

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

This Holiday, Don't Junk Your Pain Mail

Ever not paid a bill for a really long time? At first, the “past due” notices trickle in slowly. As long as we don't glance at the mail pile, they're pretty easy to ignore. Eventually, though, the steady stream of letters, creditor calls, and wage garnishing threats get impossible to ignore. It's like we're in the first Harry Potter movie where letters explode through the mail slot and chimney. Good luck ignoring *that!*

Painful emotions can be a lot like those creditor letters. At first, they send little messages: A stab of loneliness before we go to bed. A touch more frustration at the slow grocery clerk than he really deserved. A “welling up” at the Hallmark commercial that reminds us of a lost loved one we've tried not to think about. A quick flash of memory of that time when we were 10 and the unspeakable happened.

Many of us ignore these first emotion “letters.” After all, stopping to open them up and hear what they are trying to tell us is pretty inconvenient. It's exhausting and scary to think about these things. It gets in the way of what we've got on the schedule. So we snap back to what we were doing right before we felt that feeling or we grab our favorite form of technology to get our mind off it. Discomfort averted...for now.

Eventually, though, these unheeded emotions can reach Harry Potter letter proportions. The loneliness gets big enough that we can feel its weight physically in our chests and we'll do anything with anyone anytime just to not be alone. Our anger blows up all over our loved ones and we see the fear in their eyes. We find ourselves crying uncontrollably at work or in a parking lot. Or we can't shake the memory of that one horrible time without causing ourselves physical pain to achieve distraction. Let emotions go unheeded long enough and they'll eat us alive, one way or another.

Opening Pain's Letters

Though initially scary, it really is better for us long term if we open the early letters our painful emotions send us. There are lots of ways to do this. But one place to start would be to set aside some time, even half an hour away from other people, technology, and other distractions to just notice where our minds and feelings go. With a journal, a scrap of paper, a voice recorder, or anything that doesn't have other distracting programs on it, we can make some notes about what we notice and ask ourselves questions about it until it becomes clearer.

Here's an example:

I feel nervous. My shoulders feel tense. I want to jump out of this chair. Huh. Why is that? I feel like I should be doing something else right now. There's so much to get done. Why don't I think it's okay to take half an hour of “me time” away from all that? I guess my family never really stopped and rested. My husband doesn't either. Maybe that's it. Or maybe I don't feel like I'm worth much if I'm not contributing and helping people. Is that true? Am I really like that? Yeah. I guess that's true. I wonder if I've been nervous and, now that I'm thinking about it, pretty angry

because I'm tired of going non-stop, but I don't feel like it's okay to rest or do things for myself. I wonder if my short temper recently is trying to tell me I need to rest even though I'm scared to.

Of course, feelings and their invitations to change aren't always obvious right away. Sometimes it takes some repeated times alone or conversations with a trusted friend or therapist to get to the bottom of them. But what I have found, and what you may find too, is that when I take time to really feel the feelings I've been running from, often there is a surge of emotion as I face my fear. I might feel really lonely, angry, sad, or shame-filled. But the most intense part of the pain rarely lasts more than 5 minutes. In fact, it's often closer to 90 seconds, as several researchers have reported. After the initial surge of emotion, things tend to taper off a bit and the fear goes down some. It becomes easier to bring my rational brain alongside my emotions and consider any changes I might need to make to respond to what I'm feeling.

Going Deep When the Letters Aren't Clear

Sometimes, the messages that come from the pain are acute and clear: You need to schedule in more "do nothing" time to feel less harried. You really miss your brother and you need to spend time letting yourself be sad about his death rather than pretending like you are over it. You are feeling jealous of others who seem to have it all together because you don't have a job or a boyfriend yet; it's time to take a break from Facebook to remove the illusion that you are "behind" the rest of the world.

Other times, the pain that comes up does not have such straightforward solutions. After all, what's the message that's being communicated by the hopelessness associated with chronic medical conditions the doctors can't figure out? What's the message of the pain we feel in response to horrible tragedies that are beyond our power to fix? What are we supposed to do with the pain of waiting for something deeply important to us that's beyond our control? There aren't clear, defined solutions for these things that can make the pain just go away and stop sending us "messages."

What this kind of pain invites us to do is to ask deeper questions: What do we believe about suffering? What about death? Afterlife? Do we believe we are ultimately alone in a chaotic, random universe? Or is there a larger order to it or a greater Someone guiding things? What in life is meaningful? If we're overwhelmed by what we can't control, do we need to retreat from things that constantly remind us of it and spend less time ruminating on what is out of our power? Or do we need to take some action, however small, to fight the overwhelming injustices we see, if only to feel we've done something?

Even though these questions are difficult and they don't have easy-to-prove answers. It is still better to ask them than to run from them. When, instead of shrugging our shoulders and saying we just have no idea, we actively try to figure out what we believe, the pursuit of personal answers to these questions can provide a kind of relief, even in the midst of chronic pain and overwhelming suffering. When we know that we've looked at the realities around us, courageously felt our feelings about them, and consciously chosen how we want to live our lives based on our conclusions, rather than mindlessly bumbling our way through, there can be a peace that comes with knowing we've done what we can, even though the suffering or waiting remains.

The Holiday Challenge

The holidays are notorious for elevating the stress and rush in our lives, making it even more difficult to feel things and process through them. Holidays and year ends also tend to generate more disturbing feelings than other seasons do. Encounters with friends, family, crazed shoppers, loneliness, tight budgets, disappointing New Year's Eves, and subsequent resolutions all can send us emotional "letters" about the ways we feel our lives are broken or falling short of our expectations. There's a lot of potential pain there and it's extra tough to listen to those messages in constructive ways.

Still, this holiday season, my challenge to you is to take some time after the intensity of the festivities to let yourself feel the feelings that get stuffed under the busyness. Notice what you feel. Let the feelings come on strong and then dissipate. Listen to any messages your pain sends you about changes you need to make. If there's no clear message, just pain, let yourself re-examine what you believe about some of those deeper questions. And know I'll be doing the same right along there with you.

If you or someone you know would like help understanding the messages painful emotions are sending, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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