

Taking Responsibility for Your Emotional Health: How to Heal

I call this “Boo-Boo Theory”

*“No hurt survives for long without our help,”
She said and then she kissed me and sent me out to play again
for the rest of my life.”* Brian Andreas

I use Boo-Boo Theory to compare emotional healing with medical healing. **Boo-Boo Theory teaches how to heal emotionally wounded lives.** More current terminology refers to emotional wounds as trauma. Although terminology evolves over the years and we learn more about neurobiology every day, Boo-Boo Theory continues to offer a helpful analogy between mental and physical healing.

Boo-Boo Theory

Children raised in healthy families are loved, supported, mentored and guided into adulthood.



Children raised in wounded families are neglected, shamed and frightened into adulthood. They report feelings of helplessness, anger, and loss. Survivors of these wounded backgrounds ask, “*What is normal? How should I feel? How do I move past this pain?*” This is where Boo-Boo Theory can help. I use Boo-Boo Theory to describe the stages necessary to heal emotionally wounded lives.

When small children, raised in healthy families, experience their first injury, loving arms sweep them up into safety. “*It is okay honey, I am here. I am so sorry this happened to you. I know this really hurts, yes I know baby. I’m here.*”

As a child’s sobbing subsides, the loving caregiver gently empathizes and explains what is happening. Words are given to the painful experience. “*Look at this, you made a Boo-Boo. Boo-boos hurt. See the red stuff? That is your blood. Your blood is washing out the germs. You are so good. Your body knows just how to heal you. Way to go!*” The child snuffles. “*I know sweetie. Boo-Boos really hurt. It is okay to cry. I cry when I am hurting too. Let all of those tears come out.*” More hugs, a soothing voice and calm embrace and acceptance of emotional pain.

These children are now ready to learn how to heal their pain. “*Let’s hold a cold cloth on your Boo-Boo to help it feel better. There now, does that feel better? Good thing you heal so well. Here, I’ll kiss it all better.*” The magic of a Band-Aid and a loving kiss seal the deal, thus the first lesson in healing Boo-Boos is complete. Every stage is guided with loving, healing energy.

**Working through painful emotions and stressful events requires three stages:
Embrace it A.L.L.**

1. **Acknowledge:** Identify problems (**Mind**) and Experience the emotions (**Body**).
2. **Learn** to Choose: regulate uncomfortable emotions by choosing healthy **coping skills**.
3. **Let go** and grow!



As children grow older, they become more independent. They learn to apply their own cold cloths and fetch their own Band-Aids. Children practice tolerance and acceptance of painful emotions. Eventually, they learn enough self-compassion and coping skills to heal their own emotional Boo-Boos.

Emotional wounds heal like Boo-Boos.

- Emotional healing occurs when you learn to identify your painful feelings and to trust yourself enough to experience your body’s response to each emotion.
- You allow yourself to witness every emotion spontaneously and without judgment.
- You learn that acknowledging pain and shedding tears are often necessary stages of the healing process.
- You develop coping skills that become your “cold cloth” to dull the emotional pain enough so that you are able to learn, grow and move on.
- This new mindfulness allows you to trust your ability as a self-healer.
- Your mindfulness allows you to listen to your own inner voice to guide you through difficult life decisions, significant losses and challenging emotional events.

Intentional practice of emotional healing, also known as emotional self-regulation, is a choice. But not always a simple one.

When you choose to become a self-healer, you choose to face your emotional pain. Facing emotional pain is, well, *painful*. *Your natural human instinct is to avoid pain, seek out pleasure.*

Emotional healing is especially challenging for people without healthy role models or those who experienced traumatic events that altered their brain’s ability to regulate emotions. Even when people decide to heal their emotional wounds, without role models or support, they just have no idea *how to heal*. It’s no wonder why some people automatically default to self-destructive behaviors of denial, avoidance and escape. Rather than working through emotional pain, they do what their parents did. They do what they have always done.

