

Building a relationship with yourself



Gem Hill

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A note on safety

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A note on privilege, resilience, and trauma.

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Why Build a Relationship with Yourself?

This first section deals with the very start of building a relationship with yourself. It starts building building a safe and comfortable space, spending time with yourself, and finishes with looking at restorative rest.

Let's talk about how difficult figuring out self care can be. It feels like it should be obvious: it's looking after yourself and doing what you enjoy. That can be quite stressful to figure out if you don't know what those things look like, or if the 'basics' take up all your time and energy.

For example:

- You have a bunch of responsibilities which take up time and energy, so you've barely got time for self care, never mind figuring out if your self care is working or needs changing
- Looking after your health takes up all your energy due to chronic illnesses or having multiple complex conditions
- You might not know yourself. Mental illnesses, trauma, things like alexithymia, can make it difficult to have connections with yourself. This can make nurturing yourself and doing things that you enjoy not instinctive.
- You might have tried a bunch of things and none of them stuck, so you're tired or fed up with the process.

That's before we get into doing this on top of working and looking after your home, any caring responsibilities you might have, and sleeping.

Self care is about connection, both to yourself and to your community. After looking after yourself physically (eating, bathing, taking any medications, etc), next comes taking care of your emotional health. This can happen in myriad ways, so figuring out what works for you can be difficult. Building a relationship with yourself, reflection on your wants and needs can help you figure out what self care means to you.

It also requires nurturing behaviour towards yourself, which is something we don't really do. I remember when I told my therapist I make a batch of a bean stew for my lunch at work, and he told me he loved the idea of me packing a little lunch for myself, how nurturing that was. That was the first time I really thought about self care being the act of nurturing yourself.

Suddenly I'm nurturing myself, providing care for myself. Sometimes that's something that feels good, sometimes it's what I need to do for myself, even when I'd rather not.

It's strange that we think of nurturing as only something children need, and you stop needing it as you grow. I don't think we ever grow out of being nurtured. Feeling cared for can always be a comfort. (I say can because if you're unused to being cared for, and are more often the carer then it can feel uncomfortable to be cared for).

For me, figuring out self care meant spending time figuring out who I was. I spent so much of my time dissociating or busy, that I hadn't spent a lot of time with myself, certainly not alone. The idea of being alone with my thoughts was terrifying. It was a huge task, because my thoughts were constantly loud and scary and unpredictable.

I took small steps, and started building a relationship with myself, and doing some healing. This led to building safety in my brain, almost like psychological safety[1] but in myself. Holding myself accountable without berating myself. Not self-sabotaging. Being able to put myself out there and experiment. Slowly validating

my feelings, talking myself down from anxiety, and allowing myself space for fun and experimentation without having to fight a constant background noise of how terrible I am and how I was going to absolutely fail and no one likes me.

It took some getting used to. There were times where I was so exhausted of listening to my anxiety and responding in a measured way, allowing myself to feel and move through them. It felt never-ending. But there were times where it wasn't like that, where I was able to be kind to myself easily. Redirecting my thoughts became easier, less of a noticeable effort. I made the effort to notice these and be grateful to myself for this work. This meant I was noticing the small improvements, and how they were manifesting.

This led to a snowball effect in a way. I kept gathering experiences to help negate my anxiety, I knew that I could be kind and nurturing without dropping the ball, or losing myself. In fact, I became more of myself, the self I wanted to be, as I did this work.

The themes that you'll see repeated in this book are about going at your own pace, working with what works, and reflecting on what does or doesn't work. This is because pushing yourself isn't going to work, this work is tiring, and you need to not burn yourself out on trying to rewrite your brain.

As a friend told me when I was talking about how Christmas was still difficult for me: '5 years of freedom [from my family] doesn't negate 30 years worth of trauma'.

At first I found this statement a bit daunting. Thirty years of history is a lot to rewrite, and maybe I'll never get to rewrite it all fully. Maybe I should work even harder at 'fixing myself'. Then my conscious, kinder brain kicked it. The statement was a reminder to be kind to myself, to realise how far I've come, but be gentle as I continue to move forward. This work is for me, not for anyone else, and there isn't a deadline.

I've really enjoyed getting to know who this version of me is, what I'm like, what I want from my life. I'm hoping you'll enjoy getting

to know yourself as well.

