

"Emily and Amelia Nagoski deconstruct the stress we experience as women, and their compassionate, science-based advice on how to release it made me cry with gratitude and relief. The book is that revolutionary."
—PEGGY ORENSTEIN

burnout

the secret to
unlocking
the stress cycle

Emily Nagoski, PhD

New York Times bestselling author of *Come as You Are*

Amelia Nagoski, DMA

**A Guide to Using Burnout in
Groups of Artists**

Introduction

A Guide to Using Burnout in Groups of Artists

For the purposes of this guide, an artist is anyone who identifies as a creator of anything that expresses something about themselves or their ideas. It includes actors, crafters, dancers, musicians, writers... Many of us work in ensembles like choirs or bands, but even solitary workers like writers and crafters often meet in groups to support each other in our work. So we thought sharing and discussing Burnout might help members of those groups come to terms with the ways stress fuels our work even as it interferes with our work.

Artists process stress differently from other people. As our art influences who we are and how we live, how we live and who we are influences our art. The two are inseparable, though sometimes separating them is part of the goal. The artistic process can act as a sieve, filtering out whatever we want so that we can produce work that is made purely of what we want. It gives us a special relationship with our stress and our stressors.

Introduction

General Guidance

- You know best which parts of which chapters are most relevant for your group
- Because Burnout is built on the idea of women as heroines conquering the enemy of a toxic culture, it is an excellent fit for artists who explore storytelling and narrative
- Throughout the book, we follow the stories of two women (they are composites, not actual individuals in real life), with one vignette per character, per chapter. Sometimes readers identify strongly with one particular character and her overall situation and story arc; sometimes they identify with individual vignettes, even if they don't relate to a character overall. Each vignette can be a point of exploration, e.g., "Whose story did you relate to most in this chapter?" In this guide, we'll include a quick summary of what each vignette illustrates, and add a composite character, Elisa, who is an opera singer in her early 20s who, like many artists, experienced trauma in her childhood.

Introduction

Ideas to Explore:

“Emotional Exhaustion”

- What happens to your art when you are stuck in an emotion?
- What happens to your emotions when you are creating something?

“Human Giver Syndrome”

- What do you feel obliged to give of yourself to others? When?
- Does making art feel like giving something of yourself? Does it fuel you?

“The Owl and the Cheese”

- How is creating on a deadline different from creating on your own schedule?
- How does the quality and quantity of your work change based on your goals and intentions?

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 1

Complete the Cycle

Worksheet:

None in the text; see appendix in this guide

Vignettes:

- **Julie** learns that completing the stress response cycle is separate from dealing with the causes of her stress.
- **Sophie** learns that, as a non-exerciser, she can get the cycle-completing benefits of physical activity without actually exercising.
- **Elisa** uses music to complete the cycle, without even knowing that's what she's doing. In fact, music is the only place in her life where her feelings are welcome.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 1

Complete the Cycle

Ideas to Explore:

- Stress is a physiological cycle activated by stressors – and what works to complete that cycle generally have nothing to do with what works to manage those stressors. (Discuss *“What are your stressors?”* *“What does stress feel like in your body?”* *“What does it feel like when you’ve completed the cycle?”*)
- We get stuck because our stressors are chronic, because we’re told it’s “socially inappropriate” to express our emotions, because it’s safer not to react, or because we “freeze.” When we unlock from freeze, our bodies may shake or stretch or otherwise activate involuntary and irrational bodily responses, which we call “the Feels.” (Discuss *“What are some times you’ve gotten stuck?”* *“When or where do you feel safe enough to express your emotions?”* *“Have you ever ‘frozen’? Did you experience those ‘Feels’ the authors described? What was it like for you?”*)
- Many artists choose their art when they are young because of the emotional experience of making their art. (Discuss *“How have we used our art to process our feelings?”* *“Has the experience of emotional expression changed over the years?”* *“Is there a difference in how art serves as an emotional outlet when it becomes professional?”*)

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 1

Complete the Cycle

From the time she was a little girl, Elena always felt more at home singing on a stage or with a choir or just alone in the shower than she felt when she was sleeping in her own bed. She loved playing characters in school musicals and singing along with movies, and she spent most of her time at home singing in front of her mirror.

One Sunday at Mass, the cantor started singing something Elena had never heard before. It started with a bold leap up to a high note, then immediately changed, became smooth and sweet. Elena didn't know what the words meant — it was in Latin — but she was drawn into the music. It was sweet and smooth, with a swaying oscillation, like a mother rocking a child. The third time that big leap happened, it squeezed Elena's heart so hard she stopped breathing. Then the smooth, sweet oscillating tune came back and felt like curling up in a rocking chair at the end of a long day. Not that she ever felt that kind of welcome and relief at home. Actually, she'd never felt it anywhere. Until now.

She knew right then she wanted to be that kind of singer.

