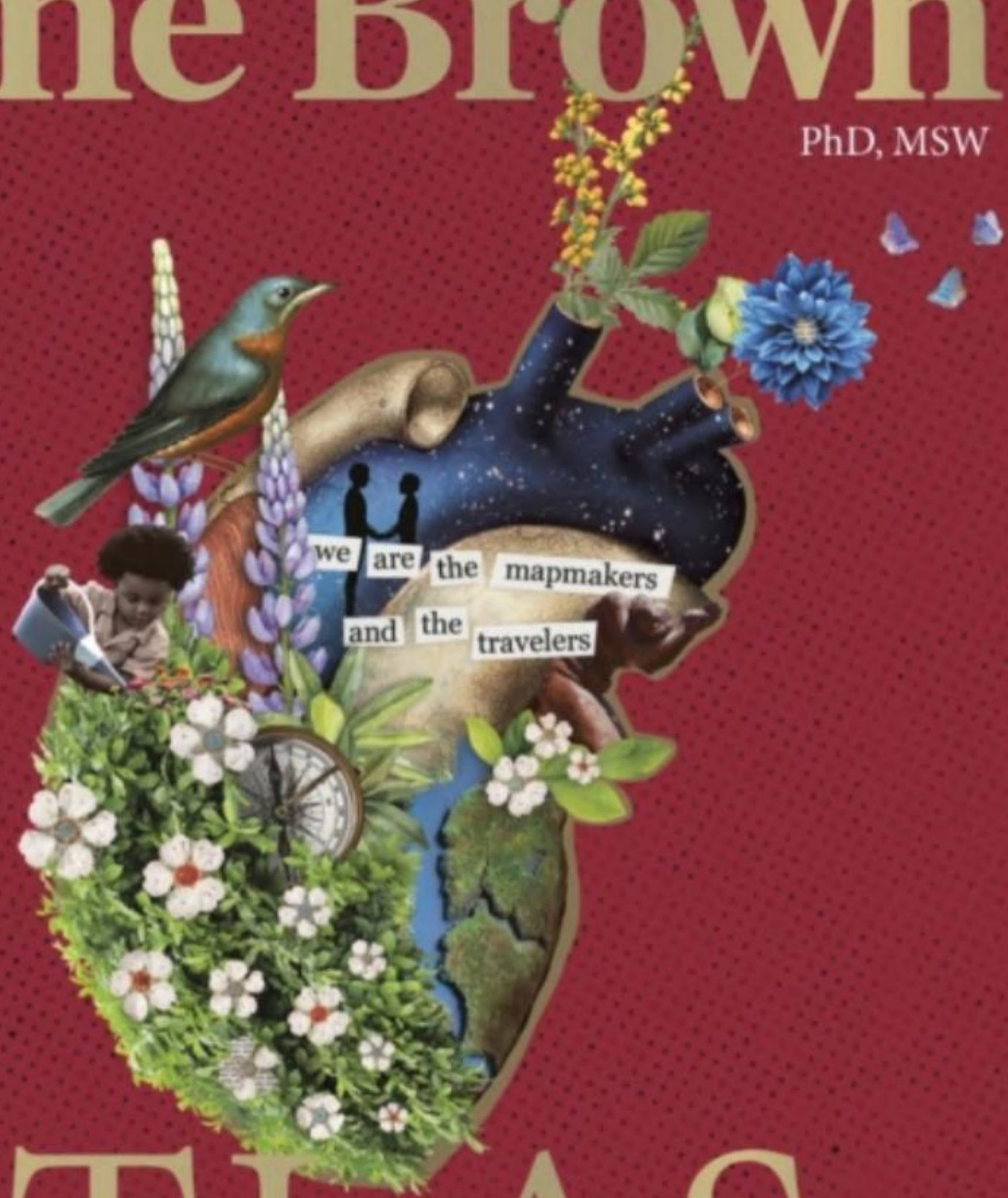


#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

# Brené Brown

PhD, MSW



# ATLAS → OF THE ← HEART

Mapping Meaningful Connection and  
the Language of Human Experience

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# Introduction

***Heart is sea,  
language is shore.  
Whatever sea includes,  
will hit the shore.***

— RUMI

## How It Started

I am not a sentimental keeper of things.

Maybe it's because I come from a long line of people who hold on to everything—every receipt and photo and old department store box. From the time I was in my early twenties, I often had the unenviable task of packing up the houses of relatives who could no longer live at home or who had died. If the movie montage version of this chore exists, I've never experienced it. It's miserable.

First, no one in my family is going to admit that they might, at some point, get sick or die. My people die with a look of defiance on their face and shit in every drawer. This leaves me and my sisters packing, crying, cussing, and using every single tool we've learned in therapy to resist turning on one another when we're exhausted. That's actually the only time we laugh—when one of us says “I wish I could take out my rage on y'all” and the other two, without even looking up, say, “Yeah. Same.”

There is nothing sweet about packing up. It's hard physical work and an emotional minefield. *Do I keep it? Do I trash it when no one is looking? Should I feel bad? Am I bad? Maybe I should box it all up and let my kids deal with it when it's their turn?*

As far as my own stuff goes, I was Marie Kondo before Marie Kondo was cool. Just like I'm convinced that my car goes faster after I get an oil change, I can feel my house sighing with relief when I take five bags of stuff to the local shelter. There's a lift and a lightness. And a sense of control. The house stands a little straighter without the extra weight, and I feel freer with a little less baggage.

