

# The Language of Emotions with Karla McLaren

**Karla McLaren:** The harm in both looking at emotions as problems or as prizes at the fair is that if you see an emotion as a problem, you will not develop skills with it. You'll learn how to repress it or hide it or pretend you're not having it. So with that emotion, you're not gonna develop any kind of vocabulary or regulation abilities because you're just running from it.

It's bad, you know, run. It's that emotion. Let's go and, on the flip side, if you treat an emotion as positive or wanted, then you're gonna overemphasize that emotion. You're gonna spend too much time in that emotions world.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That was Karla McLaren on Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Yael Schonbrun:** We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting-edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act Metaphors and the upcoming Imposter No More.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Hi everyone. This is Debbie. Today I'm bringing you a conversation with a return guest, Karla McLaren, who is talking to us all about

emotions today. She has a new addition of her book, *The Language of Emotions*, which is a terrific resource if you wanna understand your emotional experience better.

And Jill is here with me today to introduce the episode. And Jill, I believe you had quite a few thoughts about the episode.

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, I think I might be Karla's new biggest fan. I think, honestly, Debbie, this is one of the best episodes we've ever done. First of all, Karla is so wise. I mean, there were so many like quotable moments in this episode, and I just think this message is so important and it's gonna help so many people. And, I hope listeners share this one.

I know I'll be sharing this with like every, everybody I know whether they want me to or not.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, it's funny cuz my husband listens to the podcast occasionally. I can't say he listens to every episode. He's not in the field though, once in a while and he, one time he said to me, You should do an episode where you talk about different emotions and why we have them on what they mean. And so this is kind of that episode and he thought for himself as a non-mental health professional that that would be a helpful thing to offer people.

**Jill Stoddard:** It absolutely is. And you know, we're clinical psychologists, I feel like I know a fair amount about emotions, and even I got so much out of this episode, like so much, you know, there's always a nugget or two out of an episode, but I feel like. Every word of this episode was a learning lesson for me.

And you know, you guys break down anger, shame, envy, forgiveness, anxiety. And I'd love if people listen to the end. You even talk about a few emotions maybe listeners haven't heard before, like Panger. It was just so good. And, you know, I think maybe the, if I, I, I wrote a lot of notes and I struggled to kind of pick out the thing that I found the most valuable.

I think one of those was your conversation about forgiveness, and the reason for that is, it's something I've always been really confused about. It's something I've kind of struggled to talk about with my clients where I'm like, I'm not sure I know exactly what it is or how you do it, or you even should do it.

Like I've struggled to have forgiveness toward people and I thought that was because there was something wrong with me. And Karla just really, um, she

completely shifted my perspective on forgiveness. I feel like I will be like, forever changed by that part of your conversation. I'm so grateful.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I love that. I'm so glad you're saying that Jill. To me, I think that forgiveness is absolutely something where, there's a lot of I would say, misconceptions around how people think about it. I mean, even that idea of forgive and forget, it's like that's not really gonna happen.

You can't forget some of these things.

**Jill Stoddard:** And she talks about how often we are told to forgive by other people, and that that is more about those other people wanting to feel more comfortable. And that was a real like wow moment for me because I, I've had that experience. Have you had that experience where someone's, you know, kind of like, oh, Debbie, you should just forgive and forget, and then you feel guilty, like, what's wrong with me that I can't let this go?

And Karla basically is like, No. Get angry and, you know, and talks a little bit more that, and people can listen to that in the episode, but man, it was really kind of like eye-opening for me.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Almost like not only is it okay to be angry, but sometimes it's to really move forward. You have to be angry first and you may never totally get rid of that anger, but that's okay. That doesn't mean you can't move forward. You can't repair whatever the situation calls for. But to me, that's so validating cuz this idea that you're just gonna suddenly, magically not be angry at all anymore.

Like, that's not gonna fly in some situations.

**Jill Stoddard:** A hundred percent. And I think, you know, the conversation that you had about shame, I felt much the same way about that in terms of just sort of being like, wow, you know, I think shame is one of those emotions as humans, that it might be the emotion that we work the hardest to avoid. And, you know, and this was just another just incredibly rich portion of this conversation that I think is gonna really change the way our listeners think about shame and relate to shame and can honestly be healing for people.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I think you should listen to that part because I think actually that for me, the more you realize it, sometimes shame is so subtle, you don't even understand that that's what's happening. And I think once you have a word for it, and once you can be on the lookout for it and look at it in this way, you'll have to listen to hear how Karla describes shame.

But once you can think about it in that way, I think it's actually really helpful. I don't, I have definitely talked to some clients about shame, and I think they usually find it kind of almost like, oh, this makes so much sense now.

**Jill Stoddard:** Mm-hmm. It's a game-changer.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, we hope that you get as much out of this episode as Jill did, um, and hope you enjoy the conversation with Karla McLaren.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm happy to welcome Karla McLaren back to the podcast today. Karla was our guest for episode number 265 about the power of emotions at work. And we're here today to talk all about emotions and her book, *The Language of Emotions, What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You*, which is a 13-year-old book with a brand new revised edition that is just coming out this summer.

Karla, welcome back. It's great to see you.

