

Introduction

WHO'S TAKING CARE OF YOU?

"Who's taking care of you?" This one question brings more women to tears than any other question I ask. After the tears, the response that comes is usually a simple *no one*.

Do you ever feel that no one is taking care of you, and perhaps more importantly, that you are also not caring for yourself—not in a way that's working? Women from every social, economic, educational, and racial background describe the same condition. "It's like having an umbilical cord attached to me, but it only flows one way—out." We spend our lives taking care of everyone's needs, playing our roles as caretakers of the world, being *good girls*, and working on self-improvement, but often at the expense of our own needs being met.

Have you always shown up for everyone in your life, anticipated and filled their needs, carried the emotional load, given everything you have emotionally, physically, and spiritually—given down to your bone marrow—and in the process, abandoned your own needs and turned away from something authentic and vital in you? Are you living in a

way that's geared, above all else, to being liked? A way of being, essentially, that's missing *you* and what *you* need to be the truest expression of yourself.

It can take a long time to become aware of emotional exhaustion, and by the time you do, you may have developed a host of strategies for coping with it or anesthetizing yourself so you don't have to feel it. You may have even accepted at some level that your needs are not going to be met and you're not going to get to be *you* in any satisfying way, and that maybe that's just the way it is.

So, what are these needs that are not being met; what are we not getting that's resulting in our chronic exhaustion? While every woman has different desires and yearnings, there are certain needs that, when unrealized, create the emotional exhaustion and disconnection from self that's the normal state for so many of us.

As human beings, regardless of gender or identity, we share a longing to feel seen and known. And more specifically, to be seen and known *not* just for what we do and provide for others, but for who we genuinely *are*. We share a desire to live authentically, to be *real*, such that our outer experience is in alignment with our inner experience—to live a life that feels like *our* life, a life in which our truth is included.

Finally, and maybe most universally, we all yearn to feel loved and accepted—without criticism and judgment—which is the essence of feeling truly taken care of. We long for this connection not just from others, but from ourselves. If these needs are not met, or not met well enough, we end up in a state of depletion. As you embark on this journey, take a moment to ask yourself what kind of longing, absence, drive, experience, or burnout has brought *you* to this book? What hunger is going unfed in you?

Sometimes your emotional exhaustion feels unavoidable and acute. But it can also show up as a kind of wallpaper feeling, a background sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness—an emptiness. You might

have a hard time formulating the language to describe your exhaustion, and yet you feel it nonetheless.

What physical exhaustion is to the body, emotional exhaustion is to the heart and spirit. The condition manifests in many different forms: depression, anxiety, frustration, hopelessness, anger, fatigue, addiction, headaches, chronic pain, and insomnia...any and all can be manifestations of emotional exhaustion. In order to replenish ourselves and reconnect with our fundamental vitality, we must first understand the cause of our depletion. We can't fix something until we know what's broken—can't discover our real strength until we can see what's getting in its way.

This book was born from my curiosity and concern. After countless interviews with women, as well as decades of work with women clients in therapy, I was left wondering: Why do so many women describe themselves as emotionally exhausted? Why do so many of us experience ourselves as people-pleasing shells of something we used to be, or never were but maybe could be? Why do so many of us feel cut off from what we really need—and who we really are—untethered from some deeper well of nourishment? And, more important than all the whys, what can we do about it—how can we rediscover ourselves and reignite our internal vitality?

The cultural narrative goes like this: we are worthy, our needs are valid, and we have every right to express our truth. On a superficial level, the idea of authenticity is applauded in our society. *Be bold—be who you are. You be you!* We are encouraged to celebrate our uniqueness, voice our truth, and be...us. That's what's happening on the surface, but at a deeper level, such a way of living sits contrary to everything *else* we've been taught and been taught to be.

In reality, society's persistent dismissing and disparaging of women's needs, making fun of and negatively labeling women who openly express needs, idealizing women who appear need-less and self-sacrificing, has

led us to create a relationship with our own needs that, like the one modeled, is critical and rejecting. Stop for a moment and think about your own life: consider the ways that your truth has been dismissed by others, and how you too may have participated in your own dismissal.

Despite all the progress we've made in the workforce, on the family and social front, the political stage, and everywhere else, so many women still believe that they're not supposed to have needs. Little ones maybe, here and there, but *not* the real ones we actually have, and not the inconvenient ones. Needs are still seen as a failing, and like most everything else, *our* failing.

This book is designed to help you become aware of your needs, and maybe more importantly, your *relationship* with your needs. To show you how to take care of yourself from the inside out, and not just play the part of someone who practices proper self-care. It's a guide for creating an internal state of vitality and authenticity that doesn't rely on finding the right partner, self-improvement plan, or facial cream. My goal is to shift your focus from taking care of everyone else to taking care of you, but in a brand-new way (which doesn't mean *not* taking care of others).

What's to come is a radically different approach to self-care—not the kind of temporary-fix, feel-good sort our current self-care industry promises, the kind that ultimately fails you. I offer something deeper, more reliable, and, I believe, infinitely more potent. One warning, however: If you decide to go on this journey, be ready to meet yourself, to unearth the *you* that's hiding under all the roles you play; be prepared to see the *you* that's free from all your pleasing adaptations. Be prepared to change.