Becoming a parent made the purging tricky. In 1999, when I was pregnant with Ellen, I saw something on TV—a reality show or a movie or something—that showed how a mother had kept all of her son's drawings and used them to decorate for his wedding rehearsal dinner. *Jesus. So much pressure.* From that point forward, every one of the 5,684 pieces of art that my kids brought home became an emotional negotiation about their rehearsal dinner. At some point I realized that unless I was hosting this dinner in a stadium, one box of curated pieces was enough. I saved some, framed and hung pieces all over the house, photographed some of them, and, when no one was looking, put the rest in the garbage. Way down deep where no one could see.

So, given my tendency to throw out everything, I'm always fascinated when I come across an old box of my own stuff. I must have thought something was really important if it warranted saving. If you put all of my memorabilia and artifacts together, you would get the most accurate story of who I was and what I valued at any one point in my life. And you'd probably need no more than a standard issue dining room table to lay it out.

I came across this old college paper several years ago—when I was starting this book. It's not a great or even a very good paper, but it knocked me off balance for a few months. *Why have I been thinking about emotions for so long? Why has this always been so important? Can I even remember a time when I wasn't thinking about emotions?*

As I unpacked a few other things in the box—a lifeguard whistle, poems I'd written, a mixtape from Steve, and a few pictures—my time capsule transported me back to my Flock of Seagulls asymmetrical haircut and a 1974 Volvo 240D with a floorboard that was so rusted out I could see the road pass beneath as I drove. I spent a couple of days with my 1987 self and learned some things that I had either never known or never acknowledged, or things I possibly once knew and pushed way down.

C. Brene' Brown  
October 9, 1984



## Why We Feel the Pain We Feel

Throughout our lives we must experience emotions and feelings that are inevitably painful and devastating. In order to be able to cope with these situations, we must individually find explanations and justifications for having to endure this pain. Although my explanations are personal and based on my own needs, I feel they are good guidelines to help others who have not been able to understand the reasoning behind sorrow.

Because life's problems follow a very specific and planned sequence, it's necessary

I come from a very tough, suck-it-up-get-it-done-and-don't-talk-about-feelings family. Both of my parents had a hard upbringing with a lot of trauma, and despite their own unhappiness, they considered the life they gave us the height of mythical suburban bliss. In their high school years, my dad was the rage-and-grief-fueled football captain and my mom was the head of the drill team and president of half a dozen clubs. She was everything she needed to be to redeem the reputation of what was inconceivable in the *Leave It to Beaver* 1950s—having an alcoholic mother.

When I was growing up, there was a lot of unpredictable behavior and intense emotion in our home. There was intense love and there was intense rage. There was intense laughter and intense hurt. But even the good times were dicey, because they could turn in an instant.

I am the oldest of four, so I often felt the brunt of the madness, along with the responsibility of protecting my siblings from the unpredictable swings. When things were bad, I was the protector. When things were great, I was the protector-in-waiting, always on the outside of the fun, easily teased for being too serious, and always knowing that we were one sideways glance or one smart-ass comment from chaos.

By the time I was in middle school, I had used a combination of my mom's magazines and after-school specials to diagnose myself as "crazy." I know that's a pathologizing word, but back then it was all I had.

First, nothing, I mean *nothing*, was discussed or normalized in my family. Not feelings or fears or periods or friend problems or puberty or money issues or extended family members who struggled with addiction and mental health issues—nothing. *We are all good*. Any question or attempt to understand the things that were clearly *not good* was immediately shut down in punitive ways. For children, it's easy for everything to become a source of shame when nothing is normalized. You assume that if no one is talking about it, it must be just you.

Second, my parents were confusing. My parents were and are good people who did the very best they could with the tools they had. Sometimes those tools weren't enough. Growing up, they seemed to be funny, loving, well liked, smart, great storytellers, and caring neighbors. People loved them. Because they were predictably good outside the house, and wildly unpre-



dictable inside, I assumed it was us. And because I was the oldest, I assumed it was mostly me. And again, it was shaming for all of us when the inside behaviors didn't match the families on TV. Something was wrong and it must be us. We were wrong.

As if all of this wasn't enough to navigate, I had magic powers. And I couldn't talk about them or ask anyone what to do with them. I wasn't allowed to see *The Exorcist*, *Sybil*, or *Carrie*, but I knew enough about these movies to use them as my reference points for unwell teenage girls. Needless to say, I was worried. Can you imagine how this conversation would have gone over with parents who wanted nothing more than to fit in and be the suburban ideal? *Hey, Mom and Dad, I didn't make the drill team, I don't have a date with a football player to Homecoming, and I got in trouble for saying "shithead" in English. But I do have secret powers.*

At the time, I would have told you that I could predict the future. I couldn't tell you what was going to happen in twenty years, but I could tell you with stunning accuracy what was going to happen in twenty minutes. And when you're young and navigating a tough time at home combined with moving and changing schools in fourth grade, sixth grade, and eighth grade, twenty minutes is all the future you have. So, yes. I could predict the future.

I knew which snarky comment would produce a laugh and which one would set off a fight. And I knew why. I knew that the comment about too much dessert was funny when someone felt good about how they looked and how the same comment would unleash a screaming match if someone didn't feel good about themselves that day or that hour.

I knew everyone's shame triggers and the unwanted identities that elicited their shame. I knew how it was important for everyone to be perceived, when we could poke fun, and how long we had to get the hell out of Dodge if we got that wrong. I knew that everyone in our family was really smart and funny, yet there were flavors of teasing that people used to work out stress or hurt, and once unleashed, that type of teasing wouldn't stop until someone was crying.

