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Hi! I'm Coach Margie

I'm glad you're reading the Brave Space newsletter. My newsletter is written to share information and support.



Hello Margie,

I'm so glad you're here! I really love Brene Brown's work on emotions and vulnerability. Thoughts and emotions go together like peas and carrots (sorry, I couldn't resist that Forrest Gump reference)! So this week, I'm leaning into a discussion about emotions, thoughts and stories. As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts about it!

First, I'll share a story with you. It's my story, so it's 100% accurate. Right? Right. Well, maybe. I'll let you be the judge. Heads up! I'm using pseudo names.

It started like this (context): A friend of mine, Louise, and I decided to do a very nice thing for another friend of ours, Charlotte. Charlotte had been feeling down and we wanted to cheer her up. I was especially excited to do this very nice thing for Charlotte because she and I had been going through a rough patch in our

friendship (a whole other story) for a while. I was hoping that she would see our gift as a peace offering to help heal our relationship.

Louise offered to present the gift to Charlotte and tell her that we (Louise and I) came up with the idea to gift Charlotte this very nice thing. I asked Louise to let me know when she shared the news and what Charlotte thought of our gift.

A week went by, and I didn't hear anything from Charlotte or Louise. I called Charlotte and ask if she'd heard the good news from Louise.

Me: "Did Louise tell you about what we are doing for you?"

Charlotte: "Yes. She called me last week to tell me about it and I thanked her!"

Me: "Oh, ok. Great!"

Of course, I called Louise next.

Me: "Hey Louise, did you tell Charlotte about our gift for her?"

Louise: "Yes, I told her last week."

Me: "You promised to tell me when you told her the good news."

Louise: "I guess I forgot."

Me: "You forgot?"

Louise: "I guess I did."

What Happened Next was Unpleasant. And it Happened Fast.

I told myself that Louise took all of the credit for the gift herself. Or at the very least, she took most of the credit. Charlotte has always liked Louise better than me, so it was easy to assume Louise did the good thing for Charlotte. How could Louise do that? I thought we were friends! She KNEW I was working hard on my relationship with Charlotte. Why would she do this? I thought Louise was a good friend! And of course, Charlotte thought Louise was giving her the gift. She always thinks Louise is the only one doing nice things for her. She gives Louise credit for everything.

I suddenly felt hot all over inside. I had a tight feeling in my chest. My head was buzzing. The knot in my chest got tighter and tighter the more I thought about it. My head was pounding. I wanted to cry but I was too angry.

I know myself pretty well and I knew if I said one more word, I would have exploded and said things I would later regret. Drinking Margie would have slammed back a few glasses of wine and then said some really stupid things and regretted them later. **Drinking Margie would have a big mess to clean up.**

Being thoughtful about my emotions is still relatively new territory for me, but thankfully now I know I need to give myself time to put my thoughts and feelings

in order before I speak about topics than involve hurt feelings.

I've never been good at feeling my feelings. That's what I used wine for. But I've learned since I gave up alcohol that this is exactly what I needed to do to find clarity and work through this situation in a healthy way. So much easier said than done.

So, I cried. And I cried some more. I'm not usually a crier, folks! I rage-screamed into my pillow. I meditated on gratitude. I rode my trusty Peloton to get the blood pumping through my muscles and loosen the grip of the anxiety I was feeling. I journaled like I would later burn the pages so I could get it out of my head. Thankfully, after a couple of days of processing, my body and mind slowly came back into a more normal state and I was ready to talk it through with Louise, and later with Charlotte. Spoiler alert! It ended well with both, and I sharpened some really important tools in my toolbox!

So, what the heck happened here? Sorry, not sorry, folks! It's time for me to nerd out on some brain science, and in doing so, I hope I provide you with some tactics to use when you feel painful emotions.

The 3 Layers of Emotions

If you know anything about Annie Grace and This Naked Mind, you've probably heard the term "3 Layers of Emotions". The 3 Layers of Emotion was created by Annie from a lot of different resources, with huge influence from the work of [Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett](#).