☒ [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_safety ☒

Exercise 1: Hopes and Fears

Take 5 or so minutes and write out any hopes, fears, or concerns that you may have while starting this journey.

Why did you buy this book? What brings you here? What do you want to get from this book? What fears do you have about doing this work?

What themes are coming up? Is there a pattern?

If something comes up that you can do something about (set a time or space aside to do the work, have a plan to take breaks and stay safe if feelings get too big), here's some space to work them out.

If you want to write down a reminder of why you're here, you can do that here, so you can come back to it and review when needed.

At the end of the book, come back and review, see what's changed and what hasn't.

A Safe Space

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Exercise 2: What does your comfort zone look like?

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Spending Time With Yourself

Spending time with someone is a really good way of getting to know them. Being curious and accepting of their thoughts, feelings, values, and how they look next to yours. This is something you can also do with yourself.

When we talk about spending time with ourselves, we tend to think about spending time *on* ourselves. Working towards a goal. We think about meditation or mindfulness, feeling your feelings. All these are important, but there is also something to be said about spending unstructured time with yourself.

Not being mindful, but letting your mind wander and see where it goes as you do something.

Lets think of things you do where you're with yourself, most likely alone, or not talking to someone else:

- Showering and other bathroom activities
- Exercising, if you don't go to classes
- Commuting/going shopping
- Housework
- Sleeping

There may be more.

What do you do when you're doing these things? How do you feel, what do you think about?

Here's some examples from me:- My prime alone time is walking. When I'm walking I'm by myself. I tend to have two modes

when I'm walking. I'm listening to an audiobook or podcast, or I've got some background noise on and I'm thinking. Rarely I'm not listening to anything, but when I'm thinking it's for consistent background noise. I tend to think about work. I have figured out most of my talks, workshops, and resources while walking. I've also thought through things that are blocking me, wondering why I'm shying away from things.

Less usefully this is where I tend to replay conversations, or plan out various interactions or arguments that will never come to pass. I try to redirect myself when I get caught up in this, and get to something less angry. This also can happen with worrying about things that are out of my control, or may not happen. This rumination can be unhelpful and tiring, so instead I pull my mind back to the present. This is where listening to things comes in handy, and it's an easy way to redirect my brain to focus on something else when I need to.

Exercising is another one. If I'm on the rowing machine, I don't need to engage with the exercise once I'm in a rhythm. I tend to think about more active things - what my split times are, am I going too quickly, etc etc. But I'm still engaging with myself. It can be a good way to think about how you feel when you're pushing yourself, or when you're trying to maintain a sustainable pace. How do you talk to yourself?

Reflection: Where do you find alone time, and how do you use it?

A lot of the time, when we have surprise free time in our schedule, we use it to cross something else off the to do list. Instead, what if you took some of that time to spend time with yourself. Whether that be spending time on an activity (reading, watching a movie, etc), or just some time to sit, breathe, and check in with yourself. Building in a habit of making and finding time to spend time with yourself, in a safe and open place is crucial to building and maintaining that relationship with yourself.

If you need something to start with, a reflection to kick off a

thought process, you can start with checking in with yourself at any given time. What's going on? How're you talking to yourself right now? Do you need to take care of your body in some way? Just a simple 'how am I?' might bring up some thoughts. Again, the idea here isn't to necessarily do anything with your thoughts, but instead to get used to listening to them and spending time with yourself.

On Walking

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Exercise 3: Spending Time With Yourself

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Values and Self Care

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Exercise 4: Values

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Finding joy

I've referenced my business coach twice in this section, because the exercises were about me, not just my business. Spending time with myself, actively, deliberately, led me to dig deep into what I wanted, not just what I needed.

Sometimes when you're in survival mode, what you need is all you have the ability to do. Wants are a bonus that doesn't always happen. This means that when you come out of that environment, you might have no idea what a want looks like, never mind how to get it,.

Therapy and working on myself from a business point of view helped me realise that I needed to reflect on happiness as well as anxiety and trauma. I'd started by doing gratitude journaling, giving myself a little boost every day, but I wasn't engaging too much. I didn't realise I needed to. I thought that in cutting contact with my family, I'd be happy. I knew I'd have to deal with the fallout - grief, guilt, fear of them finding me, things like that - but I never realised that I'd have to work on what happiness felt like.

