

Let-Go for Health Sake

Brendan Lloyd PhD, January 2023, r:2.0

We are all somewhat capable of holding-on, for example, to a grievance or a desire. The need to let-go comes out of the suffering associated with holding-on. When letting-go is the issue it is usually because we have made the connection between the holding-on and the suffering.

When we find ourselves holding-on there is always a reason. For example, if we have a grievance then we need accountability and justice to achieve closure. We will hold onto desires because we have hope; and hope is a good thing, right.

It seems there is a struggle between letting-go and holding-on. It seems like a tug-of-war between two competing forces. Letting-go can be seen as a win-lose situation. For example, letting-go might be seen as giving up.

Does letting-go need to be about giving up? Do you ever need to give up on the need for justice? Do you even need to give up on a dream? What you can do without, of course, is the suffering in the meantime.

Is it possible then to live with an unresolved grievance without the suffering? Is it possible to live with an unrequited desire without the suffering? Can we have no closure and no suffering at the same time?

Sense of proportion

Can you eliminate the suffering and still have the grievance or desire? It doesn't seem right. How can you have a grievance with nothing to vent about? How can you have a desire without the agony of absence?

Also, letting-go seems so logical. It's okay to be logical but what if it doesn't feel right? Am I losing something by being so logical in my life? Should I live my life by how I feel or

should I examine all my potential moves with logic?

A sense of proportion could mean that you have both. The emotionality of the grievance or desire could well serve a purpose. These emotions will provide the motivation necessary to take up the challenges and to persevere and to exhaust all possibilities. But really, do you want to break yourself in the process? Do you think that you might want to live another day to fight the other battles of life?

There is purpose in the reason and logic. Reason and logic are not the party poopers. Sure, they are the brakes on your car; so when you're speeding head-on toward the brick wall, you can prevent your death if you like by applying the brakes.

The *brakes analogy* can go further. What if you found an exciting object called a *car*? What if you discovered that you can get in it and travel very quickly over vast distances? There's the accelerator-pedal that makes you go. But hang on a second, what's this other pedal on the floor? It's in the way. Its only purpose is to slow you down. "*Stuff that...*", so you rip it out and chuck it out the window. This is the defenestration of the brake pedal.

We need both. We need emotion to make life interesting and we need logic to remain alive. This is the sense of proportion. Do you even have a sense for the need to balance emotion and reason? Or more to the point, do you have a sense that you actually need to temper your passion with reason? When the passion is the pain it is logical to reduce the pain.

Is the suffering real?

Yes it's real. What you feel is real. If you feel something then there is something to feel.

You really do feel suffering. It certainly isn't all in your mind. It's mainly in your body.

When we talk about Suffering we're talking about the total picture. The trouble with the total picture is that it seems overwhelming and impossible to manage. It seems too big to get around. We need to break it down into manageable parts. By doing so it becomes possible to map out the path ahead, to let go and change the way you feel.

The total picture for suffering consists of mind and body functions. In simple terms your mind consists of cognitive processes and your body consists of physical processes. They are not all the same thing.

Your mental processes will read meanings and draw conclusions. Your physical processes will respond with the ebbing and flowing of adrenaline and cortisol. You will feel the adrenaline and cortisol.

The suffering part of Suffering, the part you feel in your body, is fully explained as *sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol*. In other words, if you elevate your adrenaline and cortisol levels in your body, and for some reason you maintain the elevated levels, you will literally experience suffering; you will suffer. You will feel terrible. Quite likely you'll report feeling ill. Most likely you'll report feeling anxious depressed.

We can blame adrenaline for that anxious, jittery, panicky, agitated, dreaded nervousness. The adrenaline might also come with nausea, the knot in the gut, the tightness in the chest.

We can blame the cortisol for that depressed, alienated, withdrawn, fatigued, brain fog effect. With sustained elevated cortisol you might feel like hiding. You might say that you're just not motivated any more.

We can blame the grievance or desire for the elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol. Whilst the grievance or desire is unresolved the adrenaline and cortisol production will continue. So, yes, the suffering is real. There is nothing theoretical about adrenaline and

cortisol. The adrenaline is real and the cortisol is real. It's all real and you really do feel it.

