

The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

THE PRISON OF: UNRESOLVED GRIEF

Minor disappointments can lead us to extreme reactions when they represent larger grief. This is why Edith Eger could support with the same empathy and compassion a woman upset because there was a delay with her Cadillac delivery, right after a client whose child was in tremendous pain in a hospital bed. Because that first woman was not crying over the Cadillac, she was crying because her desires for her family and their interpersonal relationships were unmet.

“It is a universal experience for life not to turn out as we want or expect.”

This is also why any kind of therapy is grief work at its core. We need to confront how we feel about all that we were expecting that did not happen and about all the unexpected and unanticipated we're led to experience.

She witnessed this among veterans who often report the shock resulting from being sent to a place they were not prepared for and where they found something completely different from what they expected.

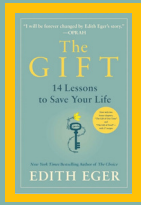
“Grief is often not about what happened. It's about what didn't happen.”

She recalls her daughter's prom night when her husband made a comment about the fact that Edith Eger had not been able to live through any of those happy milestones. She was furious to see such a burden put on her daughter's shoulders, but she was also deeply upset because he was right. Like so many others, her life had been irremediably interrupted by Hitler. She shares:

I'm a prisoner and a victim when I minimize or deny my pain—and I'm a prisoner and a victim when I hold on to regret.

She reminds us that regret is rooted in our refusal to realize that we're powerless against the past, we cannot change what happened.

Our author then describes how her own mother became a prisoner of her grief when she lost her mother, brutally, and at a very young age. She had to take on the responsibility for her siblings while her father fell prey to alcoholism. She spent her entire life talking to a portrait of a mother.



The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

To grieve, we must let ourselves feel every aspect of it, including our sadness, anger, powerlessness, but we must not stay stuck there.

Unresolved grief leads to overwhelming rage. Rage against what happened, what did not, what “should” have been different. And we also hold on tightly to guilt regarding what we did, what we did not do and what we “should” have done. We don’t realize that we do that to try and keep some sense of control over the events. And that’s also a powerful way to avoid the grieving process.

She shares:

“Resolving grief means both to release ourselves from responsibility for all the things that weren’t up to us, and to come to terms with the choices we’ve made that can’t be undone.”

“This is the work we get to do in the present: to grieve what happened or didn’t happen, to own up to what we did or didn’t do, and to choose our response now.”

We all struggle to stand in the present and accept what is.

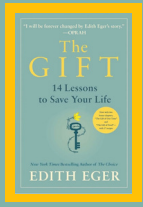
She introduces us to Sue whose son used her gun to end his life 25 years ago. She demonstrates how holding on to guilt and self-blame protects her from having to acknowledge that her son did die... or what HE chose to do, that she had no control over. She adds that her son would most probably tell her:

“Mom, I was going to kill myself anyway. I didn’t want you to die with me.”

Edith Eger is not urging us to stop crying quickly, on the contrary, she argues that it’s good to cry for those we’ve lost and to accept that the sorrow will never go away. But our healing lies within the celebration of their spirits and all they brought to the world and to acknowledge both the sadness of letting them go AND the joy that came from knowing them. Because sorrow and joy CAN coexist, and we’re called to embrace it all.

She still mourns her parents and grandparents, but she has learned that the invitation is not to die for them, but to live for them now... as well as to live for all those she loves who are still alive and surround her, including her children and grand-children! Only by living can we let the departed rest in peace.

“If we can’t move on from our guilt and make peace with our grief, it’s damaging to our loved ones, and not a compliment to those who’ve died.”



The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

Sofia's mother was a renowned psychologist who published her first book at seventy, while maintaining her therapy practice. She had always been extremely dynamic and was deeply beloved. It was a shock when her health started to deteriorate very suddenly and when she died only a month later of pancreatic cancer. A year later her daughter was still in constant mourning. She was at a crossroad where she had to come to terms and release two words that keep a lot of us prisoners: "What if?" As Edith Eger writes:

"What ifs don't empower us. They deplete us."

We can renounce our guilt by acknowledging that if we had known then what we know today we would have done things differently! But we didn't know: so here's our way out of guilt.

Guilt does not produce love. It cuts us from our current experience and prevents us from enjoying our memories... Guilt makes us feel like we're cheating on the deads when we laugh, as if we're abandoning them or forgetting them just because we're finding our way back into joy. And that's just not true. Remembering our fond memories is how we honor those who have passed. We cannot be free when we're feeling guilty. And the greatest gift we can offer to the departed is the gift of a full life.

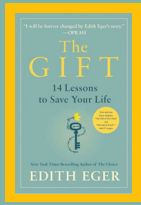
She explains:

"Grief has so many layers and flavors: sorrow, fear, relief, survivor's guilt, existential questioning, diminished safety, fragility. Our whole sense of the world is interrupted and rearranged. The adage says, 'Time heals all wounds'. But I disagree. Time doesn't heal. It's what you do with the time."

A trap we can fall into is to try to keep everything else the same, to compensate for the upheaval grief brings into our experience. But that's not the way it works. Nothing can be the same anymore after a big loss. And this is how grief can be an invitation to revisit our priorities, our sources of joy and purpose, how to be the best we can be and to embrace the new horizon we're now facing.

"To heal doesn't mean to get over it, but it does mean that we are able to be wounded and whole, to find happiness and fulfillment in our lives despite our loss."

She shares the story of David who met Tracy when he was 18, through their shared passion for environmental work and their shared roots as indigenous Canadians. They married at 25 and were parents at 30. That's when they decided to move back close to Tracy's childhood home... and it was the beginning of the end.



The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

Tracy had never shared with her husband the deep history of trauma that she held beneath her skin and she spiraled into drinking and raging fast. They first separated while trying to coparent but ultimately Daniel had to file for full custody to protect his son. Then, one day Tracy went missing, and was never found. The amount of guilt that Daniel felt was unbearable and his first impulse was to run away from his grief! But his love for his son was his beacon of strength and his saving grace. He embraced his grieving journey and even found a new professional calling, thereafter becoming a grief counselor for troubled teens and children. He told Edith Eger that:

“Helping others through the forest I walked through, I’m always reflecting, doing my own constant tending, keeping Tracy in my heart, staying aware of where I am and how I’m doing.”

Grief is not something we do once. It becomes an ongoing part of our lives and journey.

“In my experience, grief brings us together—or it pushes us apart. Either way, we’re never the same.”

We must accept that some things we will never understand and there’s just no point in trying. She adds:

“Grief forces us to get clear about what’s my business, what’s your business, and what’s God’s business.”

“Grieving is difficult, but it can also feel good.

*You can revisit the past. You can even embrace it.
You’re not stuck there. You’re here now. And you’re strong.*

*You can come to terms with what was and what wasn’t.
And you can concentrate not on what you lost, but on what is left:
the choice to live every moment as a gift, to embrace what IS.”*

And here are this chapter’s KEYS to free ourselves from self-neglect:

- **Let the dead be dead:** denying our grief will not work and will prevent our healing. She recommends the practice of dedicating 30 minutes a day to our grieving process. To cry, yell, feel deeply, and reconnect with our memories, old letters and photographs. To go all in on expressing our grief without reservation! And to then put our loved one back into our heart and come back into our lives.
- **The spirit never dies:** grief can guide us in a positive direction. It can source a life with more joy, purpose and meaning. So she invites us to ask our loved ones who have passed “What do you wish for me?”