**Karla McLaren:** Thank you so much. I'm so glad to be here.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, we're glad you're here. I think one of the words I saw that describes this book is that it's an emotional guidebook. And so today we're gonna talk about why we need an emotional guidebook, why this is an important way to look at emotions. And we're gonna talk through a few examples of emotions, um, that you cover in your book.

But, you know, I think it's interesting that 13 years later after the book came out and the book. The original edition was read by many, many people that there's reason to write a new edition at this point because things have changed in the world of our understanding of emotions.

I wonder if you could just say a few words about what you notice in terms of what's changed in the last 13 years and what kind of changes did you need to make to update your book.

**Karla McLaren:** I think for me, what has changed is I understand the emotions so much better now after having worked with them. And also, uh, I've started a licensing program in my work, so now there are a whole bunch of other people coming into. This awareness. And so we have, uh, like this massive group of emotions weighing in on, on what emotions are, and we found out so much.

And sometimes I would go to the original book and, and just sort of, you know, just sort of hold my forehead and go, oh no, what did I say back then? I understood what I understood at the time. It's like anything that you've done for 13 years, I would hope that you know more now.

We also know more thanks to Lisa Feldman Barrett, the researcher who has, she's turned the study of emotion just on its head and thank goodness, but may understand the really intense power of vocabulary that knowing what your emotions are and knowing them at very specific levels of detail.

So I'm not just sad. I am, um, dejected. I am despondent, I'm morose, I'm melancholic. Right, to know that level of detail, um, it doesn't only help you identify your emotional reality, but just knowing your emotions or that that level of detail will help you regulate them all by itself. With no other steps, simply learning an emotional vocabulary.

And so I had created an emotional vocabulary list in like 2012, but he didn't get into this book. Now it's in the book.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Mm-hmm.

**Karla McLaren:** Right? Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and for myself as a clinical psychologist, I think a big part of my job is helping people do that. Helping people look at their emotions and understand them and make sense of them. And it's really endlessly fascinating. I mean, I never get bored of helping people take a look at that and helping people understand their emotions better.

And I think you're right. The more you're in that world and you're looking out for it, you look at it, you're looking for your own emotions and other people's emotions. You can learn some of the complexities. You're right, it's, it's sad, mad, afraid. It's much more than that, right?

**Karla McLaren:** Yes, like upset. That's not an emotion, y'all.

**Karla McLaren:** I feel bad.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Well, and that actually leads us to one of the premises of your book, which is that historically we really have looked at emotions and some emotions in particular, right? As problematic or bad or as something that we should either avoid or hide from other people or repress.

And so I guess I have a two-part question here. The first part is, What's the harm of taking that approach to emotions of looking at emotions as something that is a problem?

**Karla McLaren:** The harm in both looking at emotions as problems or as prizes at the fair is that if you see an emotion as a problem, you will not develop skills with it. You'll learn how to repress it or hide it or pretend you're not having it. So with that emotion, you're not gonna develop any kind of vocabulary or regulation abilities because you're just running from it.

It's bad, you know, run. It's that emotion. Let's go. And on the flip side, if you treat an emotion as positive or wanted, then you're gonna overemphasize that emotion. You're gonna spend too much time in that emotions world. There's something called a toxic positivity bias, which we see, especially in the workplace, where emotions are not welcome, is that people who will only allow the supposedly positive emotions will create so much toxicity because no one will be able to speak what's true. Right. It would be like, no, we, we need to put a happy face on that. We need to slap a happy face on that. And people actually lose connection with what's true.

The whole like, community begins to fall apart because no one can say, no, I was angry right then, or, you know, I'm afraid that this is happening. You know, that sort of thing. So to be able to not utilize all emotions is a way to actually shut down people's neurology basically.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. And then the second part of the question is how can your approach, which is much more about using emotions to understand ourselves better and sort of channeling them effectively, how is your approach, do you think more beneficial and what does it do for people in your experience using this approach with people that you've worked with and with yourself, what do you think are some of the benefits?

**Karla McLaren:** I think there are many benefits to it. The main one is that you begin to tell the truth. You begin to learn how to tell the truth about who you are and what you feel. But, uh, I think a deeper benefit is that emotions carry information and wisdom. They are the things that help us attach meaning to incoming data.

And without emotions, we actually can't think or have ideas or dream or behave or act. Emotions underlie all functions of a conscious, well, let me say a conscious person, but also an unconscious person because emotions are working very strongly within the dream realm when you are unconscious, right? So

they're always there and learning how to work with them means sort of taking the reins of your entire life, your entire organism, your entire neurology so that you now are connected to the things that help you make meaning and act. And if you don't have a connection, you may not understand yourself very well.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Okay. And so, we'll talk about some of the different ways that you help people do this. You have these four keys to being what you call an emotional genius. You know, it's this idea of really knowing yourself and understanding your emotions, emotional intelligence. Um, one of the keys that you offer, and I wanna unpack a little bit is that we have to let go of this idea that some emotions are positive and some are negative.

I think you kind of alluded to this with the idea of toxic positivity. Um, but let's talk a little bit about, you know, this idea of having valence to emotions and why that can be, why looking at emotions in that way can be problematic.

**Karla McLaren:** You know, I talked about if you think of an emotion as bad, you're going to avoid it. And if you think of it as good, you're going to overemphasize it, right? You're gonna be in that emotions territory for way too long, longer than you should be. But another thing about thinking of emotions as positive or negative, pro-social or anti-social, um, uncomfortable or comfortable is that it places emotions in categories that aren't actually true.

