

FOREWORD BY LEVI LUSKO

ARE YOU **REALLY**



GETTING REAL
ABOUT WHO YOU ARE,
HOW YOU'RE DOING,
AND WHY IT MATTERS

**DEBRA
FILETA**

M.A., LPC

CONTENTS

Foreword by Levi Lusko 9

Introduction: You're Not as Healthy As You Think You Are 13

Part 1: Emotional Health

1. Going Underneath the Surface: Emotional Awareness. 23

2. Patterns Lead to Process: Emotional History 47

3. God Is More Real than My Reality: Emotional Control. 69

Part 2: Spiritual Health

4. God Is ____: My View of God 97

5. Hello, My Name Is ____: My View of Self 113

6. Significant Others: My View of Relationships 127

Part 3: Mental Health

7. What's on Repeat? Cognitive Distortions. 145

8. Anxiety, Depression, and the Church:
Mental Health Matters 159

9. Trauma Messes with Your Head: Peeling Back the Layers. 179

Part 4: Physical Health

10. Back to the Basics: The Body-Mind Connection 203

11. Stop Living on Empty: The Art of Self-Care 215

12. Time Doesn't Heal All Wounds: One Year from Today 231

Notes 247

Going Underneath the Surface

Emotional Awareness

The last place I would have ever expected to have a panic attack was on a safari bus.

I'd studied all about panic attacks, and I'd worked with countless people who'd experienced them. It was part of my job to help people navigate through feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, shame, and everything in between, and to be candid, I was pretty good at it. I had read all the books and knew all the strategies (or so I thought). But it's one thing to know about emotional struggles and a whole other thing to experience emotional struggles.

It was a hot, 96-degree day in September. Labor Day weekend would be a perfect time to take the kids to a local safari experience that we had on our bucket list. We got to the park and walked around for a while until we realized it was too hot to keep walking. The safari tour

bus was leaving in a few minutes, so we decided to get our tickets and head toward the line. I remember thinking how hot it was, noticing the significant amount of sweat we were dripping, and reminding the kids to make sure they were staying hydrated. We bought a couple bottles of water and got in line. Within a few moments, the safari bus pulled up in its animal print colors of black and bright orange. It was a rugged bus, with huge wheels and no roof so you could reach out and feed the wild animals as you took a tour through the “wilderness.”

We hopped on the bus and got settled, and within moments our group had entered a mock-up of the African savannah. There were elk, deer, water buffalo, and bison to begin with. Then we drove by some giraffes and eventually into a large herd of Watusi (an African breed of cattle with gigantic horns). The bus stopped to give the cattle a chance to get close and to give the riders an opportunity to feed them as they passed by.

All of a sudden, I became very aware of my body. My focus went from looking at the things around me to feeling what was going on inside of me. I realized how hot my head was feeling with the sun beating down on my black head of hair. The next thing you know, I started sweating profusely. My mouth felt dry, and I felt a tingling going up each of my hands all the way up to the top of my arms. My heart rate started climbing, and I could hear my pulse like the sound of a deafening drum beating in my ear. I felt like I was breathing through a tiny straw.

And then I started panicking. *What is wrong with me? Am I about to pass out on this safari bus?* My thoughts began to spiral. *There's nowhere to go! What do I do? I can't get off this bus right now! There are animals with huge horns everywhere, and I'm completely stuck!* My brain was spinning with silent thoughts, and I was plummeting down, down, down, down and feeling worse and worse with each passing second. I couldn't control what was happening in my body. I felt helpless. I felt scared. I felt desperate. I wanted to scream and run, I wanted to tell the bus driver to get me off this bus, but there was nowhere to go.

My six-year-old son, who was sitting next to me on the bus, broke my distressed thoughts with his whining. “Mom, I’m hot,” he said as he grabbed the bottle of water I was clutching in my hands without even realizing it. He took a drink and handed me the water bottle, and I guzzled it down as fast as I could. It helped a little, and my spiraling thoughts began to slow. I was completely out of control, but no one else around me seemed to notice. Not my son sitting next to me, nor my husband and kids sitting in front of me, nor any of the people around me.

Eventually, the tingling in my arms stopped, and my breathing and heart rate came back to normal. This whole experience probably took all of three minutes, but it felt like an eternity. There was a moment in those few minutes that I truly thought I was going to die. But now, somehow, I felt like things were starting to settle. I made it through the rest of the bus ride, although I was definitely on high alert. When we got off the bus, I pulled my husband aside and told him what had just happened.

