

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE JOYOUS PATH TO EMOTIONAL HEALING

Healing shouldn't have to be so hard.

I often hear versions of the following comments, made with strained voices:

*"I have some really heavy issues I need to work on some day."*

*"There are things about myself that I've been avoiding facing up to."*

*"Eventually I'm going to have to dive in and deal with all this bad stuff I went through, but I just don't want to look at that stuff."*

*"I'm working really hard on myself. Some things are getting better, but it's so hard to keep moving forward."*

The messages that come through are:

- \* Emotional healing is painful, scary, and slow.
- \* There can be rewards eventually from healing, but first there is huge work and sacrifice, and then maybe the improvements start to come.
- \* Big changes aren't that common, but if you really put your nose to the grindstone you'll be able to make your life better in some small ways, and that's better than nothing. Part of maturing is accepting the fact that life is hard and you need to adapt to lowered expectations.

My response to these common views? **NO!!!! I don't believe these things at all!**

The reason most people find healing so hard to do is that they've had so little *help*, so little *guidance*, and so little *information*. Emotional recovery can be, and should be, a *joyous journey*. People who really know how to heal find that:

- \* Healing moves fast.
- \* Some of the gains are immediate, with many more to follow.
- \* The pleasure greatly outweighs the pain.
- \* Even the parts that do involve hard work are so rewarding – and quickly rewarding, not months or years into the future -- that they don't feel tiring, so that the underlying feeling remains, "I can totally do this."
- \* Healing is not a solitary undertaking, and it leads rapidly to greater and greater connection.

## SOME KEY MESSAGES IN OUR HEADS THAT GET IN THE WAY

I'd like to respond to four messages that likely go through your mind, since they seem to go through almost everyone's mind at one time or another. I'm no exception, by the way; these messages fortunately don't run around in my head much anymore, but they used to.

1) *"It's different for me because the things that have happened to me in my life are just too deep and awful."*

And hand-in-hand with this message is the one that goes:

*"Other people may be able to heal, but I'm just way too messed up. My problems are so serious that it's too late to get them to change."*

No, no, no. If you're still alive, there's still time. You can gain back a vibrant, connected, satisfying life. Pain, anxiety, and isolation do not need to dominate.

Everyone that I have ever spoken with has been through experiences that are so emotionally wrenching that it's miraculous that their heart didn't just stop beating from the pain. I don't know if the world has always been this way, but it's certainly true in our times. People from the kindest families and the safest towns still have stunning stories to tell of heartbreak, loss, and fear.

Are there people who have had it even worse than the rest? Yes, some people's childhoods could only be described as torture. Some people live as slaves, literally, as children, teenagers, or adults. Some people have been targets of a level of cruelty, of a depth of atrocity, that I can't fully wrap my head around.

But you know what? Somehow, seeming to defy possibility, many of them find their way back to love and peace, back to a life that is full of meaning.

The differences in how we've been hurt do matter, and it doesn't help anyone to pretend that we've all experienced the same levels of darkness. It's not true. *But those differences don't have to set us apart from each other.* And they absolutely do not mean that only some of us can recover from the harm that's been done while others cannot. Everyone can heal.

In fact, part of what happens when you experience really deep healing is that you come to feel more and more determined that no one, *no one*, is to be left behind. It's not that you can be everyone's personal rescuer – you can't be, and it won't help you or them if you try to be – but you can certainly rescue a few, and the rest of us can each rescue a few – even while we ourselves are being rescued -- and together we can get each other, get everyone, to dry land.

2) *"I've read so many books, I've tried so many healing approaches, I've thought and thought and thought, I've wept and wept. There's just no way out for me."*

Okay, let's talk about the books first.

I recognize that there are occasional great ones. But most books about psychology, including the “self-help” genre, are long on analyzing what we’re doing wrong, especially the supposed errors in our thinking, and short on what to do about it all. Their advice tends to come down to things like, “Change your outlook,” and “Think positively,” and “Just do it.” It’s emotional healing by bumper sticker. Short-term gains are common, but none of it works for long. You end up keeping a constant eye on yourself to make sure you aren’t thinking the wrong thoughts, and it just becomes another way to feel like it’s all your own fault.

