

leaving your
Emotional Ghetto
and Taking Control of Your Life

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Foreword

When I got married and decided to have a family, I had no idea about the journey on which I was about to embark. I planned on having two or three children, stay at home with them until they were a magic age of “old enough” and then go back to work.

Fairly simple and straightforward, I thought.

Things started out as expected. I worked as an occasional teacher and our first child, Adam, was born about two years after we got married. Without much thought about anything else, I stuck to my plan and put my career on hold to raise my family. Life was comfortable and stress-free. When Adam was about a year old, we decided to have another child.



A huge change in our life came with the arrival of Eric. From the first minute of his life, we were brought into a world of the unknown, of chaos and uncertainty. Instantly we were headed in a whole different direction.

Rather than the usual time to enjoy our newborn child, our days were filled with doctor’s appointments, long hospital admissions, sleepless nights, community support people, therapy, equipment, in-home support workers and so on.

We certainly didn’t plan for this kind of life. Who does?

Eric was fighting for his life and we were fighting for our survival. We had lost all sight of our goals and dreams, and what we had planned for.

Our circumstance became a real eye-opener for me. It brought me to a whole new understanding about the meaning of determination, independence, relationships, and what it took to overcome heartbreak and unforeseen change. I quickly learned about not dwelling on what was wrong, and to focus on what was important for moving forward. I had to, for the health and well-being of Eric and our entire family. While it can be very difficult to see the positive behind a cloud of shock, sadness and misfortune, I realized that despite very tragic and sad circumstances, there were opportunities for new goals and dreams.

For many people, unexpected and unforeseen situations can easily result in feelings of bitterness, anger and resentment.

I wrote this book to offer some hope and inspiration. To let others know some of the ideas that I discovered were helpful for overcoming your grief and keeping your life good.



Can you relate...?

“I don’t know if I love you anymore, I might want a divorce.”

“I have so many bills to pay; I need to get a job.”

“There’s been an accident, your mother didn’t survive.”

“The test results came back, they’re positive, your sister has cancer.”

“From the results of the assessment we are fairly certain that your son has Autism.”

Life. It’s unpredictable and full of surprises.

You seem to have it all planned out, and suddenly, without warning, something happens to remind you that there are no guarantees about anything.

Sometimes it’s good news, and you are pleasantly surprised. Other times, you have the kind of experience that turns your world upside down, and you’re not sure what to do next. It comes on so quickly, and you can’t think straight. You find yourself saying over and over again, “I can’t believe this is happening.”

When this occurs, it can be so overwhelming that it takes you to a very dark place. Plans are destroyed, dreams are shattered and life as you know it will never be the same.

An unexpected or painful event can happen to any one of us. Anytime...anywhere.

It can have such a devastating impact on our lives that we can find ourselves trapped in an *emotional ghetto*.

What is an emotional ghetto?

An emotional ghetto is a place where you find yourself as a result of a crushing experience or unexpected change. It can leave you feeling extremely anxious, afraid and alone. You feel like you’ve lost control of your life, and you may feel trapped and see no way out.



My emotional story...

“When I look back on the past 26 years, and all that has happened in our lives, I’m amazed and astonished. It all started when my mother-in-law was killed in a tragic car accident. Our oldest son, Adam, was only 3 months old at the time. A year later, our second child, Eric, was born. He was a very sick baby and was diagnosed with severe disabilities and extraordinary health concerns. From that moment on, life as we knew it would change forever.

When Eric was about 8 years old, we celebrated the birth of our third child, Aaron. It was a good time in our lives, and we felt like we had finally come full circle. A few short years later, my mother was diagnosed with colon cancer, and we faced another emotional struggle... After a 4-year fight, my mom passed away. In the midst of all this, Eric’s health continued to get worse.

When he was almost 15 years old, a year after my mom’s passing, Eric became very ill, and we lost him too. If that wasn’t enough, 6 months later, my dear sister-in-law and friend, Mary, passed away suddenly at the age of 45.” Four years later, I lost my dad.

Our personal circumstances were very challenging and at times, so tremendously sad. The pain was unbearable, and we didn’t seem to get a break. Everything that happened was so serious and a heavy burden to carry. There wasn’t a day that didn’t go by when people would say to us “I don’t know how you do it.” And believe me, there were times when I didn’t know how we did it either.