“I’m so sorry you went through that, babe!” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I thought about his question for a moment and realized that I didn’t tell him because I didn’t even know what was happening in the moment. I thought my body was failing me. I wondered if I was going to pass out or die. But really, my emotions had taken control.

Really, I had experienced my first panic attack.

Roots Run Deep

I had always been somewhat of an anxious child growing up. I have so many memories and experiences of dealing with feelings of fear and worry that, looking back, I see glaringly how far back the roots of my sensing emotions can be traced.

Somewhere along the way, my mind had absorbed the worries I’d heard about in the world around me. Most children can hear about things like a house fire in the neighborhood or a robbery on the news,

worry about it for a few moments, and then shrug it off. But sensitive children sense things more than other children; they have a tendency to hold on to those worries and to absorb them as their own. So, I became one of those kids that couldn't go to sleep without a specific routine. Before saying goodnight, I'd walk around the house and make sure that all the plugs were fastened into the electrical outlets properly and the doors were locked and secured. I had to make sure no fires would start and no robbers would break and enter as we slept.

I even had a routine to follow when it came to saying goodnight. My brother's room was across the hall, and every night before bed I thought of all the things I wanted to tell him just in case this was our last night together. At church, I learned about the rapture and how Jesus would come like a thief in the night, so I just wanted to make sure I made my peace before that happened.

"Sweet dreams, Jonny."

"Sweet dreams," he would reply.

"Night."

"Night," he'd echo.

"I love you."

"I love you too," he'd say, starting to sound annoyed.

"God bless you."

"God bless you," he'd snort. I could tell he was getting frustrated.

"You too!"

"YOU TOO!" he'd yell back, totally exasperated.

So, to try and avoid the long speech each night, I decided to shorten my goodnight phrases. I'd take the first letter of each word and arrange them to make an acronym: *SNIGY*. *SNIGY* would be the word to help me communicate to my brother how I really felt about him. That would surely help shorten our nighttime routine. Later that night, I explained it to my brother and decided to try out the new phrase.

"SNIGY," I shouted from across the hall.

"SNIGY," he shouted back.

I sat there in silence for a while. But then...my thoughts took over.

What if this is the last night? I can't just end with the word SNIGY. There's got to be more than that.

"Sweet dreams, night, I love you, God bless you, you too!! SNIGY!" I yelled back at him.

"SNIGY!!!" came the fed-up, angry shout echoing down the hall. He. Was. Done. Totally done. And the tone of his voice clearly told me that I'd gone too far with this.

My brother and I often tell this story now, giving our friends a glimpse of our childhood, and we laugh at the absurdity of it all. But really, I see the roots. The roots that make up who I am today, stretching back all the way to who I was as a child.

Your Childhood Self

"Tell us one story from your childhood that represents who you are today."

We were having dinner with friends one evening when that conversation starter came up. It was so interesting hearing everyone tell a story from when they were a child that spoke to their personality, quirks, and temperament now as adults. My husband, John, told a story about when he was lifting weights in high school the day before he went off to college. One of the heavy weights on the machine got jammed as he was going up for another bicep curl. He tugged it hard, then harder, then so hard that it flung up right toward his face, slamming into his two front teeth. After recovering from the shock of the blow, he felt something hard moving around the inside of his mouth. He spit it out, and there were two significantly large pieces of his front teeth. He had literally broken a half-moon-shaped portion out of his smile. So, what did he do next, you're wondering? Personally, my high school self would have FREAKED OUT and run out of the gym in a panic to call my mom and frantically ask her to make me an appointment at the nearest dentist she could find! But John? He took the two pieces of his front teeth, put them in his pocket, and casually finished lifting his set. I kid you not. That, my friends, is my husband. He's

so laid back and even keeled (sometimes *too laid back*, in my humble opinion!). It takes a lot to get him worked up. He's cool and calm under pressure, and it's so interesting to trace the roots of who he was then to the person he is today.