Maya Angelou once said, “*We do the best we know how, and when we know better, we do better.*”

Question: So Boo Boo theory is nice and all that, choices sound cool, but seriously, how do you actually learn to face painful emotions, I mean, they hurt!” *Aiden*

Good question. You shouldn’t try this at home until you have tools. Coping tools allow you to experience emotional pain without self-harm or bad habits. Your first tool is learning how to breathe. (Tool #1 on this Basic Tools section of this website). Start with taking a deep breath, right now. Remembering to breathe will always be your most effective way to calm yourself. Take a few deep, cleansing breaths now. Notice how your mind and body feel as you deeply inhale and slowly exhale. Relax and focus. You are now ready to learn exactly how to travel through your own map to emotional health.

Map to Emotional Health

Emotional health, also referred to as emotional self-regulation, begins with labeling and experiencing your emotions. You can only work this step by focusing on yourself. If you read these next few pages trying to understand why your spouse gets so mad, your parent has so much anxiety or your child is so impulsive...you will have lost the whole point. **I need you to focus on yourself right now.** Your awareness includes mind (intellectual), and body (physiological experience). The order of your awareness may vary. Sometimes you identify moods first. *“I was sooooo angry, I smashed my cell phone!”* Other times your physical response is your first clue. *“I didn’t even realize I was angry until I saw my cell phone smashed to pieces on the floor.”* Prolonged exposure to stress may cause frequent explosions. It may also have a reverse effect such as feeling “numb” or “detached from emotion.”

You might report awareness of only a few emotions. *“I’m either fine or I’m pissed,”* or *“I ignore things for a long time then I just explode!”*

You might have difficulty labeling your own emotions. *“I never know how I feel but I can always tell you how my partner feels and I certainly know how my parents or my children feel.”*

Using the chart below each emotion you are able to identify and experience.

Emotional Healing 1. ACKNOWLEDGE EMOTIONS (AKA Your Internal Stimulus)



(Mind) **Identify** your emotions by labeling them.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calm | <input type="checkbox"/> Anger |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Proud | <input type="checkbox"/> Shame |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Love | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confident | <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Peaceful | <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed | <input type="checkbox"/> Worry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trust | <input type="checkbox"/> Mistrust |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accomplished | <input type="checkbox"/> Inferior |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Secure | <input type="checkbox"/> Insecure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Responsible | <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Independent | <input type="checkbox"/> Dependent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeful | <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless |



(Body) **Experience** your emotions

- Awareness of physical sensations.
- Sleep: Restful Disturbed
- Appetite: Stable ↑ ↓
- Muscles: Relaxed Tense
- Health problems:
- Pain
 - Digestion problems
 - Bowel problems
 - Hypertension
 - Fatigue
 - Tears. Crying spells
 - ↓Memory, focus
 - Fight or flight
 - Other symptoms

Write how you experience your range of identified emotions: _____

Once you identify and experience your emotions, what is next? Rather than remaining stuck in stressful emotions, Step 2 offers choices to learn, cope and heal.

Emotional Healing 2. “LEARN”
This step offers the opportunity to choose.
You may transform wounds into wisdom and pain into purpose.

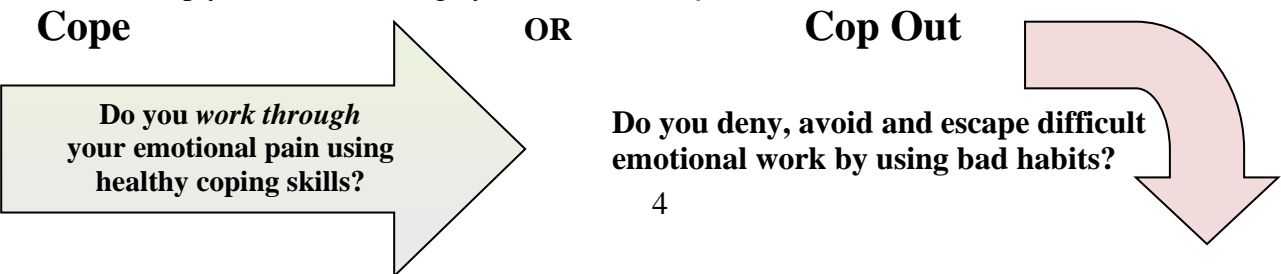
Choice #1: You have the opportunity to work through emotional pain using *coping skills*. Coping skills are behaviors, thoughts, resources or tools to assist you in the process of working through painful emotions.