For instance, anger is supposed to be a negative emotion that's antisocial and uncomfortable, but it feels great to be angry.

Right? So if you go to like, how do I feel when I'm angry? I'm like, I'm powerful. Or, uh, fear and panic. You would say those are negative emotions. Uh, but what about people who love to go to horror films?

Right. They love those emotions. They're just having so much, you know, delight in them. Or grief is considered a negative emotion, but if you try to get through the loss of something or someone important to you, without grief, you're gonna see what negative is because you're not gonna be having access to the emotion that actually can help you. And there are the so-called positive emotions, happiness, contentment, and joy. If you stay too long in happiness and you refuse to look at anything else, then we're looking at a toxic positivity bias. Too much joy can lean into mania. Right. You can lose your sense of proportion and the things that your other emotions would've brought to you.

The anger would've said, excuse me, what are you doing right now?



And fear would say, you're scaring me because you're off on a tangent right now. Right? So, if you just try to have the supposedly positive emotions, your life can spin very negative very quickly, but people sort of don't look at it that way.

Right. And the supposedly negative emotions, you require them and if you're missing them, things don't go well.

**Debbie Sorensen:** It reminds me of that movie Inside Out and how that all these different emotions sort of have to be there in the beginning. There's this sense that some are better than others, but you see how they all have to work together and they're all there for a reason. I tell my clients.

**Karla McLaren:** And I think in that movie doesn't, doesn't sadness eventually save the day?

Sadness is exiled or something, and then sadness goes and he fixes everything while the other ones are like, what do we do? Um, that's the kind of thing I like to see. It's like, oh yeah, these emotions are necessary and if you don't have them, something's going to go

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's right. Yeah. And I like to remind my clients that they're all there for a reason. Every single one of them, they're wired into us and they serve a purpose. And I think sometimes we forget that because some of them we, you know, have learned we shouldn't, we shouldn't really want.

So, as I read your book, you share a lot about your personal history and I read some more, uh, some of your essays on your webpage that go a bit and more into that.

And what I think is really interesting about your story, and I'm gonna probably just nutshell your history a little bit, which might be a strange thing hear.

Um, yes.

**Karla McLaren:** nutshell, I like

**Debbie Sorensen:** you know, write about how you. A trauma history from childhood, and you were for many years involved in kind of the new age spiritual world, which you eventually left and went toward a more academic study of emotions.



You know, you did some research, got your master's degree, but what I think is really interesting because you've had that history, I think that your approach blends some aspects of all of them, right? So there is this personal understanding. There's a very strong academic and research based understanding of emotions, sort of an intellectual framework for it.

And then you also encourage people to do some of that deep work with emotions to help them kind of listen deeply to their own emotions. And also you present how emotions can help people heal from their past history, like traumatic events they've experienced and that kind of thing.

And so I was wondering if you could just little bit about, you know, first of all, how, how you blend those and how emotions can be useful in that way in terms of deep self-understanding and healing from trauma. In other words, how do you think that those three sort of come together in your framework?

**Karla McLaren:** Well, I think you're right. This is a lived experience approach to emotion, right? And then going and getting some research support. Although it was hard to get because psychology, psychiatry, and neurology are very strongly valenced, right? So the emotions are very strongly valenced there, and a lot of times when I would read studies about the downsides of happiness or something, people would call this a confounding um, result, right? This is so confusing. How can a positive emotion be negative? I was like, because Valency is not where you should be with this, right? And they would find, for instance, um, slightly depressed people are more realistic than optimistic people, right? Not all the way depressed, just slightly depressed.

And they would say, this is confounding, right? But depression is a, an emotion that gives you a reality check and sometimes, You need a reality check, right? Especially if you're traipsing along with your happiness. It's all gonna be good. This relationship's gonna be great, and I don't have to check in with anything, right?

And your depression says, excuse me. No, you have to check in. Um, so working with emotions in the way that I did coming out of, you know, really severe trauma history, um, and a pretty severe mental illness as well. Like, most people learn to see emotions as the problem, right? They're the problem. And I would, you know, think to myself, I would go from the age of like 10 onward.

I would go into severe suicidal depressions and they would just come up of their own volition. I didn't know what started it, you know, there was no rhyme or reason to it. And I would just try to get through whatever way I could. And I

would think to myself, you know, my life would be perfect if it wasn't for these damned depressions. Like if they would leave me alone, you know what I mean? If I could just get rid of this. And I finally went into the depression and I, you know, looked at it and said, what in the hell do you want from me? And I think I was in my twenties and I was ready to be hit over the head with an anvil, right?

I was ready to be abused and yelled at and screamed at and told that I was no good. I was ready for the whole thing. I'm like, let's, let's do this, man. I've got my dukes up. We're going and uh, and all of a sudden everything went blank. And I saw an image of, uh, parents in London at a train station sending their children to the, um, the countryside. And I was like, what? You know where's my fight? Okay. So there was no fight. So as all of a sudden I was in this other world and I saw that what my depression was doing was taking away the children of my soul because there was a war in London and it was likely that we were going to be bombed and shelled.