Is the grievance/desire real?

Let's assume that you have a grievance. Or let's assume that you have a desire. Is it real? Think about your own grievance or desire, is it real?

If you have a grievance or a desire then at least one of these two statements will broadly apply to you.

For a grievance the statement is, '*They, he, she or it has done me wrong*'.

For a desire the statement is, '*I cannot be happy until it actually happens*'.

Fill in your own details for either one of the statements above as it applies to you. In the case of a grievance no doubt you can state clearly how you were wronged. Likewise with a desire you'd be able to say what it would mean to you to realise your dream. You'd just say it the way it is.

If you are able to relate to at least one of the statements above then you do have a grievance or desire. If someone or something did you wrong and you're not able to overlook the fact, then you have a real grievance. Likewise if you want something and you can't get it then you have a real desire. That is all there is to it.

Probably in your mind you'd be able to imagine yourself in the future where the grievance is resolved or the desire is realised. You'd probably be able to contrast how you feel now, to how you'd feel then.

Yes, your grievance or desire is real. We do not question that as a fact. For your grievance your sense of injustice will prevail. For your desire your hope will persist. You are who you are. You know where you stand on the issue. You know what you know. Why should you change even if you could?

But something must change

Ideally all you'd need to do is remove the suffering from the equation. Since it's not

really possible to resolve the grievance or achieve the desire, then remove the suffering part. In other words, the grievance or desire won't go away anyway so why not remove the suffering part?

Why not indeed? Does the suffering fulfil some function? Here's a curly question. Do you need the suffering? Maybe you do, at least at some point in time. For example, do you need the suffering to prove your point? Would your grievance be a grievance if you didn't suffer? Would your desire disappear if you no longer suffered?

Do you need to suffer because it validates your point of view? The suffering could be seen as honouring the grievance or desire. Or at least the suffering could be seen as the evidence of the grievance or desire. From this point of view, letting-go of the suffering is not an option until you reach breaking point on the suffering.

If you remove the suffering in relationship to your grievance or desire then what have you got? What's left over? What you'd still have, presumably, is the grievance or desire but without the suffering.

The question to ask is do you need to continue to suffer because there is no justice for your grievance? Or, do you need to continue to suffer because you can't just go out and fulfil your dream? Even if you're not suffering, justice will still be the issue for your grievance. Even if you're not suffering, your dream will still be your desire.

The other way to ask the question is how does your suffering help you to achieve justice? Or, how does your suffering help you to achieve your dream?

We don't question your outrage. We don't question your dreams. We don't need to challenge your point of view. But yet something must change. Something needs to happen to bring about a change.

So, how will this change occur? Will your suffering disappear by magic? Probably it will not. Will your suffering disappear due to good

luck? Maybe, but don't hold your breath waiting. But the change to how you feel **will** occur with a sense of proportion and a bit of effort based on a good understanding of how suffering works.

Suffering as a process

Suffering is not beyond our general understanding. It's not just one big blob that descends upon us. It has its mind body components and the ways in which the components relate.

The suffering part, the way you feel, is to do with the *sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol*. The important word in the previous sentence is *sustained*. Think about what the word "sustained" means. It means that it *continues without stopping*.

Under normal conditions, where your adrenaline and cortisol comes and goes, ebbs and flows, there would be no issue with suffering as an ongoing concern. If on the other hand you end up with sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol, regardless of why, you will suffer. You will suffer the non-specific symptoms that describe anxiety depression.

Here we have an important point. Take any person with a clear mind. In other words, find someone with no unresolved psychological issues. Introduce adrenaline and cortisol into this person's diet somehow to cause sustained elevated levels. Over time this person will eventually report experiencing anxiety depression. The experience of anxiety depression without any psychological issues is entirely possible.ⁱ For example, drug companies get their lab rats depressed by feeding them cortisol.

Adrenaline and cortisol relate. The cortisol will follow the adrenaline. The cortisol will remain elevated if the adrenaline remains elevated. Adrenaline will dissipate very quickly if you give it half a chance and the cortisol will slowly follow behind. Adrenaline is volatile in the sense that it is quick in and quick out. The cortisol is slow to come and go.

