

Ep #396: Fear of Emotional Pain



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With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

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You are listening to *The Life Coach School Podcast* with Brooke Castillo, episode number 396.

Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Well, hello, my beautiful friends. Welcome to the podcast today. I am really excited to talk to you about this podcast. I was recommended a book called *The Way Out* by Alan Gordon. Actually, I wasn't recommended the book. One of my students, who has been a long-sufferer of chronic pain, was actually reading the book and just had mentioned something in one of our channels, had just said, like, "I am obsessed with this book."

And so, I decided to read it. It was called *The Way Out* and it was talking about chronic pain. And one of the reasons why I wanted to read it is because, when I was developing the content for my program on overdrinking, I read the work of Sarno, who talked a lot about the connection between mental pain and physical pain.

And so, I've always been fascinated with that combination. I've always been fascinated to know what is the difference between physical pain and emotional pain and how are they related. So, I got this book and started reading it. I read it voraciously. I really enjoyed it.

I think anyone who is suffering with chronic pain, physical chronic pain would enjoy reading this book. I read it with the lens of trying to understand how does chronic pain and the treating of chronic pain align with emotional pain and the treatment of emotional pain? That is an area that I have worked on extensively in Self-Coaching Scholars and in certification at the school and with my clients.

And one of the main things that I learned from reading both these books, from Sarno and from Gordon and also from studying emotional pain with my students and in my own life is that there are very similar treatments for both of them.

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And one of the fascinating things about the book *The Way Out* is how he describes some chronic pain. And he basically says – and all of his work is based in neuroscience. And he basically says, “While chronic pain feels like it’s coming from the body, in most cases, it’s generated by misfiring pain circuits in the brain.”

And the way that he described it – and I’m summarizing here. You need to go get his book and read it. But basically, what happens is when we are injured physically in our bodies, there is a signal that is sent to our brain that generates fear.

So, the pain, although it feels like the pain is happening at the spot, at the injury, it’s oftentimes, it is that the actual pain signal is created in the brain, which I find totally and utterly fascinating anyway, that the brain is what processes pain.

And so, one of the ways that I’ve always described this is that a sensation of physical pain starts in the body and travels to the brain, and emotional pain starts in the brain with a thought and travels to the body as pain. And so, as I was reading this book with this lens of pain being something that is created in the brain, I opened up so many questions that I wanted to answer in my own life and in the lives of my students.

Everything that I work with on myself, I always want to work with on my students. And so, one of the main theses that he has in there is pain being associated with fear. And so, the questions that came up for me were, where does pain come from? Why is it there? What can we do about it? And then, what does fear have to do with it?

In the book, it’s that fear perpetuates pain and fear fuels pain. And the more we fear pain, the more chronic pain we’re going to have. And if we can stop being afraid of pain and we recognize the necessity of it and we’re not afraid of it – which is something that I’ve been teaching for years, is that the fear of the pain perpetuates it and fuels it – then we can simply cut off its fuel source, process it as pain, and then be done with it.

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A lot of times, we want to be done with pain because we're afraid of it. And so, we kind of attack it from all these different angles, trying to get rid of it, trying to avoid it, trying to prevent it so we don't actually have to feel it.

And what if instead of ever being afraid of it, we embraced it, we opened ourselves up to it, we allowed it to be there, and we let ourselves know that pain is not dangerous? Pain is actually very useful. Pain is actually an indicator of something that we need to pay attention to.

When we fall down and hurt ourselves, we want to be able to acknowledge that there's pain there and take care of ourselves. When we're afraid to acknowledge it or afraid to experience it, we push it away, we don't actually solve the cause of it.

And when we don't solve the cause of it, we keep perpetuating it. And so, the way that he talks about it in this book is that the brain essentially, when it gets locked into a neuropathway of pain, it's essentially lying to us and telling us we're in pain when we're actually not in danger of any physical pain. That signal is not useful to us. We do not need to be careful with the way we're walking. We do not need to be sitting in a special chair, in some instances. We don't need to be careful with our body because there is no danger of hurting us more.

And then about this concept, how fascinating it is. Pain is there so we don't further injure ourselves. So, for example, if we break our ankle, pain is there to tell us, "Hey, don't walk on this. Take care of this. Rest this. Put a cast on it," whatever.

And when we're getting false signals, false alarms of pain, thought errors of pain telling us to be careful, "Don't walk on this," that is what he would call a lie. There's the signal still happening in the brain that there's pain that we need to be careful, but there actually isn't anything wrong with us.