I'm also going to take some liberty with the order of the layers as Annie defines them. Unless you are a student of This Naked Mind, you won't notice the difference. I'm explaining the layers the way I made sense of them, and the way they work best for me. Also, before I learned about Annie's explanation of emotions, I learned about them from the book [Crucial Conversations](#). Together, they help explain what happened in my story really well.

To set the foundation of understanding the 3 Layers of Emotions, I need to make a couple of statements of scientific fact:

1. **You and only you create your emotions.**
2. **When it comes to strong emotions, you either find a way to master them or fall hostage to them.**

Emotions don't just happen to you. Others don't make you mad. **You make you mad.** You make you scared, annoyed, insulted or hurt.

Once you've created your painful emotions, you have only two options: You can act on them or be acted on by them.

Emotions Have Layers.

By looking at emotions this way, it allows us to deconstruct them and figure out what tools we can use to adjust them to work for us, instead of against us. As mentioned above, we tend to think that emotions happen to us, when in reality they are created by us. This framework allows us to **see clearly and actively work on the part of the emotion that is causing the most pain**, so we can shift into feeling relief.

The First Layer of Emotion is Meaning.

Meaning is our brain's prediction (response) of what we saw or heard (stimulus). **It is the story that we tell.** Our stories provide our rationale for what's going on. It is always based on the past - scenarios, experiences, and situations where we have felt the same way. We have memories of feeling this way, and our brain's predictions are based on what happened when we've felt this way in the past. Our brains are meaning-making machines - they are constantly constructing meanings as we go through our lives, and they use that experience to interpret stimuli (what we see or hear).

Just after we observe what others say or do and just before we feel some emotion about it, we tell ourselves a story. **We add meaning to the action we observed.** We make a guess at the motive driving the behavior.

My story was very unflattering towards both of my friends. I made a lot of negative meaning out of two facts:

- Charlotte did not acknowledge my part in the gifting.
- Louise did not keep her promise to me to let me know when she told Charlotte about our gift.

A Few Facts About Stories

Even if you don't realize it, you're telling yourself a story. Storytelling typically happens lightning fast. You can see in my situation that I went into full storytelling mode fast.

Any set of facts can be used to tell an infinite number of stories. Stories are just that - stories. We can explain the facts of our stories in an infinite number of ways. In my story, I went all the way to the most negative story possible. I could have given Louise the benefit of the doubt from the get-go. Louise is an awesome,

honorable person and a great friend! But I didn't, unfortunately.

If we take control of our stories, they won't control us. We can control how we feel and then how we act by getting control of our stories. More to come on that!

The Second Layer is Affect.

These are the actual physical feelings you have in your body. A baby is born with affect - they can feel tired, cold, or hungry. Affect is the physiological response to the story we've told ourselves. These are the physiological responses that we can feel in our bodies. Mine were intense and lasted a full two days.

The Key Takeaway (So Far)

The meanings we make create our affect and our physiological response. **There is a feedback loop between meaning and affect.** The meanings you make in turn create the affect. This loop gets us wrapped up in our story like a big ol' burrito until we convince ourselves that our stories are pure fact. And whatever emotions we're feeling can get bigger and stronger.

You have probably experienced the power your brain has to make meanings and affect in your daily life. Think of watching a scary movie - even when you're not actually in danger, the visual and audio effects of the movie create a story (meaning), and you feel the physiological signs of fear. Your brain is creating meanings and feeding that back to create your affect.

Or think of letting your mind drift: you can let it drift to a story you've told yourself that makes you super angry, and you can have physical feelings of anger. Same goes with thinking about something you're grateful for: your thoughts (story) can create positive physiological responses.

Affect and Meaning get us Hung Up on Emotions!

This can have a huge impact on the quality of our lives! **About 80% of what we thought today, we thought yesterday** - and if our meanings are negative or holding us back, we get stuck. This cycle gets repeated each day – story/meanings and affect reinforcing each other.

This can limit your emotional setpoint. We define the emotional setpoint as the high and low levels of emotions you allow yourself to have. You can think of them like your emotional boundaries - having emotions above or below them is really hard until you start to change your meanings.

Our stories contain not only conclusions but also judgments (good or bad) and attributions (interpretation of others' motives). This is when we feel or think something and then automatically, immediately say something like, "She did this on purpose (judgment) to make herself look like a better friend than me (attribution)". At our worst, we judge the other person in more negative ways. This doesn't make us bad people. It means we're human and we've been conditioned to think this way. We all do it. And we can all change it!

