

The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

UNLOCKING OUR MENTAL PRISONS

Edith Eger introduces the book by walking us through her story and how she feels like she learned how to live at a death camp. She was sixteen when she was sent to Auschwitz. It was in 1944 in Kassa, Hungary where she lived with her parents and her two sisters, while training for the Olympic gymnastics and dating a boy she loved dearly, Eric. In April, all the Jews were forced into an old brick factory on the side of town and then sent to the camp a few weeks later. Her parents were killed on the very first day, while she was forced to dance for an SS officer, known as the angel of death... She then remembered her mother's advice: **"no one can take from you what you've put in your mind."** She imagined she was dancing on the stage of the Budapest opera house, and it got her through the night.

"I summoned the strength to dance for my life"

She writes that Auschwitz was both hell on earth and her greatest classroom:

"Subjected to loss, torture, starvation, and the constant threat of death, I discovered the tools for survival and freedom that I continue to use every day in my clinical psychology practice as well as in my own life."

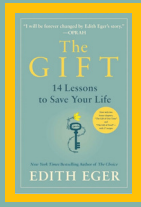
In 2019, she was 92 and decided to write the practical guide that so many of her patients had asked her for during her 40 years of practice as a Doctor in psychology. She shares that:

"As a psychologist; as a mother, grandmother and great grandmother; as an observer of my own and other's behaviors; and as an Auschwitz survivor, I am here to tell you that the worst prison is the one I built for myself."

"I couldn't alter the systematic dehumanization or slaughter of the over six millions innocents who died in the camps. All I could do was decide how to respond to terror and hopelessness. Somehow. I found it within myself to choose hope."

She shares how escaping Auschwitz was only half of her journey to freedom. She married a man named Bela, immigrated to the US, became a mother and then a psychologist. They rose out of poverty and she looked successful on the outside but she writes:

"I was still in hiding—running from the past, denying my grief and trauma, minimizing and pretending, trying to please others and do things perfectly, blaming Bela for my chronic resentment and disappointment, chasing after achievement as though it could make up for all I'd lost."



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She realized it when she first wore her badge that read Dr Eger and felt like it was written Dr Eger, IMPOSTOR. She realized that she couldn't support others on their healing journeys if she didn't commit first to hers.

Her therapeutic approach is based on intuitive insights and cognitive-oriented practices and theories. She relies on four principles that she learned from Martin Seligman, cognitive-behavioral therapy, Carl Rogers and Viktor Frankl.

- Martin Seligman taught her about **learned helplessness**, and how we suffer most when we lose touch with the agency we have over our lives and feel like we have no control on improving our circumstances. She urges us to harness the power of learned **OPTIMISM** and to connect with our ability to create the meaning and directions we want for our lives.
- CBT highlights how our **thoughts** determine our **feelings** which drive our **behaviors**.
- Carl Rogers underlined the importance of **unconditional positive self-regard**, and how so much of our suffering is rooted in our fears that we can't be loved AND genuine simultaneously.
- Viktor Frankl modeled how we can turn our worst **experiences** into our most potent **teachers**.

She shares:

“Healing, fulfillment, and freedom come from our ability to choose our response to whatever life brings us, and to make meaning and derive purpose from all we experience—and in particular, our suffering.”

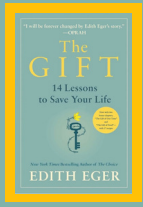
Ultimately freedom is a choice and not one that we can only make once. It has to be rechosen daily. And hope will be our better ally, by reminding us that suffering is always temporary and grounding us in the curiosity toward what happens next.

“We become free when we stop wearing masks and fulfilling the roles and expectations others assign us and start unconditionally loving ourselves.”

She reminds us that:

“There's no freedom in minimizing what happened, or in trying to forget.”

We are called to remember and honor our past experience but we must beware from staying stuck in guilt, shame, fear or anger. We never lose our ability to choose, no matter how much we've lost. And knowing that is the gift she took away from Auschwitz.



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"I could focus on what I held in my mind. I could respond, not react. (...) I learned to rely on parts of myself I would otherwise never have known were there."

We regain our freedom FROM our past and TO exercise free-will in the now.

She described a phenomenon also witnessed by Viktor Frankl: most prisoners were freed from the nazis but they couldn't physically leave the camp on the day of liberation. They had not regained the ability to take responsibility for their lives yet.

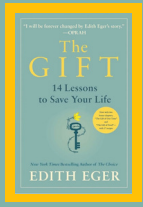
The most damaging prisons are built in our minds and even though it's not easy, it's always worth it to look for ourselves for the keys.

She shares her story to inspire us and realize that one can survive anything! (not for us to compare our sufferings). And she wrote this book as a practical guide to empower us to be the directors of our own lives.

Here are three initial guideposts to take with us while we read:

- **We don't change until we're ready:** and readiness comes from the inside and cannot be forced or rushed.
- **Change is about interrupting the habits and patterns that no longer serve us:** and those must not only be abandoned they must also be replaced by healthy ones.
- **When you change your life, it's to become the REAL you.**

"The ultimate key to freedom is to keep becoming who you truly are."



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WHAT NOW? VICTIMHOOD

Edith Eger witnessed that victims tend to ask “**why me**” and that survivors tend to ask “**what now**”.

“Suffering is universal. But victimhood is optional.”

