

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD*

JENNIE ALLEN

UNTANGLE  
YOUR  
EMOTIONS



**NAMING WHAT YOU  
FEEL AND KNOWING  
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

BOOKS BY JENNIE ALLEN

Nonfiction

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# UNTANGLE YOUR EMOTIONS

NAMING WHAT YOU FEEL AND  
KNOWING WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

jennie allen



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Two years ago, I found my way to a  
small group committed to living wholeheartedly.  
They helped me find my feelings again.

Thanks for never leaving the room, Jess, Linds,  
James, Mel, Annie, Toni, and Dr. C.  
These words were written, lived, and felt deeply  
because of Jesus through you in my life.

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put  
within you. And I will remove the heart of stone  
from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

—Ezekiel 36:26

God, we want our hearts to be whole, living,  
beating, feeling, full, connected to You  
and to one another. Help.

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PART ONE

**we're  
a bit of  
a mess**

# 1

## WHERE DID *THAT* COME FROM?

This past year, our oldest daughter, Kate, got married, and truly, everything about that day was dreamy: The weather was gorgeous, the venue was idyllic, and everywhere I turned I saw faces belonging to our most beloved people. It was spectacular, every bit of it. My husband, Zac, and I love our son-in-law, Charlie, and we approve wholeheartedly of this match. So much expectation. So much gratitude. So much *joy*.

And then, post-wedding, my heart was pretty quickly wrecked.

For all the good that a child's wedding brings, there is bad that nobody warns you about. Because the moment Kate left our nuclear family—the one made up of Zac and me and her brothers and sister—she and Charlie became their own little family of two.

The *audacity*.

It gets worse.

Kate and Charlie started telling Zac and me about ridiculous dreams they were dreaming, like most people in their twenties, using words like *adventure* and *travel* and *fun*—all words I said to my mom and dad what feels like not so long ago. Over dinner one

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night, my daughter had the dang nerve to look at her father and me and with all the casualness in the world and say some stupid sentence that included a whole bunch of words I didn't really hear and three phrases I totally did: "out of the state" . . . "maybe out of the country" . . . "not forever, of course, but for a few years."

Wait. *What?*

A season? Of adventure?

A season of adventure apart from me?

The walls of the room in which we were eating began closing in. My chest, which moments before had felt rightsized for my body, was now two sizes too small for my heart to take a beat. My airways constricted. What fresh hell had I tumbled headlong into? My reaction was not rational, I knew. I realized it in my head, but something bigger than knowing the right answers was happening to me.

I played it cool. I pasted a grin onto my face. I held eye contact with my child—*Nice and steady, Jennie. That's it, that's it*—and I focused on inhaling calmly. This wasn't about me, and I knew it. Equally true: *This was absolutely all about me.*

Thankfully, I didn't erupt that night. I didn't fall apart in waves of tears. I didn't faint or fume or fall apart. I made it through in one piece. But the following week, and the week after that and the week after that, in casual conversations with Kate, the subject kept coming up. And again, my chest and airways told me that this wasn't nothing. No, no: This, I knew, was a *thing*.

Cognitively, I understood that I wanted Kate and Charlie to go and create and live their own beautiful story, whatever that meant. So why couldn't my body and heart catch up?

## CAN'T STOP THE FEELING

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever had a disproportionate emotional response to a situation that should not have affected you in such a dramatic way?

Let me ask you one more: Have you ever stopped to think about what the reason for that response could be?

There are always things beneath the things. We are not simple creatures. Even those of us determined to live steady, unemotionally charged lives are shaped by a million small moments that stay with us. Those moments shape who we are and how we think and how we react—and, yes, how we feel—in a given moment to a given circumstance.

Among the many things I've been learning and want to share with you in the pages to come is that those revved-up reactions tell a story—a story about something we've lived. They point to a deep-seated something that has gone unaddressed in our heart.

We experience something impactful. We react to that thing by stuffing our feelings or minimizing our feelings or ignoring how we feel altogether. Then something else comes our way, something that's not even that big of a deal, and we lose it. We unload on a loved one. We catastrophize. We ugly cry, heaving until we can barely breathe.

And then we regret what we've done.

Why did we freak out?

Why did we demean our spouse?

Why did we shame our kid or yell at our roommate?

Why did we make that insane assumption and blame and threaten and walk right out the door, slamming it behind us as we

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left?

What was that all about? What was underneath it all?

Short answer: a *lot*, as the science and the Bible will show us.

Somewhere along the way, maybe from things I heard at church or just from growing up, I learned I wasn't supposed to be sad or angry or scared. I was supposed to be okay, so I needed you to be okay too. Or maybe it's just because I hate the feeling of being out of control and I believed these feelings were too scary and sitting in the hard felt . . . too hard.

Every time I experience sadness, fear, anger—emotions I've been conditioned to not want to feel—my brain immediately moves to fight off the feeling like it's a virus. My brain attacks the feeling, judges it, condemns it, and tells me why I shouldn't feel it at all. It tells me that it is all going to be okay. It barks out all these orders about what I need to do so that I can finally stop feeling the feeling.

Worse still, sometimes when you share with me your sadness, fear, or anger, I do the same stupid thing to you.

I'm sorry.

It's wrong, and I'm sorry. **Your feelings, my feelings, are not evil things that need to be beat back.**

Feelings can't be beat back, by the way. Even if you're the most effective stuffer ever to live, the very best at stuffing feelings way down deep, so far down you believe they can never be found, I'm here to tell you those feelings don't go quietly. The people who know you know that they're there. If you are honest, you know they're there too.