Who you were then impacts who you are today. What you experienced then influences who you are today. Your childhood personality, experiences, and memories have all come together to shape you into the person you have become. I wonder what story you would tell from

So much of the way we do life in the present is impacted by the way we experienced life in the past.

your childhood if you were sitting around the dinner table with us. Some stories are benign and laughable, like John's story of lifting weights. Other stories trace the struggles of childhood to the struggles of today, like my underlying anxiety. And other stories are tainted by pain or rejection, insecurity or shame, trauma or tragedy, abuse or abandonment. So much of the way we do life in the present is

impacted by the way we experienced life in the past. If we're not aware of our past, not in tune to how it has shaped us, we'll never be able to recognize the patterns. We'll never be able to break free from the past.

Backtracking

If you ever book a counseling session with me, you should know that we're going to spend a lot of time talking about the past. In fact, one of the first things I have you do during our time together is to write out a timeline for me of significant events, starting from your earliest memories, and noting the experiences that have shaped you for both good and bad all the way to today. Why don't you join in this process with me? Let's just pretend we're in a counseling session together right now. Go ahead and grab your laptop, a journal, or a piece of paper and a pen, and write out your own timeline. Think through the experiences that have really impacted you or even changed the course of your life

from childhood until today. Think of the significant highs and lows in your life that have influenced who you are today.

Maybe, like me, you dealt with some childhood anxieties. Maybe you experienced the pain of watching your parents go through a difficult divorce. What about the day you came to know Jesus; that incredible, life-changing experience at summer church camp; or some bad friendships you endured in high school? It could have been anything from dealing with difficult parents to attending a new church to failing your college entrance exams. It could have been the death of a loved one or even the death of a dream. Maybe it was the sting of a toxic relationship, experiences in your marriage, or dealing with infertility. There are so many things that shape your life, moving you to become the person you are today. Take some time to think through all of those things, and jot them down in the form of a timeline, starting with your earliest significant memories. To make it easier to visualize, I find it helpful to draw a line going up for the positive experiences along the timeline and a line going down for the harmful ones. If you were my client, this is the timeline we'd begin with in our first session together, talking through each significant event, making connections, and extracting the impact and meaning they've had on your life and development. Because whether or not you want to believe it, each portion matters.

Every now and again, I'll get a client who would rather not go there.

"What does the past have to do with what I'm going through today?" they'll question.

"Everything," I'll respond.

The average person doesn't truly understand how significant their past is in shaping their emotional health. But the *majority* of the issues we're facing in the present have their roots in the experiences of our past. When we focus too much on the present without ever looking at the past, we're like gardeners who are pulling the tops of the weeds without getting to the roots. It's only going to give us short-term relief. Those weeds are going to keep coming back until we can get to the bottom of them.

In Philippians 3:13, Paul reminds us of the importance of “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.” Our problem as human beings is that we can’t simply “forget” unless we first acknowledge, understand, and learn from our past. In order for the past to lose its power over us, we have to go back before we can move forward. We

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Bryan's Story

Bryan and his wife, Jessica, scheduled an appointment with me because they were having increased marriage conflict. Jessica was frustrated because she felt like Bryan was always working or accomplishing something *outside of* the home but not investing *in* the home. She was starting to feel like a single mom with the amount of time she was investing in the family without Bryan's help. Not only was he absent physically, but when he was home, he wasn't able to be present. There was always something that needed to be done, to be fixed, or to be cleaned. Bryan was frustrated that instead of gratitude for all he did for the family, he was getting flack for all he didn't do. He couldn't understand how Jessica could nag him when he was working so hard.

You might look at this situation from the outside looking in and think that this couple could use a good dose of communication and conflict management. And that was certainly part of the equation. But it wasn't where I began. Trying to deal with the emotional struggles that presented themselves in this couple's marriage without getting to the root of them is like trying to deal with those weeds we talked about earlier without getting to the roots. In order to move forward, we had to backtrack. I spent some time talking one-on-one with Bryan, with his wife listening quietly nearby. We unpacked some of his history to see if we could make sense of the influences from his past that were continuing to shape his present.

Bryan was the oldest of three sons. He was the typical first child in that he was naturally responsible and driven and motivated. But added to that, he grew up with a father who wasn't responsible at all, as Bryan explained it. "My father couldn't be relied on. He never got things done and didn't do what he said he was going to do. It was the running joke in the house if Dad said he was going to fix something; we would all roll our eyes because there was a good chance that it would stay broken forever. He was unmotivated, undisciplined, and always in and out of jobs when I was growing up. He was never there for me emotionally or physically, really. I felt like I couldn't rely on him, so I didn't. I relied on myself."