Life was like a bad roller coaster ride with too many upward climbs and not enough time at the top to enjoy the view. When I look back, I remember the dark times and when we didn’t know how we could carry on. And I also remember the good times, the joy, the laughter, the lessons learned, the people who helped.

Somehow, we managed to get through each day.

We are living in a time of much turmoil and uncertainty; a time where stress levels seem to be at an all-time high and our mental health is a priority.

I have learned so much from the difficulties in my life, and I have given some thought to what helped us to leave our, “*emotional ghetto*”?



15 Ideas for Leaving Your Emotional Ghetto and Taking Control of Your Life

1. Share your feelings

Whether it's friends, family, co-workers or a support professional, there are people in your life to whom you are close, and whom you trust. Get a load off your mind and tell them your story. If you aren't ready to talk, then write things down. Don't worry about grammar or creative thought, just write. Write about what's on your mind as a way of expressing how you feel. Whatever method you choose, it's so important to find a way to release stress and share your feelings.

*I had three people that I used to call when I needed to talk. My mother, my sister-in-law and my best friend were all part of my inner circle of support. I didn't look to them for answers, but they were always there to listen. Whenever I was feeling overwhelmed or sad, I would pick up the phone and talk it out. **Who is your go-to person?***

2. Give yourself time

When a major change occurs, it will take some time to sort out what has happened, and there will be a continual pull and desire to want things to be "the way they always were".

Our brain likes certainty; it doesn't like chaos and disruption.

I can tell you that difficult times cause a disturbance and it's hard to find balance and most likely you will feel rather imbalanced. It's a new situation that you didn't plan for.

A good example of this is right after a baby comes along. Couples want to share the same intimacy and closeness that they had before the baby was born.

The reality is, however, that life is different after having a baby. The spontaneity and freedom that was once present is no longer there. Couples may feel separated and not connected. The adjustment may take a while, and in the early days and months, it may feel like things won't ever be back to "normal".

Allow yourself the time that you need to come to terms with what has just occurred and give yourself time to adjust. Rather than try to hang on to what used to be, let go and embrace your new "normal". **Can you give yourself permission to take time?**



3. Nurture your relationships and forgive

At some point in your life, you may get upset if someone says the wrong thing or if someone isn't supportive of what you're going through.

Whatever you do, don't react! Take a moment to think about how you feel and how you want to express yourself. Certainly, they don't understand it like you do because they haven't had the same experience. It's not their fault.

While it can be difficult to do, if you can find it in your heart to forgive, it will be easier to move on.

*There were so many times when I felt that people didn't say the right thing, or they didn't call us enough. I would often get upset with someone who complained about their own healthy child and the difficulty they were having. I remember one time when an acquaintance was complaining that her newborn son had kept her up all night. Eric was already 2 years old, and I hadn't slept more than 3 hours each night. "Doesn't she get it?" I thought. "How could she even think about complaining to me?" Years later I realized that I couldn't hold a grudge for people who didn't truly understand my life. I came up with this motto: **"Forgive those who need you the most"**. Don't give up on people and don't turn them away. The more you involve them in your life, the more they will learn, and it may help them to understand your point of view.*

4. Be honest with yourself

Whatever the circumstance, it's not going away. This truth can be difficult and very challenging to accept, especially in the early part of your journey. However, it is so important to realize that there is nothing you can do to change it. It won't be easy, but once you've come to terms with your new situation, it will be easier to move forward.

*I didn't want to believe that my son would have a disability. I wanted to hang onto the words of some of the doctors who said, "he will be fine, he just had a rough start." Yet, in my heart, I knew the truth. The sooner I faced the truth, the quicker I was able to support and care for him so that he could have the best life possible. **What is your truth?***



5. Take care of your basic needs

I can't even begin to count the number of hours we spent in hospitals, doctor's offices, treatment rooms and so on. Our days were very long, and our nights were even longer, filled with a lot of worrying and anxious moments. When we're under stress, we often forget about our basic needs of getting the proper nutrition and a good amount of sleep.

Take time to eat and rest. You will need your energy to keep going.

