

## **Build emotional resources to own more of yourself**

by Emilia O'Neill-Baker, PhD

*How Much of Yourself Do You Own?* combines personal stories and experiences with research-based theories and models we have developed to help people build emotional resources. When we are authentic, when we share ourselves and our strategies for building emotional resources, it helps others who are traveling the same path. While *Bridges Out of Poverty* and *Getting Ahead* work to help people find resources in the community, we must also work to find those resources within ourselves. It's hard to open up and say, "This is what happened to me, and I survived," but in the book there are many stories, not only our own, but those of participants and clients we have worked with over the years.

This book is for people who have lost their way at some point. We all want to recover our stability, our wealth, and our wholeness, but as we go through life, we lose parts of ourselves because we're trying to belong, to fit in, to be loved. We give up some of our emotional resources, and we discover other emotional resources we never developed because we were busy surviving. The exercises in this book are easy to follow, and they help recover and build those missing resources. The exercises are not always emotionally easy, but remember that the only way out of pain is through pain; if you confront the things you are most afraid of, and deal with them using the exercises and strategies in the book, you will come out feeling a lot lighter.

If you are part of a Getting Ahead group, or if you're working with veterans, with peer support groups, or therapy groups, this is a great tool for everyone involved. Sometimes we as professionals don't take enough time to work on ourselves, so if you're a professor, this is a great tool to use with graduate students. The book is not, however, a substitute for professional help, so do not use it as a therapeutic tool if you are not qualified to do so, and always have professional community resources available. The book is full of exercises that invite you to reflect on your life and the way you deal with problems, with losses, and with your emotions, and the activities can be done by one person or with 10 or with 20. There is a one-day training available where you'll experience these exercises and learn how to facilitate them. You'll learn how to identify emotions, how to contain them, and of course how to refer people who need it to professionals in the community.

The elements of the program are based on how we handle our energy every day, every moment. We talk about it in terms of what makes us feel good or bad, and we talk about it in terms of awareness: How can we be aware of the way we're using our energy and if it's being used in healthy or unhealthy ways? Stress is usually related to words like *headaches, irritability, insomnia, anger*, but in this book we explain how energy and stress can be positive in terms of the areas of the brain that are activated. Positive stress helps us create, concentrate, learn, make good decisions, stay focused, and meet deadlines. There's also a part of stress, however, that is automatic: your fight or flight reaction. If you see danger, if your brain perceives danger, it sets up this automatic response to keep you alive. It's why we're able to get out of the way if a car is driving very fast towards us, and it is how we are able to protect our children when we

feel that they are in danger. Fear and anger are emotions related to the “primitive brain,” as we call it. The primitive brain is responsible for that automatic reaction, and the “thinking brain” in the front of our heads is the one that helps us reason. When we are under stress, and we perceive danger in terms of needing to survive, the thinking brain shuts off and helps us just react. This effect ceases as soon as the brain perceives that the danger is gone. If we talk about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), if we talk about trauma, we are talking about this primitive brain that keeps the person in an alert mode all the time. With PTSD, we see diminished ability to process information because the brain is focused on survival, so it’s hard for the person to deal with everyday life. When we experience negative stress and respond reactively, we have a hard time communicating our needs and our emotions. People find that they cannot concentrate, and they cannot sleep. As we know, poverty produces trauma, so this is an element we need to take into consideration if we work with populations that are under-resourced and that have to focus on survival every day.

A key question is: Where is my energy going? The book contains a tool to help measure energy in terms of percentages so you can ask yourself: Do I have any hobbies, any interests, anything that is for me alone? Am I really paying attention to myself, to my health? How much time am I giving to work, to friends, to self-care, to sleeping and eating? We find people who sleep just an hour or two hours a night, and that affects your brain function, it affects your weight, it affects your health. This book is about awareness and about choosing what we can change.