Later on, in his teen years, tragedy hit when Bryan's father passed away. And his mother was left to care for three boys on her own. Bryan stepped up and filled in the gap even more than he'd done before. He did whatever his mother needed, fixed things around the house, and got a part-time job after school so he could make extra money to help support the family. Through young adulthood, Bryan immersed himself in working hard and took pride in his responsibility. He eventually met and married Jessica—one of the most caring and loving individuals he'd ever laid eyes on. Things were going great, he thought. But fast-forward a few years, and now they were sitting here, meeting with a counselor, on the brink of divorce. He just couldn't make sense of where things had gone wrong.

But what Bryan had failed to realize is that he was living out of the wounds of his past. So accustomed to his emotionally unavailable father and the lack of connection he experienced growing up, Bryan slowly turned that part off in his own life. He failed to learn how to deeply connect with the people around him and instead found his value in what he could do for the people around him. Bryan was still playing a role that he had been playing ever since he was a child. But this time, it was beginning to destroy his relationship with his wife—a woman who was looking for deep and intimate connection from a man who had "turned off" his emotional connection.

My time with Bryan and Jessica was spent unpacking the experiences of his childhood and making connections to how he was living out of those wounds in the present—in his relationship with Jessica. He had to come to terms with the fact that part of the reason why he was so comfortable with a lack of emotional intimacy was because he never truly experienced it! From my experience as a professional counselor, I've seen time and time again how much of our emotional health is shaped by the experiences of our past. Because it's often easier to choose what is familiar rather than what is healthy.

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It was only *after* we made those connections that we were able to talk about strategies to overcome the obstacles their marriage was facing. Because once you've identified the root, you begin to have power over it. Little by little, Bryan and Jessica were able to allow God to bring healing to their relationship, but it had to start with going back and getting healing from the past.

Underneath the Surface

We all have experiences, struggles, and wounds that have shaped us into who we are today. So much of our emotional health in the present is built on the experiences of our past—things we may not even be fully aware of at this point in time. Psychologists have long referred to this concept by using the analogy of the iceberg.

When we look at an iceberg, we only see the portion that is above the water. But that's a very small part of the iceberg in its entirety. The majority of the iceberg is actually underneath the surface. Human emotions are the same in that what we see above the surface (that is, how we're acting and feeling in the present) is only a small portion of the big picture of who we are and what we're experiencing. But often the part that's underneath the surface is unknown even to us. Some psychologists refer to that portion as our "unconscious mind," meaning

the part we're unaware of. In order to get a full picture of who we are and why we do what we do, we need to take the time to dive deep and go underneath the surface to find out what's really going on inside.

Proverbs 20:5 puts it this way: "The purposes of a person's heart are like deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out." You are not made up of what you see on the surface. In fact, there's so much more to you than you realize. Your heart—your emotions—are like deep waters. But getting to those deep waters requires intention. It requires work. It requires effort. This verse reminds us that having insight is not just something that magically happens. Having insight is an *active* experience; it requires you to "draw out" the deep waters from the well of your life. That would have been such a significant analogy for those living in ancient times. Unlike those of us living in the twenty-first century who just turn on the faucet and enjoy an ice-cold drink, in order to have drinking water, our ancestors had to put in the work. They had to take their buckets and let them down into the well. They had to "draw out" water one bucket at a time, which required energy, persistence, and intention. To say that a person's heart is made up of "deep waters" reminds us that it takes intentional work to get to the bottom of who we are. It takes work that, in my clinical experience, the average Christian has not actually learned how to do.

How Are You, *Really*?

The side of you that people see is only a small part of who you are—when you walk into work, enter church on Sunday mornings and say hello to the people around you, when you walk into the grocery store and chitchat with the cashier on your way out, or as you sit down with a friend for a cup of coffee. This is the side of you that's above the surface—the part that people can see. But it's not the full perspective. If we think about the image of the iceberg, we realize the small portion that others see is only skimming the surface of who you are.