I also knew every inch of the supposedly "socially acceptable" place for processing anger, like driving and sporting events. I started out as an athlete but quit as soon as I could. It was too humiliating. Today, when I see

*that parent* at my kids' events, I have to put myself in a trance or leave. The irony is that the first time my dad came to one of Ellen's field hockey games, he got out of his folding chair in the middle of the game and started pacing along the fence line. When I went over to ask him what was wrong, he said, "These girls are under too much pressure. These parents and coaches are really piling it on. And someone's going to get hurt with those big sticks." *Who are you?*

The terrifying road rage moments of my childhood left me and my nervous system incapable of handling raging drivers. A couple of years ago, I had a driver pick me up at the airport for a work trip. He got angry when someone passed us on the right side of the freeway, so he started speeding up and slamming on the brakes to prevent that driver from sliding in front of us in the passing lane. I had to say, "I need you to pull over and let me out or stop driving like this." He laughed like I was joking until I put the driving service dispatch operator on speakerphone.

I was eight or nine years old the first time I realized that my superpowers worked outside the house. Our neighborhood swim team coach liked some people and disliked others, and his preferences seemed to change every day. Everyone tried to figure it out—some of the kids even ran experiments—but no one could solve it. Except me. I knew the secret.

This coach liked effort more than natural talent. He liked the kids who tried, even if they didn't win. And, my God, he loved backstroke. So every day when I got to practice, I'd pick the lane with the people who tried the hardest, not the best swimmers but the people who were dying by the time they reached the wall. Luckily, "dying by the time you reach the wall" was a good fit for me. And for free stroke, I'd always swim backstroke. He was a yeller, but I was never once on the receiving end of it.

I also had a really awful piano teacher who would shame and humiliate students. Because of my secret powers, I was never victimized by the teacher, but that wasn't enough. I could barely tolerate watching it happen to others, so I did my best to set the class up for success. One day, as I was showing my friend the scale we were working on, we both started giggling about something (probably how terrible I was at piano). The instructor went nuts and screamed "Why are you laughing?"

We didn't move a muscle.

Finally she said, "One of you is going to the principal's office—who's it going to be?"

It only took me a couple of seconds to work out that my parents would be okay with my getting in trouble, but this girl had an older brother who was constantly in trouble. I had even seen her mom at the school crying and picking him up from the principal's office. I shot straight up. "Me."

She told me to sit back down and set her sights on the girl sitting next to me, who was trembling. I looked at her and said, "No. I will not sit down. It was me." She lost her mind. But I was never afraid. I marched down to the office, gave the principal's assistant my home phone number, and refused to talk to anyone until my parents got there.

I told my parents that I had to stand up for someone who was getting picked on and who was afraid. My dad had me moved out of piano and we stopped for ice cream on the way home. He was proud of me for standing up to a bully. I was proud of myself for accurately predicting how everything would play out, but it wasn't a warm and fuzzy moment for me. The irony was too obvious.

Maybe I couldn't actually predict the future, but I did have top-level observation powers. I understood that people would do almost anything to not feel pain, including causing pain and abusing power, and I understood that there were very few people who could handle being held accountable for causing hurt without rationalizing, blaming, or shutting down.

What surprised me the most when I was growing up was how little other people seemed to understand or even think about the connection between feelings, thinking, and behavior. I remember often thinking, *Oh, God. Do you not see this coming?* I didn't feel smarter or better, just weirder and pained by the amount of hurt that we are capable of causing one another. The observation powers were partly survival and partly how I'm wired.

Everyone, including me, seemed so desperate to feel more connected to their own lives and to one another, but no one was looking in the right

places. No one was thinking about how it all works together. Everyone seemed disembodied from their own inner world and disconnected from other people. Too many lonely and secret lives.

As I edged into my late teens and early twenties, my powers waned. Or, it's probably more accurate to say, my power of observation was dulled by a thick layer of beer, cigarettes, dance halls, and behavior that constantly jumped the line between girls-just-want-to-have-fun and self-destructive self-medicating. As it turns out, being able to see what's coming doesn't make it any less painful when it arrives. In fact, knowing probably just upped my anticipatory anxiety and my intolerance for vulnerability. The eggshells weren't on the ground; they were duct-taped to the soles of my shoes. I could never step lightly enough or run fast enough to get away from the cracking, so I made everything around me so loud that it drowned out the sound.

It's awful that the same substances that take the edge off anxiety and pain also dull our sense of observation. We see the pain caused by the misuse of power, so we numb our pain and lose track of our own power. We become terrified of feeling pain, so we engage in behaviors that become a magnet for more pain. We run from anger and grief straight into the arms of fear, perfectionism, and the desperate need for control.

*Oh, God. Did I not see this coming?*

Over the course of several years, I learned that if understanding power and the connections between the way we feel, think, and act was my superpower, numbing was my kryptonite. Inspired by my mom, who, after my parents' divorce, worked several jobs and started therapy, I got help. I got sober and started doing my own work.

It may be just a couple of sentences here, but it was years of terrifying change, hard goodbyes, and boundaries—a truckload of boundaries. When we stop numbing and start feeling and learning again, we have to reevaluate everything, especially how to choose loving ourselves over making other people comfortable. It was the hardest work I've ever done and continue to do.