Feeling hurt or oppressed by people or circumstances is unavoidable, pain will be a part of our experience no matter how kind or hardworking we are. We don’t choose whether it happens, we choose how we respond to it when it does.

It’s counterintuitive but staying in our prisons of victimhood can feel safer. We also believe that if we knew “why” somehow things would hurt less. That’s a trap. She writes:

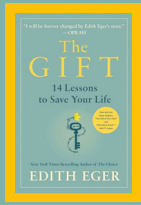
“When we ask why, we’re stuck searching for someone or something to blame—including ourselves.”

However when we ask: WHAT NOW? We stop focusing on what happened and can put our attention on the choices and possibilities we now have. She takes survivor guilt as an example... she had to decide to choose to live and heal instead, and to embrace her strength and freedom.

In victimhood, we’re stuck in the past and in the pain, stuck on what we lost. Instead, we can hold our experience in a gentle embrace and see how to “move forward instead of nowhere” as she puts it. And we must be aware that staying stuck in victimhood has a secondary benefit: it prevents us from having to show up for ourselves.

*“Freedom comes with a price. We’re called to be accountable for our own behavior
—and to take responsibility even in situations we didn’t cause or choose.”*

She shares the story of Emily, a 45 year old mother of two who learned she had breast cancer right after learning that her husband had met another woman he was in love with. He stayed with her until she was cured but then he moved out. She realized that on top of overcoming her fear of dying, she now had to learn to live. She confronted a deep-seated belief that the people we love disappear, a belief she acquired when her mother died by suicide. She learned how to be her own mother, to be the person who would never leave her and who would love her, no matter what. By loving herself, she also gave a gift to her children who could learn how to do the same for themselves and could count on a healthy mother in the process.



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"We need to give our children roots, and give them wings."

And as she struggled to find peace when interacting with her ex-husband she learned how to follow Edith Eger's guidance:

"Sometimes it just takes one sentence to point the way out of victimhood: is it good for me?"

She witnessed what helped HER. What drained her and what disempowered her. She learned how to cope with loneliness and choose the behaviors that would keep her feeling safe and whole. She realized how strong she was and how many wonderful people she could meet and connect with.

"When we start loving ourselves, we start patching up the holes in our hearts, the gaping places that feel like they'll never be filled."

The author reminds us that we can find strength and freedom in any circumstances and to write down all that we want to achieve during our time on Earth! And to then get very curious: what happens next?

We must beware from the false promise of victimhood that if we're blameless, grief will hurt less. All the responsibility will be on the offender! But so will all the power.

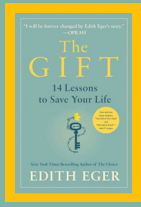
"We can be wounded and accountable. Responsible and innocent. We can give up the secondary gains of victimhood for the primary gains of growing and healing and moving on."

THAT's how we step into the rest of our lives. That's why stepping out of victimhood matters so much.

The author then relates the story of Barbara who was experiencing complicated grief a year after the passing of the mother she had had a complicated relationship with... Barbara first how to reclaim how hurt she had been as a child and all that was taken from her. She had to revisit the prison in her mind to free the little girl and allow her to finally leave the past behind. She had to allow that little girl to be angry and sad! And to show her how to move on. Finally she had to go back to heal her memories of her father and her mother. Because as Edith Eger writes:

"Releasing ourselves from victimhood also means releasing others from the roles we've assigned them."

"Tears are good. They mean we've been pierced by an important emotional truth."



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"We need to give our children roots, and give them wings."

Indeed, as long as we keep labeling some people as oppressors, we keep others stuck in the victim's role. She could recently witness that when she shared with her daughter how guilty she felt for not being there for us as much as she wishes she had. Her youngest son had had special needs which took away a lot of the energy and attention she could have given her middle child. But her daughter didn't see things that way! She explained to her mother that she didn't feel like a victim and needed her to stop seeing her as one. Edith Eger realized that expressing her truth had been cathartic for her but that the story needed to go now, because it was disempowering her daughter just as much as it was trapping her into a prison of guilt.

Two veterans also taught her the power of choosing how we interpret what happened to us. Those two men both had lost the use of their legs in combat but one experienced intense despair while the other found in this loss a source of deep gratitude and resilience, a source of growth. And when her oldest daughter was in a coma after a brain injury, a few years ago, our author faced the combo she fears most: a blend of fear and powerlessness. But then her daughter made a beautiful recovery that felt both inspiring and humbling to her loved ones. Because attitude is not everything of course, but that's where our choice lies: to resist or to adapt. And her daughter not only regained most of her previous abilities, she also acquired new skills and a new kind of intellectual aliveness!

She concludes:

"What a beautiful reminder that the things that interrupt our lives, that stop us in our tracks, can also be catalysts for the emerging self, tools that show us a new way to be, that endow us with new vision."

And here are this chapter's KEYS to free ourselves from victimhood:

- **That was then, this is now.** Let's guide ourselves out of our pasts.
- **In every crisis, there is a transition.** Let's honor the hurt first and then the lesson, by writing a letter to the person or situation that wounded us to share why and how... and then by writing them another letter: a thank you one.
- **Harness your freedom TO.** It's time to decide what we want to create and move toward. She invites us to create a vision board so that our creative intuition can draw us an arrow to follow.