Why Do I REACT the Way I Do?

The Hidden Reasons Behind Your Emotional Reactions



JEANNE LOVE SPOTTS

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This book is intended for educational purposes and is not a substitute for professional medical, psychological, or mental health care. If you are experiencing persistent physical symptoms, consult your healthcare provider. If you are experiencing a medical emergency or a mental health crisis, seek immediate medical attention.

If you and your healthcare team have ruled out a medical cause for physical sensations that arise during emotionally significant moments, you may also find it helpful to become curious about what those sensations are communicating. This book invites you to approach that possibility with gentleness, curiosity, and self-compassion.

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Dedication

For those who hold their pain quietly. The ones who smile while something inside aches. The people who feel unseen in rooms full of others.

I understand. Not because I'm special, but because I've been there.

Author's Note

Physical wounds are easy to see. Emotional wounds can hurt just as deeply, and they often last much longer.

I wrote this book for anyone living with emotional pain or wondering why they react in ways that surprise them—especially those who grew up without seeing love and respect lived between the people who raised them.

This book comes from my own life: the parts that were painful long before I had words for them.

As an empath, I felt the emotional temperature of a room before I understood why. I grew up in a home where abuse was simply the way things were. When something has always been there, you don’t question it—you adapt. The way I later adapted to twenty-seven years of a marriage built on sarcasm and disrespect. My sons watched that unfold. They never saw what a loving partnership looked like. That absence shaped them. The presence of that pain shaped me.

For years, I believed my reactions meant something was wrong with me. I didn’t know my body had simply learned to survive.

Even in the hardest times, a quiet voice insisted there was more. That voice stayed with me through thirty-eight years in an operating room, where sharp words and constant pressure felt dangerously like home. Recognizing that I had recreated my childhood dynamic at work became my turning point.

I'm a certified trauma professional, not a therapist. I build practical tools people can use at home, at their own pace. I know what it takes to move pain that talk therapy can't always reach. I discovered there are gentle ways to help the pain begin to move. But before we can use them, we first need to understand why the pain is there.

This book is for the quiet wounds that never make headlines. When trauma is active and acute, professional care is essential—this book can walk beside that care, but it can never replace it. If you are in crisis, please call or text 988 in the United States, or contact local emergency services.

Go slow. Your nervous system decides the pace, not the page numbers. If something touches a place that hurts, pause. Breathe with attention, not urgency. Put a hand over your heart.

You don't need much to begin—a quiet place, a notebook, ten minutes a day. Read a little, let it

settle, try the reflection, and write down what you notice. If it feels like too much, stop and rest.

This isn’t about getting it right. It’s about showing up with openness, curiosity, and a little kindness toward whatever you find.

Acknowledgements

To Dane: you believed in me before I could believe in myself. Your love has been my anchor. I don't say that lightly. I say it because it's true.

Your body has been speaking to you your entire life.

This book will help you learn how to listen.

About These Conversations

A conversation invites something different than a lesson. Lessons ask us to learn. Conversations ask us to listen.

As you read these pages, I hope they become conversations you have with yourself — not with me, and not with anyone else. The goal isn't to memorize what's on these pages. It's to begin understanding why you react the way you do.

The questions here aren't meant to have immediate answers. They're here because the right question has a quiet way of helping you notice something you hadn't seen before — about yourself, in your own words, at your own pace.

You don't have to rush through these conversations. Some may stay with you for a day. Others may ask you to pause and sit with them before you move on. There is no right pace.

You don't have to agree with everything you read. You don't have to understand it all at once. Simply notice what resonates, and leave the rest for another time.

If, at any point, you find yourself looking at your reactions with a little more curiosity and a little less judgment, these conversations have already begun doing what they were meant to do.

You don’t have to find the answer today. Sometimes asking the question is enough.

Whenever you’re ready…

A Personal Note

I wish someone had placed a book like this in my hands years ago.

If you're reading this, there's a good chance you've asked yourself a question many of us ask in private: Why did I react that way?

Someone said something that stayed with you for days. A conversation left you with a lump in your throat you couldn't explain. Your stomach tightened before you even knew why.

We've all wondered why one moment passes easily while another lingers long after it's over.

For much of my life, I tried to understand why certain experiences affect us so deeply. Why one comment is forgotten within minutes while another stays with someone for years.

Those questions followed me into my career, where I learned something unexpected: our reactions are

rarely shaped by the present moment alone. They're shaped by the life we've lived before it.

Our emotions aren't working against us. Our bodies aren't betraying us. They're trying to communicate.

