

8 PRACTICES FOR

STARTING OVER

BY DR. YVETTE ERASMUS



When I was 20, I made a life plan that included swimming with dolphins, living on a tropical island and getting a doctoral degree. Check, check and check. Go me! I didn't map out two failed marriages, financial crises, infidelity and abuse, but — lucky me — I got all that, too. After a particularly devastating betrayal in which I realized I had made major life decisions based on lies and illusions, I started waking up at 3:12am, wracked with worry and fear. Looping images of memories and past events plagued me as I torturously tried to figure out what had happened and where I had gone wrong. Perhaps you have been there, too.

Maybe you've suffered the end of a relationship; maybe you're facing a huge health or financial crisis. Perhaps – like me – you have been betrayed by something that you put your faith into and built your life around: another person, a trusted other, something you believed to be true, but wasn't, your investments and retirement plans, a career?

“Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible in us be found.”

PEMA CHODRON

Whatever's happened, it can be incredibly disorienting when things don't turn out the way that you want them to, especially when you don't see it coming. The rug's been pulled out from under you and you're left reeling.

Internally, everything stops. Your world has shifted on its very axis, and yet the world outside continues on as if everything were normal. This disorientation is one of the most precious gifts this experience can give you: however, you must know how to accept and receive the gift and then use it for transformation.

For me, disorientation has served as an invitation to slow down, grow, cultivate intentions, choose the foundations I want to build my life upon, and creatively change course where needed. An invitation I chose to accept.

I share what I've learned in hopes that you'll find inspiration, insight and innovative ways to navigate with new tools. In times like these, when we have very little control over other people and events, we are called to draw on an inner power: a particular quality of interiority that can be soul-nourishing, grounding and has the power to completely reorient our life and path.

#1: SO, COLLAPSE

Seriously. When your world is rocked by unexpected events and you feel like things are crumbling around you, it is essential to give yourself time to Just Feel It. Let yourself stay in bed if you can. Let yourself sit on the couch, shocked and immobilized for a while. Allow yourself to pull the covers over your head and sob alone in bed when you need to. Sit and stare at a wall or a ceiling and just watch yourself, with no demand that you do anything about it. Like the weather, this will change on its own time. Don't rush it and don't resist it.

Regardless of all the responsibilities you are facing and all the tasks that need to get done, take out your schedule and carve out even one hour here and there for mindful, choiceful Collapse. It might mean that instead of unpacking the dishwasher at the end of a long day, that you give yourself 30 minutes of couch time. You can tell yourself, for 30 minutes I am going to sit on my couch, stare at the ceiling, and do absolutely nothing about anything. I give myself permission to be immobilized, shocked, stunned and speechless by what has happened. And, I give myself permission to get to know this experience fully. Even if it's just for the next 30 minutes.

*“Let everything happen to you:
beauty and terror. Just keep going.
No feeling is final.”*

RAINER MARIA RILKE

ACTION ITEMS

- **Get your schedule and identify pockets of time every day for collapse time.**
Even if you just give yourself 10 minutes in the bathroom between meetings, make it intentional, choiceful, scheduled time and give yourself permission to be entirely unproductive for that time. If you can find larger chunks of time, even better.

#2: SEEK SUPPORT

We cannot transform this alone, and we are not meant to. Let people know what is going on for you, and allow yourself to both ask for and receive support. We are community creatures. We are mammals, social beings who are inherently interdependent on one another: embrace that. My own support community provided me the scaffolding that I needed when I needed to collapse. Knowing there were trusted, loving others just a phone call away helped me navigate the dark moments when everything felt hopeless and I just wanted to check out from everything. Friends who will sit with you on the floor, let you stare into space for hours without any pressure to fix anything or talk, and just be present and witness all you are experiencing are essential. Let them in. If you don't have people like that in your life, seek out a therapist, counselor, coach, helpline, support group, 12-step group: you need community.

