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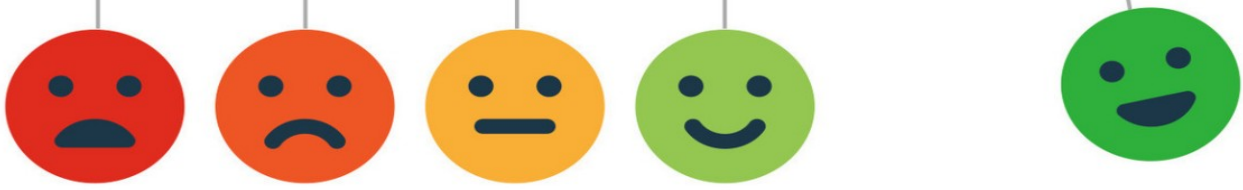

Managing Your Emotions—So They Don't Manage You

Ethan Kross

National bestselling author of **CHATTER**

ALSO BY ETHAN KROSS

Chatter

Shift

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To Bubby, for (inadvertently) guiding me to "ask why,"
Mom, for always being there,
and Lara, Maya, and Dani…for everything else.

Introduction

Why Is a Crooked Letter

As the farmhouse door flew open and the soldiers stormed in, Dora realized her first warm meal in months was actually a trap.

It was winter 1943. Dora Kremin and her boyfriend, Izzy, had been living in the snowy woods outside Eishyshok, in what was then Poland. They were a young couple in their twenties. Before the war their lives had been all about family, community, Friday night meals with music and games: a normal life in a little town. Then the Nazis came, on motorcycles. They told the Jewish townspeople that everything would be normal—that they would all work together, live together. But soon enough, it started: Yellow stars. Forced labor. Houses looted. People rounded up like animals.

One day, in the market square where she used to buy eggs and cheese as a child, Dora was lined up to be shot along with her family, friends, and neighbors she'd known her whole life. Somehow, Izzy convinced one of the Polish guards he recognized from the days before the occupation to let her run away.

And she ran.

Her sister and brother-in-law also made it out of Eishyshok, and the four of them, along with a small group of other Jews, found refuge in a bunker in the forest with a band of partisan resistance fighters, after brief stops at

multiple ghettos. The snow was so deep nobody could go out; they knew the Nazis would see their footprints, find them, and shoot them. They cooked potatoes in the bunker. They survived. Then the word came: *The Nazis are hunting for partisans. They are coming*.

The group abandoned the bunker. They lived in the woods and slept in barns among the horses and cows, slipping in after dark and leaving before dawn so they would not be seen. Some Jews, they'd heard, would pay the local farmers to let them stay for a night or two, to be hidden and fed and have a bed. But the farmers took only gold. Dora and Izzy didn't have any gold.

There was a Polish farmer who had known Dora's family before the war. The ragged band went to him and begged. *It's wintertime,* they said, *we have no place to go*. He agreed to keep them through the winter and dug a *ziemlanka,* a shallow shelter sunk in the ground, usually used to house animals. Most days, he would bring out food. And then one night he came empty-handed and called them out of their hiding hole.

"Let's go to my house," he said. "I have prepared a dinner for you, for all of you."

Freezing, emaciated, and exhausted, they were overjoyed to leave their hiding place and enter the warmth of a real home for the first time in months. The group sat around the table and began to eat together. The warmth, food, and feelings of closeness brought back memories of the large Friday dinners they enjoyed before the war, which had already vanished into some distant past. Although none of their families were wealthy, their lives had been rich with love, kindness, and communal joy. For a few minutes, they felt those lives of abundant connection that had been torn away from them resume.

Then it all happened so fast.

The door opened, men with guns started firing, and before Dora knew it, the room was plunged into darkness. More shots rang out as she scrambled around on the floor, desperate to get away. Later she would learn that the armed men were from an anti-Jewish Polish militia and that one of the Jews

in their group had extinguished the light on purpose, grabbed his gun, and shot the militia's leader. In the rush of adrenaline, the men in Dora's group clambered out the windows while she and her sister crawled under a large oven where the chickens roosted in the winter. They held hands. They held their breath.

Later that night, in the darkness, they slipped out the window. When they finally found their men, they discovered that Izzy's head had been split open by a blow from a rifle butt. His face was covered in blood, but he was alive. The blood, Dora saw, had frozen on his skin.

They crept through the winter fields to another farm, another barn, another potential enemy they'd have to beg for shelter—another desperate risk, to trust someone again. But all they could do was pray that they would not be betrayed—and survive.

The story of Dora and her family's ambush may sound like a scene out of the latest Hollywood World War II blockbuster, but it's not. It's the story of ordinary people dealing with extraordinary circumstances that I knew intimately well.

Dora and Izzy were my grandparents. After the war, they immigrated penniless to Lithuania, where they married and where Dora gave birth to my mother. Then they moved to Israel and finally to Canarsie, in Brooklyn, where I grew up.