Now here is an interesting point. If the adrenaline is so quick to uptake and so quick to go away, then how do we end up with *sustained* elevated levels of adrenaline?

In other words, the initial release of adrenaline is not the issue. The continued elevated adrenaline is the issue. So, what keeps the adrenaline elevated? What sustains the elevated adrenaline? This is a very important question.

We have elevated levels when we activate the emergency button (sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system). To have sustained elevated levels you require continuous repeated activation of the emergency button.

Picture your emergency button. Imagine it is big and red. Imagine that there is something that hits it once. Then the same thing just continues to hit it, repeatedly. The hitting will stop when the emergency is resolved.

How does one achieve repeated activations of the emergency button? To begin with this is something that happens in your mind. The signal from your mind activates the emergency button. For example, the emergency button will always be activated by a threat. Threats are guaranteed emergencies.

Think of a threatening situation. You see the bus just in time so you jump out of its way. From a purely mental point of view in a flash, you need to see the bus, you need to perceive the meaning of the situation, you need to draw a conclusion, and then you need to activate the emergency button. You then have the initial release of adrenaline in your body. If cortisol is to be involved it will begin to elevate in your body about 15 minutes later.

You jump out of the way of the bus. You dust yourself off. You go about your business. If this is the scenario, then we are looking at the adrenaline and cortisol ebbing and flowing. There is no stress here. There is no anxiety depression in this picture. There is no suffering in this scenario.

With a grievance or desire the bus does not just drive away and disappear around the corner. There is instead a continuous threat to draw your attention. With a grievance or desire there is a metaphorical bus heading toward you continuously, relentlessly, and always there coming at you. Or at least that's the way it feels.

The thing about our emergency button is that it will be triggered by *actual* threats or *apparent* threats. A bus coming at you is an actual threat. Thinking about and re-creating or imagining the bus coming at you will create an apparent threat. Your body will respond to an apparent threat in pretty much the same way as it responds to an actual threat.

In other words, if your attention is focused on the grievance or the desire, then there will be continued whacks on the emergency button. This is the holding-on part. The holding-on is to *hold your attention* on the ongoing story in the head-chatter.

We can look at suffering as a two-stage event.

Firstly there is the initial triggering event. This is the anytime anywhere anything trigger. All you need is something that reminds you of the grievance or desire. In other words, something draws your attention to the grievance or desire. The triggering-event will initiate elevated levels of adrenaline.

Secondly there is the continuing on from the triggering-event. This will be our head-chatter retelling and developing the ongoing story about the grievance or desire.

As the story is reinforced and confirmed in the head-chatter there is the continuous activation of the emergency button. This mental activity will not only sustain the elevated adrenaline, but it will also provoke the cortisol into elevated levels.

Suffering is a process where the outcome is our unwanted felt experience. There is a *triggering-event*, and then there is the *continuing*. If we have any control over anything in our lives it is the *continuing* part. This is where we need to let go.

The emergency button

We all have the same autonomic nervous system which has two main functions. These are the **go** and **relax** functions. In general terms we can talk about the *Emergency Button* and the *Relaxation Switch*. To be technical these are the *sympathetic response* and the *parasympathetic response* in our *autonomic nervous system*.

If the emergency button is in use then the relaxation switch doesn't work. So if the emergency button is off, and the relaxation-switch is on, then it will be switched-off the instant the emergency button is activated. Our body makes the choice of survival over relaxation any time.

Our default setting is Go. The emergency button and the relaxation switch can't be on at the same time; and the emergency button will overrule the relaxation switch anytime all the time. This is why relaxation cannot be the cure for suffering. The only cure for suffering is the satisfactory resolution of the issue in whatever form that takes.

The head-chatter

It's the head-chatter that's the issue. Your need for justice is not the issue, it's your human right. The fact that you have an ambition is not the issue particularly when it gives you hope. When we talk about the active ingredient for suffering, go straight to the source, the head-chatter.

The head-chatter is not your justice nor is it your hope. The difficulties of managing and letting-go of the head-chatter come down to the nature of the head-chatter, not so much the need for justice or hope.