This book is an invitation to slow down long enough to listen. Not with fear. Not with judgment. With curiosity.

You don't need every answer today. You only need a willingness to stay open to what your emotions are communicating.

By the last page, my hope is you'll trust yourself a little more than you did when you began.



Conversation One

Have You Ever Surprised Yourself?

Have you ever reacted to something... and later wondered where that came from?

Someone raises their voice just a little, and before you've had time to think, your shoulders tighten. A text message goes unanswered, and you check your phone again and again, wondering if something is wrong. Someone offers you a

compliment, and instead of receiving it, a quiet voice inside wonders if they really meant it.

Many of us have moments like these. We replay the conversation. We question ourselves. We promise we'll handle it differently next time. Then we quietly ask... why did I react like that?

That same question followed me for years. I believed a strong emotional reaction meant I was too sensitive, too weak, or too much. I spent years trying to change my reactions instead of trying to understand them.

I wish someone had gently said to me: What if the reaction was never the problem?

It opened the door to a better one: maybe my reaction was a message.

Not every reaction runs that deep. We're often just tired, hungry, stressed or overwhelmed. But there are other moments—when the feeling seems much bigger than the situation itself. Those are the ones worth paying attention to.

Our reactions deserve more kindness than criticism. Instead of asking, “Why did I react that way?” what if we paused and asked, “What did I feel? Where did I feel it? What happened just before my body responded?”

That kind of curiosity changes the conversation we have with ourselves. It moves us away from self-judgment and toward self-understanding.

That's where this book begins — with noticing, before there are any answers.

Because our bodies often catch what our minds haven't processed yet. That's where listening begins.

Reflection

Think of a recent moment when your reaction surprised you. What happened? Where did you feel it in your body? If you became curious instead of critical, what might you become aware of?



People rarely react only to the moment
they're living.
They also react to the moments they've already survived.

Conversation Two

The Same Moment. Different Reactions

How do two people experience the same event and react so differently?

Picture two coworkers sitting in the same meeting, hearing the same difficult feedback from their manager. One nods, takes a few notes, and moves on with her day. The other feels her stomach drop, replays the meeting for hours, and can't shake the

sense that something bigger just went wrong. Same words. Same room. Same manager. And yet each of them walked out carrying something completely different.

Or picture two friends waiting for the same delayed flight. One shrugs it off, finds a coffee, and settles in. The other feels her chest tighten, her patience fraying faster than the situation seems to call for.

Now imagine lying on a hospital stretcher, waiting to be wheeled into surgery. The procedure has already been explained to you. The forms are signed. There's nothing left to do but wait.

Now picture the person in the preop waiting room on the stretcher beside you — same surgery, same surgeon, same room. And yet nothing about how you each feel in that moment lines up. You close your eyes and let out a slow breath, something in your shoulders loosening. The person next to you grips the rails instead, jaw tight, unable to take in even the gentlest reassurance.

Nothing about the surgery itself explains that gap. Neither does the meeting, or the flight delay, or the team caring for you. Whatever separates those responses started taking shape long before any of you walked into the room.

During my years in the OR, I started to notice something: the body in that stretcher isn't only reacting to what's happening today. It's reacting to everything it's already lived through. The scent of antiseptic can bring back a memory you haven't thought about in a decade. A hospital room can echo a diagnosis from years ago. A hand on your shoulder might feel steadying to one person and unbearable to the next.

I noticed something else, something harder to explain but unmistakable to me every time it happened. I've always been able to sense the emotional temperature of a room, and I could often tell within moments whether the person beside a patient was a steady, loving presence or something closer to a controlling one. Some patients waited for a certain look before answering even the simplest question — how are you feeling, where does it hurt — until the doctor or I gently made clear that we needed to hear it from them, not the person beside them.

I saw the same thing in children. Some were so unnaturally composed for their age that the stillness itself said more than any answer could have, and the way they interacted with the adult beside them was often just as telling. I never knew for certain what any of them went home to. But I

wondered, more than once, whether the ones without anyone gentle beside them were holding something no hospital form ever asked about.

What surprised me most was how early that shows up — how young a body can learn to wait for permission before it trusts its own reaction.

Once you see it that way, emotional reactions stop looking random. They stop looking like a flaw. Most of the time, they make complete sense the moment you know enough of the story behind them.

Your everyday life works the same way. A conversation goes sideways. Someone you love gives you a certain look. A text sits there, unanswered. Plans shift without warning. And what stings isn't always the thing that just happened — sometimes it's older than that. Not because something's broken in you. Because your body remembers.