So there was this imagery that I was able to pick up. I mean, I'm a writer, so I have a very vivid imagination, right? Um, so, so I saw that depression was taking my energy away because it wasn't safe where I was. And I kind of came out of that sort of, you know, awareness or vision. And I looked around at my life and like, yeah, my life isn't good. You know, I was in the middle of a very dangerous relationship and I wasn't safe at all. My son wasn't safe, and I was blaming depression. I was making a fundamental you know, um, emotional attribution mistake. I was blaming depression for what was going on, and it was depression that was trying to deal with what was going on. Right. The depression was telling me the absolute truth of the situation, and I was, no, I can figure it out, blah, blah, blah. I came up against a brick wall of understanding and that was kind of where I began to understand the emotions much more clearly after that point.

Uh, and each of the emotions has its own reason for arising that is supportive. And if we think of them as negative, we're gonna be like me saying, my life would be great if, except for these damned emotions. Um, so for me, that was like a very freeing thing and it's, it's more poetic.

Right. It's more sort of like Jungian depth therapy level of understanding that isn't very, um, that isn't very accessible with people, you know, trying to manage emotions or down-regulate emotions or be in control of emotions.

**Debbie Sorensen:** So I wanna highlight from what you said, because one is that you have a chap or you have, you have a section of your book about situational depression. And that's so interesting to me because I see that a lot.

There was this meme going around a while where it said, maybe you're not depressed, maybe you're just surrounded by assholes.

I thought sometimes, right? Sometimes that's the case, that we are so busy trying to get rid of our depression and not always. You know, sometimes depression just sort of comes up for whatever reason, but there are times when people, if you actually stop trying to fight your depression and ask what is the function of it?

What's it doing for me? You know, there's some information there as you said, and I think I just really appreciate that you had your own personal experience with that, that that led you to this point and that people can do similar work in terms of whatever emotions they might be struggling with and how transformative it can be.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah. They're all there for a reason. They all have a healing purpose. Yeah. Um, now I do have to say that, um, I had been, I, I was raised in the new age in alternative medicine, so I was kind of, um, indoctrinated against, uh, modern medicine, basically conventional medicine.

And so I didn't even think of going to antidepressants. But when I hit, um, Menopause and my hormones went cattywampus, my depression went cattywampus too. And so I was on a really good antidepressant for about a year. Um, that, you know, literally saved my life. So I wouldn't say like, let's all just, let's all just throw away the medication and just deal with it.

There are many instances, especially with long-term depression as you. Where it can get, it can wear a kind of a groove in the brain and you learn to be depressed. So there's an unlearning that needs to happen if you have, you know, very long-term depression.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's a good point. Thank you. I'm glad you said that. And, and another piece, and I think you alluded to this a little bit, but I, I think this is another thing I see a lot is around, you know, sometimes people who have had a trauma history or who have just learned how to be out of touch with their emotions, maybe they never learned to be in touch with their emotions, can also almost be disconnected or dissociated from their emotional experience.

Can you say a little bit about that and how your approach can help when, when people are experiencing that disconnect?

**Karla McLaren:** I think it's the movement of the modern world or maybe, you know, it's been centuries that we've been told that emotions aren't okay and that emotions are lower than spirituality, certainly. Um, And, uh, at this point we've also got the untrue idea of the triune brain. You know, it's, it's not a thing like the amygdala is where all the emotions are, and then you've got this really smart brain above the top of it that can manage it.

It's all nonsense. That's not how the brain works, but that's a very powerful fairytale that we have in our culture, right? That emotions are primitive. And what I say instead is, no emotions are ancient. Right. And so they have an ancient wisdom that we can tap into. And when people know that their emotions are a part of their entire brain, emotions are found everywhere in the brain.

There's not just like a little emotion place. Um, and that's another thing that Lisa Feldman Barrett has helped us understand that emotions are involved in everything. They're not, they're not hidden in a part of the brain. Um, That to help people understand. No, your emotions have been with you your entire life and they've been watching what's been happening.

Each of them has a piece of wisdom. And if you would think of your body, you don't have a positive, negative connotation to any of the other parts of your body. You don't say, I love my lungs, but my stomach has to go. Right. We don't do that. Um, it would be the same to say I love happiness, but I don't want any of that anger. Right, that, that we've been taught to sort of disassemble our disassemble, our, our psyche. And in so doing, we lose connection to ourselves. So yes, people can be very dissociated from emotion, um, but what I've found is the emotions are never dissociated from us. So even if we don't think we're angry, if you understand anger as your capacity to understand what you value and set boundaries, I would just watch.

Okay, so where are you setting boundaries? There's your anger, right? It's always been there, right? Your fear is your intuition and your instincts. Are you a fairly intuitive person? There's your fear, right? Just to help people. It's like emotions are working invisibly all the time.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, that's right. They're in there somewhere. You're just not sort of paying attention or accessing them or something like that. Yeah.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah. We've been trained away from them. We've really been trained away from emotion.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And one other thing, and you have a whole chapter on this too, is that we get into avoidance behaviors, addictions, distractions, and, and you write a whole chapter about this.

And I think that's an interesting thing because well, often we, you know, I mean, who doesn't have some form of that that they, they get pulled into from time to time. But sometimes those are really underlying, that is that same desire to kind of maybe check out from your experience a little bit, would you say?

