

Reclaiming your sensitive self



How Early Emotion Blocking Creates Lifelong Patterns of Shame, Guilt and Anxiety

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Introduction: Your Emotions Were Never the Problem

Our nervous system — both central and peripheral — is always scanning. It's quietly monitoring the world around us and the people in it, including those we are most closely attached to, to decide whether we should move towards, step back, speak up, or stay quiet. This scanning is vital for our safety and connection. But if, while growing up, our emotions were ignored, ridiculed, or shamed, we may have learned to distrust this part of ourselves or shut it down altogether. When that happens, the feelings we pushed away often return in different guises in adult life — as guilt, overthinking, people-pleasing, or physical tension we can't quite explain. This book is about helping you tune back into that inner system and reclaim it as a guide, rather than a problem

Chapter 1: The Family That Forgot Your Feelings

When you're raised in a family where adults are preoccupied—by their own pain, immaturity, or emotional absence—you often end up reversing roles. You become the listener, the helper, the peacekeeper. This is what *The Narcissistic Family* describes: not necessarily full-blown narcissism, but a structure where the child's emotional world gets pushed aside to make room for the parent's.

You learn to read the room, anticipate needs, smooth things over. Your own feelings? They go underground. And this becomes your normal. You feel responsible for how others feel. You feel guilty when you say no. You feel anxious when someone's upset—even if it has nothing to do with you.

You became emotionally responsible far too early. And that burden doesn't just go away.



Chapter 2: The Triangle of Blocked Emotion

Hilary Jacobs Hendel's *It's Not Always Depression* introduces the Change Triangle—a simple way to understand what happens when our emotions get blocked. At the bottom are our core emotions: anger, sadness, fear, joy, excitement, disgust. These are hardwired, purposeful, and normal.

But if a child is shamed for crying, told off for being angry, or ignored when scared, these core emotions become unsafe. The child learns to shut them down. The brain develops 'inhibitory emotions'—guilt, anxiety, and shame—to cover them. Eventually, the person doesn't even *know* what they're feeling underneath.

What shows up instead? Overthinking. People-pleasing. Numbness. Defensiveness. Or a racing mind that won't slow down.



Chapter 3: Where Do Feelings Go? (Understanding Non-Metabolized Emotion)

Emotions are meant to move through us. Think of a wave: it rises, peaks, and falls. But when we can't express or process what we feel—when we swallow the tears, mute the anger, or talk ourselves out of sadness—the emotion doesn't vanish. It gets stored.

Biological Foundation – What “non-metabolised emotion” means:

If you imagine emotion as a whole-body survival event (not just a feeling in your head), the body mobilises a cascade of biological processes when something important happens: Amygdala detects threat or importance → triggers stress response Hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis releases stress hormones Body changes: heart rate, muscle tension, gut activity, breathing rate Brainstem and limbic circuits prepare an action (fight, flight, freeze, cry, reach for help)

Normally, when safety is restored and the event is processed, the brain engages memory reconsolidation: The memory is reactivated new, corrective information is added and synaptic proteins change (literally, proteins are removed and replaced in the synapse), making the “emotional charge” of the memory less reactive. If the process is interrupted — because the event was overwhelming, unsafe to feel, or no one helped co-regulate — the emotion doesn’t get “metabolised”.

Biologically, that means: The stress chemistry was never fully switched off The sensory, bodily, and emotional aspects of the memory remain stored in implicit memory networks (hippocampus and amygdala) without a coherent narrative in the explicit (verbal, autobiographical) system Your body keeps reactivating that same survival pattern whenever something reminds it — even subtly.

Traumatic memories are stored in sensorimotor, autonomic, and emotional circuits, not just as words or stories. When those implicit memories are triggered, you might feel tension, stomach clench, heat, collapse, guilt, or fear before you can name why. Because the memory isn’t metabolised, your body replays the state rather than the story. For example: A child learns, “If I have needs, I get hurt/ignored,” and the body learns to suppress needs to survive. As an adult, the body still feels unsafe if you focus on yourself — even if the mind knows you’re allowed to.

Dissociation / Depersonalisation as an Avoidance Pathway. When a child has no safe outlet for emotional experience: The nervous system may choose dissociation as the best survival strategy. Dissociation here is not just zoning out — it’s a functional disconnection between: The body’s survival/emotional systems The verbal, conscious mind This leads to: No emotional language for those experiences (“I don’t know what I feel”) A sense the events happened to “someone else” Body sensations that don’t seem to link to any cause So, the memory/emotion is never metabolised — it’s quarantined.

But quarantined emotions leak through in disguised forms: overgiving, guilt, people-pleasing, hyper-responsibility. 4. Behavioural Pattern Link – Why It Shows Up as Overgiving or Guilt If you never metabolised the original helplessness, shame, or fear: Your nervous system is still scanning for ways to prevent danger For many people, that means appeasing others, making themselves useful, or carrying guilt — because it kept them safer in childhood. If this is you: Childhood depersonalisation prevented unbearable feelings from breaking through. In adulthood, your nervous system still feels responsible for others’ emotional states, even if logically you know that you are not. Guilt is not evidence of wrongdoing — it’s the felt survival code from the unprocessed past.