Have you ever run into someone while you were out and about running errands or at a restaurant or at the grocery store or wherever, and

they ask that all-too-common question? “So, how are you?” I always find myself struggling with an internal battle whenever I hear that question. Usually, I respond with the typical response of, “I’m good, thanks! How are you?” But internally, I’m thinking: *Well, how much do you really want to know? Let me talk you through the stressors of today. The kids were just out of control. And then earlier this week, I was feeling pretty sick, which led to difficulty sleeping, which led to exhaustion, which retriggered some of my old patterns of anxiety that I know affected my reaction to the kids. It can be so difficult to battle with underlying anxiety and make sure it’s kept in check, you know? And honestly, John and I had a little argument this morning before I went out, so I’m dealing with feelings of disappointment and hurt from that. When I get back from the store, we’re going to have to talk through some of those emotions. And to top it all off, I’m frustrated that this store was out of my favorite brand of yogurt, which is exactly why I drove an extra ten minutes to come to this side of town. And now, here I am talking to you! Go figure!*

I’m sure that response would go over well, don’t you think? It would probably guarantee they’d never ask me how I’m doing ever again. But what’s interesting is to see how accustomed we are to just sharing the tip of the iceberg. In fact, it’s almost *strange* to share much more than that. We can get so used to living on the tip of the iceberg that we forget there’s more going on underneath the surface. We can easily fool ourselves into thinking that what’s on the surface is all there is, without ever taking the time to see how we’re *really* doing. In just a few minutes of going underneath the surface in my internal conversation that never actually happened, I was able to identify feelings of anxiety, stress, frustration, hurt, disappointment, and exhaustion. That’s what’s going on underneath the surface. That’s how I’m *really* doing. But that’s typically what gets suppressed, ignored, or forgotten.

We need to take the time and energy and intention to figure out how we are *really* doing. We need to make it a part of our regular routine and rhythms of our day. That’s not to say we need to share that side of us with every Joe and Suzy that we run into at the store (in fact,

you're probably better off not sharing), but it does mean we need to actively put in the effort to acknowledge what's really going on underneath—before the pressure rises, and it comes up on its own.

The Volcano Effect

On an average day in 1815, the earth shook with one of the world's most massive volcanic eruptions. Mount Tambora in Indonesia exploded, sending rivers of molten lava down the mountain and a plume of gases, ash, and rock 12 miles into the atmosphere. The impact of this violent shake triggered dangerous tsunamis all around the island, and over 10,000 people living on the island were instantly killed by the impact of the eruption.¹ Mount Tambora's eruption had a devastating impact on the environment, and scientists can trace its aftermath all the way to environmental consequences in the present. The massive amount of debris from the explosion caused what historians call "the year without a summer":

Debris from the volcano shrouded and chilled parts of the planet for many months, contributing to crop failure and famine in North America and epidemics in Europe. Climate experts believe that Tambora was partly responsible for the unseasonable chill that afflicted much of the Northern Hemisphere in 1816.²

A volcanic eruption is powerful, impacting both the present as well as the future.

The most interesting thing about a volcanic eruption is what's going on underneath the surface. The scalding heat from the earth's center melts the rock, causing a fiery pool of magma to build up underneath the ground. The thickness of the magma traps pockets of air, and over time, the air bubbles trying to escape cause a powerful amount of pressure to build up. Eventually, the buildup of the pressure is so strong that the magma finds the point of least resistance to escape and explodes in the form of a volcanic eruption. It causes devastation to the people

around it, as well as ongoing damage to the environment for years to come.

Emotions are much the same way. When we continue to ignore, repress, avoid, or stuff what's going on underneath the surface, we create a natural buildup of pressure. Emotions aren't meant to be stuffed. They're meant to be expressed and shared and dealt with. They're meant to be experienced and used as a compass to guide us and a signal to warn us. But the more we ignore what's actually going on underneath and avoid dealing with the things we're feeling, the more we allow the pressure to build up until, eventually, it finds the point of least resistance and makes its way to the surface. Eventually, we explode.

There are so many ways your "emotional explosion" can happen. For me, it was the unexpected surge of anxiety that led to a paralyzing panic attack on a safari bus. For Bryan, whom I mentioned earlier in the chapter, it was the inability to connect with his wife and children that wreaked havoc on his relationships. For others, it takes the form of explosive anger or rage. For still others, it comes in the form of depression, shutting down, and withdrawing from the world around them. Sometimes, it can take on the form of a physical illness like insomnia, digestive issues, migraines, or palpitations, or a host of other things. Other times, it can come as a mental block—an inability to concentrate, focus, and think clearly. But either way, emotions are a powerful force. When left unchecked, they can impact everything and take away from our ability to live life to the fullest.