*Even though I had a never-ending knot in my stomach, I really tried to make an effort to eat when I was hungry and to have enough water to drink. It gave me the energy that I needed to face the day and do the necessary work ahead. **How can you get good nutrition and enough rest?***

6. Be flexible and open-minded

We know that planning and setting goals are important. However, life is everchanging, and if you become too dependent on thinking that everything is going to work out as you want it to, you are only asking for frustration and disappointment.

It's a good idea to have some direction in your life, but it's equally as important to know that you might have to change your course along the way.

"When each of our eldest children were about a year old, my sister-in-law and I each wanted to have another baby. We had talked about how nice it would be if we could experience pregnancy together and that our kids would be close in age and grow up together.

Coincidentally, our initial plans had worked, and we found ourselves pregnant at the same time.

What we didn't plan for was that our son would be born very ill and that our lives would be consumed with our son's survival. We didn't share in the celebration that we were hoping for.

That was my first lesson in understanding that in life, there are no guarantees and that things don't always go as planned.

The good news was that she and her family became one of our biggest supports. We had planned to share our lives, and we did, just in a different way than we had originally thought.

What is your new reality?



7. Laugh

No matter how dismal things may seem, there will always be something that makes you laugh. Jump on the chance and allow yourself to enjoy the moment. That brief instant of happiness can get you through the tough times ahead.

*The days we spent in the hospital were so depressing and very isolating. We were separated from the rest of the world. But if we looked around, despite the surroundings, there was always something funny going on. Laughter got us through some of the longest days. **What is funny in your life?***

8. Get help

There are many responsibilities in today's world which can add extra stress to your life. It's not unusual to try to take care of the situation alone.

Get help and don't try to do it all by yourself. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not to be viewed as weakness. Don't hesitate to ask. You will be surprised by the amount of support you receive.

*My parents were a huge support to us. They were there whenever we needed them, and even when we didn't. Their encouragement and assistance was un-measurable, and they definitely went above and beyond what was expected of grandparents. I used to feel so guilty for asking for their help. It was also difficult to feel like I still needed my parents more than I had ever expected as an adult. Yet, I don't know how we would have coped without their help. I am so glad that we let them in. **Who can you ask for help?***

9. Life is not perfect, and you don't have to be either

Our own emotional turmoil can come from the pressure that we place on ourselves. From our children's success in school to our idea of the perfect body, or our romantic ideal of the perfect relationship, our society seems to strive for perfection and for some reason we feel like we must as well.

Nothing is perfect. The sooner we can realize this, the less stressed we will be.

*One of the most important messages that Eric brought to us was that we all have our own strengths and abilities. He helped us to realize that life was fragile and that it was our relationships and the people in our life that were important, not material wealth, fame or an unrealistic vision of a perfect life. **How can you be more flexible in how you view a perfect life?***



10. Communicate openly and honestly

When we're upset, we tend to focus on our own side of the story, and because of our emotions, we may find it difficult to see a different point of view. But, there are always two sides to every story and two perspectives to consider, especially when relationships are at stake.

A story comes to mind about a man who once shared with me that he got really depressed when his son was ill. His son had Autism, along with a seizure disorder. He said that his family couldn't understand why he would get so down in the dumps. His wife viewed her husband as withdrawn and not very talkative. She felt that he didn't feel close enough to her to share his thoughts. His children didn't understand him at all which made them feel like they were important to him.

I asked him if he had ever shared how he felt with his family. He replied that he thought the answer was obvious, that seeing his son go through all that he did was enough to make anyone very sad. He added that he didn't want to tell his wife how he felt because in his mind she had enough stress and anxiety to deal with and he didn't want to add to it.

A misunderstanding can be easily created if two different points of view are not shared. There are two sides to every story. Open and honest communication is key to a good relationship, however, being honest can lead you to feel vulnerable. **What fears can you face so that you can communicate openly and honestly?**

11. Take a break when you need it

A challenging situation can consume your entire life very quickly. For your own physical and mental health, I want to emphasize how crucial it is to take time to do something that takes you away from your stress. Exercise, scream, go out for a coffee, dance, take a course on something that interests you, do some gardening; do whatever it takes to relax your mind, even if it's only for a short time.