The therapy field, too, has a much stronger analysis of how we get hurt than of how we heal. There are some alternative therapies, especially a genre known as “body-centered therapy,” that are showing some promising healing power. But it’s hard to find the depth of positive effect that we’re all craving.

And there is even less information available about how to love the process of healing rather than experiencing it as a chore.

3) *“This is just the way life is. Life is hard. We came into the world alone and we leave it alone. You need to accept it.”*

Accept it if you want to but I won’t. I think it’s the biggest lie in the world.

My life, for example, has been mostly terrific for over a decade. Maybe for some reason it’s going to turn much harder again, but the great years I’ve already had will always be mine; it’s too late to take those away from me. And I know many, many people all over the world who enjoy their lives immensely, where the pleasure and fulfillment way outweigh the pain.

As for “we come into the world alone,” no statement could be more preposterous. We come into the world *literally inside of the body of another human being – our mother -- beginning as an actual part of her, and then we gradually separate into an individual that can survive outside of our mother’s body.* And even after we’re born, years go by before we are capable of surviving without almost constant assistance from other human beings. **How could we possibly come into the world less alone than we do?**

As for dying alone, we manage to avoid having that happen for the vast majority of the human race. Most people are accompanied by one or more of their loved ones when they pass on. (And people who have come back from near-death experiences report that they went off into a realm where they felt the most completely connected that they ever had!)

Look at wild animals. Do they seem to spend most of their lives suffering? No. Certainly parts of their lives are painful, but mostly they seem to be doing pretty well. Why would the human being be the only animal on the planet destined to spend most of its life in pain?

Yes, *modern life* has become quite painful, because humans have been driven away from our connections to each other and forced into isolation. But that doesn’t mean life is inherently that way. We can heal, and our world can heal.

4) “*Life could never be happy all the time. There will always be pain and suffering.*”

Okay. But so what? We don’t *need* to be happy all the time, we don’t need lives that are pain-free. What we need is lives where the happy times outweigh the sad ones, where we live with meaning and purpose, and where we feel connected to the human race, to all that lives, and to all that exists. When our lives contain these elements we feel *fulfilled*, and fulfillment is what we’re really wanting, not happiness or comfort. And this we absolutely can have.

So what’s different about *The Joyous Recovery*? What is this path to healing that says that you don’t have to slog through your deep issues, that you don’t have to “face up” to dark awful truths, and that doesn’t require you to stew in your faults and “work on yourself” to fix what’s wrong?

Here are the five key points that make the Peak Living Network approach distinct:

### **Point One: We’re In This Together**

*The Joyous Recovery* is *not* a self-help book. In fact, the entire concept of “self-help” is mistaken. Not only does your recovery not have to be a solitary project, the reality is that it can’t be; healing on your own will only move you small distances. This is why consumers of self-help literature keep thinking they’ve found the answer but it keeps slipping away. Emotional healing is *collective*. Either we heal in large numbers or we don’t heal much at all.

Human beings are not mountain lions. Throughout almost the entirety of human history, we have been born into tribes and clans where our membership was secure from the moment we emerged into the world. We are a species of animal that watches over each other, that shares food, that sleeps piled together, that cares for the sick, that gathers for weddings and funerals. It is only in the last 3% or so of our history that we have *not* lived in this manner, and this means that the need and desire to live in community is programmed into us at the deepest levels.<sup>i</sup>

The reason we are longing for connection is that we were built to live connected.

Much of why we are feeling so wounded and unhappy is because of ways that connection in our lives broke down, or because it failed to exist in the first place. Either the people who were supposed to be making sure we were well were hurting us instead, or there just wasn’t anyone that was focusing much on our wellness, or both. *Since aloneness is one of the most profound sources of our injuries – perhaps the single most profound source – it’s not surprising that we don’t heal well alone.*

Try, then, to stop dumping on yourself about the resolutions you haven’t been able to stick with, the diets you haven’t stayed on, the exercise programs you’ve dropped off of. You aren’t a weak person; you just need a team behind you. We all do.