I learned that taking the edge off is not rewarding, but putting the edge back on is one of the most worthwhile things we can do. Those sharp edges

feel vulnerable, but they are also the markers that let us know where we end and others begin.

Understanding and feeling those edges brings grace and clarity. The edges taught me that the more I used alcohol, food, work, caretaking, and whatever else I could get my hands on to numb my anxiety and vulnerability, the less I would understand my feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. I finally realized that trying to outrun and outsmart vulnerability and pain is choosing a life defined by suffering and exhaustion.

Still today, the more I pay attention to my life and the messages from the edges, the more I'm able to choose a way of life that doesn't demand constant vigilance and preparedness. And when there are things outside my control that do demand high alert—COVID, for example—I know running away from the pain and anxiety is way more risky than leaning in and locking eyes with it.

I've learned that power is not bad, but the abuse of power or using power over others is the opposite of courage; it's a desperate attempt to maintain a very fragile ego. It's the desperate scramble of self-worth quicksand. When people are hateful or cruel or just being assholes, they're showing us exactly what they're afraid of. Understanding their motivation doesn't make their behavior less difficult to bear, but it does give us choices. And subjecting ourselves to that behavior by choice doesn't make us tough—it's a sign of our own lack of self-worth.

I know more than I'd like about being subjected to this kind of behavior when I don't want to be, volunteering to experience it just to prove to myself and others that I'm tough, and, sadly, perpetrating it as well. I can get really scary when I'm scared if I'm not paying attention.

I also learned that when you hold someone accountable for hurtful behaviors and they feel shame, that's not the same as shaming someone. I am responsible for holding you accountable in a respectful and productive way. I'm not responsible for your emotional reaction to that accountability. Sadly, I've also learned that sometimes, even when the pain takes your breath away, you have to let the people you love experience the consequences of their own behavior. That one really hurts.

Last, I know I will never have to stop learning these things. Over and over. I've made a lot of progress, but the learning will never stop. I'm just grateful that I can find *and feel* the edges today. I love that saying, "The center will hold." I believe that in the midst of struggle, the center will hold if, and only if, we can feel the edges.

## How It's Going

Although I started honing my power of observation in kindergarten, I officially began studying the connection between how we think, feel, and act over twenty years ago. In addition to researching, I now spend most of my time writing, talking to and learning from social scientists and experts on my podcasts, and working in organizations with leaders who are scaling courage-building skills and creating culture change.

In some ways a lot has changed, and in other ways not enough has changed. For example, today if you ask me to identify the biggest barriers to developing brave leaders or cultivating courage in our families or bringing justice to communities, I'd go right back to what I believed was true about people when I was a kid:

People will do almost anything to not feel pain, including causing pain and abusing power;

Very few people can handle being held accountable without rationalizing, blaming, or shutting down; and

Without understanding how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors work together, it's almost impossible to find our way back to ourselves and each other. When we don't understand how our emotions shape our thoughts and decisions, we become disembodied from our own experiences and disconnected from each other.

Fifteen years ago, when we first introduced a curriculum based on my shame resilience research, we asked participants in the training workshops

to list all of the emotions that they could recognize and name as they were experiencing them. Over the course of five years, we collected these surveys from more than seven thousand people. The average number of emotions named across the surveys was three. The emotions were happy, sad, and angry.

When I think about this data, I think back to a quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that I came across in college: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” What does it mean if the vastness of human emotion and experience can only be expressed as mad, sad, or happy? What about shame, disappointment, wonder, awe, disgust, embarrassment, despair, contentment, boredom, anxiety, stress, love, overwhelm, surprise, and all of the other emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human?

Imagine if you had a shooting pain in your left shoulder that was so severe it actually took your breath away. The pain kept you from working, sleeping, and fully engaging in your life. When you finally arrive at the doctor’s office and she asks what’s going on, there’s suddenly tape over your mouth and your hands are tied behind your back. You try yelling through the tape and freeing your hands so you can point to your shoulder, but there’s no use. You’re just there—inches and minutes from help and possible relief—but you can’t communicate or explain the pain. I would imagine in that situation most of us would either fall to the floor in despair or fling ourselves around the room in uncontrollable rage. This is not that different from what can happen to us when we are unable to articulate our emotions. We feel hopeless or we feel a destructive level of anger.

Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. When we don’t have the language to talk about what we’re experiencing, our ability to make sense of what’s happening and share it with others is severely limited. Without accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don’t always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language shows us that naming an experience doesn’t give the experience more power, it gives *us* the power of understanding and meaning.

Additionally, we have compelling research that shows that language does more than just communicate emotion, it can actually shape what we're feeling. Our understanding of our own and others' emotions is shaped by how we perceive, categorize, and describe emotional experiences—and these interpretations rely heavily on language.

Language speeds and strengthens connections in the brain when we are processing sensory information. But newer research shows that when our access to emotional language is blocked, our ability to interpret incoming emotional information is significantly diminished. Likewise, having the correct words to describe specific emotions makes us better able to identify those emotions in others, as well as to recognize and manage the emotional experiences when we feel them ourselves.

Our ability to accurately recognize and label emotions is often referred to as *emotional granularity*. In the words of Harvard psychologist Susan David, "Learning to label emotions with a more nuanced vocabulary can be absolutely transformative." David explains that if we don't have a sufficient emotional vocabulary, it is difficult to communicate our needs and to get the support that we need from others. But those who are able to distinguish between a range of various emotions "do much, much better at managing the ups and downs of ordinary existence than those who see everything in black and white." In fact, research shows that the process of labeling emotional experience is related to greater emotion regulation and psychosocial well-being.

