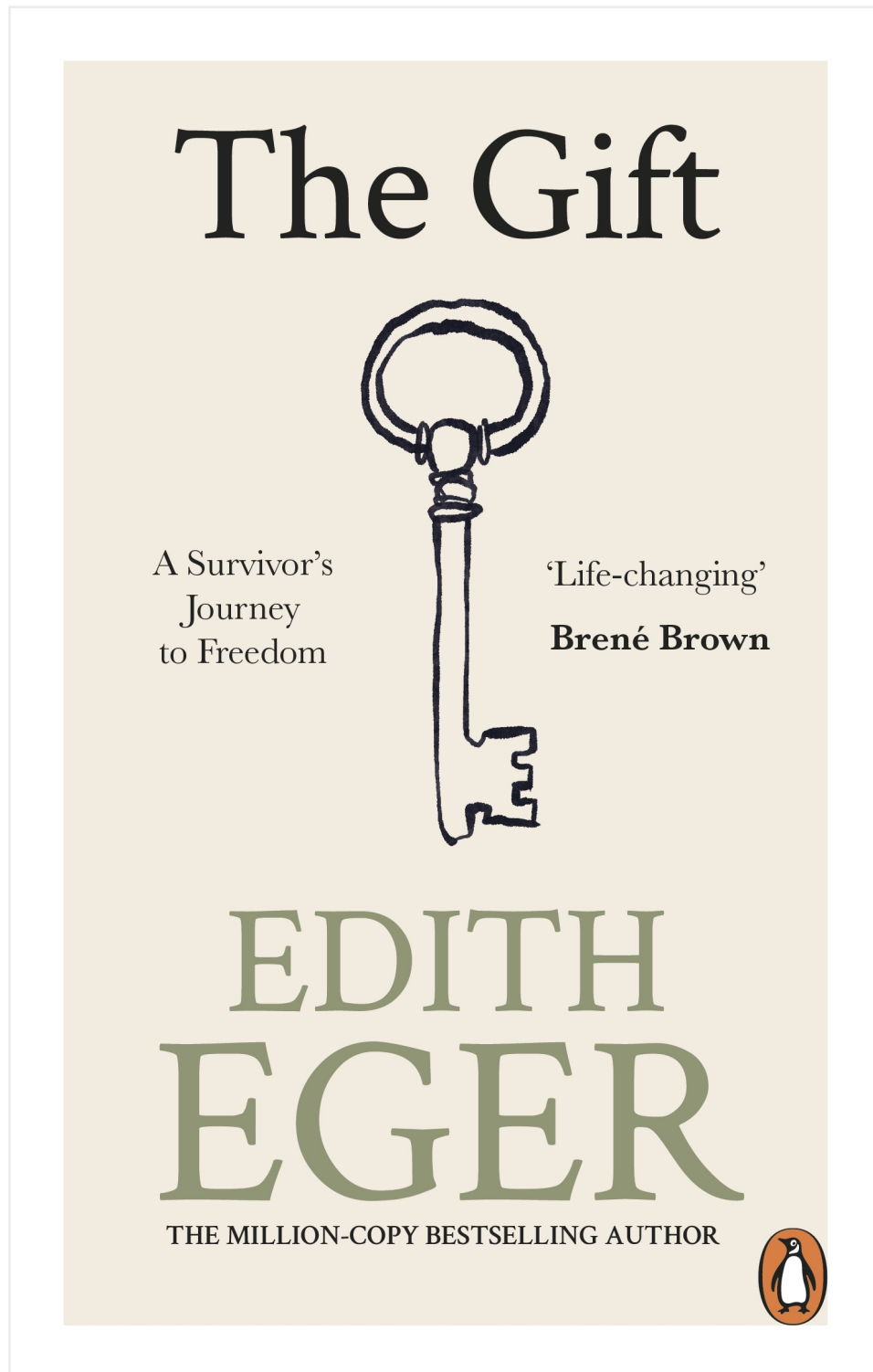


The Gift: 12 Lessons to Save Your Life (2024) - Edith Eger



About Dr. Edith Eger

Hungarian-born American psychologist and Holocaust survivor who became an expert in treating trauma. At 16, she was sent to Auschwitz, where she survived after being separated from her parents. She later became a psychologist, helping others heal from trauma, and wrote two best-selling books, *The Choice* and *The Gift*, which draw on her life experiences to offer lessons on healing and

resilience.

