

# letters from doreen

March 8, 2020

## Dealing with Big Feelings (It's Been a Hard Week)

A while back my nephew initiated a group text called "Family chat." In it, he included his parents, sister, grandparents, great aunt and uncle, my husband and I, and cousins (second and first). I think the first text from him went something like this, "What up y'all?"

At first I felt irritated when two or three people on the text chain would go back and forth for long stretches, thinking "I don't have the bandwidth to keep up with this." As time has gone on, however, this very forum is how we have all come together around birthdays and anniversaries, opening nights of plays, trips abroad, my father's heart attack, and, last week, my nephew's friends' death. This has become a sacred space.

The morning his friend died, Ethan's text to us read, "Hey y'all. I've had a hard day at school. One of my friends passed away. I would love some love and support. Thanks!"

While the responses and outpouring of love that followed was incredible, what is most notable to me is the fact that a 16 year old knew that he had people he could reach out to to help him hold and work through his feelings and that he did the reaching out.

This is not true for all of us.

It's been a week of huge news stories. The Corona Virus, tornados, instability in the stock market and, for those of us hoping that the misogynistic culture we've grown up into no longer had such a powerful political stronghold, election news that was crushing. And these are only our communal big stories. Never mind the personal losses or situations that make us want to scream or cry or crawl back into bed.

It's likely that many of us are dealing with a lot of strong feelings as we head into a new week.

Strong feelings are difficult. They are not right or wrong. They simply are. They are big and loud and make our heads spin and our stomachs hurt. They're not tidy nor are they adequately controlled by our thoughts. They don't raise their hands or wait to be called on. They just shout out to us, reminding us to pay attention to them. No. Matter. What. They are not quiet students. They are, however, important teachers.

Emotions come to us, in part, to tell us to pay attention. When we feel them, it's important to sit with them a bit so that we can listen to them, learn from them, and work them through. Understandably, we don't want to do this. It's messy and uncomfortable but it also allows us to take the high road, which is especially challenging when parties related to the big feelings are taking the low one. Even still, for us to move forward without being bound to unresolved feelings that will have the power to trip us up later, we must do this work.

If your emotions are telling you to pay attention, if you are finding yourself short with everyone or finding tears or screams right under the surface of your "I'm fine" exterior, if you are swearing under your breath or aching with grief, if you are mad or sad or scared or anxious or lonely or overwhelmed or hopeless, here are a few ideas to help you. Before stepping into a brand new week, why not spend a bit of time learning from the teachers that are, so desperately, trying to get your attention? It may not be how you'd "like" to spend a Sunday evening but it certainly may be a "good" way to do so.

### **A few helps for working with big feelings:**

1) Feel your feelings. Don't deny them or push them away. Validate how heavy the weight is that you've been carrying, how hard it is to face strong feelings, and brainstorm ways of soothing yourself. Too often we feel very big things but say to ourselves, "This shouldn't be this big of a deal." "Get over it. It is what it is." "I don't have time for this." Or, the all too famous, "This is nothing compared to what community/person X, Y, and Z are dealing with." While all these things may be true (or not), the presence of strong feelings means that you are living with extra pressure and weight.

Consider what is truly soothing to you (not simply distracting, which technology almost always is). Would a walk or run help? A long shower or bath? A phone call to a friend (see number 3 below)? Would you feel better if you did jumping jacks or pushups until you felt exhausted or if you aggressively tore up paper or smashed cans from your recycling bin. Would it help to cry or yell or both? Might this be a good time to access a comforting book or a journal? Might wrapping a blanket tightly around you and sitting in a corner do the trick? Whatever it is, make time for it. Your body and mind need to be soothed.

2) Do a brain dump. Grab a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Set a timer for 10 minutes and write everything that comes to mind related to your big feelings. Don't edit or try to write in narrative form. Just work to get every large and small thought or feeling out onto the paper. Keep pushing even when you think you are done. Often, the simple act of expressing our most difficult feelings and thoughts helps to soften them. This is important because it means we will be less likely to have unresolved feelings that can be piqued when we least expect them later.