My grandmother and I shared a special bond. She lived a few dozen blocks from my childhood home and cared for me after school. I remember how she would sit on her porch and watch me ride my bicycle up and down the sidewalk, warning me not to stray too far. She was tiny—four feet nine on a good day. But she was a force of nature. She wore bright red lipstick every day and came after you with what I called "get away from me" kisses, landing them on both cheeks no matter how hard you tried to dodge them. She did not suffer fools; one of her favorite sayings, if someone crossed her, was *That*

bastard! She had no formal education but was wise in her ability to navigate the world. I suppose, given her past, she had to be.

And there was always food at her house—more than you could ever finish. Perhaps because she had experienced scarcity, she wanted me to experience abundance. When I came through the door after school, she'd have elaborate meals laid out, which she'd press and press me to eat (no surprise I was a portly child). To this day, I haven't eaten a Michelin-starred meal that could compare with the burst of sweetness from the caramelized onions hidden inside her matzo balls, which perfectly countered the saltiness of her homemade chicken broth, or her sweet and tangy pineapple-studded noodle pudding.

She was like a second mom. And she showed, every day, that she loved me. But she was no-nonsense—tough as nails. And she never ever talked about the war. Except for one day a year.

Every year, on a crisp Sunday in the fall, my mom would drag me from my soccer game, still dressed in my cleats and typically muddy uniform, to attend the Holocaust remembrance day gatherings my grandparents held with other survivors. That was where I first heard my grandmother speak of the time she spent living in the woods, going days without food, surviving the winter in a thin dress and coat. It's where I heard her talk about learning that her mother, grandmother, and younger sister had been massacred in a ditch off the town square, and the moment she realized that her father's rushed farewell from the home where they were hiding would be the last words she ever heard from him.

Sitting in the hot synagogue where the gatherings took place, on stiff wooden benches I was convinced were designed by Jewish law to produce discomfort, I'd imagine how I would feel if it were me: the terror of my unknown fate, the anxiety of being hunted, the boiling anger over being betrayed, the unimaginable grief over lost loved ones.

Not exactly how a child hopes to wrap up the weekend after playing soccer with his friends.

But the thing that truly astonished me were my grandmother's tears. Aside from that day, I never saw her cry or express sadness. But one day each year, all the emotion came spilling out. And as the story came out, so did the tears. My grandparents sobbed, even wailed. These were people I normally knew to be pillars of stability, which made this display of raw emotion even more jarring.

Hearing my grandparents' stories filled me with questions: How were they able to endure atrocities and survive to have a normal, happy life, when so many others hadn't? How did they cope with the trauma of what had happened to them? And why did they keep all these emotions bottled up, all year long, except on this *one* day?

One night over dinner when I was in middle school, I finally blurted out my pent-up curiosity.

"Bubby," I said, using the tender Yiddish name for grandmother. "Why don't you ever talk to me about what happened during the war?"

My grandmother met my question with a long silence. An unusual stillness descended on the kitchen while I stared at her over the table awaiting a response. Finally, she answered. "E-tan," she said, unable to pronounce my name properly with her heavy Eastern European accent. "Darling, don't ask 'why.' "

It was a variation on what she said anytime I pestered her with questions about the war. "Why is a crooked letter" was one of her favorite rejoinders.

My grandmother barely spoke English, and yet she'd somehow learned this peculiar bit of idiom and made it her personal mantra. I understood what she meant: Sometimes there are no answers, and searching for them only creates suffering. "Why" is just a source of pain. Leave it alone, finish your homework, ride your bike with your friends. Cherish the life you have.

But my questions only multiplied. As I grew up, I became an observer of emotion. I began to question not just my grandparents' experiences

struggling with their emotions but other people's more common experiences grappling with the emotional obstacles they faced, including my own.

Why did my dad, normally so patient and empathic, become a raging lunatic on the roads of New York City (to the enormous fear and embarrassment of his son riding in the back seat)? Was his obsession with transcendental meditation a tool he happened on to provide an antidote to the uncontrollability of his temper while driving?

Why did my friend Amy keep focusing—over and over and over—on whether she'd get into her top college choice if it only made her more upset? And why did she think having the same conversation with me about her anxiety every time we talked would help?

Why was I unflappable on the soccer field but overcome with stomach pains before asking girls out on dates in high school, dependent on my dad and friends for pep talks to help me muster the nerve to dial their numbers?

In college, I watched charismatic close friends who were star students in high school resort to alcohol and drugs to manage feeling like impostors during their freshman year. I witnessed my atheist relative surrender to religion to cope with his overwhelming grief at the loss of his wife.

It seemed as if we were all just stumbling along, occasionally finding an accidental or Band-Aid solution to help us manage our emotional lives. Sometimes our improvised tools helped. Sometimes they made things worse. It seemed so haphazard, isolating, and inefficient.

