

# WISE MIND LIVING

MASTER YOUR EMOTIONS,  
TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

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**sounds true**

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# WISE MIND VS. EMOTION MIND

## Stress, Emotions, Health, and Happiness

So, how *are* you? If I had to guess your answer, I'd go with, "I'm so stressed out!" You might even feel like your stress is never ending; I hear this from new patients all the time. When they describe what is going wrong for them, they refer to it as stress. But by that, they could mean they're experiencing a bad mood, aches and pains, relationship conflict, or pretty much anything that simply is not going their way. Or they might be referring to overscheduling, overspending, or overexercising. Or *lack* of exercise or sleep. Or eating too much. Or not eating enough. "I'm so stressed out!" might reflect an inability to say no or a major life transition or serious trauma. Or a microtrauma ("I forgot my lunch!").

No matter what is going on with us, we tend to think of ourselves as being under stress. And so we are. But it's not the stress per se that we most need to deal with to improve our lives. These days, we can't wade two inches deep into the media without being splashed with advice on how to beat, reduce, or avoid stress—as if that were the very thing we need in order to find happiness, reach our full potential, or otherwise live the lives we dream of. "If only I could get rid of this *stress!*"

We live in a culture that is very efficient at generating stressors (thanks, smartphone) and that, at the same time, makes stress reduction

seem like an urgent task at which we are all failing to measure up. The way we think about stress stresses us out! But when we identify stress as our main problem in this way, when we target stress busting as the way to improve our lives, we make a fundamental error in thinking. If we only focus on the stress that our problems are causing or on the problems themselves, nothing will change. If we really want to make a difference for ourselves and our health, if we want to free ourselves from our “issues,” whatever they may be, we need to focus our attention on the *emotions* underlying these problems. These emotions—unmanaged and unmastered—are not only causing the problems; they are also creating the stress.

If we want to manage our stress, we have to manage our emotions. If we want to manage our *lives*, we have to manage our emotions!

Our stress and our problems both stem from emotions that are being overlooked, ignored, denied, misunderstood, misinterpreted, suppressed, or just generally poorly handled. We might pin the blame on the boss or our kids, on having too little time or too much to do, or on any number of other things. But underneath that, the real troublemakers are our *feelings* about those things and how we manage those feelings. Our distressing emotions, when they aren’t being taken care of in a productive way, are at the root of all of our most common issues, including overeating, chronic relationship conflict, money mismanagement, substance abuse, and even, in many cases, poor physical health.

So, as you can see, when you get a handle on your emotions, you’ll get a handle on your problems—and your stress. Then you will be able to effect a top-to-bottom change in every aspect of your life through the choices you make every day: *master your emotions—transform your life.*

#### LIVING IN WISE MIND

### **Tara Is Really Stressing**

Tara thought her life had been pretty well transformed already when she gave birth to her daughter. She wasn’t really in the market for any more big changes, thank you very much. But the baby was two months old now, and Tara was “really stressing” about whether she should go back

to work. She was lucky enough to have three months of maternity leave from her teaching job, but she was down to the last few weeks of it, and the school was expecting her back. If only she could get some sleep, Tara told me, maybe she wouldn't be freaking out about this; but it seemed like it was all she could think about. How could she go back to a class full of chemistry students when she was nursing her baby every two hours? How could she leave her tiny, precious daughter in the hands of those *strangers* at the day-care center?

But how could she not go back to the job she loved? How could she just abandon her students midyear? Also, would her daughter *ever* stop spitting up? Tara said she thought she no longer owned a single piece of clothing that wasn't stained with baby "urp." What was she going to wear to work, anyway? And what if her daughter learned to walk while Tara was at work? That's what happened to her friend Mindy, who was texted a photo of her son's first steps. But if Tara took a year off—or two or three—so she wouldn't miss things like that, would she ever be able to get back in a classroom? And what if she found that she hated being at home? Her other friend Yvonne had quit her job when her baby was born, only to go stir-crazy and start job hunting before her kid learned to walk. It was all too much stress, Tara told me, and she just didn't know what to do.