Getting in Tune with Our Emotions

Out of all the phrases I hear as a counselor, there's one that I hear come out of people's mouth more than any other phrase: "I don't know." My job as a counselor is to ask a lot of reflective and probing questions. Questions to get people to think, open up, and respond. Questions to spark conversation and get people to dig a little deeper to find the answers. But more often than not, upon my asking a question for the first time, the immediate response I get from people is, "I don't know."

The most interesting part about this phrase is that it comes so instantly, so naturally—almost like an automatic response. They’ve barely heard my question, much less had time to think about it when I hear the response of “I don’t know.” Sometimes I wonder if we’re wired to respond so quickly because we’re not used to the discipline of silence and contemplation. We’re not used to taking the time to sit with a question before we answer. Or maybe we’re simply uncomfortable with quiet. We feel the pressure to respond right away, and even if the response is, “I don’t know,” we assume that’s better than saying nothing.

We’re not used to the discipline of silence and contemplation.

Before we go on, I want you to do away with that notion that you have to have an instant answer. I want you to get comfortable with sitting with a question for a little while. I want you to take the time to contemplate and formulate a response before you automatically assume you don’t know. Because in a few moments, I’m going to ask you some questions. Questions to help us get underneath the surface and take inventory of how you might be feeling deep down. What emotions you might have building up pressure, with or without your awareness. In order to deal with the pressure of emotions, we have to first learn to identify them.

Dr. Robert Plutchik is the psychologist credited for identifying eight basic human emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust.³ He’s credited for using a color wheel, pairing emotions with different colors, as well as shades of color based on the intensity of that particular emotion. For instance, if the emotion of joy is represented by the color yellow, then serenity—a less intense version of joy—would be represented as a light yellow, while ecstasy—a more intense version of joy—would be portrayed in a dark yellow.

I love the color-wheel analogy because it really helps to organize emotions and see them on a scale of intensity, which is an important thing to be aware of. It also helps us to see that there are “opposite”

emotions, such as joy and sadness. Plutchik even goes so far as to identify in-between emotions, which are a “mixture” of two primary emotions that lead to another emotion. For example, the emotion of joy plus the emotion of trust equal the emotion of love. Just like colors can be mixed to produce new colors, emotions can be combined to create new emotions.

Whenever I’m counseling children, one of the first things I do in our sessions is take a piece of paper and draw an outline of a body. Usually it looks sort of like a gingerbread man, but my bad artwork is just one of my tactics to break the ice. Or so I tell myself. I then have the children identify what emotions they “feel in their body” by coloring in the amount of that emotion that correlates with a specific color. You can learn a lot about a person based on the feelings they color in their body. And what’s interesting about this activity is you really have no way of predicting what they’ll color. For example, I often do this activity with my own children as a way to check in with them emotionally. One specific season, my son was having a lot of angry moments, so I sat him down to color in the feelings in his body. I predicted I’d see a lot of “red” in his body, representing the anger he was feeling inside. But at the end of the assignment, his body was mostly filled with yellow—joy. He had a little bit of red—anger—but he was able to identify what was making him angry, deal with it, and then move on.

My daughter, on the other hand, is usually the child that presents as “happy” on the outside. But when we sat down to work on the feelings in her body, her person was filled with a lot of fear and worry. She deals with anxiety (some hereditary, thanks to her momma), and her sensitivity keeps her keenly aware of the things she’s worried about. But from the outside looking in, you wouldn’t be aware of it.

This is why it’s important for us to learn to go underneath the surface. Being in tune with your emotions isn’t something you’re born knowing how to do. It’s something you have to practice. Kids don’t naturally know how to identify and express their emotions. They have to be taught to do it, sort of like the way I’m teaching my kids. If they’re

not taught, they grow up to be adults who don't know how to identify and express their emotions. Because time alone doesn't make us emotionally aware people. The only thing that can move us into emotional awareness is intentionality. We've got to be intentional about going under the surface and finding out what's really going on.