.It means you never got the space to process what was happening. Therapy offers this space.

Non-Metabolised Emotion – When Feelings Stay Undigested.

A little girl has had a horrible day at school. A friend ignored her in the playground, and she comes home feeling hurt and tearful. Her nervous system — the body's built-in scanning system — is doing its job: I feel bad, I should go to someone safe so they can help me calm down. She goes to her mum for comfort. But her mum is distracted and says, Don't be so sensitive, it's not a big deal.

The little girl's body still holds the hurt, but now she feels alone with it. If this happens again and again, she learns: My big feelings don't get soothed here. It's safer to hide them than to share them. So she tucks the feelings away, deep inside, and carries on. This is her nervous system's way of keeping her safe from the pain of rejection — but it also means the feelings are never “digested” or understood.

Years later, as an adult, she might be watching a film and suddenly feel tears welling up. Instead of letting them flow and saying, That scene reminded me of something sad, she feels a wave of shame and forces the tears back down. What she's really feeling is not just about the film — it's all the old, stored-away sadness from childhood, still sitting there, unprocessed, waiting for the safety that never came.

Self-Sacrifice Schema – When We Live in Other People's Feelings.

A little boy falls and grazes his knee. His nervous system fires into action: I'm hurt, I should go to someone safe. This is the attachment system doing exactly what it's meant to do. But when he goes to his parent, they barely look up: Go away, you're fine, stop making a fuss. In that moment, the emotion is left unsoothed. If this happens often enough, the child learns: When I'm upset, no one helps me; my feelings must be wrong or too much. To avoid the pain of being dismissed again, he starts to push his emotions down.

Instead, he puts his attention on scanning other people: How's Mum feeling today? Is Dad in a bad mood? This is smart — it keeps him safer and gives him some connection, even if it's one-sided. Over time, it becomes his default survival strategy: living in other people's emotional worlds and neglecting his own. By adulthood, this can take the shape of the self-sacrifice schema, which has three tell-tale features: Excessive guilt when putting your own needs first. No expectation of reciprocation in relationships. Seeing others as more vulnerable than they really are, leading to over-protection. It's an adaptation that made perfect sense in childhood — but left unexamined, it can quietly run a person's adult life.



Chapter 4: The Haunted Self – When Parts Take Over

If you've ever felt like you're operating on autopilot—smiling, functioning, getting things done—while another part of you feels frozen or overwhelmed, you're not alone. *The Haunted Self* (van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele) explains this through structural dissociation.

Children who experience trauma or emotional neglect often develop different 'parts' to cope. One part handles everyday life—the Appearing Normal Part. Another part holds the big emotions, fears, or memories—the Emotional Part. When feelings weren't safe to have, they had to go somewhere else.

This is how we survive. But in adulthood, it can leave you feeling split. Like something is always under the surface, waiting. Therapy helps these parts reconnect. Not to collapse into chaos—but to bring wholeness, understanding, and choice.



Chapter 5: Guilt, Shame, and the Inner Critic

When your early safety depended on keeping others happy, guilt and shame become chronic companions. Guilt for saying no. Shame for having needs. A critic inside that watches and corrects everything you do.

Compassion-Focused Therapy for Guilt and Shame offers a different approach. Instead of fighting the critic, we learn to understand it. It developed to protect you—from rejection, from mistakes, from the pain of being too much or not enough.

But now, it's time for a new voice. One that speaks with warmth. That reminds you: you were a child doing your best. That you're allowed to be human. That your needs matter, too.



Chapter 6: Your Biology Is Not Broken

Our bodies are designed to scan for safety. This system—called neuroception—helps us detect threat or connection without thinking. Sensitive children pick up on the emotional temperature of a room instantly. They know when something's off. They feel others' pain. They adapt quickly to avoid conflict.

That's survival.

But when this system is on high alert all the time, it can become exhausting. You might feel jumpy, anxious, or shut down. Therapy helps reset this system—not by forcing you to be less sensitive, but by helping you feel *safe enough* to let the alarm settle.

Your sensitivity is not a problem. It's part of your design.



Chapter 7: Reclaiming Your Sensitive Self

Children don't question their emotions. They feel sad when something hurts. Angry when something's unfair. Scared when something's dangerous. These emotions are direct and wise.

But if you were told to stop crying, to 'man up', to stop being dramatic—you learned that your emotions were wrong. That *you* were wrong.

Now, it's time to come back to that inner emotional compass. To hear what your sadness wants to say. To let your anger speak about the boundary it needed. To fall back in love with the part of you that feels deeply, because that part is also the source of connection, meaning, and truth.

You don't need to become someone else. You just need space to return to who you were before the world taught you to hide.



We want your journey not to be of a fix; but to be a homecoming.