That's the thing worth asking instead: not what's wrong with you, but what this feeling might already know. Just letting that question sit there can open something up.

Reflection

Bring to mind a moment recently that stayed

with you longer than you expected. Don't try to fix it or explain it away. Just sit with it and ask — what might this feeling have remembered?



Conversation Three

The Moment Isn't Always the Whole Story

Why does a small moment sometimes hold so much weight?

A friend cancels dinner for the third time, and a chill runs through you, completely out of proportion to the actual inconvenience. A partner sighs before answering a simple question, and your whole body braces for an argument that hasn't even started.

We naturally assume the size of our reaction matches the size of what just happened. Usually, it doesn't.

A feeling arrives today holding the weight of every earlier moment that felt similar. The friend who canceled isn't just canceling dinner. She's standing, without meaning to, in a doorway that was already open—one that leads back to every other time you needed someone and they weren't there.

This isn't blaming the people in our lives for reactions that started somewhere else. It's understanding that the present moment is rarely working alone.

Two people can hear the exact same words and feel entirely different things. One person hears “we need to talk” and feels only curiosity, maybe even relief that something's being said out loud. Another person hears those same four words and their stomach drops before they've even braced for what comes next. The sentence never changed. What each of them brought into it did.

Once I started seeing my own reactions this way, everything shifted. I stopped asking, “Why am I so upset about something so small?” I started asking, “What does this remind me of?”

Think of someone in your life who's never given you much reason to worry — steady, reliable, someone who's shown up for you again and again, year after year. You'd probably say you trust them completely, and most days, you do. Then picture one small thing they do that shouldn't matter at all. A reply that takes longer than usual to arrive. A shorter answer than you expected. A tone in their voice that seems just slightly off, gone again before you can even be sure you heard it. And something in you tightens anyway — your stomach, your shoulders, a held breath — completely out of proportion to whatever actually happened. You might even hear yourself thinking it's silly, that there's nothing to worry about, and still not be able to shake it.

It usually isn't about them at all. It's about every earlier version of you that learned, somewhere along the way, to read small changes as warning signs — a delay that once meant something serious, a shift in tone that once came before something worse. Once you can see that, the tightness starts to make sense. It isn't an overreaction. It's an old door, quietly swinging open again, long after you thought it had closed for good.

That’s usually how it works. The moment in front of you rarely explains the full weight of what you’re

feeling. It’s only ever the door. What’s standing behind it often belongs to something older.

Reflection

Pause for a moment and recall a reaction that felt too big for what triggered it. If you gently asked, “What does this remind me of?” what comes to mind?



Conversation Four

When the Body Speaks First

What did your body know before your mind understood?

Imagine reaching out to a physician on behalf of someone you love, someone you're genuinely worried about. You write carefully, respectfully, choosing your words with more care than the message probably needed, hoping for just a few minutes of his attention.

His reply comes back short. Cold. It makes it clear your concern wasn't welcome, wasn't worth more than a clipped sentence or two.

Before you've had a single conscious thought about what to do next, your body has already responded. Your stomach turns over. A lump rises in your throat, tight and sudden. Your hands feel unsteady, like they belong to someone else for a moment. None of this waited for your permission. It simply arrived, faster than thought.

Or maybe it isn't a physician at all. Maybe it's a manager who answers your question in front of the whole team with a tone that makes you feel small for having asked. Or a teacher, years ago, who made it clear your concern was an inconvenience rather than something worth their time. Different rooms, different titles, but the same shape underneath: someone holding more power than you in that moment, deciding your concern wasn't worth much of their attention.

If you've spent any time paying attention to signals like these, you'll recognize the pull that comes next — the urge to make the sensation stop as quickly as possible, to swallow it down, to move on before you have to look at it too closely.

This time, try pausing instead. Don't ask how to make it stop. Ask, “What is my body communicating right now?”

It's easy to treat a reaction like this as the problem itself, rather than as a messenger holding something worth hearing. In a moment like that, the first impulse is almost always to quiet the sensation without ever asking what it might be pointing toward, especially when the trigger feels too small to justify this much feeling.

A quick medical note, because it matters: physical symptoms deserve real medical attention. If something in your body feels persistently wrong, please see a qualified healthcare provider. That guidance never changes.