Colors in Our Body

I believe that our inability to deal with our emotions is often rooted in a lack of awareness of our emotions. If we can't identify them, we can't express them. If we can't express them, we can't deal with them. Research has shown that when we become aware of our emotions and start talking about them, our awareness begins to produce positive emotional change in our body. One specific study measured the emotional response of people who were angry. When the subjects were asked about their emotions and responded by processing their emotions, their anger response showed a significant decrease.⁴ Awareness matters because it requires us to dig deep and find out what's really going on underneath the surface. It shifts the power from our emotions to ourselves. They are no longer in control—we are.

Awareness shifts
the power from
our emotions
to ourselves.

It's important to make emotional awareness a regular part of your life. What emotional colors are in your body right now? And how are those emotions impacting your life and well-being? Let's take a deeper look at a few common emotions:

Joy is generally described as a feeling of happiness. Physiologically speaking, it's a flood of dopamine and serotonin to the brain that induces a feeling of euphoria. For some people, joy is a common emotion. They get out of bed in the morning feeling that wonderful sense that all is well in the world. For others, joy might seem hidden, hard to reach, crowded out by other emotions. How would you assess the level of joy you have in your life right now? What are the things that bring

you joy in this season of life? When is the last time you woke up feeling that sense of joy? Is there anything that could be preventing you from feeling a sense of joy?

Trust is a feeling of confidence and security. It's a feeling of safety with someone or something. There are things that can influence our feelings of trust—namely, our past experiences and our present experiences. Sometimes the reason we have a hard time feeling trust toward someone is because they have not proven to be a safe person. But other times, the feeling of trust is inhibited because of things we've experienced in the past that keep us from trusting people in the present—even when they've proven themselves to be safe and secure. Trust is an important emotion because it facilitates and strengthens our relationships. It helps us to keep safe people in and unsafe people out. How would you assess the level of trust you have in your life right now? What is adding to your ability to trust, and what is taking away from your ability to trust? Can you differentiate safe people you can trust from unsafe people you can't trust?

Fear is an important emotion because it alerts us to the presence of danger. It sends signals to our brain to tell us to get ready and be prepared. Physiologically, we can find ourselves sweating, our hearts racing, and our minds sharp and alert during times of fear. People experience fear for many different reasons—from a fear of heights, to a fear of germs, to a fear of public speaking. And oftentimes, we can feel the feelings of fear even when there's no present danger (we'll talk a little more about this in coming chapters). How much fear do you have in your body right now? What type of things illicit a feeling of fear? What are you afraid of right now? Do you ever find yourself wondering if there's too much fear in your life?

Sadness alerts our body of the need to be comforted. Dr. Paul Ekman identifies sadness as the feeling we have in the wake of a loss—"a loss of someone or something important."⁵ But what defines a loss is different to different people. It could be the loss of a friend, family member, or spouse. The loss of trust, love, or peace. The loss of control

or security. Maybe even the loss of a possession such as money, time, power, or popularity. What is the level of sadness you are feeling in this season of life? What are the things that elicit a sense of sadness? Have you experienced any losses that are having an impact on you? What might be going on underneath the surface?

Anger tends to be identified as the emotion we experience when we don't get what we want, or when we get what we don't want. It can happen as a result of injustice, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, or any form of mistreatment. Anger is our instinctive stance to "fight" and can commonly turn into physical aggression as well. It's often been said that anger is a secondary emotion because underneath anger is usually another feeling that has yet to be identified and expressed. I like that theory because I have seen that to be true in my personal life as well as in the lives of clients. When I'm angry, there's usually another emotion fueling that—such as hurt, frustration, disappointment, fear, embarrassment, or pain. When I'm working with clients who are angry, I tend to view "anger management techniques" almost like a Band-Aid. They can't actually help unless we peel back the layers of anger to find out the emotions that are causing it. Are you dealing with any anger in your life right now? If you had to use another word to describe what's going on underneath the anger, what word would you use? What type of things tend to make you angry, and why do you think that is? In what ways is anger impacting your life and your relationships?

When I'm angry, there's usually another emotion fueling that—such as hurt, frustration, disappointment, fear, embarrassment, or pain.

Disgust is a feeling of aversion toward something or even someone. We can be disgusted by something if it impacts our senses in a negative way (i.e., if it smells or tastes bad), but we can also be disgusted by someone if we interpret their actions or behaviors as offensive. Are there any situations that have caused you to feel a general sense of disgust?

Is there anyone you find yourself avoiding or averting because you're offended by how they act or behave? Is there anything in yourself that gives you the feeling of disgust, and why could that be? How is this feeling impacting your life overall?