But before Tara could figure out what to do, she needed to figure out what she was feeling, down underneath the stress. What emotions were generating that stress? Until she could answer that question, she would be stuck feeling out of control. ①

As Tara was about to find out, and as you will see, emotions drive the decisions you make, the actions you take, what you think, and, yes, how you feel. As long as *you* have your hands on the wheel, you'll have a good trip: your emotions will alert you to obstacles and speed you where you want to go. But if you're not steering—or, like Tara, if you don't quite realize you need to steer—if you take your eyes off the road, if you leave your emotions to their own devices to take you wherever *they're* headed, then you're going to crash. Or at the very least, you'll end up somewhere other than where *you* set out to go.

## WISE MIND LIVING

The scenario with *you* driving rather than your emotions driving is one I describe to my patients as living in Wise Mind. If your emotions are running things, you're in Emotion Mind. At the other end of the spectrum, when you are doing your best impersonation of Mr. Spock, you are in Logic Mind. Wise Mind Living is when you sustain a mind-set that balances emotion and logic. You really don't want Mr. Spock driving either: just as Emotion Mind runs too hot, Logic Mind runs too cool. Wise Mind, then, is Goldilocks's *juuuuuust* right. Wise Mind proceeds logically but includes emotional information. It embraces both the rationality of Logic Mind *and* the sensitivity of Emotion Mind. It is practical and intuitive, rule based and flexible. It both protects your self-interest and takes others into account.

Imagine for a moment that you're car shopping. If you've had a terrible fight with your spouse or, at the other end of the spectrum, if you closed a really big deal at work, and you get really amped up one way or the other—all *before* you hit the dealership—then you are fully immersed in Emotion Mind. You might come home with that totally awesome sports car. Who cares if there's nowhere to put the car seat or stow the groceries? You totally deserve it! Did you check out how fast this thing goes!? And how about the color? Everyone is going to be able to see this car coming!

But what if Logic Mind were your shopping assistant? You could research the safest, most fuel-efficient car available, with the highest-rated everything right down to the cup holders, and then track down the absolute best price available. In fact, you could spend so much time figuring out the ideal car that you might never get around to buying an actual car. Or you might end up with the world's most egregiously unattractive vehicle (it had a lot of fans at *Effective Engineering* magazine), in an . . . interesting . . . shade of mustard (and it wasn't one penny over your budget). Who cares if it is a bit depressing to look at? Who cares if the winter-weather antiskid device isn't strictly necessary here in Florida? Any intelligent person could see that this is the safest car and the smartest choice.

However, if you went shopping in Wise Mind, you'd bring home something that works for you, practically speaking, but also something

that you enjoy driving. Like maybe a minivan . . . in cherry red. The one with really nice handling and a port for your iPod?

Living in Wise Mind (like shopping in Wise Mind) sets you up to make good choices. Choices that work for you. Choices that get you what you need. Choices you can live with. Choices that make you feel good. Choices that fit your life and your interpersonal situation. Choices that both optimize the good and minimize the bad. Choices that balance what you think and what you feel.

Emotion Mind usually leads to poor decisions, because you do not show up with your best self to handle whatever circumstances you find yourself in. Emotions can give you important information, but Emotion Mind often can't see anything beyond initial, visceral reactions, and it leaves no room for rationality.

Logic Mind, on the other hand, might let you make good rational sense, but it has a blind spot for how feelings affect a situation. Every situation has emotional content, and if you don't factor in that content, you can't win fairly because you won't be dealing from a full deck. With Logic Mind, you might make what looks like a smart choice on paper, but it won't be the best real-world choice.

Wise Mind and Emotion Mind are concepts developed by Marsha Linehan for the specialized type of therapy she developed known as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). (So is Logic Mind, though she calls it Reasonable Mind.) I've come to use the phrase Wise Mind with my patients in a broader sense than its original DBT meaning. DBT is designed specifically to deal with truly extreme emotion; I more often tap into the power of Wise Mind to handle everyday emotion. Wise Mind Living braids together strands from a few therapeutic and philosophical traditions and refers to an overarching approach to life. Wise Mind Living is about optimizing mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

Wisdom is the supreme part of happiness.