When you are done, take a few moments and honor the thoughts and feelings that came out of you. Look over the page(s) to see if there are themes that can direct you to what you might continue to consider or work through. Are there situations you need to avoid until you are feeling less activated? Are there places that you need to return to to resolve anything remaining? Once you've done this overview, literally try to affirm your self for being willing to take some time to honor these important teachers. Decide if keeping or burning the paper is most helpful then do so with special ceremonial care. Your feelings are sacred teachers.

3) Reach out to a therapist, faith leader, or wise friend. Too often we keep our big feelings to ourselves because we don't want to be a burden. It's appropriate, however, for us to ask for help when we need it. It's also appropriate for us to

consider the boundaries of others when we do so, letting them set them rather than trying to guess at what they are.

If you have someone you could reach out to, why not call, text, or email and say something like, “I have a lot of big feelings that are stirring in me. I don’t need answers or fixes, I just need to be able to put them in a safe space before launching into a new week. Would you be able to listen for 10 minutes?” Then wait for their response. Honor their response but don’t tell yourself that you have no one if the first person isn’t available. There are many people out and about in the world who want to help. Try again and don’t stop until you find your person with 10 minutes.

If calling a hotline feels better to you, here’s one for all: (866) 615-6464

4) Breathe. Don’t work too hard at this. Just find a place where you can sit with your back straight and your feet on the floor or lie on the floor with your feet floating up a wall. Smell the roses (inhale through your nose) and blow out the candles (exhale through your mouth). Try to make your belly and the lower regions of your lungs expand on your inhale and contract on the exhale. Oxygen can help our bodies even when our feelings are strong.

It’s important to note that, for some of us, breathing is actually anxiety provoking. If this is true for you, and trying to breathe deeply causes you to feel worse, find what is your version of breathing and do that. This may be stretching or coloring or listening to a peaceful song. The ways to “breathe”/center are endless.

On the day of the last inauguration I held a vigil where people could simply hold space for big feelings with a diverse group of people who cared. Each hour was begun with a meditation by a guide. I recorded my loving kindness meditation and it is [here](#). I offer it as a tool to help you in coming back to center.

5) Make a (realistic) plan. When you feel as though you are actually toward the end of working through (not denying or rejecting), find ways to become active. Hopeless stewing is dry tinder to the fire of big feelings. While we are not able to control the world or the outcomes of situations that matter to us, our ability to see ourselves as part of the solution to big problems and sources of pain is crucial.

Keeping your unique gifts and talents in mind (comparing yourself to others or asking your self to do things that are completely out of line with who you truly are is death), begin to let your mind wander about how you might either be part of the change that would resolve your big feelings or work to help others whose big feelings are similar to your own.

If you are grieving, perhaps you could knit blankets for grieving parents in the hospital or offer to provide food at a local place of worship after memorial services. If you are angry over the state of our world, there are limitless ways of becoming active. Every issue or concern needs letter writers, administrative help, word spreaders, carpool drivers, graphic designers, social media helpers, as well as cookies for their meetings. If you are hopeless, why not use your awareness of this painful way of living to catapult you into bringing small moments of wonder into the days of those you encounter? Write “you matter” on a busy sidewalk with chalk. Leave a thank you note for the dishwasher on your dirty dishes at a restaurant. Take a few peanut butter sandwiches or some clean socks downtown and give them away to folks without roofs. Find a Head Start program to volunteer in. Smile and look people in the eyes.

Your feelings are important and they matter. They are worthy of some time and intentional energy tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day, and, of course, the day after that. Giving them this time will radically impact the quality of your life. Robbing them of it has the power to take you down, which would pain me, because you are worthy of being seen and known and valued in full. Big feelings and all.

Thank you, Ethan, for reminding me how important it is to ask for what we need when we hurt. This post is dedicated to you and Leon. May his memory be eternal.

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