For starters there is head-chatter because the issue is unresolved. The head-chatter is not part of the solution; the head-chatter is the problem. For example, if on a grievance you are not getting an apology, and there is ongoing head-chatter about the lack of apology, then the head-chatter is the source of suffering; not the lack of an apology.

The head-chatter will not get you the apology. The head-chatter will not fulfil your desires. Head-chatter will not get you perfection; it will not get you satisfaction. It will only deepen your resentment. The head-chatter will just bang away on the emergency button; which in turn will flood your body with adrenaline and cortisol.

Head-chatter is diverting our attention to elsewhere. There is real-time and there is elsewhere. Whilst our mind is off elsewhere there is no one left in charge and the damage is done. The damage is the flooding of our bloodstream with adrenaline and cortisol over extended periods of time.

Or if the head-chatter is out loud, we call it venting. Whenever we are deeply embroiled in our head-chatter or on a roll with our venting, regardless of its content, then we are whacking away at the emergency button. The process is the same regardless of the content.

Of course our head-chatter or venting is an attempt at resolving the issue. With our head-chatter or venting we churn it over and over in our minds; like a pair of sandshoes in the clothes dryer, thump-thump, whacking away at the emergency button.

So for stress reduction generally the question has to be: **how do I allow my adrenaline and cortisol to ebb and flow normally?** We don't need these emergency chemical at sustained elevated levels at all.

Every time your mind wanders onto the subject of the grievance or desire you alter the chemistry of your body. It's not the content of the head-chatter that does it so much it's the apparent threat that is expressed in the head-chatter.

For example, if in your mind you express a threat (or demand or challenge) then your body responds with the emergency chemicals. If your mind is wandering into this head-chatter regularly then you are regularly topping up the adrenaline and cortisol in your blood stream. This is not a good thing.

If we get bogged down in the head-chatter,

particularly for those unresolved issues, then we are destined for confusion and more suffering. The head-chatter's content is infinitely variable and it is impossible to give advice on letting-go when dealing with the head-chatter's content.

On the other hand the process (how it works) is the constant. The process of letting-go is the same for everyone. The trick is to understand what it is that you need to let-go of. Mainly it's the head-chatter that we need to let go of.

Letting go

In general terms, if you are engaging with the world then there is at least your hand hovering over the emergency button. Whilst there is unfinished business or there are unresolved issues then your hand remains at least hovering over the emergency button.

At the end of the day you can put your hand away. You can do this once all the tasks are done; or you can do this if you are able to let-go of the unfinished issues until tomorrow. Then you can relax.

Relax is exactly what you should do after a hard day at the grindstone. You need your body to repair itself and to put everything back in place. We need this ability because we have to go through the whole story again tomorrow. This is the cycle of life; work-rest-repeat.

Letting-go to turn off the emergency button, therefore, is immediately identifiable as a necessary step in the processes of basic everyday living. In other words, letting-go is a natural process of everyday living.

We're not talking about simple forgetting. In the context of daily life, we're talking about our ability to put the demand aside until tomorrow. The demand does not magically disappear. Nor is it magically resolved this way. It is our conscious choice that puts it aside, that lets it go.

The natural letting go that we do is better than forgetting. We finish the day and there

may well be unresolved matters at the end of the day. We put them aside; we disengage the emergency button; the relaxation switch then becomes available. Come the next day we pick-up where we left off. All things being equal there will be no stress anxiety depression. The chemicals of our body need to ebb and flow as required. We work rest repeat.

If you have a grievance or desire then it could be that there are times when it is on your mind and times when it's not. Whether there is suffering involved would depend upon the balance between work and rest, on the issue. The work is the head-chatter in this case. For your grievance or desire, the work is the grind in our head-chatter on the same old story.

The term "letting-go" to begin with is a model; it's not a thing. Letting-go does not actually exist outside of your mental landscape. We use the term "letting-go" because it's 'as if' we have a grip on something. We don't actually have a grip on something physical.

In Jon Kabat-Zinn'sⁱⁱ Monkey Trap Storyⁱⁱⁱ the monkey is trapped because of his grip on the banana. The Monkey Trap story is just that, a story. It's an allegory. In other words it is a story that models a useful idea. Again, we need to take care that we're not sucked in by the content of the story; the story is not about traps, monkeys, bananas or even desire. The story isn't even about letting-go in the sense of opening your hand to release your grip.