When we understand how we use our energy, we must become accountable for the choices we make. We have to choose how to use our energy, and we have to learn which choices are healthy and which are not as healthy. Some people, when they are terribly stressed, put their energy not into solving the problems they're experiencing but into getting away from them. That's when we get drinking, drugs, overeating, shopping, etc. We call these "distractors." They make you forget, but the problem is still there, and if we continue to use unhealthy distractors, we are going to create an addiction that adds one more problem to our situation. We talk a lot in the book and in the training about helping others and helping yourself identify those patterns that are not healthy for you, and we discuss ways to create new habits that bring about joy and balance.

Of course, making different choices is not always easy. It can hurt. You may feel worse than before when you're going through a change, but knowing that you always have a choice makes a difference. Remembering that changing is better than staying in a place where you're suffering too much, where you cannot take any more abuse or any more losses, helps you say, "You know, changing is better for me." It's going to hurt, it's going to feel like you're not moving forward, but when you reflect, you will see that you are moving forward, that you are feeling lighter, and that your life is much better.

On the topic of energy, we also discuss those "energy eaters" that are anxieties, fears, shame, guilt, concerns, problems, and dilemmas. Just reading about them may make some people anxious already, right? These are the "monsters of change," the ones that block us. Shame and

guilt are feelings that often mask our actual needs. They usually hide other feelings, such as pain, sadness, anger, etc. It's important to work with all those feelings and ask: What is it that I need? That I really, *really* need? In Chapter 1 there is a tool to help us identify our real emotions, our real needs, our real thoughts, our real behaviors and patterns. Sometimes, when we start feeling pain, instead of dealing with what's causing it, we distract ourselves and we drink, or we go out and we gamble, or we engage in other addictions and unhealthy behaviors.

Some of us have such a hard time dealing with our own emotions that we decide to focus on other people's needs or problems. We try to control them. We try to tell them how to live, what to do and what not to do, and we're not taking care of what we need to change in ourselves. So a key point of the book is self-control versus trying to control others. The more you concentrate on you, on controlling what you can control—managing your emotions, your thoughts, your behaviors—you will feel better, and you will start to surround yourself with people that are also healthier. We relate to people who are similar to us or who we feel complete us, but sometimes we do it for the wrong reasons. When we do it for the right reasons, we exchange knowledge and emotions, but when it's not a healthy relationship, we start trading, bartering, and giving away parts of ourselves that are very hard to recover and to reintegrate. The closer we are to survival and the fewer the resources we have, the more parts of ourselves we lose.

If I am busy trying to survive, I may do things that I would not do if things were going okay. I may stay in a violent relationship or other unhealthy environment because I need to survive. In

the book and during the training, we do a lot of exercises to identify those parts that we have given up or bartered, and we find out *why* we did it and whether we still need to do it. These were once creative adaptations. For example, maybe when we were kids, we would hide when things got bad at home. Dad wouldn't beat us up, and Mom wouldn't yell at us, so hiding was a good resource. As an adult, I don't need to do that, but every time my wife gets angry, I go and hide in the closet, and that doesn't work. I need to identify how I learned the behavior, how it was helpful, and whether it is still helpful. If the behavior is no longer helpful, I can choose to concentrate my energy on changing it.

As we go through this process of building awareness, taking responsibility, and identifying our patterns, we realize that we all lose things in our lives, that we are constantly experiencing different kinds of losses at different points. We can talk about losing someone through death or divorce, people lose their jobs, they lose their homes. Losses can be material, they can be emotional, and they hurt. They hurt a lot, and sometimes we're so busy just surviving that we do not process our losses in a healthy way, and that affects us, it affects our relationships, and it affects the way we are in the world and the way we relate to others. Some losses may be less important, and some will be really significant. The thing to remember is that it's relative, that for some a loss may be the most horrible thing, and for some it may not.

Have you ever seen a child with a balloon, and then the balloon flies away? For that little kid, at that moment, losing that balloon is the worst experience in that child's life. And as adults we may say, "Oh, come on, I'll buy you another one." At that moment, we really need to be there

for them and say, “I am so sorry that happened,” so they can process the loss. As we relate to our family members, to friends, to people at work, to partners, we are giving up or sharing parts of ourselves. The important thing is: What we are willing to give in order to have company, to feel that we belong and fit in? We have this tendency to create stories about ourselves so that we can be with somebody else, and the book encourages you to be aware of the stories that are behind our reasons to relate to somebody.

