

The GIFT



BOOK DIGEST

NOTHING TO PROVE

THE PRISON OF: RIGIDITY

“Conflict is human. When we avoid conflict, we’re actually moving closer to tyranny than to peace. Conflict itself isn’t imprisonment. What keeps us trapped is the rigidity we often use to manage conflict.”

This can be a hard prison to recognize, because it’s full of good intentions. We think we’re trying to improve our relationships by going to therapy for instance, but many people are actually looking for someone to reassure them that they’re right and that everybody else needs to change. She shares:

“If you come in with an agenda, if you’re keeping score or trying to change someone else, then you’re not free. Freedom is when you embrace your power to choose your own response.”

We get stuck on wanting other people to want to say, feel or do what we want, but we can’t want something for anyone but ourselves. We can only discover what’s right for US.

The greatest tool in conflict management is to learn how to stop denying other people’s truth while standing grounded in ours. For that, we need to release the need to be right.

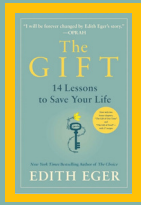
She recalls when she chose to go back to Auschwitz as part of her healing journey and how disappointed she was that her sister who was there with her, who was her reason to survive back then and with whom she shared so much, would not choose the same healing path. And yet they were both right. Magda needed to stay away and Edith needed to revisit Auschwitz.

She believes that this is what Jesus meant when he invited us to turn the other cheek: because it gives us another perspective on the situation that we cannot change. We cannot change other people’s minds but we can learn how to integrate different points of views. She writes:

“When we’re aggressive, we decide for others. When we’re passive, we let others decide for us. And when we’re passive-aggressive, we prevent others from deciding for themselves.”

She adds:

“When you’re assertive, you speak in statements.”



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Another important shift is to learn to stop putting our lives into other people's hands. Adults don't need to ask permission for what they want to do.

We can learn to hold our truth while relinquishing our need for power and control. We must meet others as they are and remember that complaining about others empowers no one.

"No one grows in criticism. So eliminate it. No criticism. None, ever."

Giving up criticism is a gift to others but also and mostly to ourselves. It allows us to live free from anger born from unrealistic expectations.

"I'm very selective about who's going to get my answer, because when I'm angry, I'm the one who suffers."

The moment we lock into a better-than, less-than mindset, we join unhealthy conflict.

A lot of us feel like we have something to prove. And we get addicted to proving that we're right or that we're good, which compels us to turn ourselves into a fiction. But she reminds us that:

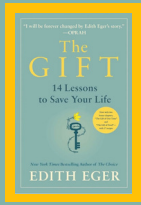
"You don't have to prove your worth. You can just embrace it, celebrate that you're imperfect and whole, that there will never be another you. Drop the agenda. If you have something to prove, you're still a prisoner."

Interestingly, she points out that when we defend ourselves against a crime we didn't commit, we join the power struggle! We grab the toxic rope that will link us to our bullies. She adds:

"It takes two to fight. But it takes one to stop."

Looking back at her time in Auschwitz, she realizes that her saving grace was realizing that the nazis would forever be more imprisoned than her, because they would always have to reckon with what she did. She was numb and terrified, but she had her inner sanctuary and found the strength to never let their dehumanizing words enter her spirit.

In an abusive situation, it is key to leave right when the abuse starts. First of all because it tends to get worse over time, but also because it will get harder and harder to escape the psychological aspects of abuse where the abuser convinces you that you need them or that you deserve what happened. Physical violence can be easier to recognize than psychological abuse that can be really hard to see and acknowledge. Without the physical scars it can also be even harder to leave the situation, knowing that we might not (and too often will not) be believed.



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Joy found the inner strength to divorce her husband who had treated her with disdain and contempt for years while hurting her verbally and financially and often threatening her by pointing a gun to her head. She then waited for an apology for years... until he died. That's when she revisited the journals she had used to keep herself sane at the time, by tracking her truth on paper day by day, to have some ground to hold on to during her unhappy marriage. And what she discovered is how abusive she had ALSO been in return.

Edith Eger writes:

“Many volatile relationships are complicated. While nothing excuses domestic violence or abuse, there often isn't a right person and a wrong person, a good spouse and a bad spouse. Both partners are contaminating the relationship.”

