

The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

ALL OTHER RELATIONSHIPS WILL END

THE PRISON OF: SELF-NEGLECT

One of our core fears is the fear of abandonment. This is why we learn as children how to get what she calls the “As”: attention, approval and affection. We study what to do and what not to do in order to get them, which is fine until it isn’t—until we convince ourselves that we need to do those things in order to be loved.

“It’s very dangerous to put your whole life into someone else’s hands. You are the only one you’re going to have for a lifetime. All other relationships will end. So how can you be the best loving, unconditional, no-nonsense caregiver to yourself?”

Our beliefs about how we matter and what we’re worth are shaped by the spoken and unspoken messages we receive in childhood. Messages that we carry into adulthood.

The author shares the story of two men who learned respectively in childhood that you have to be needed not to be loved and that they were a burden to the woman they loved. In both cases it still drives their behaviors in their romantic relationships and wreaks havoc with their lives.

She highlights:

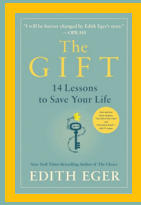
“Even if we didn’t experience a discernible event or trauma that forced us to fight to be loved or seen, most of us can remember times we protected others or performed for them in order to secure their approval.”

And she invites us to reflect on whether we’ve come to believe that we’re loved for our caretaking, the roles we play within our family systems and/or our achievements.

Trying to motivate children, many families fall into the trap of creating a culture of achievement where “doing” is entwined with “being” and children forget that they’re inherently worthy for who they are, and not through what they do. Unfortunately, as Edith Eger writes:

“If a good report card or good manners earn love, that’s not love at all. It’s manipulation.”

And because of the emphasis on achievements, children then never experience unconditional love.



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The author describes how both a twice Oscar winner and her son-in-law, a Nobel Prize recipient, decided to hide their trophies away so that their children would never use them as a benchmark for success or a tool of self-deprecation. They don't confuse who they are with what they do and don't want others to measure who they are to what they've done. Edith Eger warns us that:

“When we conflate achievement with worth, success as well as disappointment can become a burden on our children.”

However our success, achievements, skills and talents also become a part of our children's legacy and can become a part of their lives too. So shying away from self-aggrandizement and over-achievement must not be replaced by self-effacement or under-achievement. The goal is to share with them the joy of achievement—which includes working hard and nurturing our gifts: not because we have to, but because we get to.

Audrey, Edith's daughter and her husband David modeled what nurturing gifts instead of projecting expectations looks like when they supported their son's choice to delay college to attend a new music academy instead. Education being a strong value in their family, it could have been a decision met with resistance, instead of encouragement—and it would have been to everyone's detriment since their son thrived there and then went on to get a college education and to become a successful sports reporter as well as a fulfilled music lover.

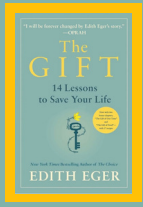
She warns us that:

“Too often we're boxed in by expectations, by the sense that we have a specific role or function to fulfill. But a label is not an identity. It's a mask—or a prison.”

“Our childhoods end when we begin to live someone else's image of who we are.”

The author reminds us that we have an entire family inside of us we need to be aware and to take care of:

- Our **childish** part: they want everything now, easy and fast.
- Our **childlike** part: they're curious, free spirited, intuitive and eager to follow their dreams, without judgment or shame.
- Our **teenager**: they like to take risks, test boundaries and flirt.
- Our **rational adult**: they make plans to reach their goals and find the way to meet them.
- Our **caring parent**: they're loving and nurturing.
- And the **scary one**: they love the shoulds, musts and have tos and to criticize us.



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She writes that:

“We need our entire family to be whole. When we’re free, this family works in balance, as a team, everyone welcome, no one absent or silenced or ruling the roost.”

When we associate our survival to a specific role, it can become very challenging to balance our inner family. The author tells the tale of Iris, a lovely woman, happy mother of three who was the youngest of four daughters raised by a man who suffered from alcoholism and schizophrenia and by a depressed mother. Iris got stuck at a very young age in the role of the caregiver and holds tremendous shame at being the one who endured the “least” abuse. She feels she owes her help to her sisters, but she’s also very aware of how toxic and all-consuming it gets when she gets stuck in rescuing mode. Edith Eger reminds her that she would never be able to do anything for her sisters until she learned to love herself first. She writes:

“Guilt is the past. (...) Worry is in the future. The only thing you can do is right here in the present. And it’s not up to you to decide what to do for your sisters. The only one you can love and accept is you.”

We don’t realize that our rescuing tendencies are unhealthy—not only for ourselves but also for those we’re trying to rescue. It is actually very disempowering for them and we don’t always realize that we’re actually doing for ourselves, for our own need to be needed.

“Sometimes we need to be needed. We don’t feel we’re functioning well if we’re not rescuing people.”

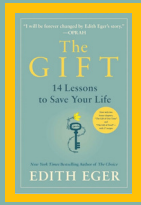
Edith Eger reminds us that a loving relationship is not based on wants, but needs. So we get to choose: do we want guilt (by only focusing on the needs of others as a means to connect) or do we want love (which entails reconnecting with ourselves first and foremost)?

And at some point, we get to pause and stop apologizing for not being everybody’s savior. We realize that we did the best we could and we recognize when enough is enough.

Here’s what she wants us to ponder next:

“Is there anything you do in excess?” We often use substances and behaviors to medicate our wounds: food, sugar, alcohol, shopping, gambling, sex. We can even do healthy things in excess. We can become addicted to work, exercise or restrictive diets.”

And she adds that sometimes we also get addicted to... being needed.



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*“But when we’re hungry for affection, attention, and approval
—for the things we didn’t get when we were young—
nothing is ever going to be enough to fill the need.*

You’re going to the wrong place to fill the void.”

To prevent this from happening, we must start practicing self-love and self-care. We must check with ourselves: am I doing this because I really want to do it? Or am I going to feel resentful afterwards? We can stop taking so much responsibility for other people’s problems and stop training them to rely on us instead of themselves! We can witness how we’re the ones paving our own road to resentment. Yes, sometimes it’s the right thing to prioritize someone else’s needs and we should always do everything in our power to help those we love, to be sensitive to other people’s needs and to cultivate interdependence. But martyrdom is not generosity.

She adds:

“Love means that we practice self-love, that we strive to be generous and compassionate toward others—and to ourselves.”

We have limited time and energy, so we must learn to structure our time in a way that prevents us from neglecting ourselves. We need work, love AND play in equal amounts.

And finally we must learn how to ask for help! That can be the best way to show up for ourselves... and giving is a gift. Receiving someone’s giving is a gift too. She highlights that:

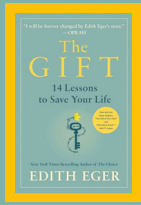
*“It’s true that generosity and compassion are vital to foster.
But selflessness doesn’t serve anyone—it leaves everyone deprived.”*

And she reminds us that:

“Being self-reliant doesn’t mean you refuse care and love from others.”

“When you’re free, you take responsibility for being who you really are.”

A free person is aware of their coping mechanisms and behavioral patterns, they reconnect with each part of themselves to reclaim the whole person they can now be again. A free person is free from self-abandonment first and foremost.



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“Honey, find YOU and keep filling it up with more you.
You don’t have to work to be loved. You just have to be you.
May you be more and more you every day.”

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

- **We must practice, so that we can get better at SAVORING.** Let’s take five minutes each day to savor pleasant situations!
- **Work, love, play:** edit your own balance between the three and adapt your schedule incrementally, accordingly.
- **Show yourself more love:** what can you do for you today?