When I have done the work to become aware of my losses, the parts of me that I have bartered or given up, the emotional resources I never developed, how I relate to others, how I choose to use my energy—now we start talking about putting all these puzzle pieces together again. We ask: How can I reintegrate? And how can I get rid of that emotional trash that I don’t need anymore? How can I leave behind all those chains I don’t need to drag so that I can come up as a whole person and as a healthy person? When we do that, we must keep in mind that we are not talking about being perfect. I like to call it the “finished product syndrome.” Some of us say, “Okay, I’m there. I went through therapy, I’ve gone through all of these processes, now I don’t have to do anything else again.” That’s the moment when we start to die, when we don’t want to grow anymore.

As we go through change, we will sometimes relapse into our old habits. They used to work, and that’s what we know. Even if I’m not very happy, I know how to handle the old habits. Some people stay in bad relationships because they know how to handle that. Some people learn as children that love is violent, that love is about screaming and yelling and hurting. While

they learn later that love can also be gentle and kind, as they go through that process, they tend to go back to negative relationships because that's what they know. It's not that they *want* relationships like that; it's that those are the relationships they can handle. With support, and with the techniques and strategies you will find in the book and during the training, you will be aware of when you're going back to harmful habits, and you will have a plan for getting back on track.

When you choose to change, please let people around you know. Otherwise, you will take them by surprise and may make them angry, or they will not recognize you. Sometimes we must give up relationships, at least temporarily, in order to change. So we have to tell people, "I'm trying to change, and this is how I'm trying, and maybe you want to change with me." Sometimes they will be unready or unwilling, and that's painful, but as you walk forward, you will find people who are on the same road as you. They are also trying to change, they are also trying to learn new habits and new ways of being in the world, and you won't feel so lonely anymore.

The process of reintegrating myself is to identify my losses and how they affected me, and to identify unhealthy patterns and choose to change them into healthier patterns. Instead of an unhealthy behavior, I can talk to a friend. I can generate new networks of support. It's about creating your future story and asking: Do I see myself healthier? Do I see myself in a better place, having a better relationship with my children, my husband, my wife? There's a wonderful exercise from the book that helps you visualize it very clearly. Once you know where you want to be, you can make a plan and work the plan step by step.

Real change is about awareness. It's about taking responsibility for my actions, my thoughts, and my emotions. It's about substituting behaviors that are no longer needed. It is about commitment: commitment to change, to myself. But I have to remind myself that it doesn't matter if I feel that I fail today; it's just a process of change. Like a butterfly, in the end I will find myself ready to fly and be free, but that happens only with practice, practice, practice.

The result is that I can start feeling good. I can recover my energy and my self. By *self* I mean my whole being. My emotions will be more balanced, my behaviors will be healthier, my thoughts will not turn against me. Positive thinking can help me. Gratitude can change the chemistry in the brain, so one of the suggestions in the book is to think about things that we are grateful for. Being aware of our sensations and knowing what it is that we want and need helps us to make a plan to get a satisfier that is healthy. If I'm feeling lonely, instead of smoking or overeating, I can call a friend for a cup of coffee or to go out for a walk. I can do this when I am aware of what I *truly* need, rather than what I think I need or what I am used to doing so I don't feel lonely.

A good head and a good heart are the best combination. Don't concentrate only on your thoughts or only on your emotions. It's about all of your sensations, your body that tells you what you need, and the thoughts you have about yourself and others. Some of us grow up with people who put a lot of garbage in our brains and in our hearts. But once we are aware, we can choose to get rid of them and say, "I am a worthy person. I am valuable, and I have a lot to give. I have a lot to share, and I'm a positive person." If you're not yet there, just keep saying it and

keep doing these exercises. One morning you will wake up and finally believe that you are the wonderful person that you already are.