That day, she found a recording of the song — it was the “Pie Jesu” from Fauré's Requiem — and listened to it over and over, singing along until she had it memorized.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 1

Complete the Cycle

After that, she would play online videos of classical songs, learn them by rote, and sing along. Though she lived with her mother and abuela, they each worked a lot of hours and were often not at home, so she could be as loud and dramatic as she wanted. She brought tears to her own eyes, imagining herself in the story and the music.

A few years later, her voice won her a scholarship at a conservatory crowded with mostly white people, from mostly affluent families. She was as much of a misfit there as she was back home, just for opposite reasons. But the teachers and other singers felt the same way she did about music – not just to dance to, not just as part of their culture, but as part of their souls.

Other students talked about music as an “outlet” for their emotions. An outlet? Elena tried to make sense of that, and recalled singing to her mirror, how she felt filled up with the feelings in the music – usually passionate longing for love, since those were her favorite songs. That was probably the only place or time in her life where she felt strong emotion.

In every other domain of her life, that kind of emotional display was considered weakness, but at the conservatory, she was supposed to be expressive and emotional.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 1

Complete the Cycle

When her voice teacher let her pick one piece to work on, she chose the “Pie Jesu.”

And when she sang it, she noticed a feeling of release, and relief. Like coming home. She could create that feeling for herself. Her “outlet” was the creation of a place where she felt at home inside her own body.

Elena had already been in love with singing for six years before she recognized what it did for her; she didn’t have to know how it worked for it to help her. Once she became aware she was using music to release strong emotions, she used it as a tool that empowered her to deal with even greater challenges that would present themselves in the years to come.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2 #Persist

Worksheet:

Integrating Limitations, Redefining Winning

Vignettes:

- **Elisa** attempts to use planful problem-solving and positive reappraisal to address her reluctance to rehearse, but the barrier for her progress lies deeper than such strategies can reach.
- **Julie** finds that her initial efforts to deal with stress more effectively work... but also they highlight the stressors that continue to cause stress. She has to adjust her expectations to integrate the reality that it is a never-ending process.
- **Sophie** reframes her inevitable extra work as “the black lady in the room” as an opportunity. If they’re going to ask her to do the work, and she’s good at it, why not make it a job?

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2 #Persist

Ideas to Explore:

- A little “monitor” in your brain knows (1) what your goal is, (2) how much effort you’re putting into that goal, and (3) how much progress you’re making. And it has a strong opinion about what the effort-to-progress ratio ought to be. When the ratio is too small, you get *frustrated*.
- If, because of your frustration, you work harder but still don’t make progress, the frustration escalates to rage... and eventually decides your goal is not obtainable, at which point it pushes you off an emotional cliff into a “pit of despair.”
- Between the rage and the despair is an emotion we call “foop,” when you oscillate from frustrated rage to helpless despair, uncertain whether to push even harder or to give up.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2

#Persist

Elena had always been the “good singer” of every group she had ever been in: school choirs, her church, her family. “Sing something!” her family would insist at Christmastime or any gathering. No matter what else was going on in her life, singing was easy, and she was good at it.

Like so many people with talent and ambition, Elena was a perfectionist—driven, uncompromising, and competitive. That worked for her when she was the good singer in the group. And then she got to the conservatory, where everyone was the good singer.

Her teachers made her slow down and think about every little detail. Now when she opened her mouth, she had a long list of things she had to remember: posture, breathing, head voice, whistle tone... She never got everything right.

Singing wasn’t fun anymore. It was frustrating. She felt like a failure. Why was it so hard for her? Music stopped being an emotional home; it became a job she hated. No, worse: It became a torture chamber.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2

#Persist

In her second year at the conservatory, Elena stopped practicing. She still loved singing, and wanted to sing, but when it was time to practice, she discovered she had other things she had to get done first. So she went to her lessons unprepared, and her progress slowed, and eventually when it was time to practice, she was filled with so much dread that she couldn't sing at all. Eventually she stopped wanting to sing.

Her voice teacher — everyone called her Dr. D — had seen this pattern many times before, so she had advice ready to go:

Dr. D said, “If it were easy, everyone would do it.”

And, “Yes, it's hard; do it anyway.”

And lavished praise on Elena for even the smallest of successes.

This was usually an effective recipe for pulling anyone out of a perfectionistic vortex like the one Elena had entered; but Elena's vortex was too strong a pull, even for Dr. D's motivational remedies.

Elena was scheduled to audition for a solo in Amelia's choir, but when she showed up, she told Amelia, “I haven't practiced it,” and explained what she was going through.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2 #Persist

Amelia said, “Everyone goes through this. Name a singer you admire; she went through this. But there’s science that can help!”

Elena’s is a story about the times planful problem-solving and positive reappraisal are not enough. She tried to apply both to her struggles with her voice, making lists and calendars and practicing daily gratitude, to help her stay organized, motivated, and optimistic. But her toxic perfectionism came from a place of deep emotional pain, a well of self-criticism she barely realized existed, and even the best evidence-based strategies weren’t enough. She kept avoiding the practice room. She kept dreading rehearsals. She made progress, but progress doesn’t always come soon enough; she lost her scholarship and had to quit school.