These benefits seem to be related to the additional information we learn from recognizing what emotion we are feeling. David states that emotions "signal rewards and dangers. They point us in the direction of our hurt. They can also tell us which situations to engage with and which to avoid. They can be beacons, not barriers, helping us identify what we most care about and motivating us to make positive changes." Work by other researchers substantiates David's thinking, indicating that our emotions help us make sense of our surroundings and provide needed input for managing ourselves and responding effectively to others.



# Making Meaning

Eduardo Bericat, a sociology professor at the University of Seville, says “As human beings we can only experience life emotionally.” My hope for this book is that together we can learn more about the emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human—including the language that allows us to make sense of what we experience. I want to open up that language portal so even more of us can step through it and find a universe of new choices and second chances—a universe where we can share the stories of our bravest and most heartbreaking moments with each other in a way that builds connection.

I know these universes of new choices and second chances exist because I’ve discovered them for myself. As I’ve researched and written about human emotion and experience, my family—including my parents—have cheered me on, read my work, and leaned into learning. The process has been messy and imperfect, but it’s been healing and powerful to be a part of a family that now has the language and skill to align the love we feel with the way we actually show up with each other. There are still tough times, and it’s easy to default to the old ways, but we’ve seen what’s possible and we’re making progress.

In the following chapters, we’re going to explore eighty-seven emotions and experiences that have been organized into groups. I say emotions *and* experiences because some of these are not emotions—they’re thoughts that lead to emotion. And if you asked ten emotion researchers which ones of these are emotions, you’d probably get ten different answers. The NYU neuroscience professor Joseph LeDoux explains, “It’s been said that there are as many theories of emotions as there are emotion theorists.”

The matter is complex because human emotions and experiences are studied from the perspective of philosophy, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, and mental health (to name just a few disciplines), and research topics include studies of facial expression, physiology, brain imaging, genetics, personality traits, cross-cultural analysis, and

more. Some researchers place all emotions into one of two categories—low arousal and high arousal—while others like to label them positive and negative. The approaches to understanding emotion are nearly endless.

When the author of a 2015 *Atlantic* article, Julie Beck, asked colleagues to define emotion, she got these varying responses:

- Individual-specific reactions to experiences
- Sensitivity to events
- Your mind’s reaction to experience
- The description of intangible human feelings, the powerful internal sensations that color our every experience.

In Beck’s article, Alan Fridlund, a social and clinical psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is quoted as saying, “The only thing certain in the emotion field is that no one agrees on how to define emotion.”

While there are many disagreements about the nature of human emotions and experiences, scientific study has narrowed the gaps of what we know to be true. For example, when comparing two studies conducted twenty-two years apart (1994 and 2016) that polled emotion research experts, Paul Ekman (a leading expert himself) concluded that these authorities have come much closer to agreement on many emotion topics. He states that the more recent survey found “broad areas of agreement about the evidence for some of the major issues about the nature of emotion.” For example, 80 percent of emotions experts now agree that there are universal voice and facial expression signals that reflect our emotional experience.

One area that remains under debate is how many human emotions and experiences exist. Ekman believes there is clear evidence for seven universal emotions (although he really talks about these as emotion “families”). He also believes that there are ten additional emotions that are close to having

sufficient evidence for being universal and eleven more on which the jury is still out. Emotion researchers Alan Cowen and Dacher Keltner believe that at least twenty-seven or twenty-eight emotions are required to convey the range of human experience.

Based on my research on the importance of emotional nuance, I have chosen to take a broader approach. These nuances matter, particularly when we are trying to accurately convey our experiences to others. Therefore, the emotions and experiences categorized in this book span beyond what many researchers would call “basic.”

The list of emotions and experiences that I present in this book first emerged from a content analysis of comments from an online course I was teaching that had several main sections on emotion and story. From 2013 to 2014, 66,625 participants were enrolled in the course and there were more than 550,000 comments. The comments were de-identified (no names) and exported to spreadsheets. After going through the human subjects approval process, I analyzed the data using two questions:

What are the emotions and experiences that emerge the most often, and which emotions and experiences do people struggle to name or label?

This yielded approximately 150 emotions and experiences. From here, we invited a group of experienced therapists who work in diverse mental health settings to a focus group process that I led. The therapists’ experience ranged from addiction and community mental health to college counseling to inpatient psychiatry and individual and group psychotherapy. We posted all 150 of the emotions and experiences on the walls of the room, and the clinicians were asked to physically tag them with red, yellow, or green stickers based on this criteria:

*In my experience working with clients, the ability to name this emotion or experience is essential to being able to process it in a productive and healing manner.*

Let me just say how much I love my job! This was such an amazing experience. Here's a picture of me with the therapists after we finished our group process.



BACK ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: Wesley Clayton, Gabriel Ramirez

FRONT ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: Debbie Sieck, Helen Stagg, Sarah Luna, Brené Brown, Ashley Brown Ruiz, Chinyere Eigege, Cheryl Scoglio, Sasha Coles

Emotions and experiences that received all green stickers were automatically included on the list. We debated and discussed the yellow and red stickers, and those were not included unless defining them offered clarity to the emotions and experiences that were marked green.