**Karla McLaren:** I think distractions can be so important, right? If you know you're doing them right, to be able to say. Um, there's a wonderful book called *The End of Trauma* by George A. Bonanno, and he calls it *Coping Ugly* so if I'm just, just netflixing my way through this situation, do you know what I mean? And I'm, yeah, chocolate and, um, reading trash novels.

Um, I'm coping.

**Debbie Sorensen:** mm.

**Karla McLaren:** my coping mechanism. It's just ugly right now. And to be able to say that to yourself instead of remaining unconscious about your netflixing and your chocolate eating right to sort of be, uh, a bystander in your own behavior.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I think there's a big difference. Choosing that, Hey, it's been a long day. I'm gonna do Netflix and chocolate tonight.

**Karla McLaren:** And that, and that shift from being entirely unconscious about something to becoming conscious of it, that's a difficult shift to make because now you've gotta look at, why was I doing that? Right? What is underneath here, you know, that might need some support.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Okay. The part of your book that I most highlighted, um, dogeared underlined, I have stars. I don't know if you can see it but it's so important and I really love your take on this is about real forgiveness, right? So the relationship between the process of forgiveness and anger, and I think, I love your take on this so much because I think there are so many misconceptions of what forgiveness means, and I think what people may be expect it to be. Um, so actually I wonder, can I just read a couple quotes from this that I start and, and

then I'm wondering if you could just say a little bit more about this. Um, first of all, you write about how anger and forgiveness kind of go together, right?

Quote, real forgiveness does not make excuses for other people's improper behavior. Real forgiveness does not tell itself that everyone always does the best they know how, because that's preposterous. Do you always do your best? Do I? Of course not. And then you say, and this is a little bit later on the next page, that it looks very evolved and saintly on the outside to have this sort of demure, head bowing type of forgiveness.

But it has some unhealthy effects in the inner world. It excuses the behavior of others and reduces our ability to be conscious and present with the pain we truly feel. I love that because I think sometimes people expect to forgive and forget or to just not care anymore. So this got me fired up as you can tell.

Can you tell the listeners a little bit about your stance on forgiveness and, and why this is important?

**Karla McLaren:** I think as a trauma survivor, I got told to forgive a lot. Right? And what I realized eventually, is that it was for the comfort of the person telling. Right. They didn't want me to be suffering. They didn't want me to be angry. They, they were trying to control my experience and I'm a very feisty person, so if people are wanting to control me, sorry pal, it's not gonna happen.

Um, but, uh, what I realized is people can also sort of do that to themselves by making excuses for the people who have hurt them. I understand that he was having a difficult time and you know, he also had this experience when he was young, so he was just acting out on me, what the blah, blah, blah. I see people going to their first and it is almost as if they have become an attorney for the accused. And I was like, that person needs to go get their own attorney. Right. That's you're the victim. And I think that's difficult for people to say, I was the victim. Rather they wanna like have some power over it, right? To say, I forgive you, which now makes me as some kind of a martyr or something. Um, or, I understand why you did that.

What for me was the, the healing process was to get good and angry and enraged about what I had been put through at the hands of this person's illness and you know, the abuse that I experienced and to be en rage for as long as I wanted to be. Just rage, rage, rage. And eventually when I had done enough raging and anger resets boundaries, when I had restored my boundaries with the emotion that does that, which is anger.

I could all of a sudden look at my molester as separate from me making terrible decisions that were entirely his responsibility and nothing, whatever to do with me. But before that, I had blown out boundaries, which most childhood assault survivors have blown out boundaries. They don't know where they are.

They, they learn to sort of read everybody because their life is unsafe. Right? So once I had reestablished my boundaries, I could then look at him and go, Ooh. I don't forgive you in the way, like, uh, it wasn't a crime, but I, because you need to go to jail. But, but I see that, that the person who was most wounded was you. Because the person who hurts people is the most powerless in the room. Nobody who has real sense of power is gonna go hurting others, right? That's not what it looks like. Um, so it was like re reestablishing my own sense of self, my own sense of agency and autonomy. Understanding power, understanding. You know, it's like there was a whole bunch of things that happened that would never have happened if I would've just done that saintly forgiveness that everybody wanted me to do.

I understand, blah, blah, blah, blah. And what that does is it makes me his attorney and nobody's my attorney, nobody's, nobody's my advocate. I'm continuing in the boundary-less state that I was put into. Right. Forgiveness I think requires that kind of fury, um, if someone's really injured you, uh, to be able to set those boundaries.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And think that, you know, whether it's something major like what you're talking about, or even smaller, you know, day-to-day grievances, um, behaviors, I would say that, I think it's to imagine that you're just gonna jump to this place where you're so saintly and unforgiving, and you don't care anymore.

And. It's okay that this happened, or anger is completely gone. It's just not, I mean, maybe it's even realistic for some people, I don't know. But I think often it's not realistic, but also it's like you're not honoring your emotions in response to that. You know, sometimes it's, it's okay that you're mad about the way that this person treated you.

That actually doesn't have to go away for you to move forward.

I just really appreciate that you point that out.

**Karla McLaren:** And I have to say that I've seen people do that saintly forgiveness, like with their grandmother, and then get into relationships that are exactly like the relationship with the grandmother because it's not finished. Like



that was a ritual that got started and that ritual has not ended, and so they just go have it.