Example: *“When I feel upset, I remember this is only an emotion. I can witness my emotions like a detached observer, like when I notice goose bumps on my skin. I see changes in my skin without fear or distress because I know what they are. I can remember to take deep, mindful and focused breaths. I can make choices about how I respond to my emotions. I do not have to escalate my emotions, lash out or self-harm. I do not have to lose my dignity or my self-respect. I take a long walk followed by cool shower. I read my motivational materials and journal my thoughts until I feel better. I respect myself for the way I cope with my emotions.”*

Choice #2: You also have the option of avoiding, denying or escaping your emotional pain by choosing self-defeating behaviors. Self-defeating behaviors are coping skills gone bad. Self-defeating behaviors relieve emotional pain but they also have negative consequences. **Bad habits and addictions are both examples of self-defeating behaviors.**

Example: *“When I feel upset I comfort myself with junk food, followed by shopping. I am overweight, have wardrobes in all sizes, huge credit card debt and I feel out of control. Honestly, I don’t really feel better after I binge or spend. I am embarrassed. I am not a good role model. I don’t really like myself.”*

Responding to painful emotions with bad habits and addictions creates self-loathing. You decide when to stop your self-defeating cycle. **You always have a choice.**



3. LETTING GO

Question: *“I like the sound of “letting go”. Seems peaceful. Can I just skip over experiencing the emotional pain? I would rather go straight to the “Letting Go” stage? I want to feel better NOW. I want to be OVER this emotional pain.”*

Chad

Sorry, but no. The third step of emotional health is last in the sequence for a reason. Skipping step one and two is not really emotional health, it is more like denial, escape and avoidance. Now I think you understand why emotional healing is not for cowards. Identifying emotions, expressing feelings and assigning deeper meaning through insight all takes time. For most people, that time is unpaid, underappreciated and easily interrupted by those who view meditation and introspection as lazy or selfish. Prioritizing time to work through emotions and cope more effectively are essential elements of successful emotional healing.

Step 1 + Step 2 = Step 3 LET GO and GROW

Once a lesson is learned, the emotional pain heals. Transformation occurs.





“Letting go” is the natural result of *working through* your emotional pain.

“Letting go” happens while you are busy making healthier choices.

Example: When tuning into your emotions, you **identify** emotional wounds of sadness, anger, blame, guilt, anxiety and shame. You grieve over what you always wanted, but never received. You rage over what you could not stop and that which you had no control. You didn’t get to choose what happened to you. You didn’t get to choose your pain.

*“They never loved me, all they ever did was hurt me!
What did I do to make them treat me like that!?
Nothing I ever did was good enough!
It wasn’t fair!”*

Your emotional pain is raw and alive. You **experience** all of your wounded feelings. Your body reacts with sleep difficulty, appetite disturbances and stress related illnesses. You don’t get to choose how your physical body responds, but you do get to choose whether or not to practice self-compassion and self-respect. You may choose to **cope** or you may *self-destruct*. You may choose to *heal* or you may prolong or repeat your *pain*.