Over a three-year period, I worked closely with Dr. Ronda Dearing, our senior director of research, reviewing close to fifteen hundred academic publications. As we started researching the emotions and experiences that made the list, there were times that we would add a word that was helpful to define for comparative reasons—especially if we have a tendency to confuse the words in question (e.g., jealousy and envy). I couldn't have done this work without her.

At first the terms were in alphabetical order, but in 2020, our summer college interns told us that learning about the emotions and experiences was most effective when the terms were in groups that highlighted the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between experiences. They explained that grouping them based on how they relate and compare to one another reflects more of our lived experiences and enhances learning. When interns teach, we listen and learn. Thank you, Ellen and Prerna!

Once we had the final list, we used the course data to better understand how people actually use language when describing their feelings. How we talk about our experiences is often not even close to how those experiences are discussed by researchers. My commitment is to deliver work that is empirically based and accessible and that resonates with our lived experiences and lived language.

I know what a privilege it is to have spent my education and career working closely with research participants, practitioners (therapists, counselors, organizers, leaders, and others) and educators (from kindergarten teachers to doctoral professors). Without this diverse group of people, I'd have no career, which is why I consider them my most important audience when I'm researching and writing.

I figure that if these groups have the courage to share their experiences and stories with me, I'm going to do my best to present the research findings in ways that are meaningful for them and their work, including using accessible language and stories.

If the research participants, practitioners, and educators don't get what I'm saying, or find it irrelevant because of how it's presented, I've failed. This is not the way I'm trained—there is absolutely no emphasis on accessibility in academia—but I'm a social worker before I'm anything else, and “meeting people where they are” is an ethical mandate from this perspective. Sometimes I'm successful, sometimes I need to do better. Sometimes I fail. And when I fail, I hear about it. Thankfully.

I want this book to be an atlas for all of us, because I believe that with an adventurous heart and the right maps, we can travel anywhere and never fear losing ourselves. Even when we don't know where we are.

## You Are Here

In most of my books, I've shared the line "I am a mapmaker and a traveler." It's my way of telling you that I don't have the answers. I have data, and I use that data to chart a course that I'm sharing with you and trying to navigate at the same time. I don't have it figured out, and most of my research has surprised me and kicked my ass.

I stumble and fall a lot as I try to put what I learn into practice. This book is no exception. In the three years that we've been working on this research, I learned that I was misusing language and that I had a profound misunderstanding of several of these concepts. I also came across new research that shifted my thinking on emotions and how I'll talk about them in the future.

This research also taught me that there are times when I can't even offer you a map. I simply don't have access to some of the places you've been and many of the places you'll need to go. This is one of those times. For this work, we are all the mapmakers and the travelers.

When I settled on using a map metaphor for the book, the first person I called was Dr. Kirk Goldsberry, my friend and colleague at the University of Texas at Austin. Kirk is a mapmaker and a cartography scholar. He knows and loves maps. He also knows and loves basketball. Realizing that the accuracy of his shots depended on his court position, he used his cartography skills to analyze and present spatial basketball data to readers in new ways. He was the vice president for strategic research for the San Antonio Spurs, the lead analyst for Team USA Basketball, and a visiting researcher at the Harvard Institute of Quantitative Social Sciences. Kirk is best known for his sports writing, including his book *Sprawlball: A Visual Tour of the New Era of the NBA*.

Kirk explained that there are two ways to make a map: actual exploration to collect your own data, and using data provided by other people. Either way, maps are about layers. If you're using existing data, you might start with elevation, then use a different set of data to layer on roads, then perhaps use hydrography data to find the lakes, streams, and rivers, and so

on. He helped me understand that while different maps may use different layers, the one thing that all maps do is provide readers with orientation.

But mapmaking is not as easy as simply stacking data on top of data. There's an art and science to how cartographers prioritize and integrate the data. And, according to Kirk, 50 to 60 percent of the challenge of mapmaking is labeling the map in a way that appropriately prioritizes the right information. He explained, "The interaction between the layers is the story of the map. It is the narrative structure of what we see when we read a map. The layers tell us the hierarchy of what's most important."

When he said that, I could immediately picture a Texas state map on which Houston, Austin, Dallas, and San Antonio immediately grab your attention and Luckenbach and Hondo require a solid squint and some finger tracing. The labeling tells me which cities are the biggest and where they are in relation to one another.

Kirk told me, "Maps are the most important documents in human history. They give us tools to store and exchange knowledge about space and place." I know I'm a map geek, but when he said that, I got goosebumps. We are meaning makers, and a sense of place is central to meaning-making.

*Where am I?*

*How did I get here from there?*

*How do I get there from here?*

These questions are central to understanding the physical world, and they're central to understanding our internal worlds. Whether we're looking at a map of Texas or reflecting on a tough conversation with someone we love, we need landmarks to orient us, and we need language to label what we're experiencing. And, just like a map, the interaction between the layers of our emotions and experiences tells our story.

But rather than elevation and roads and water, **human emotions and experiences are layers of biology, biography, behavior, and backstory.** As

you make your way through this book, you'll see that in order to recognize, name, and make sense of our feelings and experiences, we have to:

1. Understand how they show up in our bodies and why (biology)
2. Get curious about how our families and communities shape our beliefs about the connection between our feelings, thoughts, and behavior (biography)
3. Examine our go-to (behaviors), and
4. Recognize the context of what we're feeling or thinking. *What brought this on?* (backstory)

These are the questions that help us make meaning of our lives.