I saw this for myself in my twenties when I would get into jobs and I was like, okay, I have all my clothes on as nobody's touching me in a sexual way, but this feels exactly like being molested, right? I was like, oh, okay, so I'm still in this world. I'm still in this situation, so what do I do to get out of it?

You know? You know, it's like this reminds me of something.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's right. It can feel familiar over and over again until you  
yeah

**Karla McLaren:** until you reset your boundary, going back to that original one and each one after and be like, no,

**Debbie Sorensen:** yeah, not here to defend you, right. So the bulk of your book, the main part about I'd say probably about two thirds of your book is this very comprehensive, as you said, it's, it's almost like a, a guidebook to your emotions. It goes through different emotion families and breaks down different emotions and really unpacks them.

Um, And I think what, and, and for each one it, um, it goes through some of the messages that the emotion contains, what can be learned from them, some practices for learning from them or embracing them. And so I thought it might be fun. I think people need to read the book because you go through so many just, but as a couple of examples, I thought it might be fun to highlight a few and maybe a few emotions that people.

That are maybe less obvious or people that don't talk about quite as much. Um, so start with shame. Could you talk a little bit about shame, um, uh, which I think is often one that we categorize as a negative emotion, um, or that people might wanna overlook or turn away from. So what's the function shame and how might shame be a helpful thing to be aware?

**Karla McLaren:** I love shame. Love it. Because everybody hates it, so I'm just an opposite person. No, because, but shame is kind of a sibling emotion to anger. Anger helps you set boundaries from the outside, so it helps you identify what you value. And if people step across your boundaries, some form of anger should come forward to help you say, Hey.

That's not all right. Shame is, uh, an internal boundary setting emotion that helps you maintain the values, ethics, and, um, morals that you agree with, so that if you start stepping across what you've agreed to, your shame should come up and say, Hey, let, that's not a thing. So the problem with shame is that most of us have learned about shame by being. Right. So the shame doesn't come from within our own moral structure. It comes from exterior sources, many of whom are abusive, right? So if I have something in my moral structure that says I want to floss every night, that is a livable agreement that I, and my shame. That's cool. So if I, it's at, it's 10 o'clock, it's 11 o'clock, and I haven't flossed yet, my shame will say, Hey, uh, what's going on?

I was like, oops, I didn't floss right? That's me and my shame working together on an agreement that is livable. But what if I got an agreement that says, no one will ever love you until you're perfect. And that's part of my moral and ethical structure. Shame is going to help me live up to it. I don't know where I got that picture from. Maybe from Instagram.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah, go for some shame at Instagram. Um, but if some poor soul comes to love me, my shame is gonna go on a bender. My shame is gonna go banana crackers, right? It's gonna be like you can't be loved and all those messages are gonna come up. And if I don't understand shame, I'm gonna say shame is the worst emotion that's ever lived, right?

I won't understand that it's the message underneath that shame is helping me uphold. So, because it's an emotion of values, ethics, and, and, and rules, right? The work of shame is to understand whose values and ethics are these? Are they mine? Are they livable? Are they appropriate? Are they from the present moment? Because I mean, like you could have, um, children are best seen and not heard, and you're 35 and you're having a really hard time in board meetings because you're still like, no, you're not a child anymore. But your shame's like, I have this as a contract. You, you assigned it when you were seven. Right?

So there's, there's the work with shame is to make sure that all of your ethics and morals belong to you. And so it is the emotion, self realization, self-actualization. But if you don't know that about shame, you would just think, I never want to feel shame. Shame is the worst feeling in the world. It's a terrible emotion and it's gonna murder us all in our sleep.

No, it's not. Right. So, yeah, so misunderstanding or misattribution of shame onto the contract that is, or the agreement that is upholding, is one of the hugest, uh, emotional, um, confusions.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah,

**Debbie Sorensen:** that's really helpful. I think where it yeah, kind of crosses that line into something that's important to something that's not working. And one of the things, you mentioned this in your book, and I, I sometimes think about this, especially with shame prone clients is how often we wanna hide when we're shamed.

Right. And when we feel a ashamed, when we feel shame, we wanna bury that deep or not let other people see it. And it's really the opposite that needs to happen to move forward. Yeah.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah. To be able to say, what is this? What is this agreement?

Where's this ethic from? Where's this moral from? Do I agree with it now today? And if not,

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Yeah. that can get you unstuck. Okay. Another emotion that I think is also similarly, sometimes misunderstood or o overlooked is envy. Tell us a little bit about envy.

**Karla McLaren:** Now envy is one of the seven deadly sins. So we see how Catholics feel about envy and the seven deadly sins I think five of them are human emotions. Pride,

lust, you know, anger. Yeah. I think there's a lot going on there. So, envy and it's sibling emotion. Jealousy. I call them the sociological emotions because their work is to, um, situate us appropriately in social groups.

These are the social emotions. Shame is also a social emotion. Um, envy. I call it interactional radar. Its work is to help us maintain our mm, safety and stability, and sort of boundaries around access to resources, uh, money, things, recognition and approval. Right? So it is what is our sort of social capital envy's involved in that. Jealousy it's sibling emotion is about love, commitment, um, close relationships, right? So a lot of times they work together. Um, children who grow up with siblings deal with a lot of jealousy and envy, and sadly, most

parents will crush it. Right, because it's not, you don't wanna hear kids always whining about how it's not fair.