While writing *The Joyous Recovery*, I have simultaneously launching the Peak Living Network. PLN is a free global network for anyone who chooses to be part of it. Our mission is to

support each other's healing and recovery in thoughtful, aware, successful ways. This book will be far more likely to lead you toward your dreams if you become part of the Peak Living Network, or of some other community that consciously supports mutual healing.

The Peak Living Network is here to support your healing. Through the network and our website you can find, *entirely free*:

- \* peer-led support groups
- \* peer-led discussion groups
- \* articles and brochures
- \* an online healing forum
- \* people to meet with for co-counseling sessions (explained in Chapters 8-10)

For very reasonable costs you can also find:

- \* classes on co-counseling
- \* weekend healing retreats
- \* larger regional or national Peak Living Network gatherings

For more information see Chapter 11, see the videos at [YouTube.com/@peaklivingnetwork](https://www.youtube.com/@peaklivingnetwork), and visit [PeakLivingNetwork.org](https://www.peaklivingnetwork.org).

One of the core activities of the Peak Living Network is co-counseling, which we also call "splitting time." I will explain how to work with a partner to do healing sessions where you split the time in half; one person is the speaker during the first half while the other person listens and gives support, and then you *switch roles* for the second half of the time. Learning how to split time skillfully and effectively is a lifetime learning process; the better you get at it, the more you'll be amazed by its power to transform your life.

Throughout this book, I'll be returning to strategies for increasing connection in your life, so that your healing can happen in a sea of love and encouragement. The difference in your progress will be immeasurable.

### **Point Two: You Aren't Broken, So You Don't Need to Be Fixed**

There's a big difference between the message, "*I need to change the things that are wrong with me,*" and the message, "*I choose to heal so that I can enjoy life deeply and help those around me do the same.*"

What do our emotional struggles typically look like? Mostly things like:

being downhearted much of the time  
having low energy or low motivation

feeling ashamed or embarrassed about who we are  
feeling unattractive or unappealing  
feeling plagued by guilt over things we've done in the past  
believing we aren't very smart  
feeling afraid, feeling limited in what we can do because of our fears  
feeling unpleasantly full of anger, feeling a lot of frustrated rage  
feeling powerless to defend ourselves or our loved ones from wrongs that are being done  
feeling powerless to stop behaving in ways that are harmful to ourselves

This list doesn't cover everything, but most of what we go through fits in here somewhere.

And these elements, whether we carry just a few of them or whether we are burdened by them all, are signs of ways in which we have been *hurt*; they are the effects of traumatic emotional injury. In most cases they are the products of wounds that happened *over and over again*, with particular damage done when these recurring injuries were during childhood.

Moreover, these effects didn't come from small things. They grew out of experiences that were devastating to us when they happened, though we may have forgotten the soul-assaults that we endured.

It isn't your fault that you developed distressing effects from outrages and heartbreaks. *We all need to stop blaming ourselves, and each other, for the injuries we are carrying.*

You may ask the question, "But what if I'm behaving in ways that are really hurting other people, such as my children?" I put our emotional problems in three categories:

- 1) Ways that we chronically feel bad or empty
- 2) Ways that we chronically behave in ways that are bad *for us*
- 3) Ways that we chronically behave in ways that are harmful *to others*

For now I'm addressing only numbers 1 and 2 above. For these aspects of emotional difficulty -- which are the lion's share -- self-blame will get sharply in the way of your progress in overcoming them. It's no help at all.

Number 3 above -- patterns of harming other people -- has to be thought about differently, and in fact certain aspects of self-blame play a positive role in stopping those behaviors. We return to that topic at the end of chapter 15.

Human healing happens most powerfully when we feel connected to our strengths. If from the outset we're made to feel that we need a repair job, how will we be able to focus on what we do well and where our blessings are?

I'm not saying that positive thinking is the solution; in fact, the power of positive thinking has been greatly exaggerated. We need lots of space to allow ourselves to feel how bad we really

feel, and not to be constantly pressured to “look on the bright side” and walk around pretending that everything's okay.