*“We are called to be strong companions
and clear mirrors to one another,
to seek those who reflect with compassion
and a keen eye how we are doing,
whether we seem centered or off course.”*

WAYNE MULLER

ACTION ITEMS

- **Make a list of your people: who are your trusted others?** Do you have enough of them? If not, make a plan to reach out for the support you need right now. Is there someone you can call at 2:00am if you need to?
- **If not, make a list of 24-hr crisis line numbers so that they are easily accessible to you.**

#3: WELCOME ALL REACTIONS

Feeling your way through the crisis and allowing it to impact you is one of the things that will help you metabolize and move through it more completely. When you are immobilized, get to know that place. When you are sobbing, allow it. When you are harboring revenge fantasies, enjoy them. When you are bargaining with some higher power, bring out your best negotiator.

Let yourself rage and wail about how unfair and unjust the world is. I know so many people (myself included) who worry that these aren't "enlightened" reactions and apologize for them and try to qualify them and move away from them too quickly. To help with this, as you go through each stage, you may say to yourself, "while this is who I am in this moment, this is not the totality of who I am." Know and trust that your reactions will shift with time and that action can wait until you've processed your impulses more fully. You might also sit with a thought like, "So. This is what "is" right now. Can this be OK?"

“It’s like a mother, when the baby is crying, she picks up the baby and she holds the baby tenderly in her arms. Your pain, your anxiety is your baby. You have to take care of it. You have to go back to yourself, to recognize the suffering in you, embrace the suffering, and you get a relief.”

THICH NHAT HANH

“Asking for help does not mean that we are weak or incompetent. It usually indicates an advanced level of honesty and intelligence.”

ANNE WILSON SCHAEF

Practice nonresistance. Do whatever you need to do to allow yourself to notice and track everything that is happening without judgment. Your subjective experience matters. All the memories, feelings and reactions you are having, matter. Allow yourself to get to know all that is arising within you and to see these internal events as gifts and jewels being presented to you. See them, hear them, witness them and get to know them deeply.

ACTION ITEMS

- **Practice internal mantras, for example:**

“This is what is arising right now, this too can be OK.”

“I’m just watching and noticing all my very human reactions; they are all welcome.”

“I am feeling and thinking these things, but it does not define who I am.”

“This is the weather, but I am the sky.”

- **You can repeat to yourself,** *“This is what is happening right now; this is just happening right now.”*

- **Writing out all the judgments, evaluations, analysis and interpretations as a long bullet list** can help you externalize and separate from the “What Is” experience.

#4: DEFER DECISIONS

As you are going through these stages, remember, it is not time yet for decisions or actions. Give yourself permission to think everything, but do nothing. Got that? Think everything. Do nothing. Just because you think it does not mean that you actually believe or want what you are thinking about.

You may find yourself swinging from revenge fantasies (cuz ya want some empathy and want them to know how it FEELS!), to enthusiasm about all the things you could give yourself permission to do now that you didn't before (cuz, hey, choice and freedom rock!) to begging the universe to change the conditions that you find yourself in (your inner kiddie wants some comfort, safety and familiarity). Watch and wait: allow it all to arise, but remember, this is not the end of your story or the time to make life-changing decisions or bargains. Wait your bad self out.

Revenge fantasies are common – especially if we feel we have been wronged or abandoned by someone else. If you have them, enjoy them (after all, they are simply a way of letting you know that you matter to yourself!) Enjoying the violent, rageful and terrible things you'd like to do and say in your mind does not make you a terrible person and does not mean that you will choose to do any of the horrible things you may be imagining. Your inner warrior just wants you to connect with your empowered protective self. These fantasies are a way of reminding yourself that you matter and of acknowledging the wide range of choices available to you: don't shut them down. Hear them, see them, consider them, witness them. Just don't commit to any of them yet.

“Patience is power. Patience is not an absence of action; rather it is ‘timing.’ It waits on the right time to act, for the right principles and in the right way.”

ANNE WILSON SCHAEF

“Hoping a situation will change keeps you at a distance from your true feelings – sadness, anger, fear. Each of these feelings is best appreciated up close. Feel them deeply, and they will cease to bother you. Hope they’ll go away, and they’ll bother you all day.”

