Commonplace

How to Make Better Friends with the Terrible Feelings You're Feeling

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Preface

Smack in the middle of Covid lockdown, one of my parents was diagnosed with acute leukemia. This would have been bad regardless; with Covid, it was that much worse. Like so many people, I was already at my anxiety limit, where I've been...for years, really, with the last few months an absolute clown car of chaos and fear. After the diagnosis, news related to the pandemic, to racist violence, to the 2020 election which stalks my dreams, not to mention all the noxious and disorienting and utterly incessant false and misleading information everywhere, had me beside myself.

To help me and my family process, I decided to illustrate a guidebook for dealing with the weird ups and downs and moments of rage-smashing and weeping and all the quiet, dissociated moments in between. And that was just regarding the diagnosis. We still continued to struggle to process everything else, as stress compounded stress compounded stress.

Which got me thinking. One of my basic media literacy contentions—front and center in my [introduction to the Knowledge Futures media literacy toolkit](#)—is that our disinformation hellscape is a mental health crisis as much as an informational one. What this art project did was remind me that anxiety stemming from disinformation, manipulation, and extreme polarization doesn't happen in an emotional vacuum. We encounter these anxieties within our already-complicated lives, replete with interpersonal and familial and community struggles, all of which intensify and are intensified by all the other things all around us. To talk about better practices for responding to polluted information, then, we also need to talk about better practices for navigating mental health more broadly. Panic in one area of our lives will always dovetail with panic in another.

2020 isn't done with us yet. We need to ramp up conversations about media literacy; and foundational to that, we need to ramp up conversations about taking care of ourselves. That isn't an individualistic goal. Taking care of ourselves means we'll be better equipped to take care of others—from family members struggling with all kinds of challenges to strangers on social media who would benefit from a kind word, or more simply, from not having us scream at them because we're carrying massive amounts of stress online and mistaking our existential panic for a compelling reason to keep debating people on Twitter.

And that's why I decided to share this guide. There are certainly other approaches to wellbeing; I hope others share theirs in the toolkit. This one happens to resonate with me. Also, a note on format: I don't have a scanner at home, which is why the images are scruffy—page edges curled up, paper a bit rumpled, cutouts visible. But this is perfect, not just because it's pandemic times and I used what was here. It's perfect because I was pretty scruffy as I worked. It's perfect because all of our inner lives are pretty scruffy. The point of the guide is to say: that's fine.

Positioned in a rectangular box off-center in the image, the text reads, "These reflections are adapted from a talk given by Buddhist psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach on April 17,

2020, as part of her series responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this talk, Brach focuses on the animal-headed deities of Tibetan Buddhism, which embody the most ferocious human emotions as a pathway to enlightenment. They do this by helping cultivate deeper compassion for self and others, and by asking us to pay attention to the life that's here—however challenging our circumstances might be.”

Throughout this text box and the entire work, the word “the” is written as “t6,” a function of the author’s slightly cursive writing style which could uncharitably be described as bad penmanship. The author’s name, *Whitney Phillips*, appears in the bottom left corner. *June 2020* appears in the bottom right corner.”

Large, slightly off-kilter block letters read in all-caps, “How to make better friends with the terrible feelings you’re feeling.” Impressively, the author managed to spell “the” with only the letters T and

E, and needed to sandwich in a small H. Three small simple cartoon faces—a frowny face, a mad face, and a crying face—are stacked on top of each other in the bottom right corner.

Another set of large, all-caps letters, these scribblier and more emphatic than the last, read, “I hate these terrible feelings I’m feeling! Look at the mess they’re making!” A cacophony of exaggerated

cartoon faces, tangled up with frenetic squiggles, surround the text; the lower third of the page is cluttered by angry, judgmental eyes, like predators peering out from the forest undergrowth.

Panic in her eyes, Anxiety Rabbit dashes away from the threats, or at least the threat of threats—represented unsubtly by the repeated word **THREAT**—that surround her. Maybe the dangers are

real. Maybe they're imagined. Either way, they're underscored by a small "*You're doomed*" written in the bottom right corner.

Fear Squirrel clings for dear life on a tree branch. If he lets go, he might lose all his nuts. If he stays put, he might lose all his nuts. Fight and flight are both terrible options. "I see you looking at

my nuts you're all trying to take my nuts what if I lose all my nuts," all-caps block letters lament.

"I'm going to punch your nuts," Anger Bear roars in all caps, mouth agape, paw clenched. "I'm going to eat off your face." Increased violence colliding with increased nonsense, the words in her third

threat curl down menacingly around her body. *"I'm going to hide your little brother in my ass!"*¹

Two cats stand facing each other. On the right is Disgust Cat, who shoves an outstretched paw into the face of the other cat. Other Cat scrunches up in discomfort and meekly raises his paw.

"You get out of here this is my area," Disgust Cat snarls in all-caps block letters. "I have never been more disrespected in my whole life."