But the thing is, on a deeper level you *are* okay. So I'm going to encourage you to do a balancing act, where you:

- \* keep one foot delicately placed in the realities of today's challenges
- \* keep the other foot rooted in the profound truth of who you really are

And who you really are is the same person you were when you were born; loving, open, full of energy, and with a vast capacity for intelligence.

### **Point Three: To Give Is to Receive**

If you go see a therapist, the discussion is all about you. The therapist doesn't open up much about his or her own life or challenges, and you aren't expected to give anything back emotionally. In some ways this is nice. You probably don't get listened to anywhere else in your life with this kind of focused attention, and that support allows some new things to happen inside you.

But at the same time, something's a little wrong here. A message is being sent (usually not intentionally) that says, “Some people in the world are helpers, and other people are in need of help. You are one of the ones who need help. The therapist has special healing knowledge and powers that you don't.”

What works better is to set up a healing path where, from the very start, we remember that you have as much to give as to receive, whether you feel that way at the moment or not. And I mean now; it doesn't make sense to wait “until I have it together enough to be able to offer something to other people.” *Our own healing is accelerated when we contribute to the healing of others*, because:

- \* it helps us to see who we really are: smart, capable people with a lot to give, not helpless people who need to be endlessly rescued
- \* when we help strengthen the people around us, their increased wellness then comes back to help us; we're helping them become *better helpers for us*
- \* it helps us to heal injuries we carry from times when we didn't get *to give* enough caring, not just times when we didn't *receive* enough caring

This last point is a crucial one but it's never mentioned. People don't just get hurt by not getting the love that we need; we get just as wounded from not having the opportunity to *give* the love that we feel in our hearts, and to have that love valued and treasured. This is true for children too, not just for adults. Children need to feel that their love is noticed and taken in by

other people, that it is taken seriously, and that it *makes a difference*. This is a huge challenge because most adults in our times are reluctant to respect and value what children have to give and to let themselves be transformed by those gifts.

### Are You Giving Too Much Already?

Perhaps you're already a giving style of person, and you're actually feeling a little burnt out on all the time you spend listening to other people, attending to their needs, and trying to help them with their problems. You may feel that the last thing you need for your healing is to be giving even more to others. And in a sense you're right.

But I'm going to teach you a new way of giving – with some specific structures in place – that doesn't drain you. In fact, it will leave you feeling more filled up than you did without it. The difference is that we're going to set things up so that:

- \* You get reminded often of how much your gifts are appreciated.
- \* The people you are supporting are actually *moving* in their lives. That relieves you of the burden of holding people up through struggles that never seem to improve much.
- \* Equal exchange is built into how we do things, so that you receive support in equal measure to how you give it.

### Point Four: “Just Do It” Doesn't Do It

Bumper stickers often point to a kernel of truth, but the wisdom gets ruined by trying to cram it into so few words. For example, if we could “Just Do It,” we would. If New Years' Resolutions actually worked we'd all be physically fit, caught up with our taxes, out of debt, and racing forward on the novel we always said we'd write some day.

At the same time, the sticker has a point. It doesn't work to keep waiting until we “feel ready” to make the changes that we hunger for in our lives. It's tragically easy to wait a lifetime for the right moment to take those big risks, to run with those great ideas, to let our hearts show. It is important to seize the moment, and sometimes we do have to just stop whining.

What's the solution to this apparent contradiction? The answer is to stop seeing these two aspects of life – getting ready to take steps vs. actually taking those steps -- as a forced choice. The reality is that the two can go on simultaneously, and in fact they should.

*The Joyous Recovery* teaches you how to create a rhythm that moves steadily back and forth between:

*taking decisive action in your life, moving forward, and living fully*  
and

*gathering support, taking time to feel and release your fear and sadness, healing, and growing*



When we stop thinking of these as separate processes, one that's better than the other (take your pick), or one that's for now and the other for later, we discover that a wonderful interplay is possible.

