

SESSION 2: Love Wound - Trauma and Neglect

WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

Love is essential, but it's also challenging, because it's a skill that can both be simple and complex. Most of us had caregivers who were wounded to some degree in their capacity to love, so they couldn't teach us how to fully love and be loved. Many of us experienced some degree of trauma and neglect that left us feeling unlovable and challenged in our capacity to love and be loved. We entered adulthood with a Love Wound.

Fortunately, we can learn to love and heal our Love Wound. We do this through the practice of the WellMind Method. The WellMind method is the practice of the 3 A's of Awakening to love. The 3 A's are attending, appreciating, and acting with love. While the 3 A's may sound simple, the practice of the 3 A's can be profound. Through the practice of the 3 A's, you will heal your Love Wound and realize a life of love.

In our sessions together, we're exploring love and its benefits. We're talking about the Love Wound. We're studying the 3 A's and how to apply them to our lives. We're practicing many heart-mind practices for cultivating reverence. For acting with love, we're studying in detail 31 different love practices. By the time you finish this course, you will be well on your way to realizing a life of love.

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If you have a severe Love Wound, you might want to consider combining this course with psychotherapy to help you heal. If you have a moderate or mild Love Wound, this course will help you to heal and grow. If you don't have a Love Wound, this course will still help you to grow and transcend the limitations and suffering of the ego.

If you are new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the previous session, because the first ten sessions make up the core foundation upon which the rest of the course is built. You'll need this foundation to benefit from the remaining sessions.

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SO LET'S GET STARTED!

Last session we talked about the benefits of love and loving. We talked about the nature of love. We learned that love is essential to a healthy and vital life, family, community, and world.

Yet there is so much pain and suffering in this world due to a lack of love. So many people suffer from hatred of self and others. Countless numbers of us are afflicted with apathy, preoccupied with ourselves, and insensitive to the great suffering of the world. This course is intended to help you be part of the solution to this **global “Love Wound.”**

Of course, I’m not talking about romantic love alone. I’m speaking of **love in a much more expansive context** that includes our ability to love ourselves, our friends, family, strangers, and the world itself.

For me personally, loving has been a lifelong challenge. Like many of us, I’m a wounded person who has wounded many people. Fortunately, I’m healing and am now blessed with opportunities to heal others. But the road to creating this course has been a long one with many painful twists and turns.

My childhood home was loving in some ways but not in others. My parents are good people who had their own Love Wounds. My mother couldn’t show affection or nurturing. For many years, she worked in the evenings or went to school, leaving the kids at home alone with babysitters or no one at all. This made my siblings and I latchkey children.

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My mother once told me I was a colicky baby, and my father—who later struggled with alcoholism—would lose his temper and hit me when I cried. He went on to severely whip me several times during my childhood, once punching me so hard in the gut that he knocked me out.

I felt alone emotionally, so I soothed myself with reading and hobbies. I was conditioned to be isolated, as my parents were socially isolated with few friends. We didn't grow up with a strong sense of connection between us, so I developed a sense of myself—a “me”—that was not part of a larger family “we.” Because of my parents' wounds, I felt a vague feeling of family shame. My sense of shame and disconnection made it difficult for me to feel a belonging to a larger group and to then contribute to that group.

When I was about six years old, I received my first report card with an “A” in math. I didn't fully understand the importance of this until I showed my mother, who responded by giving me 50 cents. That proved to be a life-changing event for me. At that moment, I devoted myself to getting As in order to earn my mother's love. Since then, the root of my addiction to achievement has been a yearning for her love.

In school I was younger and smaller than the other kids. I was bright, and not that athletic. These traits, along with my family conditioning, made it challenging to fit in with my peers and led to my experiencing some bullying in school. I struggled to feel a sense of belonging with others.

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I entered adulthood with a great deal of anxiety about my relationships. Because of my conditioning growing up, I felt unworthy and unlovable. Deep down, I hated myself, so I believed the only way others would think I was lovable was if I achieved a lot. While I had a good heart, my goodness was covered over by self-hatred. My motivations were largely selfish because of the emotional pain I was trying to ease. I had what psychologists call narcissistic character traits.