SOPHOCLES

## IT'S WHAT I TEACH AND WHAT I DO

Over the course of nineteen years of working with patients, I've relied on a combination of DBT, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mind-body strategies (the ones with good research backing up their efficacy), and Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices to create an approach that I call Wise Mind Living. It's what I've studied, what I've trained in, and what I use in my own life. My expertise comes not just from formal education and professional experience but also from growing up, dating (is there another area with as many emotions that really need managing as dating?), getting married, building a business, and parenting—in other words, it comes from living my life. I know that what I teach my patients works because I've done it—and do it—myself.

Everyone struggles with emotions: you, me, the Dalai Lama, *everyone*. And it's not just the negative emotions—even love and happiness are emotional experiences that can benefit by being managed. That's how you wring every last drop of goodness out of them! Wise Mind is not just a state you access once in a while to deal with a panic attack here or a heartbreak there. It's also not just for problems. It's more like a zone you try to stay in as you live your everyday life—lessening the grip of Emotion Mind without getting stuck in Logic Mind to find the balanced Wise Mind state in between. Wise Mind is for issues big and small. It's for problems and opportunities. Every stage of life comes with its own challenges—emotional and otherwise—and Wise Mind can see you through them all. That's why I call it Wise Mind Living.

Anyone can live in Wise Mind as long as they are willing to learn a handful of straightforward skills and practical strategies and deploy them daily. If that is you, you will understand and manage your emotions, control the stress emotions can cause, and find a path out of negative behavior patterns that are both fueling and fueled by distressing emotions. Everyone has emotions, and they affect us all every day. Emotion guides what we feel, think, and do—and *so does Wise Mind*. Mastering your emotions with Wise Mind strategies calms your body and physical symptoms, shapes thought patterns that help rather than hinder you, and supports productive action rather than uncontrolled *reaction*.



The principles of Wise Mind Living can work like therapy, or as a part of therapy, but they are just as useful for people who haven't felt any need for therapy. Wise Mind Living is good for everyone, because everyone has emotions. You don't have to be intensively struggling with those emotions to benefit from Wise Mind Living. Living in Wise Mind can help you get out of a jam, but it's even better for keeping you out of sticky messes in the first place.

## LIVING IN WISE MIND

**Tara Gets Wise**


After becoming a mother, Tara spent a lot of time in Emotion Mind, ping-ponging from one overwhelming idea to the next: "I don't know what I'm doing! Is it supposed to be like this? I can't cope with this! Will she ever stop crying? How can he sleep through this? I want my life back!" It's not unusual for a new phase of life to come with new emotional challenges. Even someone like Tara, who'd felt she had it pretty much together, can be thrown for a loop. And she was particularly vulnerable because of the physical challenges of new motherhood; getting by on next-to-no sleep, for example, was priming her to take everything harder than she otherwise might.

Of course, Tara didn't know about Emotion Mind when she first sought help. So her first step was the same as it is for almost all of my patients: getting familiar with the concept of Emotion Mind and learning to identify when it was happening to her. Tara's second step was to identify which emotion, exactly, was pushing her around. That required a bit more work, but as she went through it, Tara came to see that she was fearful of what her principal—and her husband—would think of her. But Tara also felt guilty, both when she thought about anyone else caring for her daughter *and* when she imagined her students permanently stranded with a sub. For the trifecta, Tara also realized she felt sad at the prospect of missing time with her daughter, with simultaneous feelings of sadness at the prospect of not teaching.

Tara had already tried to work out a stress-busting solution with a strategy that had always worked for her before: she made a list of pros and cons.

She analyzed her choices to within an inch of her life. The money she'd lose in salary. The money they'd save on day care. The statistics on getting another teaching job after gaps of varying lengths. The outcome data on kids in day care. And on and on. She summoned the full (and considerable) power of her Logic Mind, yet still somehow, she couldn't get everything to add up to an answer. There was no column in her spreadsheet for emotion, and without it, her equations were never going to balance.

Swinging as she was between Emotion Mind and Logic Mind, Tara was poised to find her balance in Wise Mind. She had three conflicting emotions to contend with, so she learned to step back from them enough to observe her emotions, describing them and their effects to herself, then reality-testing them. These were her feelings—no one could deny that—but was she thinking about them in ways that worked for her? How would she know if her actions were good choices? What was she going to do about how she felt?