In fact, the cycle that I will be teaching you involves four elements, not two:

- 1) Increasing our awareness of our personal strengths, and our awareness of the love and support we can find from other people
- 2) Taking time to feel and process our weaknesses and wounds; that whole internal landscape where we *don't* feel confident or strong, where we *don't* feel whole, where in fact we may feel profoundly shattered
- 3) Allowing time and space for deep crying (not just weeping a few tears) and other forms of deep emotional release
- 4) Taking decisive, courageous action to improve our lives, the lives of others, and the condition of our world

You won't necessarily start at number one on the above list – you can start at any of these four places depending on where you're at on a given day -- but if you follow the process in this book you will cycle roughly through these four phases, and they'll tend to follow more or less this order. Sometimes you'll cycle through them all in a day and other times in a month or even a few months; the pace doesn't matter as long as the cycle keeps moving.

The healing approaches you've tried before have been held back by the fact that they are missing one or more of these pieces, or because they emphasize one of them way out of proportion to the others. Number 3 above, in particular, is entirely missing from most healing paths, and the whole train gets badly held back if that engine isn't hooked up.

### We Need to Live to Heal, Not Just Heal to Live

If I were to ask someone, "Why do you want to heal emotionally?" I'd be likely to hear answers along the lines of:

*"So my life wouldn't feel so painful and frustrating."*

*"So I could have more energy and motivation."*

*"So I wouldn't have these terrible nightmares."*

*"So I could stop binge eating."*

*"So I could get out of this emptiness and longing."*

All good. These are terrific goals, pointing you toward reclaiming the life that was your birthright. And to accomplish any of these would feel huge.

But these goals primarily touch on just one aspect of life: your relationship with yourself. Consider some other realms of life that are just as important to your well-being:

*How can I grow closer to other people?*

*How can I stand up for myself better?*

*How can I get clearer about what I want to accomplish on this earth?*

*How can I make more of a difference to people?*

*How can I help the people around me pull together?*

*How can I have an impact on the crises that are facing my world?*

You may feel a sudden urge to put this book down. The last three or four questions in particular may bring up a sensation of, “I’m barely making it through each day, the last thing I need right now is the weight of the world on my shoulders! I have to get myself together first!”

It certainly makes sense to be cautious about what you take on. And there are periods in life when we simply have to just focus on our own healing and not try to think about much of anything else, because we just can’t.

But there are risks to narrowing our view in this way, even temporarily. Notice some of the messages that we are sending ourselves:

*“I’m in such bad shape that I have nothing to offer others.”*

*“My healing is all up to me.”*

*“Dealing with relationships is just too stressful at this point.”*

*“The world doesn’t need me right now.”*

These ways of thinking create obstacles to healing, largely because they root us in what’s wrong with us. That’s why the whole, “I have to get myself together first” approach rarely leads to much progress, and should therefore be reserved for times when we are truly in too much emotional pain to function at all.

I encourage you to start gently – not roughly – leading yourself toward thinking on four levels simultaneously:

- \* my wishes and goals for myself
- \* my wishes and goals for the people I care about (which often includes the goal to simply *have* more people in our lives who matter to us, which means finding them and building connections to them)
- \* my wishes and goals for my surroundings (my neighborhood, my community, my work place, my spiritual community, my broader social network)
- \* my wishes and goals for the world I live in

I'll guide you in ways to think into these areas that won't add to your burden. What you'll find is that, rather than slowing your inner healing processes down, learning to move in and out of these four realms will get your recovery speeding along like never before.

Healing is often thought of as a process that we go through now so that we can live better later. I want to steer you away from this outlook. Instead, think of healing as a wonderful *way of living* that will be with you your entire life. Don't want to wait for later to live; start leaning into life right now. In a sense we do heal to live, but we also *live to heal*. And this interplay is what works best.

### **Point Five: Deep Release Shoots You Forward**

The fifth -- and last -- point in this section is missing from every well-known healing approach, and yet is the single most important concept in emotional recovery. All human beings -- including you and me -- come into the world built to heal. Healing *emotionally*, not just physically, is literally part of our bodies' physical design, woven into how our immune system works.