"Oh god do I stink," Shame Skunk asks plaintively in all-caps block letters. Worry flashes across his face, and his two front feet point towards each other. The wobble-knees of self-loathing is strong

today. “*Of course I stink,*” he answers himself. “*I’m disgusting.*”

Depression Dog lays motionless on the floor, everything but his head covered in an old blanket. His right paw peeks out beneath the fabric and flops over listlessly. He frowns slightly, but

otherwise stares out at nothing. “*No dogs allowed,*” all-caps block letters read, with “*Dogs*” crossed out and replaced with the word “*Anyone.*”

Glaring off to the right at some unseen letdown, Disappointment Vulture raises his wings indignantly. "Oh really just what I need more scraps," he snaps in all-caps block letters. "Thank you

sooo much for nothing." The word "nothing" trails off to smaller-sized letters, as the author miscalculated how much space she had left.

At the top of the page, an all-caps explanation reads, “It makes sense that you wouldn’t want any of them around. All they do is smash up your house! But what happens, Tara Brach asks, if you look at the

terrible feeling you're feeling not as an enemy, but as a friend who's trying to help? (Even if they're being kind of a dick about it)."

Beneath that, a rectangular text box with a thick black border lists each animal in all-caps block letters, followed by the protection they offer:

- *Anxiety rabbit's goal is to alert you to potential threats*
- *Fear squirrel's goal is to protect you from loss or injury*
- *Anger bear's goal is to remove obstacles to your well-being*
- *Disgust cat's goal is to repel things that could cause harm*
- *Shame skunk's goal is to prevent you from being rejected*
- *Depression dog's goal is to shield you from the rawness of pain*
- *Disappointment vulture's goal is to remind you that your needs matter*

In the bottom right corner of the image, a long-legged man with a puzzled expression holds his hand against the top of his head. *"Hmm I mean but I still feel pretty terrible though,"* he says.²

Standing relaxed but alert on her hind legs, Helpful Rabbit looks with interest towards an approaching something-or-other. Just below her, a set of all-caps block letters read, “*I want you to*

be prepared.”

Helpful Squirrel is perched on a tree branch, his tail serving as ballast. He cocks his head and smiles adoringly. Another set of all-caps block letters, these slanted slightly upward, read, "I

want you to be whole.”

Helpful Bear sits on his haunches and waves a friendly hello. Just beneath his paws and a bit off-center, all-caps block letters read, "I want things to be easy for you."

Helpful Cat smiles peacefully. His eyes are closed; all is well. He's perched above a set of all-caps block letters that read, "*I want you to be safe.*"

Standing beside a flower, Helpful Skunk looks on hopefully. His all-caps block letters read, sweetly, *"I want you to be loved."*

A very good boy with a waggily tail, Helpful Dog is ready for his next adventure. Below, gently crooked all-caps block letters read, *"I want you to feel happy."*

Helpful Vulture extends his right wing; he has so much to show you. His feathers graze a set of all-caps block letters that read, “I want you to have what you want,” with “want” falling on its own

line because the author got carried away.

Reflecting on the feelings' positive intentions doesn't make them, suddenly, pleasant to have around. Instead, remembering that they serve a purpose, and that the purpose is protecting you, helps ground you in the idea that the feelings just **are**—they're not outside attackers, and aren't fundamentally bad.

So, instead of screaming and yelling and fighting back because **WHY ARE THEY IN YOUR BACKYARD AGAIN WE JUST WENT THROUGH THIS**, you can take a breath, pour yourself a glass of lemonade, and sit down at the table with them. "I'm listening," you can say.

And then they'll do what they do, which is tell you stories to keep you stuck in the feeling (they **REALLY** have something to tell you, and want to make sure you get the message). Maybe the stories will be about the people you love, or the people who love you, or about yourself. Maybe they'll reflect things that are true about the world. Maybe they'll be meanspirited lies.

Even when the stories reflect true things, there might be an added layer of falsehood: that it will be like this forever, that the cause is already lost so why even bother, that you deserved to have this happen.

Bordered by a light squiggly line, hand-written text reads, "Reflecting on the feelings' positive intentions doesn't make them, suddenly, pleasant to have around. Instead, remembering that they serve

a purpose, and that that purpose is protecting you, helps ground you in the idea that the feelings just are; they're not outside attackers, and they aren't fundamentally bad.³

So, instead of screaming and yelling and fighting back because **WHY ARE THEY IN YOUR BACKYARD AGAIN WE JUST WENT THROUGH THIS**, you can take a breath, pour yourself a glass of lemonade, and sit down at the table with them. "I'm listening," you can say.

And then they'll start to do what they do, which is tell you stories to keep you stuck in the feeling (they *REALLY* have something to tell you, and want to make sure you get the message). Maybe the stories will be about the people you love, or the people who love you, or about yourself. Maybe they'll reflect things that are true about the world. Maybe they'll be mean-spirited lies. Even when the stories reflect true things, there might be an added layer of falsehood: that it will be like this forever, that the cause is already lost, that you deserved to have this happen."