That hint of rage you felt toward your dad, the fear of rejection you felt with your family, the striving that has exhausted you at school or work, the jealousy that creeps in whenever you are at

that one friend's house, the bitterness that flickers when you talk about why you don't yet have kids, the despair you feel in your gut every time you think of the person you love buried underground—I know you think you packed all those things safely away in a box so that you won't have to see them again.

But inevitably they pop out at unexpected times, like over a lovely dinner when your daughter is just dreaming beautiful dreams.

Whatever the triggering situation, at some point the next day or the next week or sometime even later than that, you look back on the catalyst—and on your response—thinking, *Why on earth did I say (or do) that?*

You wonder, *How on earth did those feelings sneak up on me?* You wonder why they didn't play fair.

The truth of the matter? They *were* playing fair.

Or playing *predictably*, anyway.

Because those feelings are tangled up with something very real in your past or present, something that absolutely *is* a big deal to you, whether or not you're ready to admit it.

Feelings can't be beat back.

They can't be ignored or dismissed.

They are trying to tell us something.

## THE FEAR BEHIND THE FEAR

I wanted to show up better for Kate, so in that pursuit, I shot straight with my counselor about what was happening in my heart and body every time the subject of my daughter leaving

came up. He asked, "Jennie, when did you first experience the feeling you feel every time Kate talks about moving away?"

My mind flashed to a scene. Have you ever had this happen? I wasn't trying to think of this particular memory, but in one millisecond, there it was, demanding to be seen.

I was standing in the long, cold hospital corridor just outside my husband's room, silently begging God to spare his life, despite some pretty grave reports. "This isn't human," the doctor had said to me after reviewing Zac's blood-pressure results. "Humans can't sustain life with blood pressure this ridiculously high." My husband had suffered a small stroke and was unable to say the right words.

Although eight highly trained, highly pedigreed doctors had gathered around Zac, nobody could determine why his blood pressure continued soaring.

"Please pray"—that's the text I was sending to everyone who cared about us, as I paced those sterile halls.

*Please pray.*

*Please pray.*

*Please pray.*

Weirdly, I held it together emotionally while Zac lay in that hospital bed. Have you ever heard the theory that the reason we go into something of a state of shock whenever crisis hits is so we don't utterly and completely melt down?<sup>1</sup> It's like our brains or our bodies or a combination of our brains and our bodies looks at our situation and mutters, "Listen, if we don't all but shut her down, she'll never get out of this alive."

For the days when Zac was stuck inside a hospital, my mind was clear. My memory was sharp. My reflexes were quick. And, miraculously, I didn't crumble under my fears.

But there's a second part to that theory about the protective shock that covers us when crisis initially hits: After about forty-eight hours, that covering disappears. I can vouch for this part of the theory, because on day three, just as Zac was coming home, I completely lost my cool.

Zac's doctors had discharged him not because he had recovered but because, except for a few meds, there was nothing they could do. His blood pressure wasn't yet even close to being within the normal range, but it would take time, they said, and lots of rest. "He's a walking heart attack," one of the doctors had stated with no hint of compassion. "He's got to rest until this BP goes down."

Zac knew this.

I knew this.

Still, we couldn't relax.

How is someone supposed to be *calm* after being given such stressful news?

*Rest.*

*Relax.*

*Stay calm.*

He'd try and try again.

For my part, I felt increasingly consumed by anxiety.

*He can't rest.*

*He can't relax.*

*He can't stay calm.*

I'd lie in bed every night beside my husband, carefully waking nearly every hour so I could lay a hand on his chest, check for a steady heartbeat and the rising of his breath, and exhale relief



each time I felt them.

That first hospital stay led to several others, all connected by a sad strand of doctor appointments where Zac was tested, assessed, cautioned, counseled, and medicated further.

"I'm fine," Zac would insist whenever he was asked, even though clearly he wasn't fine.

At some point in this agonizing process, my husband looked at me as if it was finally hitting him and said, "This is pretty serious, I guess."

*Um, YES.*

*You think?*

Meanwhile, despite my best attempts to block fear out, it was staking its claim on me.

*He's going to stress himself out.*

*He's going to stress himself out and have a heart attack.*

*He's going to stress himself out and have a heart attack and leave me all alone.*

And there it was: I wasn't afraid simply of Zac's medical condition. I was afraid of losing my best friend. Losing the life I knew. Losing the caretaker of all of us.

I was afraid of being left . . . *alone*.

**MY RESPONSE TO** my counselor's question—*When did you first experience this feeling?*—was helping me understand that without my being aware of the connection, every time Kate talked about moving away, about leaving me, my brain or heart or soul or whichever part of me holds my feelings was subconsciously

zooming back to that first hospital stay and the weeks that followed it, to the time when I was just *sure* I was losing Zac.

Because of my daughter's for-a-season adventures, I'd be abandoned all over again. Something deep inside me believed that not only was I destined to lose Zac very soon, but I would now lose Kate soon too. And Charlie, my new son-in-law. And probably our other three kids—Conner, Caroline, and Cooper—as well. If adulthood meant that one kid left, wouldn't they all?

My subconscious imagination was going all those places as I sat across from Kate at a simple, fun dinner, so I couldn't breathe.

Yep, everyone would leave me.

I'd live the rest of my life alone.

Dramatic, I know. If I had been conscious of it at the time, I would have rationally decided not to spiral and assured myself that I wasn't losing everyone. But emotions often don't play rationally. They show up in a blaze of glory, asking for something.

I was tangled up in knots by a fear I hadn't fully acknowledged and didn't totally understand.

The question was, what was I supposed to do with this feeling?

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