What does a person do when faced with questions like these? My grandmother's advice all those years ago was simple: Stay away. *Don't* ask why.

Fast-forward thirty-five years. I'm now a professor at the University of Michigan, where I founded and direct the Emotion and Self-Control Laboratory, a lab that specializes in asking "why" questions about emotions.

I can only imagine my grandmother shaking her head with amused exasperation.

Until relatively recently, the scientific establishment took the same attitude toward emotion that my grandmother once had: Mainstream

researchers have long considered feelings, moods, and other emotional processes a confounding black box that was impossible to measure, and generally not worthy of "serious" study. But during the years since I first became interested in understanding people's struggles with emotion, the field of psychology underwent tectonic shifts. The territory of emotion, once marginalized and under-studied, has evolved into a vibrant area of research that draws scientists from multiple disciplines to shed light on many of the same questions about emotions that I found myself asking as a kid. We now possess a vastly improved understanding of the science of emotions—a science that teaches us about what emotions are, why we have them, and, most important from my perspective, how we can manage them effectively.

Speaking to these vast, universal, and timeless issues is the purpose of this book. Because as long as humans have walked this planet, we've struggled—mightily—with our emotions. Early human writing samples attest to this: three-thousand-year-old clay tablets discovered in present-day Syria and Iraq describe the pain associated with emotional states such as anxiety, depression, and heartbreak. Many of the tools we've discovered to deal with our emotional struggles haven't exactly stood the test of time. In fact, some of them are downright chilling to contemplate.

In the mid 1860s, an American diplomat traveling in Peru came across a remarkable artifact. Ephraim George Squier—also an archaeologist—paid a visit to a socialite who collected ancient artifacts. She welcomed Squier into her home and allowed him to inspect her Incan treasures. After admiring the myriad stone figures, sculptures, and other items she had accumulated, he noticed a peculiar specimen: a skull fragment that had been unearthed from an Incan cemetery.

Ancient skulls are common archaeological finds, but this was no ordinary relic. A nearly symmetrical half-inch square with clean edges had been carved out of the frontal bone, the area of the skull that sits above the

eyes and encases the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain that enables us to plan, manage our lives, and reason logically. Plenty of ancient skulls had, of course, been unearthed with damage, but usually that breakage was irregularly shaped and most likely the consequence of a traumatic event or prolonged exposure to the elements. The four surgically precise incisions on this Incan skull told a different story.

Squier sent the skull across the Atlantic to be examined by the famous French surgeon Dr. Paul Broca, one of the world's foremost experts on ancient human skulls. After inspecting the cranium, Broca concluded that the square-shaped hole represented clear evidence of a surgical intervention that predated the European conquest of the region in the sixteenth century and was performed on the deceased person *while they were still alive*.

The hole carved into the Incan skull resulted from a procedure that is now widely considered one of the first surgical techniques developed in human history: *trepanation,* or the creation of holes in people's skulls. That our distant ancestors were capable of carefully trepanning people's skulls is remarkable. But even more incredible is one of the reasons *why* they are believed to have used this intervention: to help people manage their *emotions*.

Consider that for a moment: One of the earliest forms of surgery in the history of medicine was used to help people regulate their feelings.

It is impossible to know exactly which emotional maladies warranted receiving a hole in the head thousands of years ago. Historians suspect the technique was likely used to help people manage extreme cases of depression, mania, and other conditions characterized by emotion dysregulation. Regardless, what we can say for certain is that carving a hole in a person's head to provide them with emotional relief was *not* a great idea. But when you look at the history of how our species has dealt with emotions since those early days of head carving, you see that the struggle has always been real. And for as long as we've been grappling with our emotions, we've been trying to find tools to regulate them.

Leeches.

Exorcisms.

Witch burnings.

We've come up with remarkably creative (and cruel) measures to control our emotions. In the seventeenth century, pressing a burning iron rod to the skull was a recommended solution for managing heartbreak, while centuries later mineral water was pedaled as a stress tonic. And as shocking as the treatment may seem to us today, the spirit of trepanation lived on until only a few decades ago in the form of the lobotomy, in which a surgeon would flip open the eyelid, slip an ice-pick-shaped instrument through a person's eye socket, and poke around in their frontal cortex to sever key neural connections. In fact, António Egas Moniz, a Portuguese neurologist, shared the Nobel Prize in 1949 for developing the procedure to treat extreme emotional states. The structure of DNA, the discovery of insulin, the development of MRI technology—Moniz's procedure reached the same level of distinction as these extraordinary discoveries. We human beings have considered emotions so perplexing—so destructive—that we have resorted to carving holes in our heads, ingesting heavy metals, and disabling parts of our brains just to get some relief.