She felt like a failure. She sank into the pit of despair.

And yet this was the moment she became the heroine of her own life.

How?

Even though she quit school, Elena didn’t quit singing.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 2

#Persist

It's not that that she logically assessed her options, decided singing was worthwhile, and so chose to persist. It's that she felt like a magnet was pulling her to the work of making music, whether she wanted to or not. Something inside her wouldn't let her give up even when it was scary and painful, even when some part of her wished she could quit.

Stuck in the impossible situation of needing to sing and not being able to afford school, the lessons in managing the monitor finally kicked in. Her positive reappraisal was simply: I have to sing, whether I like it or not. Which made the question not, What do I do now? but How do I keep singing?

With that, Elena got busy playful problem-solving, setting short-term, achievable goals, finding ways to make music while also making a living.

She used the practical skills, but they were only useful when she understood why.

“Why” was that singing wasn't just a thing she did, it was part of her identity. It was a calling. For Elena, music was what brought meaning to her life; sometimes it brought her the most intense joy she had ever known and sometimes it brought out the deepest suffering, but always it connected her to something larger than herself, something that seemed to matter, no matter what. And that's what would get her through the challenges that followed.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 3 Meaning

Worksheet:

None in the text; see appendix in this guide

Vignettes:

- **Sophie** cosplays as a Star Trek character for fun, but also because engaging with that fictional world with other fans is a way to practice living in a world where prejudice has been overcome. It connects her with something larger than herself.
- **Julie** finds, again, that improvement in one domain of her life highlights problems in other domain. She soothes herself with TV, but that doesn't help her move forward from her struggles. What helps her move forward is remembering what matters most.
- **Elisa** faced with a song that triggered her past trauma, she found her way through by singing with a young girl who reminded of the girl she had been. Singing together allowed her to give the song a new meaning.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 3 Meaning

Ideas to Explore:

- Meaning in life is important for wellbeing, and it isn't found; it is *made* by engaging with something larger than yourself. (Ask, "What is your 'Something Larger'?"")
- The "Mighty Should" is the relentless cultural stream pushing us to go with the flow, even if the flow divides us from our Something Larger. But the Mighty Should is alluring and even important, because it keeps us safe within our group.
- Isolation and helplessness are the opposite of meaning, which is why trauma can seem to drain life of meaning. But our Something Larger lives inside our bodies, so nothing can separate us from our source of meaning.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 3

Meaning

The community choir Elisa sang in was learning arrangements of folk songs to sing in a festival with several children's choirs. Elisa was assigned a duet in "De Colores," a cheerful, relaxed song she had known all her life. As a child, she had loved singing "De Colores." Now it made her uncomfortable. Untangling old vocal habits from new techniques took her into the past, triggering memories of terrible things she had ignored for a long time. The song made her stomach turn. It showed her the faces of people she had wanted to forget.

She cried through most of her voice lessons, which felt like a waste of the money she paid for them. Her teacher assured her it was common in young singers, but Elisa wondered why she was putting herself through this. What good could come of all this remembering and feeling and suffering, just to sing a folk song? She wanted to disappear into the fantasy and technical challenge of opera roles and art song. This easy little tune was ripping her heart to shreds. Why bother?

Then she met her partner in the "De Colores" duet, a ten year old girl in Amelia's children's choir.

When the two singers met for the first time to rehearse, the little girl stared at Elisa with shining brown eyes and long, dark hair that reminded Elisa of herself when she was that age.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 3 Meaning

It was strange to be stared at. Elisa looked back with all the patience she could muster. She finally lifted her hand in a wave and said “Hi.”

“Hi,” the girl whispered.

There was a silent beat while they stared at each other, before Elisa said, “Wanna sing?”

The girl nodded seriously.

Elisa sat on the risers next to her. They sang in unison at first, then she sang harmony while the girl sang the melody. There is a kind of listening necessary for a duet with a child, gentle but focused, and it kept Elisa out of the past, harnessed her attention in the present, so she sang without getting hooked by the memories. With the help of this girl, she reconnected with her Something Larger — music — free of its associations with the past.

At the end of rehearsal, before Elisa could even begin processing the experience, the girl approached her, staring awkwardly again. Elisa stared back, until the child said quietly, “I see you as a role model.” Then she rushed away, to grab the hand of an exhausted-looking older lady carrying a heavy bag. The lady looked back at Elisa with a serious expression, nodding at her before escorting the girl out.

Part 1: Only What You Take With You

CHAPTER 3

Meaning

Elisa noticed Amelia observing, and turned to her in confusion.

Amelia explained, “Patricia loves singing, and she’s one of the best natural musicians in my choir. But she misses a lot of rehearsals because of her grandmother’s work schedule, so sometimes she doesn’t feel she quite belongs”

Elisa just nodded, not saying how deeply she connected with that.