My narcissism made it almost impossible to be a good friend because my anxious self-concern made me compulsively self-preoccupied. So, I couldn't give of myself wholeheartedly to my few friends.

My anxiety also got in the way at work. Rather than humbly contributing to the team, I was competitive, judgmental, disconnected, and sometimes disregarding of others.

I did get married, twice, but both marriages ended in part because of my Love Wound and my struggles with loving and being loved.

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MY RECOVERY FROM MY LOVE WOUND

The beginning of my recovery from my Love Wound began when I was about 54. I had just won a second “Top Doctor” award given by New Hampshire magazine. While I’d experienced a temporary thrill the first time I received this award, I felt sad and depressed the second time. I was overweight, unhappy in my marriage, lacking friends, and working seven days a week. I felt lonely and emotionally numb. I realized that living to be special was unfulfilling, and that living to do good would be a better way. Like water polishing a rock, I began to set an intention each day to love for love’s sake alone.

This awakening eventually led to the end of my marriage to my second wife, as I understood that our relationship wasn’t good for either of us and wasn’t going to change after several unsuccessful attempts at couple’s therapy. I began to meditate regularly again—something I had given up shortly after I met my second wife—and I went back to my Unitarian church.

A few months after leaving my marriage, I met my current wife, who has been a Godsend for me. Because of my awakening, for the first time in my life, I was able to devote myself to loving her and receiving her love in return. So, as you can see, I have experienced firsthand the powerful healing that takes place when you devote yourself fully to loving others and let them love you.

My meditations, which have included the practices of loving kindness and self-compassion, have had a gradual, transformative effect on me. I now know that the practice of kind awareness serves as the foundation for loving action. That’s the essence of what you’ll learn in this course.

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Over the years, I've had several awakening experiences. One significant one was in August 2019 while backpacking with a friend. During the trip, I read Thomas Merton, journaled, and meditated. Suddenly, I became aware of the Life force that flows through all of us. I sensed it in me, in the fish in the lake, in the ducks on the water, in the birds in the air, and in the plants and trees. I sensed that this sacred Life force was not just about me, but about all of Life—it was both personal to me and impersonal. I experienced myself as but a miniscule but important channel for this force, and I could feel a oneness with all that is. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift of Life, and I felt a profound calling—even a duty—to serve this sacred Life force. It was a reminder of the mandate to live to do good rather than to be great.

This awakening further shifted me from an egocentric point of view to a “unicentric” one. If you have yet to have such an experience, the practices in this course are designed to lead you there.

As I've worked on nurturing my own healing, I believe I've become a more effective healer of others, as my own wounds have given me empathy and compassion for my patients. I have also worked to forgive myself for the harm I've done, so I now experience more forgiveness for others who commit harmful acts.

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I've struggled to make sense of my own experience of healing and transformation over the past 10 years. One morning several years ago, while running in the early morning darkness, I had an epiphany of sorts. I was contemplating the roles of mindfulness, compassion, acceptance, and nonjudgmental loving awareness in my healing and in the healing of my patients. I was also thinking about the interaction between doing good and feeling good, and how the two contributed to each other in that feeling good inspires doing good and doing good helps us to feel good. Then, all of a sudden, it came to me in a flash that I could boil down my own and others' awakening, healing, and transformations to four core processes: Attending, Appreciating, Abstaining from harm, and Acting with love. I realized that it was my practice of nonjudgmental, kind inquiry into my moment-to-moment experience that had allowed me to see more clearly what I was feeling and thinking, to see my motives and intentions, and to see my pain with compassionate eyes. I also realized I felt better about myself and my life the less I harmed myself and others and the more I worked to benefit myself and others. That was when I first came up with the four A's of awakening: Attending, Appreciating, Abstaining from harm, and Acting with love. In order to simplify this model, I later included abstaining from harm as a type of action in which we act to inhibit acting on destructive impulses. I condensed the four As of awakening to the 3 A's of awakening: Attending, Appreciating, and Acting with love.