I still have moments of dread when I'm having a good time. Usually when I'm out with friends. I'll have a little pull in my brain, and dread in the pit of my stomach. That fear of it all falling down, and having to cope with the fall from happiness to anxiety, anger, etc. I have to remind myself that I'm fine, and even if something does happen, I can cope with it. That I have the skills, and strength, and support to cope with whatever life throws at me.

My brain and body are learning what safety feels like, and learning to trust in good times. Knowing what happiness feels like for me, and learning that I don't need to temper it has been an important part of my journey. I've found it's made being kind to myself easier,

because I'm feeling my happiness fully, without caveat. It helps me find small pockets of joy in my life, because I'm not constantly distrusting it, or fearing the come down.

It's easier to cope with now the dread isn't needed, there's no real thing for me to dread, but reflecting on it made me think about how my relationship with joy has changed over the years.

Joy When You're Struggling

If you've been struggling with your mental or physical health, you're probably familiar with the cycle of trying to find The Thing That Will Help, and let you lead a more settled life. If your illnesses are physical, you might only have so much energy you can spare to try things, so you really need the things you try to bring some relief or joy.

This can put a lot of pressure on things that aren't meant to Fix All The Things. It might also mean you think about what happens when this fails, rehearsing the unhappiness before experiencing the actual happiness. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It's possible that your mental illness or ill-health means you're used to joy being fleeting, or followed by a crash of depression. This might mean you may find any kind of happiness either dangerous and untrustworthy, because the crash afterwards is so awful that you would almost prefer to not feel any joy at all, because the aftereffects are too much to cope with. When your baseline is so low, even a sliver of joy can feel like soaring, and then you bump down to earth.

You might also find joy hard to find - again if your baseline feels so low, you might feel like you need a huge event to bring you joy. This is especially true if you struggle to name or feel your emotions, you experience dissociation, etc.

Maybe you even experience both of these, shying away from joyful experiences but then holding on to them when they happen despite yourself. It's a horrible place to be, torn between two extremes.

Look at these unscientific graphs. In this first one, the baseline is low, with massive peaks of joy, followed by crashes to the baseline. If that baseline is depression, anxiety, low mood, hypomania, etc. that crash can feel apocalyptic. It's also exhausting to be bouncing like this, managing both the joy and the aftermath.

This pattern can also lead to you calculating the cost of joy. Maybe you need the joy to be worth it, to last, in order to fully engage with it. You shut yourself off from potential joy because you can't bear the loss.



Ideally, we'd be like this second graph: still having peaks and troughs, but they're steadier. The climbs and falls aren't so steep as to be a cost of feeling joy or happiness.



There are a few ways to manage this: helping increase your baseline, trusting feelings, staying in the present and not slipping off to the future. The one I want to talk about here though is trying to remove the pressure of joy.

Find Your Glimmers There's a relatively new concept called Glimmers. The term was coined by Deb Dana, LCSW, in her 2018 book *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy*. Glimmers are the opposite of triggers. They're small, micro-moments of joy that are all around us, and can have an affect on our feelings and wellbeing.

Things that are glimmers for me, right now as I write this:

- the cup of tea I have
- the stunning cluster of pink amethyst I have on my desk, which I love to run my fingers over while thinking
- The little handwritten note from my partner, telling me I'm awesome, that I stuck to my wall above my monitor, as a reminder.

When joy happens, it can be fleeting and that's okay. It can warm you through future experiences. Joy doesn't also have to be a big thing. Finding joy in smaller things can really help you get used to feeling joy without pressure of it being The Thing That Will Fix You, and The Thing That When It Disappears Will Leave Me Bereft. It can be something small, that you acknowledge, welcome the warmth, and then let it go.

It can remind us that joy can co-exist with pain, anxiety, depression. It's not and all or nothing. This can help with self talk, which often deals in absolutes. I discuss this more in the Self Talk section.

It's also not just something that happens to you, it's something you can make happen yourself. You can build up a small pot of joyful experiences that you can use to keep you warm in dark times. And if you find small ways to build joy in your life, you can use them when you feel down. You don't need to earn joy.

Looking for, and acknowledging things that bring us joy whenever we can can help us learn to accept joy as it comes, not place any expectations on it, and let it pass through us. It can warm us, and give us a little boost. You can be grateful for it, hold on to the memories, maybe even make plans to make it happen again in the future. But it doesn't need to be clung to forever, just like it doesn't need to be feared.

Exercise: What Brings You Joy?

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