GAY HENDRICKS

You may also start to imagine all the drastic and wonderful opportunities that are suddenly available to you now! Ideas about repainting the whole house, moving to that neighborhood you always secretly wished to live in, buying something you’ve wanted for a while, quitting the job you’ve always hated and roadtripping for the next year may feel compelling and delicious. Allow yourself to get to know all the things you have denied yourself and are now considering giving yourself permission to embrace. Indulge those ideas and enjoy your expanded sense of freedom and choice. But, don’t actually go out and buy that puppy or move to that tropical island! (Trust me, I learned this from hard experience.)

ACTION ITEMS

- **Keep bullet point lists of all the things you could now say and do that you may have inhibited previously.** As things come to you during the day, jot them down, telling yourself, “Yes, I’ll file that away as another option,” knowing that you can revisit this long list with your future wiser self, later.

#5: GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD

You will drive yourself crazy up there. When big events like this come into our lives, they are by nature “unreasonable.” And yet, we try to bring reason to the rescue by asking “Why did this happen?” “Why me?” “Why didn’t I see this coming?” “How could I have prevented this?” “What was wrong with me?” “What is wrong with them/the world?” The longer you stay there, the crazier you will feel. It’s like being in a hall of mirrors. Obsessive thinking and rumination will not provide you with any relief, clarity or understanding. Returning to the scene of the crime to be hurt all over again in your memory is not going to help you process and move through this.

Notice when you are tempted to keep your focus on external factors over which you have no control, and choose to bring your attention back to internal factors over which you do have control. When you find yourself trying to solve and process this experience in your mind-space, do something active to get back into your body and back into the present moment. Healing is an embodied, present moment experience. Breathe.

Working with your fears by staying out of your mind and instead leaning into your bodily sensations, is a key practice. Nikki Myers points out that fear responses fall into two categories: F- Everything And Run, or Face Everything And Recover. You can run away and resist what is happening by escaping into rumination, memory and thought, or you can allow yourself to feel and metabolize this, lean into the discomfort and pain, and recover. As she is known for saying: our issues live in our tissues. If you want to process an experience, it needs to be done by listening to your whole embodied self.

“Having compassion starts and ends with having compassion for all those unwanted parts of ourselves, all those imperfections that we don’t even want to look at.”

PEMA CHODRON

“All the things that truly matter – beauty, love, creativity, joy, inner peace – arise from beyond the mind..”

ECKHART TOLLE

Gently and mindfully, work with and nurture your body. Get more rest and sleep, even if that is difficult right now. If you have no appetite, get some concentrated nutritional shakes to make sure your body is getting what it needs until your appetite comes back. Stay away from toxins like alcohol, drugs and junk food. Take hot epsom salt baths or pressure filled showers. Dance. Move. Get into Yoga Poses like Mountain Pose to feel the energy of the earth grounding and strengthening you. Try a shaking meditation to move emotions through your body. Practice mindful breathing exercises to re-regulate your stress response system.

ACTION ITEMS

- **Use music and movement to shift out of your head, into your body and through emotions.** Do you need an empowering song? A comforting one? An angry rebellious song? A loving and gentle one? Find the one you need, turn up the volume and move with it. Sing your heart out. Embrace the message and the movement. Make a playlist; use it.
- **Download an app to explore autogenic training.**
- **Use breathing practices to stop your mind from time-traveling, and to help you get back into the present moment.** Healing happens in the present moment.
- **Recite the Serenity Prayer:** “God grant me the serenity, to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

#6: GET INTO YOUR HEART

Practice getting back into your body and into the present moment. Drop your attention down into your heart space: place your hand over your heart and gently put pressure on your chest, feeling your warm hand over your heart. Place your other hand on your stomach and bring your awareness to these two centers in your body: your heart and your gut. Your heart generates courage; your gut sources your intuition and survival systems. Bring your attention to them: they hold a wisdom for you that your mind cannot provide in crisis.

Focus on what really motivates you and what deep longings drive you. Are you longing for more safety? Support? Predictability? Empathy? Trust? Health? Well-being? Rest? Understanding? Clarity? The things you are needing are valid and necessary: when you know what you are needing, you have taken the first step towards being able to get those needs met.