Sometimes our Something Larger gets enmeshed in something even larger – the terrible things that happened in our past. Elisa’s something larger is music. On that day, singing with that child and seeing herself through that child’s eyes, she began to release music from the tangle of terrible things from her past, so that she could connect with music, freely in the present.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4

The Game Is Rigged

Worksheet:

Smashin' Some Patriarchy

Vignettes:

- **Elisa** recognizes the emotional labor she's doing at her day job, to appease her emotionally manipulative boss. She learns to be aware of it and make deliberate decisions about when and when not to engage in that labor.
- **Sophie** frames her daily experiences of discrimination and bias as a game that can only be won by showing her character, rather than trying to "win" any specific goal.
- **Julie** stops "mother henning" and starts "father cocking," treating responsibilities the same way her male colleagues do. Not everyone loves the shift, but she feels much less exhausted.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

Ideas to Explore:

- Systemic bias against women still exists, and one of the ways it instantiates itself in our lives is by trying to tell us it does not exist. Which makes us “bananas”
- “Human Giver Syndrome” – the belief that women should give everything they have, including all their emotional energy and even their bodies – blinds us to this bias.
- The “availability bias” or “headwinds-tailwinds asymmetry” also blinds us, because the ways we have to work hard make us forget the ways we had it easy.
- We can begin to undo the damaging effects of patriarchy, both on our individual lives and on the culture as a whole, by doing small things every day that remind us that we can make a difference.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

After Elena had to quit school, she got a job that paid the bills while she took voice lessons, auditioned for young artist programs, and considered her options.

Her boss at the office was a “gentleman,” which was code for “well-mannered sexist.” He held doors for her and the other women-(never the men). So polite. He addressed all the assistants formally, using their last names, with Mrs. or Miss – except the men, whom he called jocularly by their given names. And he spoke to women with a friendly sing-song in his voice as if he were addressing a child.

“Miss Escutia,” he would say, “There’s no coffee on my desk.”

“Oh. Sorry. Did you ask for coffee, Mr. Boss? I didn’t hear you.”

“Do I have to ask?”

Or a playful, “That’s not what I like to see! Put a smile on that pretty face!”

And yes, on her first day, he mistook Elena for a cleaner. Because of course he did. But he did it in a really friendly way.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

Such a gentleman. And his expectation was that the women would be “ladies” —read: human givers. Pretty, happy, calm, generous, and attentive to the needs of others. Especially his needs. And if a woman didn’t meet that expectation — if she raised her voice in a meeting, if she seemed too ambitious or competitive, if she failed to learn his needs and preferences, if she didn’t wear make-up one day — he did not yell or use abusive language. He just ignored her. Ignored her in meetings, turned his back to her to talk to someone else in the elevator, excluded her from decision-making discussions, stopped asking for her input or help.

You could get back into his good graces by getting back in line, and sometimes you got back in simply because he was turning toward you in order to turn his back on someone else who had not met his expectations.

And so the women in the office worked really hard all the time to be pretty, happy, calm, generous, and attentive.

“How much effort do you spend on avoiding offending him?” Amelia asked when Elena told her about the day job situation.

“It’s no big deal. His rules are easy.”

“And it’s your job to make him comfortable? He doesn’t have any responsibility to make you comfortable?”

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

Elena laughed. “Yes, that is literally my job. He’s the boss. It’s fine – I just wanted you to know my friend from work is coming to the concert – “

But Amelia cut her off. “Do you do that with me? Tiptoe around my feelings?”

“No way. Tiptoeing around feelings is your job. You have divas to placate. And sometimes they call you out, too”

“They do,” Amelia agreed. “Sometimes I make mistakes, so I’m glad when you guys help me. I mean, you all. You’re not guys. Sorry.”

“Exaaaaaactly,” Elena crooned. “You don’t need us to tailor every word to you, you tailor you to us!”

“And you’re right that I tiptoe around singers,” Amelia confirmed. “It’s important to make everyone feel comfortable so they sing their best. So I am extremely careful to shape every message to make it as inclusive as possible. Everyone deserves to feel welcome and accepted.”

Elena grinned. “That’s why you’re our favorite.”

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

“It’s exhausting,” Amelia said bluntly. “It’s my job. It’s important to me, and it’s absolutely worth doing. But it’s work, and I take care of myself after rehearsal is over, refuel what I’ve lost through all that emotional labor.” She eyed Elena. “Which is why I’m asking, how much effort do you spend on avoiding offending Mr. Boss?”

When Elena started paying attention, she noticed it took up way more of her time and energy than she had recognized before. And then she noticed the ways she did it all the time, in almost every context. It wasn’t just spoonfuls of sugar, but buckets of sugar made of her patience and smiles and grooming and dressing and modifying everything about her speech from her vocabulary to her accent. It was an extra layer of work she was doing all the time that she had always just taken for granted.