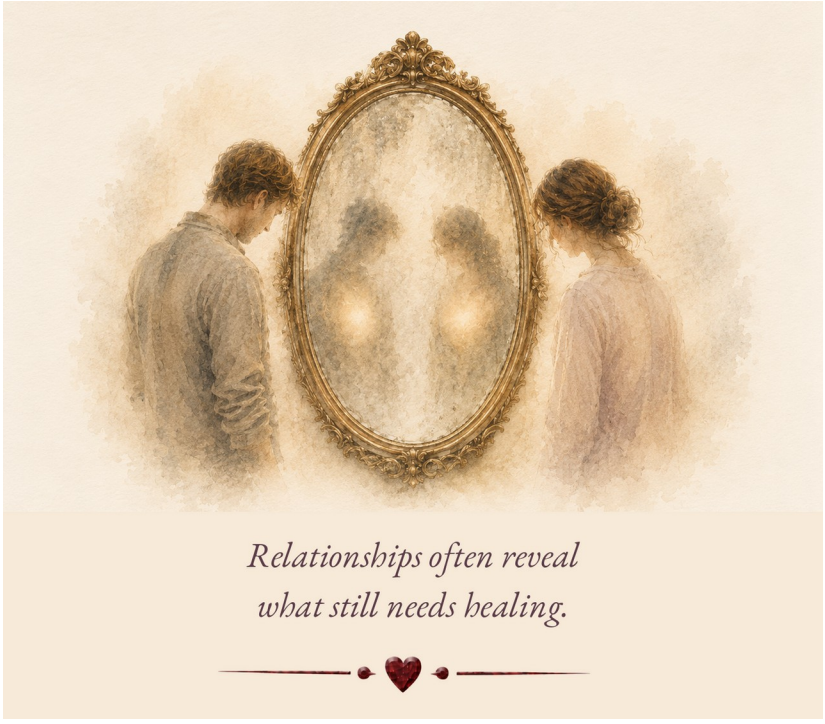
But when a physical reaction shows up specifically in emotionally charged moments, and a medical cause has been ruled out, it's worth getting curious instead of alarmed — sitting with it long enough to ask, “What is this responding to?”

You may find, as I have, that the pain in your gut was never really about one dismissive reply, or one cutting tone from someone in charge. It touches something much older — every earlier time someone with the power to help chose not to, every earlier moment your concern was met with silence instead of care.

The body often speaks before the mind catches up. Learning to listen for that voice, instead of silencing it the moment it appears, may become one of the most valuable practices in your life, the way it has in mine.

Reflection

Remember a time your body reacted before your mind understood why. What was the sensation? Where did you feel it? What might it have been responding to?



Conversation Five

What Relationships Reveal

What might this relationship be showing you?

The most profound things we learn about ourselves rarely come from being alone. They come from being close to someone else.

I don't mean practical things, like learning someone's habits or preferences. I mean a deeper truth: what a relationship stirs in us that has little to do with the other person at all.

A longing to be chosen first. A habit of going quiet the moment things feel tense. A deep need to know, without asking, that you still matter to someone.

None of that points to a flaw in who you are. It points to a mirror—one relationships hold up whether we ask them to or not.

Sometimes it isn't even one relationship that reveals it. It's a feeling that keeps finding you inside several different ones—with a partner, then a friend, then a coworker who has nothing in common with either of them, except that all three, somehow, know exactly which nerve to touch. That's rarely a coincidence. It usually means the nerve was there long before any of them arrived, quietly waiting for someone to find it.

Think of a moment when someone you love did something small—forgot to ask how your day went, took a beat too long to answer a text, seemed distracted when you needed them present. If the reaction that followed felt larger than the moment itself, it likely wasn't really about that moment. It was about every earlier time you reached for someone and found no one reaching back. This new moment simply held the mirror up again, showing you what had been waiting there all along.

I used to believe a strong reaction to someone meant I was broken. I see it differently today. Usually, it means a part of me has surfaced enough to be noticed.

That's a different place to sit in than asking, “Why am I like this?” The better question is, “What is this relationship showing me?”

Reflection

Consider someone who brings up a strong feeling in you. Instead of focusing on what they did, recognize what their presence is showing you about what you need, or about what you've been protecting.



The question you ask yourself changes the path you walk.

Conversation Six

Learning to Listen

What if the next step isn't changing yourself... but listening to yourself?

By now, you may have realized a few things. Reactions you once dismissed as random usually aren't. Emotions that felt like interruptions were often trying to get your attention. Together, they've been trying to reach you.

Most of us were never taught to listen this way. We learned to explain our feelings. Ignore them. Push through them. Stay busy until they faded. Some of us became experts at pretending we were fine. Others learned to keep everyone else comfortable while quietly setting ourselves aside.