These judgmental thoughts add a whole other layer of suffering to our emotions: We don't want to feel this way about people we love, but we do it to protect ourselves. Our brains like to do two things: Predict and Be Right. All of the time. **And it's a self-feeding loop.**

How Do We Change Our Emotions?

Let's start with meaning. One tool I can give you right now that can have an immediate impact is asking one simple question. This question is one that, if you ask yourself this all the time, will have huge results. The question is this: **What is my story and what am I making it mean?**

When you ask this question, you shine a spotlight on the meaning (your brain will always try to shift away from pain. If your meaning is creating pain, your brain will start this shift right away!). When you ask this question, **you take back total power of the situation**: no longer are these emotions or circumstances happening to you - you'll see exactly how you are creating these emotions because of your meanings! By asking this question you are able to see where you can shift meanings to feel better.

Another tool I can offer you: Remember that the stories we tell are in reaction to the stimuli (what we saw or heard). When you ask yourself **"What have I seen or heard that supports this story? What have I seen or heard that conflicts with this story?"** These questions shift your thinking from the feeling and judgment part of your story to the actual facts contained in your story!

Next up is affect. Before we DO anything, we can ask ourselves, **"What emotions am I feeling?"** Engaging your brain will immediately start to put your feelings into perspective and teach you how to calm yourself. I knew from the work I've done since going alcohol free that those negative emotions I was feeling in my body needed attention before I acted on them. Since I was not used to feeling my feelings, it was a big wake up call for me, and I had to get introspective to try to understand them.

Getting enough sleep, eating well, meditating, exercising, being in sunshine can also change our affect, or at least moderate the emotions. (Interesting side note: research indicates that putting your hands in dirt - literally reconnecting with the Earth - has a massive calming effect on our nervous systems!) Let me know if this works for you – I don't like digging in dirt.

I rage-screamed into my pillow and got my muscles moving by riding my bike. I let myself feel those feelings and rode the wave. I felt them release their grip on me. Good, restful sleep, meditating, and eating nutritious foods helped, too.

So, what about judgment? How do we shift that? The best way to shift judgment is to just let it go if you can. If you can't, get curious. Sometimes judgment is easy to let go of just by deciding to. Other times, it's an automatic negative assumption about someone else that takes curiosity to let it go.

Try these curiosity questions to interrupt the feedback loop:

- **What am I pretending not to notice about my role in the problem?**
- **Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do this?**
- **What do I really want right now for myself, the other person, and the relationship?**
- **What should I do right now to move toward what I really want?**

I used curiosity. I examined my role in the situation, and I acknowledged what a good friend Louise has always been to me. What I wanted was to improve my relationship with both of my friends and make sure we were always honest and considerate of each other. I knew I needed to get my head and my heart aligned and then have an honest conversation with Louise, and then with Charlotte.

Another way to liberate yourself from an overpowering story is to **separate facts from story**. When trying to strip out the story, it helps to test your ideas against a simple criterion: **Can you see or hear this thing you're calling a fact? Was it an actual behavior that you witnessed? Was it specific, observable, and verifiable? Did I overlook anything?**

Mastering our stories and getting curious about our judgment of others isn't about letting someone off the hook for perceived bad behavior. When we master our stories, we take ownership for the emotional energy we bring into future conversations with those we love and care for. And when we do that, we can not only change the conversation, but we can also build stronger relationships.

I invite you to do three things right now:

1. Go through my story and peel away the facts from stories. Also, what was my

role in all of this?

2. Think about one of your relationships, and a recent conversation that could use a bit of diagnostic sleuthing.
3. Tell me what you found.

Look for my posts on Facebook and Instagram and add a comment with your thoughts!

Sending you lots of love and warm thoughts,

Margie

Margie, do you have questions about this topic? If this newsletter resonates with you and you'd like some help working through your stories and emotions, I'm here for you.



Let's talk about how my coaching can help you and see if we're a good fit to work together! Click the [Schedule a Free Call](#), or the [Email Me](#) button.



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