Pressure Check

Now that we've gone through some of the basic emotions, I want to ask you a question, and I want you to take your time to answer: Are you *really* okay? How are you really doing? What's going on underneath the surface that might be building up pressure and impacting you from the inside out? There are so many triggers (things that bring about an emotional response) that go unnoticed and unidentified in our day-to-day lives. But something you need to know about triggers is that the more you ignore them, the more pressure begins to build. Our emotional eruption isn't about the trigger itself but about the thousands of emotions that have been building and pent up over time—unexpressed and unaddressed.

There's an inventory that counselors and psychologists often use to get an idea of how many triggers or stressors are building up underneath the surface and potentially causing the buildup of pressure and emotions. It's called the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory.⁶ It breaks down different emotional stressors on a scale of most stressful to least stressful. What's interesting to note about this scale—and something many people don't take into consideration—is that positive life experiences can also cause stress, not just negative ones. Let me give you an example. According to the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, getting divorced is one of the top ten stressors on the list, but so is getting married! Both experiences, as different as they are, require change and adjustment. Anytime you go through major changes, there's an element of stress and emotional pressure you need to be aware of.

In his book *Walking on Water When You Feel Like You're Drowning*, world-renowned pastor Tommy Nelson, one of my favorite Bible teachers, very vulnerably talked about his journey through an emotional

breakdown at one of the highest moments of his career. He was teaching, preaching, and sharing the gospel on so many platforms, feeling like he was in the prime of his ministry life, when all of a sudden, one day the “explosion” happened. The stress of the pace of his life and the pressure of his emotions underneath the surface finally got to him. He was struck with his very first panic attack a few moments before he got on stage to preach. One thing that struck me most about his story is that there wasn’t anything “bad” going on in his life. In fact, it was mostly good things. Good things that required a lot of time, concentration, commitment, and emotional energy. Good things that he enjoyed doing, yet were causing an underlying pressure.⁷ Whether from the roots of your past or from the pressure in your present, taking the time to go underneath the surface and get to the bottom of how you really are is an important discipline that you need to build into your life.

I want you to take a moment to go through the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory that you’ll find at my website, TrueLoveDates.com/resources/, and mark off as many of the life stressors that you’ve experienced in the last 12 months. After you’ve done so, add them up to get a final score.

Now, I want you to look at your score as a reminder that both good things and hard things in life can cause pressure. The important thing is that you learn to identify what’s going on underneath the surface and learn to release the pressure by acknowledging the experience, being aware of the emotions, talking through it, and finding support. Like I mentioned above, simply being aware of our emotions can decrease their negative impact on our lives. It’s important to be in tune with what’s going on underneath the surface so you can be active in decreasing the pressure to the best of your ability. We’ll talk about additional methods to decrease that pressure later on in the book.

Taking Inventory

Becoming aware and going underneath the surface is the first step toward emotional health. As you get ready to go deeper into the journey

of emotional health, I challenge you to start taking notes. Being intentional about getting healthy means you can't just read about it—you have to actually go after it. Grab an empty journal that you will use to write and reflect on the “checkup” exercises at the end of each chapter of this book. Write out the questions, and then think through the answer before you begin to write. I suggest you also note the date at the top of each page to keep track of your journey and make it easier to look back at your progress and change. Allow this to be an interactive experience for you, where you're not just reading the information but applying it as well. The more you put into this, the more you'll get out of it.

Journaling Questions: 5-Minute Emotional Checkup

- What are the triggers, problems, struggles, stressors, adjustments, or changes that I find myself dealing with today?
- On a “Pressure Scale” of 1 to 10 (10 being the most pressure), how much pressure do I feel like I'm dealing with underneath the surface?
- Are the emotions I present to the world (the top of the iceberg) similar to what I am feeling inside (underneath the surface)? If not, what might really be going on underneath the surface?
- List the most common emotions you have experienced in the past 12 months, as well as what causes those emotions. Which one of those emotions do you tend to experience most often? In what type of situations do these emotions tend to come up?
- Do I have “safe people” to express what's going on underneath the surface?
 - If so, who? How can I begin letting them into what's going on underneath?

- If not, what are some steps I can take to invite people into my life?
- What are some ways I can begin the process of investing in my emotional awareness?