So often, when we feel lost, adrift in our lives, our first instinct is to look out into the distance to find the nearest shore. But that shore, that solid ground, is within us. The anchor we are searching for is connection, and it is internal. To form meaningful connections with others, we must first connect with ourselves, but to do either, we must first establish a common understanding of the language of emotion and human experience.



# **Atlas of the Heart**

# Stressed and Overwhelmed

The restaurant is packed. It's loud, every table is full, and people are lined up out the door. There's at least one angry person at every table who is desperately trying to wave down a waiter.

"We never got our bread!"

"We need more tea!"

"We've been waiting on our salads for twenty minutes!"

"We need our check unless you don't want us to pay for this crappy service!"

You can hear the kitchen manager's booming voice through the swinging doors:

"The food on the line is dying—let's go, let's go!"

"We've got desserts ready for table 10 and bread ready for tables 3, 4, and 8."

But only one waiter showed up for the shift. And it's me. And I can't speak, for some reason. And I'm wearing a bathing suit and huge fins that make it hard to walk and impossible to run.

This is one of my least favorite recurring bad dreams. I hate it because, after six years of waiting tables and bartending for a high-pressure, high-expectation restaurant group through college and grad school, I know that feeling all too well. We made a lot of money, but we worked our asses off. And the pressure left a mark.

Still today, if Steve is in the kitchen and I walk behind him, I'll shout, "Behind you!" And if I spy someone leaning against the counter during a family kitchen clean-up after dinner, I have to stop myself from saying, "Hey! If you have time to lean, you have time to clean." The language and habits of that job were survival, and they stuck.

Weirdly—or maybe not—the majority of my current leadership team have significant restaurant experience. Maybe we attract one another, or maybe I'm just drawn to the capacity for grind. If you work on our team and you

step over a sugar packet on the floor because picking that up is someone else's job—you're not a good fit.

**Stressed** and **overwhelmed** remind me of two restaurant terms that my team and I often use today: “in the weeds” and “blown.” Back in the day, if I walked into the kitchen and told another waiter “I’m in the weeds”—the response would be, “What do you need?” I might say, “Can you take bread to tables 2 and 4, and re-tea tables 3 and 5, please?”

Being in the weeds and pulling out of the weeds happened to everyone on almost every shift. It was just part of the job, and you learned to manage it.

Walking into the kitchen and saying “I’m blown”—well, that’s completely different. The kitchen gets really quiet. No one asks what you need. Normally, someone runs to the hostess stand to find out what tables you’re running that shift—they don’t even assume you know at this point. The kitchen manager, who would never get involved in an “in the weeds” situation, pulls all the tickets for your guests to evaluate what’s happening and immediately assigns your tables to other waitstaff.

When you’re blown, you can either step outside or into the cooler or go to the bathroom (and cry). Whatever you need. You’re expected back in ten minutes, ready to go, but for ten minutes, there’s a complete takeover. In six years, it happened to me twice, both times due to pure exhaustion at the end of triple shifts that I was working because tuition was due. Stressed is being in the weeds. Overwhelmed is being blown.

## **Stressed**

**We feel stressed when we evaluate environmental demand as beyond our ability to cope successfully. This includes elements of unpredictability, uncontrollability, and feeling overloaded.**

Stressful situations cause both physiological (body) and psychological (mind and emotion) reactions. However, regardless of how strongly our body responds to stress (increases in heart rate and cortisol), our emotional reaction is more tied to our cognitive assessment of whether we can cope

# “ Stressed is being in the weeds. Overwhelmed is being blown.”

with the situation than to how our body is reacting. I found this really interesting because I always assumed that my emotions responded to my body freaking out. But really, my emotions are responding to my “thinking” assessment of how well I can handle something.

Just as getting in and out of the weeds is a part of every waitstaff shift in a restaurant, navigating stressors is a daily part of living. However, daily stress can take a toll. In fact, chronic exposure to stressors can be detrimental to health. High levels of perceived stress have been shown to correlate with more rapid aging, decreased immune function, greater inflammatory processes, less sleep, and poorer health behaviors.

## **Overwhelmed**

If stress is like being in the weeds, feeling overwhelmed is like being blown. **Overwhelmed means an extreme level of stress, an emotional and/or cognitive intensity to the point of feeling unable to function.** I love this definition of “overwhelmed” from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: “completely overcome or overpowered by thought or feeling.”

We all know that feeling that washes over us and leaves us completely unsure of what to do next. Even when people ask “How can I help?” or

“What needs to be done?”—responding with organized thoughts feels impossible. This is also when I can get really crappy and think to myself, *If I had the wherewithal to figure out what comes next and how we need to approach all of this, I wouldn't be walking around in circles crying and talking to myself.*

Feeling stressed and feeling overwhelmed seem to be related to our perception of how we are coping with our current situation and our ability to handle the accompanying emotions: *Am I coping? Can I handle this? Am I inching toward the quicksand?*

Jon Kabat-Zinn describes overwhelm as the all-too-common feeling “that our lives are somehow unfolding faster than the human nervous system and psyche are able to manage well.”

This really resonates with me: *It's all unfolding faster than my nervous system and psyche can manage it.*

When I read that Kabat-Zinn suggests that mindful play, or no-agenda, non-doing time, is the cure for overwhelm, it made sense to me why, when we were blown at the restaurant, we weren't asked to help problem-solve the situation. We were just asked to engage in non-doing. I'm sure experience taught the managers that doing nothing was the only way back for someone totally overwhelmed.

