

The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

NO PROZAC IN AUSCHWITZ

THE PRISON OF: AVOIDANCE

Edith Eger recalls a time when her daughter came back from school very upset, but how she (Edith) hadn't come out of denial yet nor started processing her own trauma, so she couldn't connect with Marianne's feeling and resolved to offering her comfort food instead. She shares:

"I didn't know it then but we disable our children when we take away their suffering."

Unwillingly, we teach children that feelings are either wrong or scary. We don't show them that feelings are only feelings. We don't teach them to allow their feelings to happen and how to stay with them by asking "tell me more". She warns us never to say that we know what someone else is feeling, because we simply CANNOT know that.

"To be empathetic and supportive, don't take on other people's inner life as if it is your own. That's just another way of robbing others of their experience—and of keeping them stuck."

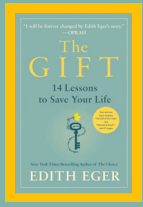
She likes telling her patients that EXPRESSION is the opposite of depression. She writes:

"What comes out of you doesn't make you sick; what stays in there does."

The goal is not to blame ourselves for the diseases we might encounter, as multiple factors are always involved, but we still need to realize that unprocessed, unfelt emotions bottle up and affect our bodies' chemistry and ability to function. Shielding ourselves from our feelings can only work in the short-term, and then it backfires. Unfortunately a lot of us learned to disown our inner responses—and therefore our true selves—at a very young age.

"In trying to help children regroup or bounce back from hurt or difficulty, caring adults can minimize what the child is going through, or inadvertently teach that some things are permissible to feel and others aren't."

We must always remember that children learn by watching us. It's not what we say, it's what we do. So they will take on our habits of reacting instead of responding and of hiding from, suppressing or medicating our own emotional world.



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She highlights that there was nothing one could use in Auschwitz to numb their emotions. Nothing came from without. No sugar, no alcohol, no prozac. They had to learn to be dedicated self-observer... and how to just be. She also remembers how crying wasn't really an option and reminds us that feelings come AFTER the survival part. Still, that's a crucial part of the healing process because: the survival part. And that's a crucial part of the healing process because:

"You can't heal what you don't feel."

She also shares how she avoided the Auschwitz museum in Washington for years, before realizing that convincing herself that she had overcome her past and would never need to face it again was not helping her—it was keeping her stuck there. It required a ton of courage for her to visit that museum and the feelings that were bottled under her skin, but it was also a key milestone on her healing journey.

"They are many good reasons why we avoid our feelings: they're uncomfortable, or they're not the feelings we think we should be having, or we're afraid of how they might hurt others, or afraid of what they could mean—what they might reveal about the choices we've made or the ones we will make going forward."

By avoiding our feelings, we deny reality. Our only option is to invite our feelings and to sit with them until they've taught us what they need us to understand.

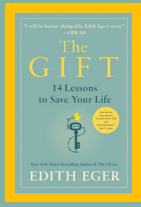
"(...) a feeling is just a feeling—it's not your identity."

The author then recounts the terrifying ordeal faced by one of her clients, Caroline, when she was living in rural Canada with her husband and her three stepsons. They were supporting a family member, Michael, who was overcoming a past of petty theft and drug addiction. One day, Michael came into their house, shot Caroline in the head twice and left her for dead, after robbing them. She miraculously survived and Michael went to jail for 16 years. She met Edith Eger when Michael was about to be liberated on parole and because recovering from her brain injuries had been a long process, but trauma recovery was a whole lot more complicated.

"But if you've lived through trauma and come out the other side, you know that surviving is only the first battle."

Edith Eger recalls how much strength, love, and dedication she heard in Caroline's voice and story, and also how there were four behaviors keeping her stuck in the most horrific time of her life:

- She spent most of her energy trying to change her feelings, and to focus on the positive instead of feeling her truth.



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- She was trying to spare her loved ones from witnessing her distress and misguidedly robbing herself from freeing herself, in the process.
- She let fear consume her still and still gave all her power away to Michael and her past.
- She needed to release herself from all the “don’ts” she was now living by and to give herself a lot of “dos” to find her way back into joy and freedom—such as “I do have a choice, a life to live, a role, the ability to choose what I focus on now, or the ability and right to choose joy.”

Edith Eger reminds us again that nobody can take our inner experience away from us. Caroline had been horrifically victimized and she was entitled to every bit of the rage, sorrow, fear and grief that she was experiencing...Michael did indeed almost rob her from her life. But he also didn't and it had happened sixteen years ago. It was time to EXPRESS and then release (in that order) her rage, so that it wouldn't pollute her experience any longer. She reminded Caroline that fear is something we learn! We had no idea what fear was when we were born.

Another important point to keep in mind is that we don't only run away from our so-called negative emotions. We can be just as scared—and sometimes even more so—of our good feelings! A part of our psyche identifies with our victimizer when we've been victimized... and it can lead us to punish, belittle and attack ourselves, rubbing ourselves of our birthright to joy! This is why many victims become victimizers, without the proper support to heal and overcome what happened to them.

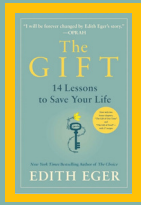
To recover from trauma, we must process the horror AND we must reconnect with our senses, our ability to laugh, our lightheartedness.

“This is what it means to face and release the past. We drive on by. We're not living there anymore.”

Now if we've been denying our feelings for years, it can be hard to identify our feelings in the first place! A lot of people confuse their thoughts and feelings for instance... saying for instance “I feel we should [insert action]” when really they're sharing an opinion, not an emotion. Edith Eger reminds us that:

“Feelings are energy. With feelings there's no way out but THROUGH.”

And it takes so much more courage to just be than to “do something about it”. So feeling takes practice. We must learn how to reconnect with them first and then how to face them, before we can understand how to release them.



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“This is how we release ourselves from the prison of avoidance—we let the feelings come.

We let them move through us. And then we let them go.”

And here are this chapter’s KEYS to free ourselves from avoidance::

- **We must feel so we can heal.** Let’s develop a daily practice of checking how we feel: once a day everyday, let’s take a few minutes to ask ourselves how we feel, scan our body and WITNESS—just witness—our experience.
- We can ground in the certainty that **everything is temporary.** When we name our feeling, then locate where it lives in our bodies, we can observe them as they change and dissipate.
- We must remember that **the opposite of depression is expression.** It’s time to take responsibility for our feelings! And to express our truth.