



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

all our hearts can hold: our incredible expandable hearts

Many times in the last few months I have found myself thinking “I cannot take any more!” No more news of deaths and hardship and violence, and grief. I feel overwhelmed with the suffering and destruction in the world. I want to withdraw and hide, and sometimes I do. But gradually I have come to a deeper understanding of an essential truth:

My heart can hold everything, and indeed it does. And yours can too.

Our hearts are incredibly strong, and strongest when they are soft and open. It is counter-intuitive but true. We are strongest and at our best when our hearts are soft and open.

Take a minute and see if this is true for you. Think of a time when you were fully present, interacting with others, able to listen deeply and also share your own truth. You likely felt deeply connected to yourself and also connected to the other person. At those times our hearts are soft and open, and we are both vulnerable and very strong. We are vulnerable because we are open to another and yet strong because we are in touch with our whole, full self. We are curious, we see clearly, we are creative and can work together to solve problems effectively.

When things are going well it is easy to be soft and open, it feels good and right. As things get stressful staying open becomes more difficult. I gradually find myself becoming more distant. I don't listen as carefully, my focus narrows and I become more self-centered. When I am hurt or angry or afraid, I may feel the impulse to fight or flee. I can become suspicious and mistrustful and withdraw from friends and loved ones. Eventually I start to shut down, become hard and closed. I completely forget about staying soft and vulnerable. Strangely, eventually my pain brings me back to the truth: The only way past unpleasant feelings is through them and the only way through them is softening and opening my heart and letting the feelings in, as frightening and impossible as that may seem.

When things are really bad, we need to go deep, surrender, and face our distress.

We notice that we are in pain. We take a deep breath and name the feeling—it may be terror, rage, despair, betrayal, abandonment, self-criticism, or self-blame. We breathe into the terrible feeling. We may acknowledge what triggered the feeling, but we give up railing against the unfairness of the situation or the belief that things should be different. We just name and accept the feeling.

Next, we describe what we are feeling—body sensations, emotions, and thoughts. This can take practice because we are not necessarily used to paying attention to the wisdom of our body.

We ask, “where does it hurt?” Most often it is in the areas of our neck, throat, chest, heart, or gut but the dis-ease can lodge anywhere. We describe the bodily sensation in as much detail as possible. We breathe and describe our emotions. We notice our thoughts, but we don't get caught up in them. We just watch as the thoughts pass by like clouds in the sky. We take our time doing this, really paying attention to ourselves, not distracting ourselves with whatever triggered the experience. We pay the same loving attention to ourselves that we would to our child or a friend.

After we have thoroughly acknowledged and described our experience, we can ask ourselves, “who is feeling this”? And the answer to that question is always “I am.”* When we say I am we almost always put our hands on our heart. Saying I am helps us begin to get some distance from the pain. The pain doesn't go away, but we begin to remember that we are more than any particular feeling or experience, no matter how overwhelming it is.

We can breathe and sink to that deep calm inside where we know that the body sensations, emotions and thoughts will pass eventually. We don't have to do anything but sit and feel and send lovingkindness to ourselves. We can imagine being held and soothed like a small child. We simply accept the pain and the experience may begin to recede. Gradually our sense of safety returns, our hearts begin to soften and open and we begin to feel connected with others.

In one recent week I had been vigilant about keeping my heart open: The shooting in the maternity ward in Afghanistan—breathe, let the horror in, hold the dead, the injured, the 11 motherless children. The murder of George Floyd by police and endless stories of brutality—breathe, hold the horror in my heart and send loving kindness to oppressed People of Color everywhere. Fear that our country will devolve into a dystopian society, breathe—hold the fear in my heart and envision a peaceful, just world where everyone has food, shelter, health care, a good education, employment, vacation and sick leave.

Over and over and over I do this, and my heart expands. It seems my heart can hold it all and I can stay open and connected. Then in the middle of the night I forget, and the fear grabs me, but I remember, I stop and name it and hold it and I am home—safe and peaceful.

Our hearts are amazing, incredible and expandable and capable of bearing anything if we keep them open and soft. Our hearts can hold everything in love and also find space for beauty and joy and gratitude. From this strong and open place we can then act in the world to do what we can to make things better and our actions will be more effective. May our hearts stay soft and open.

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