Blurb

***In the end, it's not what happens to us that matters most - it's what we choose to do with it.** We all face suffering - sadness, loss, despair, fear, anxiety, failure. But we also have a choice; to give in and give up in the face of trauma or difficulties, or to live every moment as a gift. Celebrated therapist and Holocaust survivor, Dr Edith Eger, provides a hands-on guide that gently encourages us to change the imprisoning thoughts and destructive behaviours that may be holding us back. Accompanied by stories from Eger's own life and the lives of her patients, her empowering lessons help you to see your darkest moments as your greatest teachers, and find freedom through the strength that lies within.*

What follows are quotes from the book above. These quotes stood out to psychotherapist Emil Barna in his reading of the book in 2025. They are not meant to be exhaustive nor representative of the entire book. All quotes are to be read in this context and must not replace medical and/or other professional advice. Note: Any typographical errors occurred through the transcription process and do not reflect what may be found in the book.

Introduction: UNLOCKING OUR MENTAL PRISONS

I learned how to live at a death camp

"the worst prison is not the one the Nazis put me in. The worst prison is the one I built for myself."

"All I could do was decide how to respond to terror and hopelessness. Somehow, I found it within myself to choose hope."

"freedom is fundamentally about choice."

"We flourish when we harness "learned optimism"—the strength, resiliency, and ability to create the meaning and direction of our lives."

"our worst experiences can be our best teachers, catalyzing unforeseen discoveries and opening us up to new possibilities and perspectives. **Healing, fulfillment, and freedom come from our ability to choose our response to whatever life brings us, and to make meaning and derive purpose from all we experience**—and in particular, from our suffering. [...] **freedom requires hope** [...] the awareness that suffering, however terrible, is temporary; and the curiosity to discover what happens next."

"For me, the ability to choose, even in the midst of so much suffering and powerlessness, is the true gift that came out of my time in Auschwitz. [...] I learned to rely on parts of myself I would otherwise never have known were there."

Chapter 1: WHAT NOW?

The Prison of Victimhood

"In my experience, **victims ask, "Why me?" Survivors ask, "What now?"** [...] We ask "Why?" over and over, believing that if we could just figure out the reason, the pain would lessen. [...] when we ask why, we're stuck searching for someone or something to blame—including ourselves. **Why did this happen to me? Well, why not you?** Maybe I went to Auschwitz and survived so I could talk to you now, so I could live as an example of how to be a survivor instead of a victim. [...] **Victimhood is rigor mortis of the mind.** It's stuck in the past, stuck in the pain, and stuck on the losses and deficits: what I can't do and what I don't have. [...] approach whatever is happening with a gentle embrace."

"Another tool for moving out of victimhood is to learn to cope with loneliness. It's what most of us fear more than anything else. But **when you're in love with yourself, alone doesn't mean lonely.** "Loving yourself is good for your kids, too," I told Emily [a client]. "When you show them that you'll never lose you, you show them that they're not losing you, either. That you're here now. Then they can live their lives, rather than you worrying about them, and them worrying about you, and everybody worrying, worrying. **To your children, and to yourself, you say, I'm here. I'm showing up for you.' You'll give them—and yourself—what you never had: a healthy mother**"

"**Victimhood is a tempting shield because it suggests that if we make ourselves blameless, our grief will hurt less.** As long as Emily identified as the victim, she could pass all the blame and responsibility for her wellbeing on to her ex-husband. **Victimhood offers a false respite by deferring and delaying growth.** The longer we stay there, the harder it is to leave."

Eger conducts what looks like an IFS session...

"**"You were a child then," I said. "You're an adult now. Go to that precious, one-of-a-kind little girl. Be her mother now. Take her hand and tell her, 'I'm going to take you out of here.'**" Barbara's [another client] eyes were still closed. She swayed side to side. "Hold her hand," I continued. "Walk her to the door, down the front steps, out to the sidewalk. Walk her up the block. Turn the corner. Tell the little girl, 'You're not stuck there anymore.'" [...] "And then take her down to the beach," I said. "Show her how to kick the sand. Tell her, 'I'm here and we're going to be angry. Kick the sand with her. Yell and shout. Then take her home. Not back to the kitchen, but where you live now. [...] "Your mother needs you, too," I said. "She's still standing in that kitchen. Open the

door for her. Tell her it's time for both of you to be free." [...] **Releasing ourselves from victimhood also means releasing others from the roles we've assigned them.**"

"The role of victim is often passed back and forth in relationships and families. But there can't be a victim without a victimizer. When we stay a victim, or put someone else in that role, we reinforce and perpetuate the harm. In focusing on what Audrey hadn't had growing up, I was undermining her survivor strength—her capacity to see any experience as an opportunity for growth. And I was trapping myself in a prison of guilt."