My intention is to empower and encourage you to be more than just pleasing, more than just the parts you play for others. To dare you not just to know, but to speak and live from your actual truth. To help you discover who you actually are—beyond your ability to be likable. Ultimately, this book is about becoming a woman for whom it's more

important to like herself than to be liked. If that sounds like what you want and need, and if you're willing to commit to this process, a time will come when you will trust your own knowing and stand firmly in your own shoes.

At its heart, this reading journey is about awareness. Through your investigation, you'll come to see the *truths* you've assumed about being a woman, the core beliefs you've been holding about your own needs, and the conditioning you've undergone, from society, family, education, media, and everywhere else—conditioning that's made you seek acceptance over authenticity. You'll become aware of your training to care for and manage others' needs at the expense of your own—to disappear to yourself so as to appear attractive to others.

Keep in mind, just by bringing light to your shadows, recognizing what's going on inside you, absorbing the message of this book, you are already doing the work. You are already changing.

Going forward, I describe what emotional exhaustion feels like and also what creates it. I throw open the door to *the likability cage*: the trap of always trying to be (and feeling like we have to be) pleasing in order to be emotionally safe—not judged and not rejected. I examine the individual bars that make up our cage, and the behaviors we assume to keep ourselves inside it and keep ourselves likable. All the ways we abandon ourselves while imagining we are taking care of ourselves.

I will lead us through the perilous and painful minefield of judgments, criticisms, and labels that our culture imposes on women (and we impose on ourselves) from *difficult* to *high maintenance* to *control freak*...the whole arsenal of threats that keep us silent and our needs in check. I look at early family environments—how your caretakers responded to your needs and how that shaped and distorted your own beliefs—as well as your strategies for trying to get your needs met.

Along the way, I unpack core beliefs—those imagined truths and assumed realities lingering in the shadows of our mind, which ultimately

shape and guide our behavior. Core beliefs that kick up guilt, shame, and judgment, and if they stay in the shadows, continue getting in the way of what we need.

From there, we take a deep dive into the \$11 billion self-care industry, the system that ultimately fails to address or remedy the real cause of our exhaustion.

And do I offer a solution? you're probably asking. Yes. A fundamentally different approach to taking care of yourself—practical, boots-on-the-ground tools for living a self-caring life, for being *you* in the world. A way of relating with the purpose of telling your truth rather than ensuring your likability. This book is a guide for how to live as a woman who knows that her experience matters and that *she* matters; a woman who respects and attends to her own needs, and who trusts her own knowing. A woman who is unshakably on her own side.

If you're still reading, my guess is that you identify with the feeling of emotional exhaustion, of not attending to yourself in a meaningful way, not getting your needs met, or perhaps not knowing what your needs even are. Or maybe the hope and possibility of a more truthful and vital life has kept your attention. Either way, it's good news that you're still here.

It's easy to talk about it, but *living* as a confident and truthful woman, who also has needs, is not easy. In fact, it can be downright risky. We face serious judgments for being who we really are...from men and women (ourselves included). Our conditioning has taught us to make sure that no one is ever displeased, which often doesn't line up well with being strong, visible, and genuinely honest. Tucking away our needs and our experience and focusing on making other people happy can seem like the safer and wiser choice.

But here's the thing: You don't have to abandon the people you love to take care of yourself. You also don't have to abandon yourself to be safe and happy. Over the years, I've accompanied innumerable women,

a lot of them probably like you, on what I believe is the most important journey any of us ever take: from being whom you think everyone wants you to be...to being who you actually are. It's a process of relocating your center of gravity and North Star from the outside world to inside yourself. It's a homecoming.

No matter how many times I see a woman undergo this transformation—find her real voice, real needs, real strength, and real self, always in her unique style—I, too, am transformed. It's like watching a miracle every time. The sense of awe I carry for this process is ultimately why I wrote this book.

I invite you to read these pages slowly and carefully. Consider what it's like for *you* to be a woman in this society, the challenges you've personally faced, both internally and externally. Examine the ways you've been shaped—trapped or limited by your female conditioning. Pay close attention to how you relate to your own needs and how you allow (or don't allow) your needs to matter. You may find yourself asking, "But what do I *do*? What does it look like or feel like to do this work? Where do I begin?" The answer is simply to absorb the material, allow it into your consciousness, and let it work its way into your experience in whatever way it needs to.

We can and must look at this together to effect change. I encourage gathering with others along the way to bring this awareness to a personal and cultural level. To that end, I created a reading group guide that you can find at <http://www.newharbinger.com/50157>.

If you decide to embark on this journey, I would ask one favor: Promise me that you won't hold yourself to blame for what you discover along the way, that you will stay on your own side throughout this process. Let the words on these pages mean whatever they mean for you. There's no right way to experience them. But *do* experience them; don't turn this process into just another idea, another interesting addition to your self-care to-do list.

Keep it real and apply it in your own life (even if you never tell anyone that you're doing it). Use what works and leave the rest behind; not all of it will resonate, because you're *you* and not anyone else, and have lived your own unique road to here. Consider the reading of this book as a practice, one of listening deeply to your own experience and honoring *whatever* truth is uncovered.