Listening asks something different of us. It asks us to slow down. Not to search for answers, but to pay attention.

You don't have to understand an emotion the moment it appears. Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is acknowledge that it's there. That simple act changes everything. Instead of fighting yourself, you begin standing beside yourself.

Over the years, I've found that listening often begins in very small, ordinary ways. Your shoulders rise before you realize it. Your jaw tightens. Your breathing shifts. Your stomach feels uneasy.

These physical cues pass quickly if we aren't paying attention. But if we pause, they sometimes have a story to tell — not always a deep hidden meaning, just something worth a moment of curiosity. You don't have to solve it. You don't have to explain it. You only have to stay with it.

It feels surprisingly simple, because it is. Learning to listen isn't another task to master. It's a different way of meeting yourself—one that replaces criticism with gentleness, and judgment with understanding.

Some days that might look like catching your breath in the middle of a conversation and noticing what's happening in your chest before you say a word. Other days it's nothing more than quietly admitting that something is stirring, without needing to explain what it is or where it came from.

There is no finish line. No perfect way to do this. Some days you'll sense it right away. Other days you'll remember hours later. Both are part of learning.

Every time you pause with compassion instead of criticism, you're building trust — in your body, in your emotions, in the parts of yourself you once talked over. That trust grows the same way anything real does—slowly, and with practice.

Reflection

This week, choose one ordinary moment. Nothing dramatic. Become aware of your body before your thoughts take over. What

do you find? You don't need to change anything. Just listen. That’s enough for today.



Conversation Seven

A Different Question

The question you ask a feeling shapes what it tells you.

What if you've been asking yourself the wrong question all along?

You're in the car, a song comes on that shouldn't mean anything, and suddenly your throat is tight and you can't say why. The first thing most of us

reach for in a moment like that is the same question: Why do I react the way I do?

You didn't invent that question. It's inherited—passed down from a parent who called big feelings “too much,” reinforced by years of watching sensitivity get treated like a flaw instead of information. So the feeling becomes evidence against you before you've even had a chance to look at it. The problem was never the feeling. It was the question you learned to ask about it.

Notice what that question already assumes. The moment you ask why do I react, you've decided something is wrong. There's nowhere to go from there but further into self-judgment—searching for the flaw, the overreaction, the thing to fix.

There's a quieter question underneath it, one most of us were never taught to ask: What is this feeling trying to tell me? Nothing about the feeling changes when you ask it. Only your relationship to it does. Instead of a verdict, it becomes an opening.

Sometimes it surfaces grief you haven't fully acknowledged. Other times, it's a boundary that's been crossed so quietly you hadn't named it yet. And once in a while, a feeling doesn't want to be explained at all—it only wants to be noticed, the way you'd notice a person standing at the edge of a

room, waiting to be seen before they'll say anything.

I think of it now the way I used to think about a monitor in the operating room. A number changes, and the instinct is to silence the alarm as fast as possible. But the alarm was never the problem. It was reporting something that had already started in the body, something that had been building before the sound ever went off. Emotions work the same way. By the time you feel one, it's usually been gathering for a while. The feeling isn't the emergency. It's the report.

You don't have to earn the right to feel something before you're allowed to sit with it. You can simply pause, ask the gentler question, and listen for whatever answer is willing to come—today, hours from now, or in the middle of some ordinary moment that has nothing to do with any of this.

That's the whole shift. Not fixing the feeling. Just choosing to read the report instead of racing to silence the alarm.

Reflection

Call to mind a feeling you've had recently. Instead of asking, “Why do I react the way I

do?” ask, “What is this feeling trying to tell me?” Notice what comes up. If you'd like to, write a few thoughts down. You don't have to reach a conclusion. Sometimes the question itself does important work.



What feels like anxiety today
may only be your body, still trying to be heard.

Conversation Eight

When There Is No Obvious Trigger

What if your body isn't overreacting? What if it's remembering?

You're standing in a grocery store. Nothing unusual has happened. You're simply looking for something to make for dinner.

Then it begins. Your chest tightens. Your breathing turns shallow. Your stomach feels uneasy. Your mind starts searching for an explanation. What's wrong? Did I forget something? Am I getting sick? You glance around, half expecting the answer to be sitting somewhere in the aisle in front of you. It isn't. There's only the cart, the list, the same fluorescent lights that were there a minute ago when none of this was happening.