The Monkey Trap story is about the conscious choice. That's it. There is no more to the story other than to illustrate the conscious choice. Even if there is a tug of war between letting-go and holding-on, the letting-go bit comes down to a conscious choice.

Also it would be a mistake to believe that letting-go is a one-off event. In other words it would be a mistake to believe that you let something go, and then it's gone.

There might be examples of where a matter is done-and-dusted with just a letting-go. For

example, someone makes an appointment with you and he doesn't turn up. You will be annoyed. Objectively it is annoying and inconvenient. There's no getting around that point. In the end you find that you need to let-go of the head-chatter and get on with something else.

For the example above, for that particular grievance you can permanently drop it; but still you needed the sense of proportion to make that conscious choice in order to move on; and what is more you'd need to make that choice every time this type of challenge occurs.

Letting-go is an ongoing process. This is particularly relevant where the issue is unresolved. This is where letting-go becomes the resolution.

The skill of letting-go

Our aim is to have the skill to bring our attention back to real-time on demand.

The triggering-events are beyond our control. We will be triggered by the reminders or symbolic representations of our grievance or desire. The trigger will capture our attention. Our attention is elsewhere when it's drawn into head-chatter. The head-chatter is the ongoing story that picks up from the triggering-event.

The solution is to develop the skills for Noticing and Focusing.^{iv} That is, to notice your mind wandering off into the head-chatter, then to deliberately focus back to real-time.

In your daily life, chances are you'll feel the adrenaline first, and then you'll become aware of the head-chatter. It comes down to how long before you notice the head-chatter and how long it takes you to bring your attention back to real-time. The sooner you're able to come out of that head-chatter and bring your attention back to real-time the less you will suffer. We can call this the recovery-rate.

Recovery-rate is a term that originates in psychical fitness. It's the measure of how long

it takes for your heart-rate to return to baseline after a period of exertion. The quicker your recovery-rate the fitter you are. Likewise we can model mental fitness by observing how long it takes for you to get off the emergency button once you have found yourself on it.

The head-chatter is basically a subconscious mental activity. We find ourselves doing it. Quite often we don't notice the head-chatter. Whether you notice your head-chatter or not, it will still be there banging away on your emergency button. So, the sooner you can bring it to consciousness and positively disengage from the head-chatter, the sooner you'll be off the emergency button.

Letting-go of and positively disengaging from the head-chatter becomes the ongoing resolution for those otherwise unresolved issues. Letting-go of the head-chatter is the ongoing resolution; this is an ongoing process. The outcome for this ongoing process is the reduction of adrenaline and cortisol in your bloodstream. With this reduction of the emergency chemicals in our bloodstream we will alter our felt experience; you will change the way you feel.

You can develop a healthy relationship with your nervous system to manage your ongoing felt experiences. The focus for this relationship is the mind-body connection. In other words we're talking about the effect of your mind on your autonomic nervous system. There is at least the daily requirement to disengage the emergency button and to allow the relaxation switch to turn on and do its job.

Additionally we need to take care that during the course of each day we are not spending too much time whacking away at the emergency button for no good purpose other than to create the felt experience of suffering. To do this we need to understand, manage and ultimately let-go of, and positively disengage from our head-chatter.

The mind skills that would help you to let-go of the head-chatter are...

The mind skills...

- a sense of proportion, to temper emotion with reason;
- focus on the process not the content so much;
- mental discipline, effort is required, it's an ongoing project;
- remembering, you have skills, so use them;
- noticing and focusing, observe your mind wandering off to elsewhere and bring it back to real-time.

Happiness requires effort; suffering requires no effort at all as it turns out.

ⁱ Google the technical term "psychological masquerade".

ⁱⁱ Jon Kabat-Zinn PhD (1990), FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Monkey Trap story is re-told in the Appendix B of the article, *Anxiety as a felt experience*, <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/AnxietyAsTheFeltExperience.pdf>

^{iv} Three-Minute Breathing Meditation to practice the Noticing and Focusing: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>