One of the things that we try and do is create emotional safety for ourselves. Because of the fear of pain, we try to insulate ourselves from it and we actually end up constricting our lives. So, you can imagine, if your

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body is sending you a bunch of signals of physical pain into your brain, you're not going to want to move your body.

Now, one of the questions that he brought up that I thought was very interesting in this book is that his patients would ask him, "So you're telling me that my body isn't sending pain signals. Are you telling me my pain isn't real?"

And he said, "No, absolutely not. If you are feeling pain, if your brain is sending you a pain signal, you are definitely experiencing real pain. That is where it comes from; the brain. It's just not serving the purpose that pain was intended to serve."

And so, that becomes the question. If we're constricting our lives and immobilizing ourselves because of pain that isn't actually serving a purpose, it isn't protecting us physically or emotionally, then how much of our life aren't we living because of the fear of pain and not actually for pain?

He basically says that pain can become a habit, a brain pathway that gets triggered and just repeats it. And I see this very clearly with so many of my students with emotional pain, is the emotional pain becomes a habit, a brain pathway gets triggered, and then we start repeating thoughts in a habitual way that perpetuates pain that we end up buffering and not experiencing because we're so afraid.

And by not experiencing the pain, by not processing it through, by not being willing to go through it, we perpetuate the idea that pain is scary and that we shouldn't experience it and that we should stay away from it.

Now, I want you to really think about what happens when we avoid processing pain, understanding pain, going all the way to the other side of it.

If we ignore it and avoid it, we can actually create a situation that is much more dangerous than if we acknowledge it and solve for it. Back to the ankle example, if we break our ankle, we realize we're in pain, we are

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willing to experience the pain because we understand that our ankle is broken and that we should, quote unquote be in pain. And then we get it fixed. We go through the process of recovering from it. And then, we no longer have pain.

And even though we definitely don't want to break our ankle again, we understand that it's not something that we have to stay in the house and hide from forever because we know, if we break our ankle, there will be a way to go all the way to the other side of that pain and process it, unless we get caught in the fear emotional cycle, unless we get stuck in the process of experiencing the habit of avoiding pain. And that's what most of us are in. We perpetuate our pain by avoiding it.

The more we understand pain and our own emotional pain, the more authority we have over it, the less fear we have. We do so many destructive things in an attempt to avoid pain.

We think we love food, drugs, social media. But really, we're just running away from pain, not towards those other things, but running away from pain. So, when we tell ourselves we just love cookies, we just love chardonnay, we just love Instagram, we're telling ourselves that we love those things, but really, we love that they prevent us from feeling this illusion of very scary pain. And we would call it boredom or isolation or loneliness.

Those things are painful. Those human emotions are useful, painful emotions that we could pay attention to and process through and experience and find all of the thought patterns contributing towards them, and take action based on a fully-processed felt experience.

That's not the same as reacting to negative emotion. Reacting to negative emotion is the opposite of processing it through.

If we can find a way to stay unafraid of pain, we can reduce it and therefore reduce the behaviors we use to attempt to avoid it. False pleasure does not eliminate pain. It actually prolongs it, gives you a temporary relief of it, but then it prolongs it.

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When we construct our lives to increase pleasure and reduce pain, we end up being afraid of the pain we are actually causing ourselves. We have emotional pain false alarms, is what he would call them; false alarms.

So, we're afraid of deprivation or withdrawal. We're afraid that pain could actually kill us, emotional pain could actually kill us. Which when you think about it, emotional pain doesn't kill us. Reacting to it is what kills us. Not acknowledging it, not experiencing it is what can cause us to hurt ourselves with the pain, literally.

We're afraid that the pain won't ever end. We're afraid that we can't handle the pain. We're afraid of feeling abandonment and deprivation and nonacceptance or exclusion or criticism, rejection, or unworthiness. These emotions are what I see all of us doing our best to avoid.

We try to please people. We try to perfect. We try and buffer to avoid all of these emotions that are actually harmless to us if we experience them. It's the avoiding of them, the reacting to them, and the buffering of them that makes them quote unquote dangerous.

So, when we let go of the fear of these emotions, we realize that they're just vibrations in our body. We do not have to recreate pain. We do not have to recreate the habit of emotional pain and relive, over and over and over, Models that perpetuate pain.