She started being more selective about when she smiled to mask her impatience or worried about what he would need on his desk when he got back from a meeting, and discovered she could get by with a lot less than she thought she needed. This was a day job. If he wanted to exclude her, how much did that matter to her?

This was Elena’s introduction to the skill of managing her new double life — office worker by day, opera diva by night. Learning to deal with the politics of a day job was necessary. But the most profound lessons she would learn would always come from her art.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 5

The Bikini Industrial Complex

Worksheet:

None in the text; see appendix in this guide.

Vignettes:

- **Julie** accumulates so much stress that she lands in the emergency room with a fecal impaction. It forces her to confront the ways she has been treating her body like an object rather than an organic partner with things to tell her.
- **Sophie** is confronted with the sizist biases of people who work in a dress shop. She had friends to support her and a deep well of self-confidence that allowed her to turn it into a funny story.
- **Elisa** finds a way to view her body with affection when a costumer tells her she has a great silhouette for stage. At last, the shape of her body is any kind of asset, rather than a domain of conflict between the dominant culture and her family's culture.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 5

The Bikini Industrial Complex

Ideas to Explore:

- According to the largest scale, highest quality meta-analyses, it's as unhealthy to be "underweight," according to medical definitions, as it is to be "obese," and the healthiest weights are somewhere between the high end of "normal" and "overweight."
- This isn't just about how we absorb and enact the cultural obsession with weight; it's about how we dismiss everything else related to our bodies.
- What would it be like if we and the people around us felt the same way about our bodies as we all did on the day we were born? Celebrated and seen as beautiful, no matter what?

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 5

The Bikini Industrial Complex

After all her drama and struggles, it was the phrase “bodacious ta-tas” that really kickstarted Elena’s journey out of survivorship and into real joy.

She was being fitted for her costume in Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro, including a corset, custom made for her. There were a lot of measurements involved, and Elena stood for a long time in the costume shop wearing very little as two costumers grabbed her various parts and shifted them around to where they’d need to be when clothed. It was all very businesslike.

As the costumer lifted Elena’s breasts into a model garment, she commented, “You have what we call in the industry ‘bodacious ta-tas.’”

“Thanks?” Elena asked, laughing and jiggling.

The costumer talked as she worked, praising Elena’s silhouette and proportions as ideal. “I wish every body I costumed was like yours,” she concluded.

Growing up in her Mexican American family and community, Elena had felt conflicted between the uberculture’s pressure to be thin, and her home culture’s pressure to be thick; it seemed like whatever shape her body was, it was wrong. She had dealt with the problem by believing that she would never be beautiful. She just hated her body and assumed that’s the way it would always be. The only good thing about her body was that it could sing.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 5

The Bikini Industrial Complex

But she got this compliment, and it made her look in the mirror with different eyes.

She began, tentatively, to consider the idea that her body was beautiful: good at singing, good proportions for costumes... and maybe just plain good. The idea was slightly scary. Beautiful bodies attracted attention she didn't want, and she was comfortable with the idea of being dumpy. Being bodacious was a risk.

Then Elena did some research for her role. She looked at paintings contemporary to Mozart. She found an account of eighteenth century scholar Joseph Spence, who identified the Venus de Medici as, "the standard of all female beauty and softness." This statue was one of the most reproduced works of art in history, so Mozart himself probably had seen her.

When Elena found pictures of that statue, she was astonished. Venus looked, to Elena's twenty-first century eyes, like a sort of thick-waisted girl with no muscle tone, not much thinner than Elena. She was bent forward a little, and the bend made a fold on her belly. Venus's thighs would rub together when she walked. In Spence's writing, he even appreciated that "her waist is not stinted by art but as exactly proportioned by nature" unlike the corseted fashions of his day. He described overhearing an English lady comment that Venus' waist was too wide. The eighteenth century lady and Elena had both been indoctrinated to believe that women's waists ought to be smaller than nature usually makes them.

Part 2: The Real Enemy

CHAPTER 5

The Bikini Industrial Complex

Elena found idealized depictions of women from before and after Mozart's time. The Venus of Willendorf and all those women painted by Rubens were not the exception, but the rule. Lots of people throughout history and in different cultures found bodies like hers beautiful. It made her imagine that the Countess, her character in the opera, might have felt beautiful, too. That she could pretend to feel beautiful for a couple of hours and see what it was like.

The dress rehearsal was a few weeks later. Laced tightly into supportive silk and another round of compliments, she performed the whole opera with more confidence than she'd ever felt before. Even if Elena was still working on it in real life, the Countess knew her husband was a lucky man.

In an ideal world, women should be able to love their bodies without the approval of others, and without a gorgeous gown to make it look different from what it is. In an ideal world, body love isn't about being an attractive object, it's about you being you, on your own terms.