But, um, helping children really hone their idea of fairness is such an important thing, or anybody's fairness. With jealousy and envy the work with a sort of a mature jealousy and envy that people have been allowed to work with is, I need to make sure that everybody else has the love they need. I need to make sure that everybody else has the things they. Right, because then we're gonna have a happy community, right? We're gonna have a happy social group, and it's not just me. So for a lot of, a lot of us, our connection to jealousy and envy was broken in childhood. So we sort of have that sometimes self, self-centered child behavior around our jealousy and envy.

And that's not jealousy and envy's fault. That's not the heart of jealousy and envy. So we learn in this work to work with them directly and you know, when we see something they're like, I hate it when she gets the thing that I, and just pull back and go, could it be okay for her to have the

**Debbie Sorensen:** Mm.

**Karla McLaren:** You to want the thing.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You know, this is gonna directly impact my parenting because I'm gonna start talking to my kids about this more because I pointed out to them, I think it was just this weekend, that they were so fixated. I was pouring them each of beverages, and they were so fixated about making sure they were exactly the same.

They were like looking, making sure the line was even, and I said do you really care that much if your sister gets a teaspoon more of this than you do? And I think I maybe missed an opportunity to teach them something about envy because yeah, that's a really interesting way to think about it.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah, one of the, one, a good way to work with kids on that. Um, my sister and I were very competitive and my mom would have one of us pour or

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah,

**Karla McLaren:** And the other choose.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes.

**Karla McLaren:** So the pouring and cutting person had to be really, really precise.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Uh, maybe we need to teach them a little generosity too, you know.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah

**Debbie Sorensen:** Another emotion, um, which I had, had interestingly not really thought about much as an emotion. Apathy, what's going on with apathy. Karla,

I love how you delight in emotion that I name. You just get this big smile on your face.

I can see Karla on the video. You should see her beaming about each and every one of these emotions.

**Karla McLaren:** Like I get to go to Apathy Town. Yay.

I call apathy the mask for anger, because if anger's about boundaries and what we value, if you look at apathy, this is a person setting a boundary. Especially if you look at like teenage apathy, whatever, I don't care, whatever they are appearing to not care, but they're definitely setting a boundary around it. And what I've found about apathy is that it will come up when we are in a situation where our voice, our values and our needs are not important either because we're in a yucky place or it's a, you know, it's biology 101. You just gotta get through it. It's not about you at all. And so to become aware when we're apathetic, and what I learned to do with my apathy when I was really trapped in a place that wasn't for me at all, was to go into my imagination. So I would doodle and things like that.

So the thing that I ask about apathy is, Why is this place not built for you in any way, shape, or form? Why are you here? What's, what's going on? And then sometimes when I'm in a place where I cannot, there's nothing I can do, I start creating a place that would be better, right? So it's like there's a learning thing.

I know this place is nothing and I'm just gonna put down my mask of apathy and inside my psyche, I'm gonna build a place that would work and it sort of helps me get into this dreaming, you know, where I get my agency back, I get my autonomy back. But, uh, you know, adolescents are plagued by apathy because their world isn't built for them.

It's built to control.

It's built to educate them. It's right. It's built to teach them, but it's not built for them. And you know, until they're 18th, they're, they're 18, they're actually not legal entities. Right. A child has no legal standing. Um, and my son, when he was in that age, he came out and he said like, why do I have to clean my room?

It's my only space. It's literally the only space I own. And he said, you guys can have your stuff out in the living room, in the dining room, in the kitchen, in your own bedroom in here. And my room is still not mine. And I went, Your Honor, I conceive my case. So I said, so here's what I would ask. Please don't take food in there.

Then your room is your own. Right. He made a really good, right. It was a really good argument, and I looked around at the kitchen table. I was like, oh, he got me there.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Flexible parenting. You can admit when your child has

**Karla McLaren:** Oh, I was wrong. My shame was like, he's made a point here and my envy was like, is it fair for everyone? No, it's not. So listen to him. Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's funny. I wanna ask about one more final emotion, and this one probably isn't one of the lesser known emotions or lesser acknowledged emotions.

This one I think we hear about a but I just wanted to hear your thoughts about it cuz I think so many people might find themselves struggling this with this one. But can you just say a little bit about anxiety and worry and what they're there for and why we might want to honor those particular emotions aswell.

**Karla McLaren:** My friend anxiety. Uh, in the original Language of Emotions, there was no anxiety chapter because I thought anxiety was a problem. I also wrote a book in, I think 2021 or 2020 called Embracing Anxiety about how to work with anxiety. What I found when I was doing my research for the book is that almost everybody confuses anxiety with panic, and so the, the emotion of anxiety helps us plan for the future. And what it does is it makes sure that we have everything we need to complete our tasks and hit our deadlines. So anxiety has a lot of energy, but it's also a forward-leaning emotion. So it can be ungrounding just in its own self. If there is any sense of dread or danger then another emotion has come in, and that's panic.