Our bodies are primed to heal emotional distress through deep, prolonged, visceral releases. There is no question that these releases are inherent, because babies and children exhibit them without ever having been taught anything about them. These processes are present because they are *necessary* to us. The specific forms they take are the following:

- \* Deep, prolonged crying and sobbing, which is primarily a healer of grief and longing
- \* Deep trembling, usually accompanied by frightened outbursts and agitated physical movements and often accompanied by sweating, which is primarily a healer of deep fear or terror
- \* Deep laughter, which again may be accompanied by sweating, which is primarily a healer of fear at non-terrifying levels (including embarrassment, which is a light form of fear)
- \* Raging, generally with intense angry noises and vigorous physical movements, which is primarily a healer of anger and injustice (a critically important and healthful release, but that unfortunately gets a bad reputation because of some people who use it as an excuse for frightening or intimidate other people)
- \* Yawning, often accompanied by a desire to stretch, which is a mysterious part of this process (but that is clearly one of the inherent healing releases, as I will explain)

No other healing experience open to human beings has quite the transforming power that the inherent releases carry when they get a chance to work as deeply as they were designed to do. They are as central to lasting recovery as antibodies are to physical healing. In fact, they are biologically interwoven in many intriguing ways with the physical immune system, as I explain in detail in PLN book two, *The Emotional Immune Response*.

The inherent releases are massively -- and tragically -- misunderstood.

One misconception is that these releases are ways of *expressing* emotion, which they aren't. We express emotion with words, songs, paintings, tones of voice, physical movements, and other channels. The inherent releases, though, exist to *heal* pain, not to express it.

Here, then, is a crucial understanding:

**Expressing pain *cannot* substitute for releasing it. These two processes play important but *distinct* roles.**

That's why people can express pain endlessly without getting relief from it.

A second crucial misconception is that the inherent releases just help us manage our distress. In this view vigorous exercise, for example, plays the same role as a deep sobbing cry does, since they can both create the sense of having driven our emotional pain away. But actually two very different things have happened. The exercise has made the distress *dissipate* – which can certainly be valuable – but the deep cry has actually *healed* a significant piece of the distress so that it's *gone*, discharged from our being. Exercise is important for getting through the day today, but in the long run it can't do what the deep inherent releases can. Dissipation and discharge are two different processes.

The releases won't necessarily help unless they go deep. That's why you may sometimes cry all night and not wake up feeling any better. Weeping won't do it. We have to relearn how to cry like babies, no holds barred, busting it all out of ourselves like an avalanche. And in order to cry this hard, we generally have to have someone holding us snugly; so unless you've had a long, deep cry while being held, you've never even discovered what crying can actually do.

When you open up these natural healing channels -- which may take some considerable work -- all your other efforts towards healing and growth will seem so much easier that you'll feel that you've entered a new life. *The deepest underpinnings of the Peak Living Network are **love** and **release**.* Our inherent nature, including the natural wisdom of our bodies, leads the way.

There is no need to choose between pursuing the inherent releases and any other approach you find useful in your healing. Don't abandon your practices or beliefs. Just *add* deep release; it makes all paths go better.

Here's a quick recap of the five tenets of emotional healing that underpin *The Joyous Recovery*:

- 1) It doesn't need to be all up to you -- in fact, it can't be. Healing is a collective process. (And to a huge extent *injury* is a collective process too, as we see in Chapter 16.)
- 2) We're not fixing what's wrong with us, we're healing.
- 3) We don't heal well unless we're involved with healing others, and we don't help other people well unless we're involved in our own healing. The two have to go together.

- 4) Trying harder won't work; we need well thought-out plans that can succeed, following a proven set of steps and with adequate support and resources. We can't wait until we feel ready to take action, but we also can't just lurch wildly forward. The solution is to blend smart, courageous action and healing.
- 5) The deep releases we were born with are the greatest keys to faster and deeper emotional recovery.

Living by these tenets puts us on a healing path that is connected, successful, and deeply rewarding. They lead to a process of daily unfolding full of joy and excitement *now*, rather than slogging through a swamp in hope of reaching green lands in some distant future.

We can't do all of our healing today – in fact we can expect to be healing for as long as we live – but the joy of regaining the pieces of ourselves that we lost, the joy of regaining our excitement and engagement with life, can begin today. So why not do it that way?

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<sup>i</sup> Humans are in no way the only animal this is true of, of course. To pick just one example, elephants are known to gather in large groups to share births and deaths together.