In the bottom right corner of the image, there's a rough sketch of a glass of lemonade holding a straw ("Paper straw," a small arrowed caption reads), with an even rougher sketch of one sliced and one whole lemon beside it ("Definitely lemons," a second arrowed caption reads, because otherwise they could be mistaken for an eyeball).

Again bordered with a thin squiggly line, the text reads: “Eventually it might make sense—it might be critical—to analyze those stories. But as you sit there in that moment, Tara Brach explains, just

notice the reactions in your body. Is your chest tight? Do you feel it in your throat, or in your belly? Whatever happens is ok; notice.

Just sitting there might feel counterintuitive, or even extremely uncomfortable—usually when we're confronted with bad feelings, we want to distract ourselves, or find some way, any way, to make it stop (which never actually works, since the more we try to fight our feelings, the more intense they tend to get). But just sitting there is a critical step in the process. The more we're able to sit with our terrible feelings, the easier it is to identify the parts of ourselves that need connection and care.

*You can send this care, Brach explains, by imagining a religious figure or some other protector in your life offering their love, or just by putting your hand on your heart. Something, anything, that meets the emotion's plaintive cry PAY ATTENTION TO ME with the response, **I'm here, I see you, I won't leave.**"*

Beneath the text, a vaguely-mulleted figure looks up timidly, hand to temple. "Promise?" they ask.

The practice of responding to fear or anger or any other terrible feeling with loving, nonjudgmental presence helps guide you to a more connected self. Not a "cured" self, this isn't about getting rid of something (allegedly) broken in you. Nor is it to minimize the source of the feeling, whatever it might be, especially when it's something genuinely threatening or life-altering.

What this practice does do is allow you, over time, to show up more authentically and lovingly for yourself. This, in turn, allows you to show up more authentically and lovingly for others. As Brach emphasizes, knowing how to stay and not panic in response to your own terrible feelings means you'll know how to stay and not panic when other people show you theirs.

Given the systemic violence and mass suffering and incessant disinformation crashing down on us daily, we need to be able to show up, and keep showing up, for ourselves and for others. So, while feeling terrible feelings, whatever those feelings might be, feels totally terrible, they have enormously important things to teach us about ourselves and our connection to others - including the fact that feeling terrible feelings is one of the most human things we can do. We invite those lessons when we say, hey terrible feeling, I see you, and you belong.

Thank you
I'm doing my best

Within the same thin squiggly border, text reads: "The practice of responding to fear or anger or any other terrible feeling with loving, nonjudgmental presence helps guide you to a more connected self. Not

a cured self, this isn't about getting rid of something broken in you. Nor is it to minimize the source of the feeling, especially when it's something genuinely threatening or life altering.

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Given the systemic violence and mass suffering and incessant disinformation crashing down on us daily, we need to be able to show up, and keep showing up, for ourselves and for others [the author got a letter wrong in "showing" and needed to write the word more carefully above]. So, while feeling terrible feelings, whatever those feelings might be, feels totally terrible, they have enormously important things to teach us: about ourselves, and about our connection to others— including the fact that feeling terrible feelings is one of the most human things we can do. We invite these lessons when we say, hey terrible feeling, I see you, and you belong.

Beneath the text, the same mulleted figure smiles serenely, eyes closed, their hand resting gently over their heart. "Thank you," they say. "I'm doing my best."

Appreciation + Further Reading

It bears repeating that this project is based on Tara Brach's talk, "Sheltering in Love, Part Four," which is part of her very excellent series of talks responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Brach's self-titled podcast (on which you can find the Sheltering in Love series) and her books *Radical Acceptance*, *True Refuge*, and *Radical Compassion* have been extremely influential in my life—and more indirectly in my academic work, but also there too—and I thank her for her wisdom + insight. As I worked on this project while processing my own clown car of terrible emotions, I also read, was inspired by, and would recommend to following:

Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*
The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times

And written pens

Marc Brackett, *Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive*

Brene Brown, *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*

This time borderless, text reads: "Appreciation + Further Reading"

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The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times
- Marc Brackett, Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Our Society, and Ourselves Thrive [The “-mission” in “Permission” switches to darker ink, and is arrow-captioned with the explanation that the author needed to switch pens]
- Brené Brown, Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

END

Footnotes

1. As a nod to the origins of the project, this is a decades-old inside joke with the author's family, stemming from a memorable live action roleplay performance involving a stuffed bear puppet. [↩](#)

2.

The author wasn't thinking of this at the time, not consciously anyway, but the 13th century Persian poet Rumi talks about a similar invasion of unwelcome emotions in “The Guest House.” Quoth:

“A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!” [↩](#)

3. [after she wrote the text out, the author realized that something sounded redundant, so she replaced “the feelings belong” with “the feelings just are,” which she did by cutting away the “belong” and taping a new panel beneath so she could add the new pair of words. If she could write it out a little differently, she would, but oh well] [↩](#)