And panic is the emotion that saves our life. So it has the fight, flea, freeze, flock to safety actions, right? And for a lot of people, anxiety and panic are fused as if it's two hands, you know, holding each other and not letting go. So for a lot of people when they're talking about anxiety, they're talking about panic. And so that's a big confusion in the, you know, in our emotional understanding. But anxiety's such an important emotion. It's the emotion of your motivation. It's the emotion of getting things done. So you literally can't do anything without your anxiety. But if it is extremely hand holding with your panic, it could be very uncomfortable because as we know, anxiety has energy and panic has a whole heck of energy. So you could be riled up most of the day with these two emotions and if you're feeling any sense of dread or danger, there's panic in it, right? So that's one big thing is trying to, you know, the work is to like separate these two emotions.

And when I get in a kind of a heightened state, I check with the panic first and I say, am I in danger of losing my life right now? And panic will say, um, no.

I say, but are there tasks and deadlines that are coming up? And anxiety will say, yes, this one's mine. I'll say, okay, panic. Let's see if we can just like soothe it out a little bit.

Thank you for coming and checking to see that I wasn't gonna be murdered by my tasks and deadlines. That's very thoughtful of you. So it's sort of like getting into a, you know, a calm relationship with panic and always asking, am I in physical danger right now? Is my life in danger? That's panics job.

And you need panic, right? You need it to be on the task all the time. Um, panic will jump out when, you know, all of a sudden someone drives into you. You know, they just, they don't know you're there in the fast lane. Boom. Your panic needs to be right there. So there are times when panic is very appropriate and for some reason anxiety and panic are strongly connected in modern people.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I, I appreciate that distinction between those, because I think sometimes we use these words, so generally that we don't think about these subtle differences between these different yeah experiences.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah.

So like when people say anxiety attack, and I was like, yeah, there's panic in that because anxiety doesn't attack you.



**Debbie Sorensen:** And then, another one of your four keys of emotional genius has to do with identifying multiple emotions that might be occurring at the same time, and you actually have some words that I really appreciated for blends of emotions.

Could you give a couple of examples of those? Because it's often the case, right? That were not just feeling one emotion and that's it in any given moment. Usually there's several, especially in an emotionally intense situation.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah. Well, with panic and anxiety, we call it panxiety. With, um, panic and anger. Uh, anger does not in and of its own self have a fight action. There's no fight action in anger. If you're fighting, you're in the fight free emotion of panic, right? Um, so it's panger and we say, am I in anger? Or panger?

Hold on. I have to check. Am I in danger right now? You know, and then get panicked to stand down. Okay, let me say this with anger. Let me set a boundary about what I value, right? But most people, panic and anger are as, as, as linked. Panic has a lot to do in modern people. I'm really interested in how much work this emotion is doing, because really it should be like, like, uh, laying under a tree in a hammock and having a mint julep most of the time, and instead it's up with every emotion.

So it's interesting to see. I was like, panic, what are you doing here? I was like, I was called to the party.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's a good point because we're not really, in the modern world, how often are you really in a life or death situation? I mean, I'm not very often I have to say.

**Karla McLaren:** Yeah, tigers are not coming at me, but my panic is like, it could have happened. You dunno.

Yeah. So what do we have also? We have pangerxiety, which is panic, anger, and anxiety. Um, there's. What was I having the other day? Oh, um, depressed anxiety, which depression and anxiety, which are two weird emotions to have together because one gives you all the energy and one takes your energy away. So having those two together is like an amazing juggling act.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I appreciate that and I do think, so part of the work here and people, I really, really recommend taking a look at your book so that you can get some strategies for how to look at your own emotions and some of these, you

know, just ideas about the individual emotions themselves. And then you can start to notice.

You know, maybe what's the most prominent one? What else is in there too? And I think as you do this, as you go through the process and read the book and really pay attention to your emotions, you will become the emotional genius that Karla talks about, and it will serve you very well.

**Karla McLaren:** And your emotions will be so happy. They'll be like, oh my gosh, they're listening to me.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Karla, and say, yay envy. I love envy. Be the cheerleader them all right. Well, Karla, thank you so much for coming back on this show and, um, people can find you, we'll post to your website and the book and some of your other resources on our show notes. But where can people find you if they wanna look for your, some of your fabulous essays and your trainings and your books?

Where can people find you online?

**Karla McLaren:** They can find me at my site, [karlamclaren.com](http://karlamclaren.com). And I also have an online learning site called [empathyacademy.org](http://empathyacademy.org) and I teach on there and so do, uh, my licensees. And we have some beautiful courses every month.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes, and I, I follow you on social media and I believe I get your newsletter, and so there are some really interesting, you know, you feature different emotions and you have some wonderful writing that you do just helps me stay current on what's happening in the world of emotions. So thank you, Karla, for providing content for everyone.

**Karla McLaren:** Thank you.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Thank you for listening to psychologists off the clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

**Yael Schonbrun:** You can get more psychology tips by subscribing to our newsletter and connecting with us on social media.

**Jill Stoddard:** We'd like to thank our strategic consultant, Michael Harold, and our podcast Production Manager, Jaidine Stoutt Williams.

**Debbie Sorensen:** This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only, and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're having a mental health emergency, dial 9 1 1. If you're looking for mental health treatment, please visit the resources page of our website [offthelockpsych.com](http://offthelockpsych.com)