Tara would find her answers with Wise Mind. She would find a way to honor her personal and professional self, her husband and her baby, her job and her life. Her thoughts about the political implications of her choice, her calculations about her financial future, and her long-standing commitment to education would all be factored in, and so would her sudden fascination with baby booties, her mixed feelings about being a full-time caregiver, and her full-to-overflowing supply of mother's love. 



#### WISE MIND LIVING PRACTICE

### Catch Yourself in Emotion Mind

Now that you know about Emotion Mind, Logic Mind, and Wise Mind, try catching yourself in the midst of each one. Start with Emotion Mind. Can you recognize when your emotions are driving solo?

## EMOTIONS 101: THE OWNER'S MANUAL AND TOOL KIT

Wise Mind Living is like Emotions 101. Wait, I take that back: Emotions 101 sounds like a college-level course, and that is more or less what

I aimed to give Tara, as I do all my patients. But the fact is, I wish everyone were taught these skills earlier in school, right alongside learning to read and count. Even sooner, really. In fact, I'm doing my best to raise my son to know these things, and he's only just started preschool. Any parent could do the same. I am often amazed at the way my son's young mind takes to this so naturally, unlike the adults in my practice and my life, who not only have to learn new ways of being but also have to let go of some ingrained habits that are not serving them well.

For the record, Wise Mind Living does *not* involve rummaging around in any baggage you may be carrying (though it does aim to lighten the load). Living in Wise Mind is about dealing with your emotions *now*—what they are in the present, how they affect you today, and how they show up in your behavior. Wise Mind Living is focused on solutions; it is about doing what works, right now.

Tara has come to think of Wise Mind Living as a combination owner's manual and tool kit for her emotions. It provides information and tools for maintaining emotions for optimum efficiency and peak performance. It gives solutions for when she breaks down. It lets her know what the warning lights look like, what they mean, and what she needs to do when she notices them. And it explains the basics about what emotions are, how they work, and what good they do.

If you intend to drive, rather than letting your emotions chart your course, it's wise to be familiar with the contents of the owner's manual and to be prepared with the right tools. It'll help you be the best driver you can be and ensure a smooth, safe trip.

## CHANGE

When the trip is rocky, when you don't like the way you are feeling and don't want to feel that way, Wise Mind Living can help you change, or manage, that emotion—even when you can't change the circumstances! This is exactly the promise I made to Tara. Figuring out how to change your emotions, or their intensity, will also allow you to change the behavior problems (overeating, overspending, and so on) that those emotions produce when left unmanaged. In Tara's case, the problem was paralyzed decision making.

The process of change begins with understanding what emotions are, how they work, and how they serve you. Wise Mind strategies helped Tara recognize and accurately identify the emotions she was feeling as she was feeling them, including what she felt physically. Wise Mind helped her be equally aware of her reactions to her emotions—that is, how she was thinking about them and what she was doing. Once she was tuned in in all these ways—and *only* when she was tuned in in all these ways—was she able to *change* how she felt, what she thought, and what she did. In the end, Tara decided not to go back to full-time teaching right away; instead, she got a flexible job tutoring students who miss school for long stretches due to medical reasons. Finding and using her Wise Mind, Tara was able to reduce her vulnerability to distressing emotions and increase her experience of positive ones, both as she planned her future and as she lived her plan. She decreased her emotional suffering, let go of painful emotions, and relieved stress. Just as she did, you too can choose constructive thought and behavior patterns. You can ease any physical symptoms and even improve your long-term health, both physical and mental.

However you feel right now, with Wise Mind Living, *you can feel better.*

## WHEN YOU CAN'T CHANGE

Strategies for change are only half of the Wise Mind tool kit, because, of course, there are some things you can't change. (Just ask Tara. No matter how she looked at it, the fact remained that she simply was not going to be able to teach full-time *and* care for her daughter full-time.) Although you are in charge of more than you might think when it comes to what you can change, you will also experience irresistible forces and immovable objects, just like everyone else does. The trick is to simultaneously be ready, willing, and able to change *and* accept what you cannot change: that very balance is Wise Mind Living. Tara had to make her choice *and* come to grips with being unable to do two things at once.

Wise Mind strategies help you learn to abide the negative effects of what you can't change and to cope with them, without allowing them to push you into destructive behavior. Wise Mind represents a more