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As I pondered this model and its implications, I began to use it in my clinical practice with remarkable results. First, I noticed that it was very helpful for patients to see that they have a Love Wound. It was validating of their experience and gave them a perspective for holding feelings of self-hatred with compassion for the first time. They could also begin to see how their Love Wound distorted their life agenda to an agenda of trying to heal the Love Wound by getting the love of others or trying to numb the pain of the Love Wound through drinking, drugs and distractions. Helping patients to see this has been truly eye opening and liberating. It has allowed my patients to engage in a process of healing their Love Wounds through the practice of the 3 A's of awakening.

One patient, I'll call her Judy, came to me with the pain of a strained and conflicted marriage along with marked anxiety around other people. She started a practice of attending and noticed that her thoughts were mostly about herself. With attending, she noticed a constant worry about whether others were nice to her or not. She also noticed that her self-preoccupation caused her to neglect her friends and family and left her feeling anxious and unfulfilled. With further attending, she traced this feeling back to her childhood and her mother, who was indifferent to her growing up. With this insight, she began a practice of showing herself the kindness and concern she never felt growing up. She began to let go of her habit of self-preoccupation and began to instead preoccupy herself with how she might benefit her family and friends. Her life flourished as a result.

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Another patient, Jeff, also came to me for help with his marriage. Jeff began a practice of attending and quickly noticed anger and irritation when his wife asked him to help out around the house. With continued inquiry, he remembered that his father had treated his mother like a slave. With further inquiry, he noticed feeling very vulnerable. He felt he might be engulfed if he yielded to his wife's requests. He realized he didn't know how to be in a collaborative relationship because he never experienced such a relationship between his mother and father. With this insight, he decided to develop this skill by yielding to some of his wife's requests and holding his anxiety about engulfment in his kind awareness. He started to collaborate with her, asserting himself when he didn't want to go along with her requests while looking for ways to respond to her needs. During the process, he attended kindly to his fear and resistance while doing what he knew was right, even though it was uncomfortable. After about six months, his marriage developed a level of harmony he had never before experienced.

Another patient, Paula, came to me for treatment of a severe depression. She began an attending practice and quickly noticed a compulsion to appease her husband. As she inquired further, she noticed this impulse was out of a fear of abandonment. She felt she needed to please her husband and others to be loved by them. With further attending, she recalled that her father would judge and condemn her if she didn't do what he wanted. With this insight, Paula began to show herself kindness and compassion for the hurt her father inflicted upon her. This was liberating. She no longer felt enslaved to her husband's approval. Her depression lifted as she began a practicing of living authentically and honoring her own needs. This was scary for her, but as she began to assert herself and ask for what she wanted from her husband, she discovered that he continued to love her even when she was being authentic with him. She discovered for the first time that it was possible to be loved for who she was even when she wasn't appeasing others.

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Another patient, Grace, came to me for treatment of severe alcoholism. Grace began a practice of appreciative attending early in her recovery. She noticed that the purpose of her life had been to have excitement through drinking and that alcohol gave her a way to bond and belong with others. She also noticed she felt afraid and inferior with people who didn't use drugs. She traced this fear back to many years of being bullied as a child and a teen. With appreciative attending, her buried pain emerged, and she grieved. With practice, she learned to hold her pain and anxiety in kind awareness and to seek out sober peers who were also kind to her. With time, she developed loving connections with loving people that substituted for her use of alcohol to soothe herself.

Like me and my patients, we're all struggling in our own ways to find happiness and get by, possessed at times by symptoms of the Love Wound: fear, anger, judgment, and self-centeredness. The practice of love through the 3 A's of awakening to love offers healing and liberation, and that's the aim of this course. As we continue in this series of talks, I pray that you too will experience a healing of your Love Wound so that you might also realize a life of love as I and my patients have done.

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OUR NEXT SESSION:

In our next session I'll discuss the impact a love wound has on our lives and the ways we try to manage the pain of the love wound. **In the meantime, between now and then, reflect on the following:**

1. Did you have any painful experiences growing up where you felt harmed by your caregivers?
2. Did you have any painful experiences growing up where you felt neglected by your caregivers?
3. Did you have any painful experiences growing up where you felt harmed, neglected, or abandoned by other people?
4. Did you have experiences in the past where you felt embarrassed, ashamed, or humiliated? How did these experiences impact how you felt about yourself?
5. Have you done anything that you find it difficult to forgive?

Please take some time to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. **Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!**