“You can be dead right—and you're still dead. So do you want to be happy, or do you want to be right?”

When two partners fight, it's important to look at the maintainers of the conflict, more than the causes itself. Keeping someone on trial in our minds fixes nothing and helps no one. She urges us to realize that:

“Power has nothing to do with brawn or domination. It means you have the strength to respond instead of react, to take charge of your life, to have total ownership of your choices.”

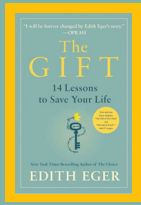
“You are powerful because you're not giving your power away.”

Gaining flexibility with our thinking does not only alter our relationships, it changes our perceptions, the way we see the world and the way we feel about. And no matter how unjust or unpleasant a circumstance is, we still have a choice to make: to meet it with rigidity or flexibility.

*“We don't have to like the difficult or painful things that happen to us.
But when we stop fighting and resisting,
we have more energy and imagination to move forward, instead of nowhere.”*

When we leave no room for nuance or complexity in our mindsets, we can't tolerate any disagreement. It's the trap of dichotomies. Anyone who doesn't think we're right is saying we're wrong.

*“Freed from her black-and-white thinking and rigid interpretations of the past,
the world appeared more vivid and vibrant.”*



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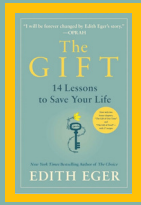


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And as for the body, flexibility is strength for our psyche. We're strong when we're supple and limber, not when we're trapped in rigidity.

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

- **Giving a gentle embrace to our current challenge:** let's get curious about exactly what we don't like about it, and ask ourselves "What is this situation telling me? What's in my best interest? What serves and empowers me?"
- **Meeting others as they are:** she invites us to write all we believe about someone we're in conflict with, and to then rewrite that same list without any interpretation, editorialization, "always" or "never". To carve out the facts from the story...
- **Cooperation beats domination:** we can then choose one of our complaints and meet the other person with a question... without blaming or shaming, we can ask them what's going on, sharing what we've noticed and what our unmet need is. We can ask them for ideas on how to solve the situation.
- **Treating others as who they can be:** finally, she invites us to imagine the person we're in conflict with's highest self, to imagine them surrounded by light and to connect with our own heart before saying to them "I see you."



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WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MARRIED TO YOU?

THE PRISON OF: RESENTMENT

“The biggest disrupter of intimacy is low-level, chronic anger and irritation.”

Edith Eger divorced Bela after her resentment festered for years and reached the point where it felt unbearable to her. Only then could she witness that her disappointment and anger had actually little to do with him, and everything to do with her unfinished emotional business and unresolved grief.

After decades of disowning her feelings, she was suffocating, but it wasn't because of her marriage. She had to mourn those she had lost in the camps, her shattered youth, and her fears of repeating the mistakes of her own parents. At forty, she realized that she was running out of time to start living the way she'd always wanted: free. Misguidedly, she thought it was freedom from Bela, not realizing that freedom comes from discovering our own genuine purpose and direction.

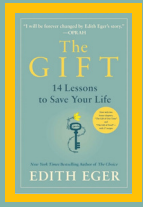
Anger usually stems from the gap between our reality and expectations. We believe someone else is trapping and aggravating us, but our real prison is our unrealistic expectations.

Our author reflects on how we romanticize falling in love because of the chemical high and don't realize that we marry like Romeo and Juliet, before knowing each other. We either assign to them all the characters traits we crave or we choose someone with whom to repeat all our unconscious family patterns. On the other end, we can also present a false self... and then years down the line we feel a sense of loss towards someone we never actually had.

Edith Eger reminds us that:

“Love isn't what you feel. It's what you do.”

She retells Marina's story, a young woman who had been abandoned first by her father and then by her mother. She then married a man who made her feel adored but who also was emotionally unavailable. They ended up fighting daily for eighteen years and she was aware that it was affecting her teenage daughter. That's when she came to seek help.



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She knew something had to change but she was unsure of her options. As Edith Eger writes, every choice comes with a price; we gain something and we lose something else. That's why many decide to not decide anything! But Marina didn't want to stay stuck. Our author reassured her that she didn't have to stay in a bad situation but also warned her that divorce doesn't resolve the emotional business of a relationship. She highlights:

"It just gives you permission to repeat the same pattern with someone else. It doesn't make you free."

