



‘What I learnt from feeling...

Our emotions – whether negative or positive – can be powerful tools for self-awareness and change. Three writers reveal significant moments in their lives when acknowledging a feeling led to personal growth.

Where do our moods come from and what are they for? We might wake up feeling happy and energised one day, but sad and tired the next. And although these fluctuations seem to have no apparent cause, this simply isn't the case.

When you register powerful feelings, there is usually a meaningful reason why you are experiencing this particular activity in your limbic system (one of the key areas of your brain that deals with showing,

recognising and controlling your body's reactions to emotions).

As we all know, not all emotions are particularly comfortable to feel. Yet, more often than not, these surges can jolt us into moving out of our comfort zones – or, at the very least, encourage us to examine the way we behave. In certain situations, whether it's a crisis, a life-threatening illness or a serious career disappointment, tapping into a key emotion can motivate us to re-evaluate a troublesome event and to make it work in our favour.

...hope'

Bridget McNulty, 25, is the author of *Strange Nervous Laughter* (Oshun).

‘This condition would not ruin my life, it would make my life’

On my left lay a woman hooked up to a feeding tube, a catheter hanging from the side of her bed, a dull look in her eyes. On my right, an elderly lady in a coma; she'd had a stroke earlier that day. I was the third in a trio of ICU patients being watched over 24 hours a day, but, compared to my roommates, I felt wonderful.

My doctor didn't agree. 'I'm not a dramatic person, Bridget,' he told me, 'but if you'd waited two days longer, you would have been in a diabetic

coma.' So here I was – a recently diagnosed type-1 diabetic and an ICU patient. I felt adrift. I've always been a healthy person, but now, suddenly, my body had failed me – profoundly. I was severely dehydrated, my blood sugar was through the roof, I was weak, ravenous and my eyes kept blurring. To top it all, I had to have blood taken every four hours (throughout the night) and I was hooked up to two drips, one of which (potassium) felt like fire flooding my veins and made me cry in my sleep. But through it all, I never let myself feel like a patient.

You might question how I could feel like anything else, with nurses constantly at my side, checking my vital statistics, changing my drip, giving me injections and taking blood, but the whole time I floated in the certainty that I wasn't really an ICU patient. How could I be? I was young, I was strong; it was some kind of mistake. I believe they call this feeling hope. It was the only thing that kept me from drowning in despair at the dramatic change my life had taken. I clung to hope like a life raft. It was all I had.

There is one moment in ICU I remember distinctly. I was eating a cheese sandwich (my pre-diagnosis hunger hadn't yet abated) and I remember feeling, for the first time, clear headed and well, more like myself than I had in a long time.

I looked at my reflection in the window and I knew, with absolute certainty, that not only was I going to get out of hospital, I was going to be well. Extremely well. This condition would not ruin my life, it would make my life. I would sail through to the other side, with hope as my constant companion.





...jealousy'

Zubeida Jaffer, 50, is the author of *Our Generation* (Kwela).

'Any pretence that I was not the jealous type had been abruptly torn away from me'

The occasion was a glittering gala dinner for writers and publishers at a city hotel. I had written my first book and was fortunate enough to be shortlisted for two major prizes. We were led to designated tables in the large ballroom dotted with men wearing their black suits and tuxedos. I was feeling apprehensive, but many who passed by paused to wish me well.

When it came to my category, three book covers blazed on the

screen. The master of ceremonies cited some flattering comments on each, which I did not hear. All I was waiting to hear were the words 'Our Generation by Zubeida Jaffer'. But someone else's name was announced. I felt awkward and uncomfortable as my eyes met those of the other guests around the table. Everybody looked sympathetic. One reached out and touched my hand. Another said, 'You should have won.' And I

suddenly felt like the biggest idiot ever. Instead of feeling I had achieved something by being shortlisted for a prestigious prize, I was overcome with dislike for the person who had won. If I could have fled from that room at that moment, I would have.

I sipped listlessly on my coffee and kept up a brave face until I considered it reasonable to leave.

The next morning, I could not shake off my extreme discomfort. I was forced to pause and reflect, and face an uncomfortable fact. Any pretence that I was not the jealous type had been abruptly torn away from me in a single moment.

Later that day, my mother called to ask about the evening's events. Fortunately, she did not commiserate with me. She said she was so proud of me for being shortlisted for a prize for my first book and asked if I had called to congratulate the winner.

I sheepishly admitted I had not. I went a step further and admitted I was unsure of my feelings, that I did not know how to cope with this situation. She then said something that has guided me through similar situations ever since. 'Each person gets what is due to them. This is her turn to get what is due to her.'

After her call, I picked up the telephone and called the winner to congratulate her and found I was able to reconnect with my generous centre and genuinely wish her well. There was still a tinge of discomfort, but it was minimal compared to what I had felt the previous night and most of the day. In my mid-forties, I had finally learnt how to cope with feelings of jealousy.

...fear'

Rosemund Handler, 59, is the author of *Madlands* (Penguin).

'It's a lesson I will never forget: mastering fear, before it masters you, may save your life'

Dawn streaked the blonde bushveld grass with a faint strawberry glow. Off we marched, six women and a game ranger, the orange eye of the sun bleeding rose and gold into the sky. The air was grassy and cool. Dew splintered the bushes with spider webs, and a bird chirped its alarm at our clumsy passing.

After a while, the guide came to a silent halt, his hand raised. It was the jackpot: eight lionesses and four cubs, about 80 metres away. They had spotted us, but did not leave at once, giving the photographers ample opportunity to snap away before rising as one to their feet, turning sandy backs on us, and retreating at a leisurely pace. We moved on, the guide purring to an avalanche of muted praise from his intrepid band.

A good bit further, half-asleep, I heard what sounded like tearing cloth. The guide stopped abruptly, staring intently ahead. There was a fearsome snarl, close by. The woman behind me turned to run.

'You run, you die,' hissed the guide.

I drew in a harsh breath, trying desperately to control the overwhelming compulsion to ignore him, to flee. My saliva clogged with the feral dust of an enormous lioness, crouched five metres away, her yellow fangs baring black and red gums. Dropping to one knee, the guide levelled his rifle. The lioness withdrew slightly and

charged; withdrew and charged again, growling deep in her throat, the rustling of her cubs all around us. Fear, frigid and raw, locked my limbs in ice, yet I felt feverish. We shook against one another, tremors rippling through the group. 'If I'm in the middle, she won't get me,' I thought dazedly. Among us, there was a minute but urgent jostling for position.

The lioness charged for the fourth time. I saw the guide's finger tighten on the trigger and I thought, 'He must, he must not, he must – it's her or us.'

And then she was gone, taking her cubs with her. But she taught me a lesson I will never forget: mastering fear – the most powerful emotion of all – before it masters you, may save your life. ▸

