your body. See the love and light enter your body through the crown of your head. Feel it expand within.

Breath Out Pain

Then breathe out pain. Breathe out suffering. Breathe out judgement. Breathe out shame. Whatever the painful emotions are, breathe them out. Release them from their fixed position with you (where they may be stuck) and let them flow (as they are meant to). Let them leave your body through your feet and enter the earth below. Then breathe in love and start the cycle all over again.

Become the Witness

Do this until you feel calm, present, and ready to be a more neutral witness to your story.

How can you now look at the experience that engendered your painful emotions with this new perspective? The perspective of love? Love for yourself. Love for the opportunity to learn and grow. Love for the incredible transformation that will take place as you take in what this painful experience has brought to you.

Tell a New Story

With your lens of love, can you tell a different story? Perhaps a shiny new story? Let's give it a whirl.

Get another fresh page ready and write away! Write fast. Write with love. Whether you believe it or not, write your new story from a perspective of love.

Don't change the absolute facts. But absolutely change the negative assumptions you made about the facts that engendered such strong emotions. Did you take something personally? Did you blame someone else for your problem? Did you assign blame or shame to yourself? Use your lens of love to change these assumptions and incorrect assessments of the facts now.

The Life School Point of View (POV)

Ah, I love this tool!

Here's how the Life School POV works:

No matter how painful or traumatizing the events of our lives are, there is always something to learn. There is always some way we've grown, become more resilient, or blossomed into our greater selves. At least this is how it *could* be if we used the perspective of Life School to understand the events and experiences of our lives.

Once again, we aren't changing any facts, we're just claiming personal responsibility for them as part of the essential trajectory of our lives. We're acknowledging how even the worst moments of our lives have shaped us into who we are today: the person we love and are satisfied with, or the person who needs some work (but without the Life School POV would never realize this). Not that these events were somehow preordained, but they are all available to us to derive meaning and foster strength and wisdom.

The Life School POV is the way we honor all the events of our lives and keep ourselves from sinking into the passive position of the victim of our circumstances. We make sense out of it—we learn, we grow, we rise. We drop the blame and excuses that suck our souls. We claim responsibility for our lives and our healing.

How to Apply the Life School POV to Your Story

Soften Your Story

Take your previous story—the pain, the suffering, the hurt, the anguish. Soften the harsh edges of your story first by doing the Lens of Love exercise. Once it's soft and your heart is open, you're ready to work with how your experience benefits you. (Yes, they *all* do.) Acknowledging the benefits changes the story, releasing you from pain.

Write a New Story

Now, be brave. Breathe. Step right up to this. Get a new page and your pen ready. Start by making a list of ten ways (yes, ten!) your difficult experience benefits you now or will in the

future.

Include things in the list that your neutral witness self can see, but perhaps your present moment self can't quite wrap her mind around yet. It's okay not to believe or feel the truth of this practice. Do it anyway. Remember, we're building new [neural networks] and harnessing [neuroplasticity] to make you more resilient.

Carry Your New Story with You

Nice work! You've just honored the hell out of yourself. That's what healing work is all about. Stepping up. Being brave. Doing the work. Carrying it with you. Starting a revolution.

Take your new stories with you. They may not be finished yet. And if they are, you'll surely have opportunities to use your Lens of Love and Life School POV on future stories.

You'll find that as your stories change, so do you. And as you change, so do all future stories. Life will continue to offer its challenges, but you, the wiser, more savvy, witness you, the you with power tools, will navigate them much more easily. You'll get less stuck. You'll know what to do.

I'm so proud!

Resources

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: A Manifesto](#). 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: What are Stories?](#) 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: By Reimagining These Five Stories](#). 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: Lessons in Story Mining](#). 2019.

Karyn Shanks MD. [How to Empower Your Healing Story: Rewrite Your Failure Stories](#). 2019.

KARYN SHANKS MD

Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner

wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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