Whether we stay or go, we must do the work to understand our needs and expectations and to heal the wounds we had brought into the relationship.

She reminds us that:

"Every behavior satisfies a need. Evn an imprisoning and terrifying situation can serve us in some way."

We all carry a core fear of abandonment, and in Marina's case it had been compounded by outright neglect. Marina's survival was proof of her strength and resilience, and one of her saving grace was falling in love with dancing. Through movement, she reconnected with her body, found a way into joy and for self-expression, and a source of meaning and passion. But she had internalized the belief that if you love someone, that person will leave you. When we're imprisoned by our minds, the damaging messages are the ones that stick.

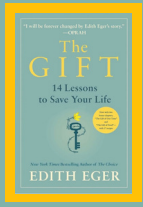
Edith Eger offered her a new story to contemplate:

"You're a woman of strength. Once you were that scared, lonely girl standing on the street with your suitcases. Many times you could have died, and you didn't. Now look at you. Out of something you didn't want, you made something good. YOU're good."

She gave a tool to Marina to explore with her husband. Most couples are stuck in a three-step dance that starts with frustration, which is followed by fighting and then making up. She warns us:

"Making up seems like the end of the conflict, but it's really a continuation of the cycle. The initial frustration hasn't been resolved. You've just set yourself up for another go-round."

She explained that we're either contributing or contaminating our relationships. His defenses were offense and hers were blame and criticism. The goal was to take a detour at the very beginning of the conflict to take them on a very different path than usual. She reminded Marina that denying an accusation is STILL accepting blame! Because we're taking responsibility for something that isn't ours.



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She urged her to stop rescuing him by stepping into the ring and allowing him to focus his rage on her, instead of acknowledging his own feelings. And it worked. Conflicts deescalated quickly between them, and suddenly she wasn't talking about his anger anymore during her sessions, she could connect with her own.

Edith Eger observes that:

"Many of us didn't have the loving and caring parents we desired, and deserved. Maybe they were preoccupied, angry, worried, depressed. Maybe we were born at the wrong time, in a season of friction or loss or financial strain. Maybe our caregivers were dealing with their own trauma and they weren't always responsive to our needs for attention and affection."

And we need to allow ourselves to grieve those facts. Grief guides us to face what did and did not happen and that's how we can release the pain and heal. That's when we can connect with what IS and choose where we want to go from here.

She guided Marina towards an inventory of all the things she liked about herself, because we get to choose what we focus on! And it's so easy to criticize ourselves and others, but we are good inside and that matters even more.

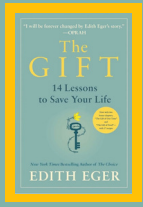
And coming back to the question of going or staying:

"Only you can decide if a relationship depletes or empowers you. But it's not a question to answer quickly. You can't know the truth about your relationships until you deal with your own wounds, until you bury and leave behind all the things from the past you're still dragging around."

In hindsight she finds her decision to divorce Bela unkind and unnecessary, but it did give her the silence and space she needed to focus on her grief work. Her feelings of numbness, isolation, anxiety, her nightmares and her fears couldn't disappear through a divorce, and only through reconnecting to herself deeply. They remarried two years later, but this time they had chosen each other anew, without the distorted lens of resentment and unmet expectations.

"We cast others in the roles that help us enact the story we've decided to tell."

Only by coming back into our wholeness and telling a new story can we find if the relationship can improve--or discover that we don't need that person anymore or that they have no place in our story of freedom.



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“You don’t have to figure it out in a hurry.
In fact, it’s best to stop figuring and figuring and trying to understand.

It’s an answer that will come only by playing more,
by living your life as fully as possible,
and being who you already are: a person of strength.”

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

- **Changing the steps of the dance:** the most important part is to resolve the initial frustration, so we must change the first step. Let’s reflect on one thing we can do differently the next time a familiar conflictual dynamic surfaces.
- **Addressing our own emotional business:** let’s check the messages we’ve received about love, consciously or not.
- **Checking whether we would like to be married to ourselves:** are we living in a way that allows us to call forward our best selves?