So, the question becomes, how do we experience it? How do we go through pain instead of trying to avoid it and perpetuate it? And I think one of the things that this book really helped me understand and I really want to pass onto you is that the fear of emotional pain is the most dangerous fear there is. Because when we are afraid of being human, of showing up, of moving through our lives, of taking care of the things that we want to take care of our lives, the danger, quote unquote, comes from our un-lived experience.

We do not get to find out who we really are in our relationships, in our lives, in our abilities, in our capacities because we're ducking and covering in

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fear. The worst that can happen is that you have to process an emotion all the way through, that you have to open up to the vibration of the emotion.

And if you're not afraid to do that, if you're like, "Bring on rejection, bring on loneliness, bring on abandonment. I can feel these emotions now. I'm an adult I'm capable. I am not afraid," you will reduce a tremendous amount of avoidance in your life, of holding yourself back, of not showing up.

You will reduce an extraordinarily huge amount of buffering that you may not even realize you're doing.

I want to tell you that releasing the fear of emotional pain only takes the willingness to sit down, to breathe in, to welcome that pain in, to describe it. One of the things that I have found to be the most useful thing is to describe the emotional pain that is going on in my body. As soon as I switch into the watcher mode to describe it, I get relief from it without avoiding it.

I can say it's in my chest, it feels tight. It's vibrating. It's in my stomach. It feels empty and hollow and like a huge void that I'll never be able to fill with anything. That hollow, empty sound, it's just vibrating over and over and over. And it seems like it will never, ever stop.

Or anxiety, just this constant buzzing and buzzing and buzzing, and then you feel it, you describe what it's like in your body. And what you realize is that even in describing it, you're releasing it. you're processing it. You're feeling it.

The more you experience the pain and breathe into it and allow it to be there, the less afraid you'll be because the more harmless it is. When we're grasping at the external world, trying to solve for our internal pain, trying to fix people and fix our lives and make more money and have more people in our life and have people like us more and have other people behave in a way that we want them to behave, when we grasp at that external world trying to solve for internal pain, we are always going to be frustrating ourselves and creating fear around being out of control.

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The truth is, we don't need to be in control of our emotions. We can allow our emotions to be there, even though we know we're causing them with our own mind, even though we know our thoughts create our emotions, it doesn't mean we shouldn't feel them. It doesn't mean we should change our thoughts.

It means we should be present with those emotions, knowing that thoughts are causing them, knowing that there's nothing to be afraid of, knowing that it's just a thought-feeling combination. We think a certain way, we feel a certain way.

We do a lot of work in Scholars with thought downloads. So, we're going to the mind to understand what our mind is thinking and the feelings that our mind is creating. And one of the other approaches that I highly recommend, if you are someone who has a fear of emotional pain, you feel like that pain will kill you, is you just want to practice being mindful of your body.

"What am I feeling? What is my now feeling? What does it feel like to feel this?" Don't be tempted to go, "What is the thought causing it and let me get the hell out of Dodge. This feels terrible and I'm afraid of it." Because you'll miss the opportunity to process it.

Let's say the feeling is lonely, "I feel lonely right now." What does lonely feel like? What is your experience of that in your body? Are you afraid to feel it? Why? What is so scary about an emotion that just vibrates in your body? Why are you trying so desperately to do everything you can to eat, to avoid, buffer, to stay away from that emotion? And how might your life be different if you allowed yourself to feel it?

Do you think, if you start to allow yourself to feel it, that it will never end? If you start to feel lonely, you'll be lonely for the rest of your life? If you start to feel unworthy, that you think you'll be unworthy for the rest of your life, not approved of, disapproval, maybe someone is feeling hate.

Are you afraid that once you let yourself feel this emotion all the way through that somehow you'll never stop? I want to promise you, the opposite is true.

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When you try to prevent an emotion because you're afraid, "Oh my gosh, if I think that thought and feel that way then I'll act on it." That's not the case. When you understand the Model as an awareness tool, what's beautiful about it is you can stop and pause the Model right after that F-line. You can simply process that emotion without reacting to it. You can allow it to be there.

You can embrace all emotions. And what you'll see is that as you do this, your life will open up. Opportunities will open up. You'll be much more willing to have goals. You'll be much more willing to push yourself into the fullest expression of yourself, no matter what anyone else thinks. Because the worst that can happen is an emotion. That's the worst that any of us is ever going to experience is an emotion that we're causing ourselves.

And just because we're causing it, doesn't mean we don't want to cause it. Sometimes, we want to be devastated. We want to be disappointed. We want to be frustrated. That's the experience that we're having. So, how do we show up for those emotions without being afraid?