Most of us learned to treat a moment like this as something to push through. Keep moving. Finish the list. Get to the car before anyone notices anything is wrong. That instinct feels responsible, even protective. But pushing through doesn't ask the feeling anything. It just outlasts it, until the next ordinary moment brings it back again, just as unannounced as before.

Earlier, we talked about the body reacting to people — to a dismissive tone or a sharp word. But your body doesn't always react to what's actually happening in front of you. Sometimes it reacts to what feels familiar. Your nervous system isn't only asking whether you're in danger right now. It's asking whether this moment resembles another one it once learned to survive. A crowded store, a certain tone of voice, an unexpected text, a look on someone's face, or even nothing in particular —

your body often notices what your thinking mind hasn't caught up to yet. It was never really about the grocery aisle at all.

That doesn't mean every reaction is an emotional memory. Remember, physical symptoms always deserve appropriate medical evaluation, and that guidance never changes. But once medical causes have been ruled out, and a reaction like this keeps appearing in emotionally charged moments, it can help to meet it with curiosity instead of rushing to make it disappear.

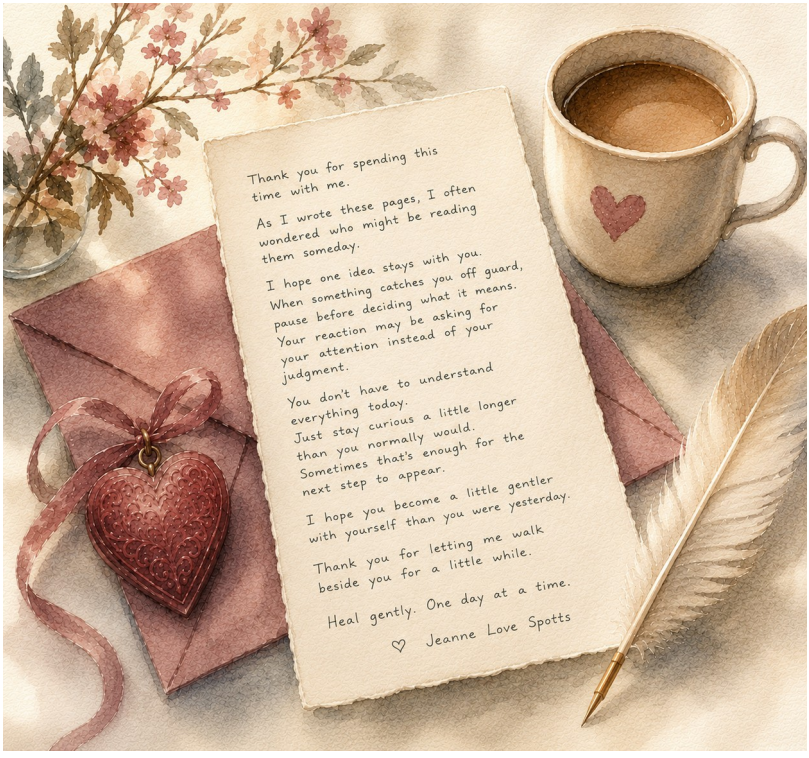
Instead of asking, “How do I stop feeling this?” try asking, “What does this feeling remind my body of?” That one small shift changes everything. It doesn't demand an answer right away, and it doesn't require you to stand in the aisle sorting through old memories until you settle on the right one. It simply opens a door that “make it stop” keeps shut. The goal was never to eliminate every anxious moment. It's to understand what the feeling has been trying to communicate all along.

You've known this language your whole life, even when you couldn't yet translate it. Little by little, you've begun learning how to hear it. And once you can hear it, you don't have to fight it quite so hard anymore. The chest still may tighten in a grocery

line someday. But it can be met differently than it was before — not as an alarm demanding to be silenced, but as a familiar voice, being given room to finish what it's trying to say.

Reflection

Recall a time your body reacted without an obvious person or event triggering it. Where were you? What did your body notice first? What might it have been remembering?



A Letter to You

Thank you for spending this
time with me.

As I wrote these pages, I often
wondered who might be reading
them someday.

I hope one idea stays with you.
When something catches you off guard,
pause before deciding what it means.

Your reaction may be asking for
your attention instead of your
judgment.

You don’t have to understand
everything today.
Just stay curious a little longer
than you normally would.
Sometimes that’s enough for the
next step to appear.

I hope you become a little gentler
with yourself than you were yesterday.

Thank you for letting me walk
beside you for a little while.

Heal gently. One day at a time.

❤️ Jeanne Love Spotts

To learn more about Jeanne Love Spotts, REHM™, and additional resources, visit JeanneLoveSpotts.com