The non-doing also makes sense—there is a body of research that indicates that we don't process other emotional information accurately when we feel overwhelmed, and this can result in poor decision making. In fact, researcher Carol Gohm used the term “overwhelmed” to describe an experience where our emotions are intense, our focus on them is moderate, and our clarity about exactly what we're feeling is low enough that we get confused when trying to identify or describe the emotions.

In other words: *On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm feeling my emotions at about 10, I'm paying attention to them at about 5, and I understand them at about 2.*

This is not a setup for successful decision making. The big learning here is that feeling both stressed and overwhelmed is about our narrative of

emotional and mental depletion—there’s just too much going on to manage effectively.

## Anxiety

For me, **anxiety** feels like what I lovingly call the “Willy Wonka shit tunnel.” There’s a frightening scene in the original Willy Wonka film that starts out as a sweet boat ride through a magical land of supersized candy and turns into an escalating scene of fear and loss of control. As the boat enters a dark tunnel, the mood turns. The boat starts going faster and faster while terrible images flash on the walls, including a close-up of a millipede crawling over someone’s face, a chicken getting its head cut off, and a lizard eating a bug. None of it makes narrative sense; it’s just scary and confusing.

All of this is happening while the passengers—children and their parents—are freaking out and Willy Wonka, played by the incredible, wild-eyed Gene Wilder, is maniacally reciting this poem at an increasingly frenetic rate:

*There’s no earthly way of knowing  
Which direction we are going.  
There’s no knowing where we’re rowing  
Or which way the river’s flowing.  
Is it raining?  
Is it snowing?  
Is a hurricane a-blowing?  
Not a speck of light is showing  
So the danger must be growing.  
Are the fires of hell a-glowing?  
Is the grisly reaper mowing?  
Yes! The danger must be growing  
For the rowers keep on rowing.  
And they’re certainly not showing  
Any signs that they are slowing!*

That’s what anxiety feels like to me. Escalating loss of control, worst-case-scenario thinking and imagery, and total uncertainty.

through my feelings of anxiety. I've also had to give up caffeine, commit to eight to nine hours of sleep a night, and exercise almost every day.

An intolerance for uncertainty is an important contributing factor to all types of anxiety. Those of us who are generally uncomfortable with uncertainty are more likely to experience anxiety in specific situations as well as to have trait anxiety and anxiety disorders.

Our anxiety often leads to one of two coping mechanisms: worry or avoidance. Unfortunately, neither of these coping strategies is very effective.

Worrying and anxiety go together, but worry is not an emotion; it's the thinking part of anxiety. **Worry is described as a chain of negative thoughts about bad things that might happen in the future.**

What really got me about the worry research is that those of us with a tendency to worry believe it is helpful for coping (it is not), believe it is uncontrollable (which means we don't try to stop worrying), and try to suppress worry thoughts (which actually strengthens and reinforces worry). I'm not suggesting that we worry about worry, but it's helpful to recognize that worrying is not a helpful coping mechanism, that we absolutely can learn how to control it, and that rather than suppressing worry, we need to dig into and address the emotion driving the thinking.

**Avoidance, the second coping strategy for anxiety, is not showing up and often spending a lot of energy zigzagging around and away from that thing that already feels like it's consuming us.** And avoidance isn't benign. It can hurt us, hurt other people, and lead to increased and mounting anxiety. In her book *The Dance of Fear*, Dr. Harriet Lerner writes, "It is not fear that stops you from doing the brave and true thing in your daily life. Rather, the problem is avoidance. You want to feel comfortable, so you avoid doing or saying the thing that will evoke fear and other difficult emotions. Avoidance will make you feel less vulnerable in the short run, but it will never make you less afraid."

The entire premise of this book is that language has the power to define our experiences, and there's no better example of this than anxiety and excitement.

**Anxiety** and **excitement** feel the same, but how we interpret and label them can determine how we experience them.

Even though **excitement is described as an energized state of enthusiasm leading up to or during an enjoyable activity**, it doesn't always feel great. We can get the same "coming out of our skin" feeling that we experience when we're feeling anxious. Similar sensations are labeled "anxiety" when we perceive them negatively and "excitement" when we perceive them positively. One important strategy when we're in these feelings is to take a deep breath and try to determine whether we're feeling anxiety or excitement. Researchers found that labeling the emotion as excitement seems to hinge on interpreting the bodily sensations as positive. The labels are important because they help us know what to do next.

**Dread occurs frequently in response to high-probability negative events; its magnitude increases as the dreaded event draws nearer.** Because dread makes an anticipated negative event even worse, we often prefer to get unpleasant things over with quickly, even if doing them sooner means that they will be more unpleasant (e.g., a more painful procedure now is preferred to a less painful procedure later).

I felt so called out when I read this. I can convince myself that an experience is going to be disastrous and work myself into a dread-frenzy. It's terrible, because even if it goes well, I'm so dread-exhausted that I can't enjoy it.

For anxiety and dread, the threat is in the future. For fear, the threat is now—in the present. **Fear is a negative, short-lasting, high-alert emotion in response to a perceived threat, and, like anxiety, it can be measured as a state or trait.** Some people have a higher propensity to experience fear than others.

Fear arises when we need to respond quickly to physical or psychological danger that is present and imminent. Because fear is a rapid-fire emotion, the physiological reaction can sometimes occur before we even realize that we are afraid. The typical responses are fight, flight, or freeze.

In the research, you can find many lists of what elicits fear in us. The items range from rodents and snakes, to the inability to see our surroundings, to observing our children in peril. However, no matter how much the lists vary,