"Marianne's neurologist told her a number of his patients, never skilled artists, suddenly found after a major brain injury that they could draw or paint—and do it remarkably well. **Something about the broken and reconfigured neural pathways allows many survivors to find they're in possession of gifts they never had or knew about before.** What a beautiful reminder that the things that interrupt our lives, that stop us in our tracks, can also be catalysts for the emerging self, tools that show us a new way to be, that endow us with new vision.

An exercise:

"The goal of the **thank-you letter** is not to pretend to like something you didn't like, or to force yourself to be happy about something painful. Acknowledge that what happened wasn't right and that it hurt. And also notice the healing power in shifting your point of view from a powerless victim to who you really are: a survivor, a person of strength.

Chapter 2: NO PROZAC AT AUSCHWITZ

The Prison of Avoidance

"I know how you feel." It's a lie. You can't ever know how someone else feels."

"the opposite of depression is expression. What comes out of you doesn't make you sick; what stays in there does. [...] **the emotions we don't allow ourselves to express or release stay bottled inside, and whatever were holding on to affects our body chemistry and finds expression in our cells and neural circuitry.** In Hungary we say, "Don't inhale your anger to your breast."

"I don't remember ever crying in the camps. I was too occupied with survival. The feelings came later. And when they came, for many, many years I managed to avoid them, to keep running away. But **you can't heal what you don't feel.**"

"I told her [a client] to mentally put Michael [her perpetrator] in a chair, tie him up, beat him. Shout at him. "How could you do this to me?" Get her anger going. Scream it out. She said she was too afraid to do that. **"The fear was**

learned. You had no idea what fear was when you were born. Don't let it take over your life. Love and fear don't go together. Enough. You don't have time to live in fear."

"When we've been victimized, there's a part of our psyche that identifies with the victimizer, and sometimes we adopt that punitive, victimizer stance toward ourselves, denying ourselves the permission to feel good, depriving ourselves of our birthright: joy. That's why I often say that yesterday's victims can easily become today's victimizers. Whatever you practice, you become better at."

You can relate what Eger says above to the critical inner voice that berates you and accuses you of doing something wrong (even though you most likely had not, especially if you were traumatised at a young age). From an attachment perspective, these 'voices' can get out of hand, convincing you that you're a bad person and deserve all that you've gotten ... overwhelming you. One antidote to all this is to learn self-compassion. (NICABM provides more context from an attachment perspective [here](#).)

"I gave her one more freedom exercise. I told her to write down what happened, and then go in the backyard with a shovel and start digging a hole. "It's hot," I said, "and you're perspiring. Keep going till you have a hole three feet deep. And bury that piece of paper. Put the soil back over it and go back inside, ready to be born again and have a new beginning because you've put that part to rest."

Chapter 3: ALL OTHER RELATIONSHIPS WILL END

The Prison of Self-Neglect

"Brian's father abandoned the family when Brian was ten, and he became the man of the house, taking care of his mother, doing everything in his power to make life easier for her, to soothe her pain—and to make sure she wouldn't leave, too. He brought this **caretaker identity into adulthood and kept choosing relationships with needy women. He resented them for the constant sacrifice they demanded, and yet he had difficulty setting healthy boundaries. **He thought that to be loved, he had to be needed.**"**

"When parents are stressed or disappointed or unfulfilled, **their children pick up the tab, carrying the burden into their own lives."**

"if a good report card or good manners earn love, that's not love at all. It's manipulation."

"Our childhoods end when we begin to live in someone else's image of who we are."

"Guilt is in the past, [...] Worry is in the future. **The only thing you can change**

is right here in the present. [...] The only one you can love and accept is you."

"Honey, when you concentrate on what more you can do for your sisters, it isn't healthy. It's not healthy for you. And it's not healthy for them. You cripple them. You make them depend on you. You deprive them of being responsible grown-ups."

"Sometimes we have the need to be needed. We don't feel we're functioning well if we're not rescuing people. But **when you depend on being needed, you're likely to marry an alcoholic.** They're irresponsible, you're responsible. You re-create that pattern."

"She's learning to recognize that the clinching feeling at the top of her gut when she starts to say yes to a request is a signal to stop. and ask herself, "Is this what I want to do? **Will I be resentful if I do this?**"

"We can always make the choice to accommodate, to be flexible. The problem is that many of us rush to fix and adjust out of habit. **We take too much responsibility for others' problems, training them to rely on us instead of on themselves, and paving our own way toward resentment down the road.**"

Chapter 4: ONE BUTT, TWO CHAIRS

The Prison of Secrets

"secrets are harmful because they create and sustain a climate for shame, and **shame is the bottom line of any addiction.** Freedom comes from facing and telling the truth"

Chapter 5: NO ONE REJECTS YOU BUT YOU

The Prison of Guilt and Shame

"**What you pay attention to grows stronger.** Spend a day listening to your self-talk. Is it full of "I should," "I shouldn't," and "yes, but"? Do you tell yourself, "It's my fault," or "I don't deserve it," or "It could have been worse"? Replace these messages of guilt or shame with a daily practice of kind and loving self-talk. As soon as you wake up in the morning, go to the mirror and look at yourself with loving eyes. Say, "I'm powerful. I'm kind. I'm a person of strength." Then kiss yourself on the back of each hand. Smile at yourself in the mirror. Say, "I love you."