Taking a few minutes to chill out will mean better coping throughout.

*No matter how tired I felt, I would make every effort to exercise at least 4 times a week. It was my time alone for when I could do something I enjoyed and focus on nothing but running. I would come home re-energized and ready to face the rest of the day. Without those short breaks, I would not have had any time for myself and could have unwillingly resented my situation and burned out very quickly. **What is your way of taking a break?***



12. Value your life and what's important to you

Despite what has happened, you have a life to live and to enjoy. Too often we hear about people's lives falling apart because of a tragic experience. Whether it's your job, a hobby, family or friendships; there is something in your life that is very important to you. Be passionate about what makes you happy and be determined to continue with it. It will give you another focus and help you put everything into perspective.

After Eric was born, I was a full-time mom for many years. As time went by I began to feel very isolated, alone and frustrated. It felt like the rest of the world was going on without me. I felt trapped and couldn't see a way out. I started to resent the fact that my husband got to go to work every day and that I was stuck at home. I cried a lot and wasn't a very happy mom. I felt like nobody cared about what I was going through.

Then one day it hit me. My happiness is up to me. It wasn't up to my husband, my children, my friends or anyone else. If I wanted to see my life change, I had to do something about it.

*This wasn't going to be easy, but I knew that I had to do it. My first opportunity was a volunteer commitment as a member of a children's services committee. After the first meeting, I immediately felt a renewed sense of purpose and involvement in the bigger world! I met new people and was instantly inspired by ideas that would help children and families. This was the start of my second chance, and I didn't look back. **What is important to you and how can you nurture it?***

13. Look at the positive for personal growth

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "Everything happens for a reason". When someone gets very ill or dies, or your partner tells you that they want a divorce, it can be very difficult to find the silver lining in the situation. The fact that there is a purpose to all that takes place in our life is not an easy concept to understand.

During tough times is when it's most important to find a way to believe that our experience will one day strengthen our lives or the lives of others. Consider the lessons that you've learned and see if there's an opportunity to help or teach others.

Having Eric as a son was indeed very challenging but each day I was learning so much from him. I remember someone had described me as a box of information waiting to be opened. That was so true. I wanted to share what I had learned with everyone and anyone.

When Eric was about 7 years old, I started my coaching and consulting business.

*I can share my perspective with all kinds of professionals and also assist other families who share a similar situation. My work has been very therapeutic and extremely rewarding. **What have you learned from your situation and how has it contributed to your personal growth?***

14. Live without regret

Life is fragile, so grab hold of the opportunity and enjoy the good times. Give someone a hug when you have the chance. Accept an invitation even if you don't think you have time to go. Call a friend if she's on your mind. Spend time with your mother even if you know your visit might end in an argument. There is so much truth to the old expression, "live life to the fullest". Do everything you and enjoy and that is important to you so that when a major change does occur you don't have any regrets.

*As an only child and I was always very close to my mom, so naturally people expected her death to be devastating for me. The opposite was actually true. Because my mom and I had such a close relationship, doing a lot together and finding the time to call and say "hi" every day, I had no regrets when she passed away. I knew that all that I had learned from her and shared with her would stay with me for a lifetime. **What is it that you don't want to regret not doing?***

15. Ask yourself "Who's in control of my life?"

Is it the situation? Is it your emotions? Is it another person? Or is it you?

This question is your key to leaving your *emotional ghetto*. Despite all the people around you and all the experiences you will go through, taking a step back and asking, "who is in control of my life right now" is going to help you realize what or who is in control.

To regain stability and balance; to be happy and satisfied, to find peace with your situation, the answer to the question should be, "I am".

*I had a professor in University who was a mentor to many of us. Whenever we would get upset, whether it was because of a love interest, school or sports, he would ask us "who's in control of your life?" For me, his question would make me stop and think about whom or what was in charge of my emotions at the time. I knew the answer was supposed to be that I was in control of my life, but it wasn't always the case. Emotions are a powerful force, and it's not always easy to let them go. If you regularly ask yourself, "Who or what is in control of my life?" It can be your gauge for knowing if a change is required. **Who is in control of your life?***

Ready to learn more? [Contact me](#) about group seminars and workshops options.