And—like our ancient forebears—we remain in trouble in the emotion department.

College campuses are overrun with students who require extra support to help with their emotions. Britain and Japan have ministers of loneliness, while the U.S. surgeon general has made combating social isolation a national crusade. Corporations invest millions in programs to address burnout. Even "the Boss" Bruce Springsteen himself has talked about his struggles with depression. We install apps on our phones to keep our stress levels in check. We spend money we don't have in a wellness industry that promises to make us just a little bit happier. A 2020 report found that approximately one in eight adults in America took an antidepressant every day to manage their emotions. A medication that, although genuinely helpful for many people, is far from a panacea.

Interventions have undoubtedly improved since the days of leeches and lobotomies. Our methods have become much subtler—and less damaging. Advances in talk therapy, innovations in psychopharmacology, and the blending of ancient and modern contemplative traditions have expanded our access to relief from emotional distress. And yet despite all these efforts, the statistics on mental health and well-being are going in the wrong direction and keep getting worse. More than half a billion people worldwide suffer from some form of depression and anxiety, afflictions that cost the global economy a staggering one trillion dollars a year.

One *trillion* dollars.

Patchwork solutions reside in myriad places, from the bowels of the internet to the dusty shelves of the library. As a result, many of us resort to cobbling together coping tactics that range from kind of effective to actually harmful without really understanding how they all fit together to help us (or not). A little meditation here, a cold plunge there, some cognitive restructuring, maybe a cocktail or five to smooth things out.

Meanwhile, people who *are* good at managing their emotions are less lonely, maintain more fulfilling social relationships, and are more satisfied with their lives. They experience fewer financial hardships, commit less crimes, and perform better at school and work. And they're physically healthier as well: they move faster, look more youthful in photographs, biologically age less quickly, and live longer. Simply put, the ability to control your emotions isn't just about avoiding the dark side of life; it's about enriching the positive, generative, and rewarding dimensions of existence as well.

The question we now face is the same one that likely inspired our ancestors to drill holes in their heads when they were struggling: What do we do about all these feelings?

In 2021, I published my first book, *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It*. Its central question: Why do our attempts to work through our negative feelings often backfire, leading us to feel worse, and what does science teach us about how to harness our capacity for self-reflection?

Immediately after publishing the book, I set off on an extended book tour that lasted about two years. After events, people would come up to me wanting to talk. They were grateful for the book and had feedback about how it helped them, which was wonderful to hear. But they had questions—lots of them—about the broader terrain of emotions and how to manage them:

Should I always be in the moment?

Can you really control emotions?

Why do I struggle to do the things I know I should do in the heat of the moment?

It was as though I had just taught them about heart disease, which was great, but they also needed help dealing with inflammation, diabetes, and cancer.

People talked about having parents and bosses who brushed their feelings aside. They struggled to define what an emotion was and asked me why they never learned how to manage them growing up. I am not exaggerating when I say that some people would come up to me with these questions in tears. And it was *everybody:* elite athletes, CEOs, parents of teenagers, special forces operators, you name it.

What became clear to me during those moments was how curious people were about their emotional lives and how motivated they were to manage them. Which is why I decided to write this book. *To provide you with a blueprint for understanding your emotions—what they are, why they matter, and how to harness them.*

Our emotions, both the positive and the negative ones, are tools we use to navigate the world. They influence who we fall in love with and who we hate. They motivate us to stay longer hours at work to realize our dreams and rein in our aspirations when they no longer serve us. They can fill our lives with health and vitality or sap our energy when we lose sight of what matters. And they are often the difference maker when it comes to sustaining close bonds with others or becoming mired in relationships fraught with conflict. And yet, for all their profound impact on our lives, few of us receive a science-based guide for how to turn the volume on our emotions up or down, or how to transition gracefully from one emotional state into another.

Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed a scientific renaissance in our understanding of these mechanics of emotions—the psychological and neural "nuts and bolts" that explain how emotions work—and an explosion of new methods to measure and test those mechanics. Neuroscience techniques allow us to visualize where and how quickly different brain networks become activated when people experience and control their emotions. Smartphones and wearables enable us to observe people's emotional responses unfold organically in real time as they navigate the world. Internet technologies permit us to run experiments on vast numbers of people scattered across the globe and gather unprecedented amounts of data.

These innovations, combined with our more traditional methods of experimentation, have transformed our way of thinking about emotions. We've learned, for example, that the key to emotional salvation doesn't always involve living in the present, and that far from being toxic, negative emotions can sometimes help us in surprising ways.

And perhaps most important, we've discovered that there are *no one-size-fits-all solutions* to our emotional problems. Would you ever take your vehicle to the mechanic and expect them to fix it with one tool? Of course not! Cars are complex, dynamic machines that require different tools to manage different problems. The same concept applies to us. Our emotional needs change from situation to situation, person to person, and certainly day