Chapter 6: WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

The Prison of Unresolved Grief

"When we have unresolved grief, we often live with overwhelming rage."

"Resolving grief means both to release ourselves from responsibility for all the things that weren't up to us, and to come to terms with the choices we've made that can't be undone. [...] This is the work we get to do in the present: to grieve what happened or didn't happen, to own up to what we did or didn't do, and to choose our response now."

"Today you can say, If I knew then what I know now, I would have done things differently? And that's the end of the guilt."

"If someone you love has died, give yourself thirty minutes every day to honor the person and the loss. [...] Take an imaginary key, unlock your heart, and free your grief. Cry, yell, listen to music that reminds you of your loved one, look at pictures, read old letters. Express and be with your grief, 100 percent. When the thirty minutes have passed, tuck your loved one safely inside your heart and get back to living. "

Chapter 7: NOTHING TO PROVE

The Prison of Rigidity

"If you have something to prove, you're still a prisoner."

"It's important that we give up the need to defend ourselves."

"Don't defend yourself against a crime you never committed. It just becomes a power struggle. The bully throws you a rope, you pick up the other end, and you're both tugging and exhausted. **It takes two to fight. But it takes one to stop."**

"Somehow I was blessed with the insight that the Nazis were more imprisoned than I was. I first understood this the night I danced for [the Nazi doctor, Josef] Mengele. **My physical body was trapped in a death camp, but my spirit was free.** Mengele and the others would always have to reckon with what they'd done."

"If you don't leave the first time, the abuser isn't going to take you seriously. And each instance of abuse will make it harder and harder to leave. The violence will usually get worse the longer you stay. And it will get more difficult to reverse the psychological aspects of the abuse, the things the abuser wants you to believe—that you're nothing without him, that when he hits you, it's your fault."

""How are you maintaining a point of view that isn't serving you anymore?" I asked. [...] "Honey," I told her, **"you can be dead right—and you're still dead. So do you want to be happy, or do you want to be right?"**

""When your body hurts," I told her, "don't punish it, or resent it, or demand

things of it. Say, I'm listening'""

""What ideas do you have for a solution that works for both of us?""

Chapter 8: WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MARRIED TO YOU?

The Prison of Resentment

"The biggest disruptor of intimacy is low-level, chronic anger and irritation."

Compare above with Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Relationships: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

"When we're angry, it's often because there's a gap between our expectations and reality. [...] real prison is our unrealistic expectations."

"a divorce can be an extreme way of continuing to do nothing."

"Maybe they didn't pick us up and say, 'We always wanted a child just like you.'"

Chapter 9: ARE YOU EVOLVING OR REVOLVING?

The Prison of Paralyzing Fear

"One day my clinical supervisor came to me and said, 'Edie, you've got to get a doctorate' I laughed. 'By the time I get a doctorate I'll be fifty,' I said. **"You'll be fifty anyway."** Those are the smartest four words anyone ever said to me."

"Fear uses the most insistent, relentless, provocative words: what if, what if, what if? [...] 'Thank you, fear, for wanting to protect me.' Then say, 'That was then, this is now.' Say it over and over again. You already made it. Here you are. Wrap your arms around yourself and rub your own shoulders. 'Attagirl,' you say. 'Love you.'"

"The prison of fear can become a catalyst for growth and empowerment. To enact this transformation, language is one of our most powerful tools. [...] 'First of all, it's a lie. **I can't means I'm helpless. And unless you're an infant, that simply isn't true.**' When we say **"I can't,"** what we're really saying is **"I won't."** I won't accept it. I won't believe. I won't escape the fear. I won't stop policing and monitoring him. The language of fear is the language of resistance. And if we're resisting, we're working very hard to ensure that we go nowhere. [...] **If you're going to take away something, you'll be more successful if you can replace it with something else.** [...] 'Anytime you start to say I can't, replace it with **"I can."** *I can let go of the past. I can stay in the present. I can love and trust myself.* [...] 'You said you're trying to live in the present,' I said. 'But trying is lying. You're either doing it or you're not.' If you say, 'I'm trying,' you don't actually have to do it. You let yourself off the hook. 'It's time to stop