*“Be softer with you. You are a breathing thing.
A memory to someone. A home to a life.”*

NAYYIRAH WAHEED

ACTION ITEMS

- **Download the list of universal human needs on my website or at www.cnvc.org;** choose one need each day, and as a daily practice, focus on all the ways in which this need is well met in your life.
- **Contemplate what it has felt like in your life to have this need well met** — either now or in the past.
- **Focus on what happens in your body when you remember times that this need has been well met.**
- **Write down a few different ways that you can keep meeting this need in the present moment.**

#7: GET PERSPECTIVE

It's not personal. Take the 3,000 foot view.

As you go through this experience, imagine all the other people in the world who have had and are having the same experience that you are having: feel a sense of solidarity and empathy with them. You are not alone. You have simply joined a tribe of people who also have experienced this particular suffering, who understand this particular experience and who - like you - are struggling with the choice between becoming hardened and embittered by it, or allowing themselves to soften into transforming the experience.

*“Once we truly know that life is difficult –
once we truly understand and accept it –
then life is no longer difficult..”*

M. SCOTT PECK

Choose to feel it fully and allow this experience to break your heart open even further so that more light can get in and radiate through you. These times, alchemically and archetypally, are crucibles in which you actively choose to bring in more light or shut down into a cave of darkness. Practice the mental discipline of staying away from toxic punitive interpretations: this is not a punishment. You are not being punished for doing something wrong. You are instead being given another opportunity to learn about and connect with being uncompromisingly human.

Crises like these often activate us into re-examining our lives, decisions and choices: What really brings you meaning and purpose? Who are you and what do you identify with? What structures do you build your life around? How is that working for you? Are you living in congruence with your values? Is this crisis a blessing in disguise? Can this be an opportunity for re-invention and course correction? If so, what might that look like?

“All any feeling wants is to be welcomed with tenderness. It wants room to unfold. It wants to relax and tell its story. It wants to dissolve like a thousand writhing snakes that with a flick of kindness become harmless strands of rope.”

GENEEN ROTH

ACTION ITEMS

- **Create a Vision & Inspiration Board:** Find images of people, ideas, practices, places that inspire and comfort you. Identify what you are moving towards. What does your future wise self want you to move towards next? What inner whisperings are increasing in volume within you? What deep knowings are emerging now that the structures of your life have cracked open and allowed them to surface more prominently?
- **Practice Tonglen:** Take a moment right now to check in with yourself. Take a few mindful breaths. Notice how you are feeling in your body. Is there any physical discomfort? How are you feeling emotionally? Think of a time recently when you were experiencing an unpleasant emotion--this could be anything, like sadness, fear, or anger. Hold the feeling in your awareness, and as you breathe in, breathe in the feeling. If it is sadness, for example, breathe in the sadness and imagine you are connecting with all the other people on the planet who are experiencing sadness right now. You breathe in sadness for yourself and all of them with the longing to remove your collective suffering. Then, as you breathe out, breathe out compassion, safety and comfort for yourself and all people who experience sadness. Breathe in the sadness, and breathe out compassion, safety and comfort for all beings.

..... #8: LET YOUR FUTURE WISE SELF LEAD THE WAY

Eventually, as you work through these practices, you will find your center of gravity shifting from an old paradigm to a new one. This earthquake in your life cracked open continents within you and - while painful at the time - this allowed the foundations of your life to shift, and opened up creative new possibilities for you.

You can rebuild your life, your health, your relationships, your finances, your life's work. You are an inherently creative being, and your power lies within you. Be gentle with your younger selves - they need comfort and reassurance. Draw on your Future Wise Self and allow him or her to integrate all that you have been through, to synthesize your experiences, and to start making new choices from an empowered and grounded place within you.

Those decisions I suggested you defer earlier in the process? Revisit them now, from this perspective and with this clarity. Don't be in too much of a hurry to get here. The process has its own timing, and you really are just along for the ride. Take your time; stay present to yourself; cultivate compassion, and as much as you can, Enjoy It.

“We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”

PEMA CHODRON