But sometimes a professional costumer complimenting your boobs can begin a revolution in how you relate to your body and your own sense of at-homeness inside it.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 6

Connect

Worksheet:

None in the text; see appendix in this guide.

Vignettes:

- **Sophie** has resisted having a relationship because she's a strong, independent woman. When she meets someone who fills her stomach with butterflies, she has to acknowledge that intimate connection isn't just about knowing someone else well and trusting them, it's about knowing yourself more profoundly.
- **Julie** receives connection not just as emotional support but through instrumental support – help with time-consuming but necessary household tasks. Support isn't just about feelings.
- **Elisa** faced with daily street harassment that triggers her past trauma, finds support when she shares her experience with her fellow singers. They band together to support and protect each other and to push back against the harassment.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 6

Connect

Ideas to Explore:

- We require connection in the same way we require food: we can literally sicken and even die without it. The need for emotional connection is not a weakness or pathology; it's a normal part of being human.
- Many people – especially women – get to know the world, other people, and themselves, not through analytical ways of knowing but through connected knowing, where they suspend their own point of view to explore an idea within the context of the other point of view. Connected knowing is one characteristic of what we call “the Bubble of Love,” the kind of relationship that creates energy in our lives.
- The other characteristic is trust – that is, feeling confident that another person will reciprocate in kind when you give them something. As Sue Johnson says, trust can be boiled down the question, “Are you there for me?”
- Sadness is the beacon; it is the Bat Signal emotion, telling you to reach out for connection.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 6

Connect

With her new appreciation for her body, Elena began training with a new teacher, who took a new approach to her voice. Like previous teachers, she used visualizations to teach Elena about the acoustical sensations of her voice, but unlike the other teachers, she guided Elena's attention inward and downward, toward the physical and emotional sensations of her whole body as she sang.

After several lessons like this, Elena could identify the physical sensations associated with different notes. After even more lessons, she began to connect physical sensations with specific emotions, which was... interesting.

And that's when she was cast in an all-female production of a new opera that tells the true story of the abduction and rape of a teenage girl.

Rehearsing this music, something unlocked in Elena. She thought she had worked through her issues – all that therapy, the meditation, the crying to purge her rage. But this role, this character who was a real person who was alive right now, touched a truth that had been hidden even from her concerted efforts to embrace her history and challenges.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 6

Connect

As she was preparing for the role, Elena began having flashbacks: not just seeing the face of her mother's boyfriend, but also feeling the actual physical sensation of him touching her; not just the feeling of cringing disgust and shame, but also the unquestioned certainty that she was on her own. When her therapist understood that Elena was having a hard time distinguishing between real and imagined threats, she diagnosed her with PTSD. Elena worked with her to recover from the trauma she had denied for so many years at the same time as she worked preparing the role – learning music as well as thinking about the girl she was portraying.

She was in rehearsal with the stage director, music director, and accompanist, when her co-star, Schauntice (a soprano Elena admired tremendously), broke down. No singer wants to bring a rehearsal to a halt because of something so stereotypically diva-ish as a crying fit. Elena froze, caught between her instinct to comfort her colleague, her professional training not to disrupt the rehearsal further, and her old learned judgment that showing emotion in public is weakness and a failing.

The director, Kristy, took it out of her hands by doing what Elena wanted to do. Kristy went to Schauntice and hugged her. And then they sat, all of them, and spent twenty minutes talking about what it meant to them to be telling this story.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 6

Connect

After several others had talked about their intense experiences preparing their roles, Elena admitted, “I’ve been having flashbacks.”

And then a miracle happened.

Instead of dismissing her as high-maintenance or needy or an attention hog, both Kristy and Schauntice put their arms around her.

Kristy said, “That honesty and vulnerability is why I hired you. Thank you for bringing all of you to this work.”

Schauntice – the star – said, “When I sing with you, I feel totally safe going there, even to the dark places. You’re amazing. I hope you trust yourself as much as I trust you.”

It was unusual for a director to make time for this. Most directors don’t want to use precious rehearsal time just talking about feelings, so the emotional work is done by each individual outside of rehearsal. But in this case, sharing their experiences deepened everyone’s understanding of the story and its characters. Creating this work together made Elena feel more supported and safe than she had ever felt – more than she would have believed possible. The more she gave, the more she received.

But then.