-  Once you release the need to blame, avoid, deny or escape, you begin to value the importance of coping and problem solving.
-  You learn that forgiveness is not about *them*. Forgiveness is a gift you give *yourself*.
-  You learn the coping skills necessary to feel worthy of your self-healing. You learn to treat yourself with compassion. Eventually with time, practice and support you learn to take responsibility for creating the life you desire.
-  As you actively pursue your dreams, you realize that you have **let go** of your emotional pain. Follow the “map” to mental health on the following page.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH = PROCESS OF WORKING THROUGH EMOTIONS

Work Through Emotions Using Coping Skills

1: Acknowledge: Label

External: What is happening around you?

Name your external triggers

Stress: Change, clutter-chaos, time management, education, employment/career, finances, relationships, parenting, childcare, caregiving, separation, divorce, conflict, criticism, betrayal, judgment, bullying, illness, injustice, abuse, dishonesty, legal problems, crime, natural disaster, trauma, pandemic, death.

Internal: Identify (Mind) & Experience (Body) How do you feel?

(Also referred to as internal emotional awareness)

(Mind) Label Emotions:		Bodily Sensations:
Joy	Sadness	Sleep problem
Happiness	Anger	Appetite problem
Peace	Worry	Muscle tension
Acceptance	Jealousy	Digestion issues
Pride	Embarrassment	Pain
Serenity	Resentment	Fatigue
Trust	Mistrust	Irritability
Confidence	Inferiority	Anxiety, agitation
Security	Insecurity	Memory, focus
Healthy Guilt	Shame	Tears
Independence	Dependence	Hypertension
Hope	Hopeless	Illness

When **EXPERIENCING** Your **EMOTIONS** becomes too uncomfortable, **COPING SKILLS** relieve and soothe your pain.

2: Learn

Consider emotions as OPPORTUNITIES.

- 1. Breathe, calm yourself**
- 2. Reality Check**—Cross off the items in column 1 that are not happening, exaggerations, distortions or not true. Cross off anything that is *not* within your control.
- 3. Intention**--What do you want to achieve? Goals? Direction? Role-modeling?
- 4. Choices-- Logic**--What are the possible options? Brainstorm all possibilities, seek resources & learn how successful people coped with distress. How can you problem solve? (*Google to help research*)
- 5. Values:** What advice would you give a beloved who felt this way in a similar situation? Roles reversed, how would you wish to be treated? **What is the right thing to do?**— Use Wise mind: align action with values, maintain dignity and role model what you believe in.
- 6. What is the life lesson?** What does this experience teach you? What could you learn?

Stage 3: Let Go & Grow

Release the need to control
That which is out of your control.

*Face Fears

*Coping skills replace avoidance & bad habits.

1. Be curious about how to face fears and make changes in small, attainable steps.
2. What resources and support do you need?
3. What could make your lifestyle changes easier, more interesting, more fun?
4. Is there an app for that?

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When EXPERIENCING Your EMOTIONS becomes too uncomfortable, COPING SKILLS relieve and soothe your pain.

Coping skills are behaviors, thoughts, resources or tools that assist you in the process of working through painful emotions. Examples of coping skills: meditation, healthy nutrition, exercise, recreation, positive attitude, cognitive-reframing, problem-solving strategies and medication as prescribed.

Self-Defeating Behaviors: Cop Out

A cop out is a bad coping skill. It's a self-destructive quick fix that allows you to avoid deny, stuff, or escape your painful emotions and problems rather than dealing with them with dignity or becoming a role model.



Copping out with bad habits creates self-sabotage.

Your **bad habits** and **addictions** mess up your life with negative and harmful consequences.

You choose your response. Cope or Cop out?

Are you living your best life?

Bad Habits Addictions

Habitual complaining, blaming, worrying

Excessive working, media, spending, shopping, gambling, eating and obesity.

Dysfunctional relationships: gossip
co-dependence: obsessing about other people's behavior and thoughts, affairs, betrayal, excessive porn

Rage addiction: yelling, tantrums, threats, name calling, physical abuse, domestic violence

Substance Addictions: caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, drug abuse,

Sexual addiction
Self-mutilation