And I want to tell you, the best way that I've learned how to do that for all the emotions in my life, the ones that I'm most afraid of, is by actually experiencing them, processing them, making it to the other side of them, and becoming stronger because of it.

When we hide from our lives in order to hide from emotions, we do not ever start to understand that there's nothing to be afraid of, that at the end of our lives, we want to have experienced negative emotion. We want to have experienced all of the emotion in the biggest way because it means we've lived our lives in the biggest way.

When we avoid negative emotion, we get to experience another one. All we do is experience fear. When we avoid pain, we get fear instead. And then, we have to buffer, avoid, react, blame, and try and change the world to fix our emotional life.

And you can be fueled by that fear to try and fix your life so you'll no longer feel pain. But what you will discover, my friends, all of you will discover is

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there is no external solution for internal pain. There just isn't. You cannot manipulate enough circumstances to change how you feel.

The brain is designed to memorize things, to be socialized, to learn things. And you may have many patterns of thought that are going on in your brain that are creating pain you're not even conscious of because you're unwilling to open the door of that pain. And when you are willing to go into the pain, that is when you get the authority. That's when you get the access to the thinking, to the habitual thinking that is causing it. That is how we change our lives; by telling ourselves the truth and experiencing the truth without fear.

Now, we may find that that pain is coming from a lie inside of our brain. But if we're willing to experience the pain of that, even lies, even the way our brain is human doesn't prevent us from living our best life. When we start becoming afraid of the thoughts in our brain, we might as well just be afraid of the world because the brain is always going to be producing thoughts; half of them negative.

But we don't have to be afraid. And when we're not afraid of those thoughts creating the pain, that's when we get the authority. That's when we can change it. We don't feel victims to our own brain. We feel like we're the masters of our own brain, even though it produces a habitual negative stream of thoughts.

Because all of a sudden, it doesn't need to be our enemy because we understand, brain produces negative thoughts, I experience negative emotions, not the end of the world. It's actually what being in the world is all about half the time.

People ask me sometimes, is there a way to reprogram your entire brain so you never have negative emotion? I think there may be, but I don't think any of us would want to do that. The magic of being alive is the balance of it. It's the learning about it. It's the being present and mindful for all of it.

We don't become fearless because there's nothing scary in the world. We just become fearless of avoiding our emotions. We become fearless

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feelers. We're willing to feel what will happen when we live our lives in the biggest way possible.

Rejection, disapproval, frustration, failure, shame, bring it all on. Bring on all those emotions. Let me move through them and towards them and not let them prevent me from being who I really am. I don't want to live my life hiding.

We tell ourselves we're hiding from life; we're hiding from other people. But really, we're just hiding from the pain that we're afraid we're going to feel. So, I want you to think about, what would your life be like if pain wasn't that big of a deal? If emotional pain was just a signal created in your brain?

Think about what this book talks about, where he'll go to his patient and he'll say, "Listen, there's nothing wrong with your leg. I know that your brain is telling you that the pain is coming from your leg. But you do not have anything wrong with your leg. It's a misfire of your brain. Your leg is healthy and whole and good. So, any pain that you're experiencing is just being produced by your brain. It doesn't make the pain any less real. It doesn't make it hurt any less. But it allows you to breathe into it and not be afraid of it."

And when his patients do this, when his patients allow themselves to experience the truth, that they're safe and that there's nothing wrong with them and that they're physically okay and that their brain is just misfiring, hundreds of people have gotten out and released that chronic pain.

It doesn't mean they don't feel pain when they get hurt. Of course, they do. But they just don't experience the unnecessary chronic pain. And that is something I want to offer to all of you, my students. Emotional pain is normal. It's part of life. It's the other half that makes the great part great.

It's the unnecessary hiding from pain and pushing it away and being afraid of it that we want to let go of. So, I want to invite you to open up to the pain in your life. Make a list of the things that you're avoiding because you don't want to experience pain. Make a list of the actual emotions that you're afraid of experiencing.

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What do you spend a lot of time trying to avoid? And what if you didn't? What if you allowed yourself to be brave enough to experience the pain that is part of your big, spectacular, amazing, beautiful life? I hope you're willing to find out.

If you want more help in learning how to process pain, if you want more help in trying to figure out how to observe the pain in your body without being afraid of it, I want to invite you to join Scholars. We will help you. We do one-on-one coaching in there and we have many classes on processing emotion in there that will help you with this. It is one of the most important skills you can develop to change your life permanently.

Have a beautiful week, everyone. I'll talk to you soon. Bye.

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