When the show finished and she lost the structure – the support – of the production... all hell broke loose.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7

What Makes You Stronger

Worksheet:

24/7

Vignettes:

- **Sophie** earns the neurological connection between rest and creativity, which motivates her to leave an organization that pushes employees to exhaustion.
- **Elisa** spends a month in “vocal rest,” not singing or listening to singing, as a way to deal with whatever emotions are interfering with the free prosody of her voice.
- **Julie** uses the structure of her physical therapy to recognize and ask for help when she needs it, so that she can rest – which results in her husband recognizing how difficult it can be to get rest.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7

What Makes You Stronger

Ideas to Explore:

- Our brains are designed to oscillate between a state of active attention and a “default mode” state of mind-wandering or daydreaming, when it explores the past and the future. The better the balance between these two states, the better our mental health and cognitive clarity. (Ask, “What low-demand tasks facilitate ‘default mode’?” or “How does the idea of default mode fit with what you’ve been taught about ‘hard work’ or ‘grit’ or ‘never giving up’?”)
- Boredom is the uncomfortable state of the brain being an active-attention mode, without anything it can pay attention to. (Ask, “When you’re bored, what don’t you want to pay attention to?” or “When you’re bored, what helps you toggle from attention into default-mode daydreaming?”)
- Daydreaming or mind-wandering can turn into *rumination* if it gets stuck reexamining a negative past experience or worrying over a potential future experience. (“Ask, when your mind-wandering gets stuck in a negative place, what helps you transition into a solution-focused state or a place of gratitude?” [a.k.a., positive reappraisal].)
- No domain of human life is really complete without sleep; our physical health, mental health, relationships, and cognitive abilities all depend on getting enough sleep. (Ask, “How much sleep are you getting?” or “What relationship do you notice between sleep and your mood/anxiety/attention/other mental health issues?”)

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7 What Makes You Stronger

Elena approached Amelia after choir rehearsal one evening.

“Um, I’ve been really struggling with my voice lately...” she said, and she detailed some issues.

“When did this start?” Amelia asked.

“After the show ended.”

“Uh-huh,” Amelia said, knowing a little about Elena’s experiences in that production and wanting to help, but feeling like the problem was huge and she the right person to help. “Here’s a wellness education skill I learned from my sister.”

And she handed Elena a book about Adverse Childhood Experiences or “ACEs.”

As she read it, Elena was surprised to see descriptions of situations that were similar to her own, described as “traumatic.” These (to her) non-problem experiences were related to basically every problem a person can have: Depression, anxiety, and drug addiction – that was no surprise. But also sex and relationship violence, heart disease, diabetes... It was not a huge leap to think her voice might be affected too.

She told her voice teacher, Dr. D., about it.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7

What Makes You Stronger

Dr. D. said, “Elena, the whole point of that mechanism in your throat is to express emotion. If your brain is telling you to stay away from your emotions — to protect you from remembered pain, or just out of habit because that’s what it’s always done to help you survive — the muscles of your vocal apparatus are going to be involved.”

“How do I fix it?” Elena choked out, terrified of losing the one thing she needed most in her life.

And she received the most terrifying answer.

“I suggest a month of vocal rest. No singing, no listening to singing, as little speaking as possible. Just let the muscles rest. Rest.”

Elena did absolutely not want to do that, but she didn’t have any better ideas. She e-mailed Amelia that she wouldn’t be at rehearsals for the next few weeks. Vocal rest is very common for singers, so Amelia e-mailed back, “Great idea. Let me know how it goes.”

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7

What Makes You Stronger

It went well... and it was awful. A lot of people who, like Elena, have always “powered through” their struggles, never stand still long enough to feel how much pain they’re in, so when they’re forced to stop, all that pain is there, waiting for them, like an ambush. Elena had been “powering through” for, oh, two decades, and vocal rest forced her to stand still long enough to feel all those feelings.

In the quiet, Elena had to learn brand new skills for tolerating and processing the deep well of grief and loneliness and fear inside her. It was like traveling to the other side of the globe by digging a tunnel through the earth, with only a spoon to help her get through rock and magma. Her therapist affirmed that yes, if she kept digging, she would arrive at a sunny beach with lounge chairs on the shore and frozen Margaritas brought to her by handsome waiters... but she would only get there if she kept digging.

Rest was exhausting.

At her first voice lesson following the month of rest, she was crying before she even got out of her car. She sobbed through her lesson, pouring out all the fear and anger and sadness that had been allowed to the surface when everything around it was still. She stood, puffy and drippy and red-eyed, feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

Dr. D., sitting at the piano, was ecstatic.

“Elena!” she crowed, and she hit her hand on the keyboard lid. “This is SO GOOD FOR YOU!!!”

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 7 What Makes You Stronger

Good for me? Elena thought, shocked. *It feels awful. It hurts. I'm miserable. How can this be good?*

She found out at her next lesson, one week later.

She made it through the parking lot without crying; that was a good start.

Then she opened her mouth to begin warming up.

The sound of her voice was completely new. It rang richly in the acoustical spaces in her head and in the room as it had never done before.

It was a soprano's equivalent of a lounge chair on a beach, with a frozen margarita brought to her by a handsome waiter. It was better than easy; it was like coming home.

"Rest," her voice teacher declared. "Sometimes that's all you need."

"All," Elena said with an inner eyeroll.

"You have joined a glorious club," her teacher said. "Almost every singer who studies seriously goes through a period of rest followed by sudden blossoming growth. Welcome!"

"Do they all cry?" Elena asked.

"Yes," said Dr. D. "We all cry. Welcome!"