trying and start doing." When we're on the cusp of taking action, many of us use the phrase "I need to." It sounds like we're identifying goals and setting priorities. [...] "But that's another lie, I told her. "Needs are things without which we can't survive. Breathing, sleeping, eating." We can stop burdening and pressuring ourselves, telling ourselves that something is necessary for our survival when it isn't. And we can stop looking at our choices as obligations. "You don't need to trust your husband," I said. "You want to. And if you want to, you can choose to." When we talk as though we're forced or obligated or incapable, that's how we're going to think, which means that's also how we'll feel, and consequently, how we'll behave. **We become captives to fear: I need to do this, or else; I want to do that, but I can't. To free yourself from the prison, pay attention to your language."**

"I'm all for positive thinking, but it goes nowhere unless it's followed by positive action."

"ask yourself, "Is this my fear? Or someone else's?" If the fear really belongs to your mother or father or grandparent or spouse, you don't have to carry it anymore. Just put it down. Release your hold. Leave it behind."

"You're going to be dead anyway someday, and you'll be dead for a very long time. Why not become curious? Why not see what this life has to offer you?"

Chapter 10: THE NAZI IN YOU

The Prison of Judgement

"We're all victims of victims. How far back do you want to go, searching for the source? It's better to start with yourself."

Chapter 11: IF I SURVIVE TODAY, TOMORROW I WILL BE FREE

The Prison of Hopelessness

"All of it has taught me how much I have, and how to celebrate each precious moment, without waiting for someone else's permission or approval. I am reminded again and again: to choose hope is to choose life. Hope does not guarantee anything about what will happen in the future. The scoliosis I've had since the war has stayed with me. It affects my lung, pushing it closer and closer to my heart. I don't know if I'll have a heart attack, or when I might wake up unable to breathe. But choosing hope affects what gets my attention every day."

"To ask how hope is possible in the face of dire realities is to confuse hope with idealism. Idealism is when you expect that everything in life is going to be fair or good or easy. It's a defense mechanism, just like denial or delusion. Honey, don't cover garlic with chocolate. It doesn't taste good. Likewise, there's no freedom in denying reality, or trying to cloak it in something sweet. Hope isn't a distraction from darkness. It's a confrontation with darkness."

"It's tempting to confuse hope with idealism, but idealism is just another form of denial, a way of evading a true confrontation with suffering. Resiliency and freedom don't come from pretending away our pain. Listen to the way you talk about a hard or hurtful situation. [...] The next time you hear yourself using the language of minimization, delusion, or denial, try replacing the words with: "It hurts, And it's temporary." Remind yourself, "I've survived pain before."

Chapter 12: THERE'S NO FORGIVENESS WITHOUT RAGE

The Prison of Not Forgiving

"I finally asked my therapist to sit on me, to hold me down so I had a force to push against, so I could release a primal scream."

"You have a right to feel rage. It's a human emotion. You are human. When we can't release anger, we're either denying that we were victimized, or denying that we're human. (That's how a perfectionist suffers. Silently!) [...] We sing alone in the car. Why not scream alone? Roll up all the windows, take a giant breath, and when you exhale, give it voice, let it crescendo into the world's longest and loudest scream. When a patient comes to see me, looking rigid or masked, I say, "I feel like screaming today. Shall we scream?" And we do it together. [...] To hear yourself unmasked. To stand up, claim your space, say, "I was victimized, but I'm not a victim. I am me." Anger is a secondary emotion, a defense, armor we put up around the primary feeling underneath. **We burn through anger so we can get to what's underneath: fear or grief.**"

"It took me so many years to work through my anger and grief, to release Mengele and Hitler, to forgive myself for having survived. But in the theater with my daughter, watching one of the darkest moments of my past brought to life on the stage, I knew again what I realized that night in the barracks—that while Mengele had all the power, while day after day he chose with his grotesquely wagging finger who would live and who would die, he was more a prisoner than I was. I was innocent. And free."

"Legitimize your anger, then choose a way to channel and then dissolve it. Scream and yell. Hit a punching bag. Bang the ground with a stick. Break plates on the patio. Get the rage moving, let it out so it doesn't fester and contaminate you. Don't stop until there's nothing left. In a day or a week, do it again."

These notes were collected by psychotherapist and author Emil Barna in December 2025 in his efforts to assist with professional development and further education for himself and those who read them. You can find out more about Emil by visiting www.barnacc.com

"A text without a context is a pretext to a proof text."

—Dr. Don Carson