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

Worksheet:

Get to Know Your Madwoman; Lovingkindness Practice

Vignettes:

- **Elisa** learns to turn with kindness and compassion toward the hurt little girl that lives inside her and makes her afraid to be seen or heard.
- **Julie** avoided the damage inflicted by her inner critic by being as kind to herself as she would want to be, as her best self, to anyone else.
- **Sophie's** “madwoman” is funny pop culture symbol of gendered biases. By making her a source of amusement rather than a source of anger, she can share her experiences with her partner in a way that bonds them more closely.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

Ideas to Explore:

- Each of us has a “madwoman in the attic,” an inner voice that criticizes us any time she notices a gap between who we are and who the world expects us to be.
- The key to dealing with this self-criticism is to turn toward that inner critic with compassion and gratitude – never forgetting that she is mad.
- Self-compassion is difficult because we believe if we stop beating ourselves up, we’ll lose motivation and become complacent or lazy. Self-compassion is also difficult because it is healing, and healing can be painful. It’s also difficult because the result of healing is that you grow stronger, and we might be scared of the feeling of strength and power.
- Self-compassion can be most difficult for those with histories of trauma and neglect; receiving compassion, whether from themselves or others, activates a threat response instead of a relaxation response. The solution is to extend care to others, before attempting to care for oneself.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

Amelia was conducting Fauré's Requiem, and hired Elena to sing the "Pie Jesu." This was the very piece that, a decade ago, had cracked Elena open and revealed to her that she is a musician. In rehearsal, they found ways for Elena to connect honestly to the text.

And then on the day of the performance, Elena had a panic attack.

"I can't stop crying," Elena sobbed, mopping her tears with a tissue before they fell and stained her formal gown. "How am I going to sing? I can't stop crying."

"Did something happen?" Amelia asked.

"No!" Elena wailed. "Everything is fine! Why can't I stop crying?"

"This is so good for you," Amelia reminded Elena.

"Okay but right now?! I have to be on stage in twenty minutes, I don't have time for feelings! Oh shit, my mascara!"

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

Very calmly, Amelia said, “You have time. You’re a person first and a singer second. If you can’t sing, someone else will cover it. Maybe they won’t be as good as you, but so what? It’s more important that you take care of yourself. So, for real, there’s no pressure. Second of all, I’m grateful to have a singer like you in my choir who can feel so deeply and pour that kind of emotion into their singing. This is part of what makes you a powerhouse. And third, right now you have access to exactly what Fauré needs from you. A plea to God for peace to all who suffer. You’re right where Fauré wants you. It’s an amazing gift.”

“It’s pretty screwed up to have a job that makes you feel this way,” Elena said through her tears.

“I know, right?” Amelia enthused. “You get to be fully human for a living!”

Elena made a noise of frustration and closed her eyes. She and Amelia sat together quietly for a few minutes. Amelia watched Elena as the singer’s breath slowed and gradually she began to rock slowly and hum, very quietly, the “Pie Jesu,” even as she cried.

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

When she opened her eyes, she was smiling.

“What was that?” Amelia asked.

It was Elena turning toward her madwoman.

Elena’s madwoman isn’t a woman. It’s a little girl, filled with the burning, tearing rage of an adult.

When she closed her eyes, the little girl appeared in her mind’s eye, screaming incoherently, pounding her tiny fists against Elena’s heart.

Using everything she had learned from singing and therapy and everyone who supported her, Elena allowed herself to turn toward the suffering little girl.

In her mind, she asked the girl, “What’s wrong?”

The answer was a panicked scream of, “You can’t tell them! If you tell them, they’ll hate you and you’ll be alone and you’ll die! Shut up! Just shut up!”

Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

Instead of believing that thought, and instead of challenging it, Elena simply pictured herself opening her arms and allowing the girl to climb into her lap. She held her and rocked her and hummed the “Pie Jesu” for her. Mericiful Lord, grant us rest. Grant us, grant us everlasting rest. The girl quieted, felt safe and at home, just as Elena had all those years ago, listening to the cantor at Mass. Now she was the cantor for herself.

What Amelia saw was a singer in a formal gown, humming and rocking and crying until she opened her eyes and smiled.

The time came to go on stage, and Elena felt ready. There were four movements before her solo, and by the time they were over, Elena had disappeared into the music. She sang with her heart tuned to the sadness in her body and in the world, but without it overcoming her. She entreated God for peace, while she owned the peace within herself.

People cried. No one could hear Elena and not feel her grace. Afterward, they approached her and told her how beautiful her performance was. Though a small voice in her head said, “So you faked your way through another one,” a voice in her heart said, “They saw me and I didn’t die; I’m not alone.”

She smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Conclusion

Joyfully Ever After

Ideas to Explore:

Joy and happiness not the same thing. Joy is more important.

- What is the role of art in making joy?
- How does your art shape you and your experience?
- How do you and your experiences become your art?