



*Angry Cat Can't Remember Why*  
Jason Edward Davis



JOINT OWNERSHIP

# The Disappointed and the Disappointment

HOW TO BREAK FREE FROM THIS PERPETUAL DRAMA

**WE LIE TO THOSE WE LOVE**, spend money we don't have, and do things we really do not want to do. We will do just about anything to defend ourselves from one of the most uncomfortable emotional states around: Disappointment.

There is something about the experience of disappointment—either yours or someone's you love—that can leave even the most therapized human backpedaling into a quagmire of guilt or shame. From an etymological standpoint it makes sense, in that the word infers an assault on our status. *Disappoint* originates from the Old French word *desapointer* which means to “to deprive of an office or position.”

In relationships, this translates to being “no longer favored” by someone whose favor means a lot to us.

Disappointment is tricky to navigate because it stimulates opposing feeling states in us. Yet whether it's a child dropping his ice-cream cone, an athlete losing a close race, or your partner forgetting your anniversary, the brain chemistry is the same. New studies from UC San Diego School of Medicine have identified that disappointment is a unique brain experience that involves a simultaneous firing of two oppositional neurotransmitters—glutamate and GABA (short for gamma-aminobutyric acid). This phenomenon, labeled “the disappointment circuit,” occurs in an evolutionarily ancient part of the brain known as the *lateral*

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*habenua*. Brain scientists now believe it's the ratio of these dual-firing neurotransmitters—one enhancing and one dampening positive feelings—that determines where we land on the spectrum from "oh, well" to "my life is ruined" in our reaction to feeling "let down."

A common pattern I see in couples is that one partner tends to be more wired to feel disappointment, while the other has a history of trying to rescue another from the feeling and/or has unconsciously resigned themselves to the role of "being a disappointment." Either way, it's a perfect setup for perpetual relationship drama.

Take, for instance, Shanti and Will. They came to me after suffering an extended bout of feeling disconnected from each other. Shanti is a highly responsible doer who juggles her job as a pharmacist, raising two kids, and being an anchor for her friends and extended family. Will recently went on sabbatical, taking time to deeply reevaluate his life after a major lawsuit almost ended his career. The day before they were scheduled to have a long-overdue weekend away together, Shanti got an emergency call that her mother was in the hospital. Instead of a weekend at the coast, she spent three grueling days in the hospital in another state. When she flew home, she desperately wanted to curl up in her man's arms and feel the sanctity of home.

But that was not meant to be. Will, who met her when she returned, was sick and sullen, and his mild depression was exacerbated by

the flu. He barely spoke to her on the way home and when they did arrive, Shanti found a weekend's worth of dishes and debris as her homecoming. Her disappointment was compounded by the fact that her husband seemed oblivious to anything but his own illness. When she tried to express her disappointment, he said it wasn't his fault that their weekend plans were ruined. Disappointment turned to resentment and they found themselves at a classic standoff: "who had it worse." It took two sessions for them to unpack their layers of disappointment.

Ultimately, the key to dealing with disappointment is simple, though not necessarily easy. Set up a spacious time to share your experience. Remind yourself and your partner that it's not really about them; it's

*your* disappointment. After revealing that "*I am feeling disappointed*," also name the underlying core feeling states: anger, grief, perhaps fear. Take time to ponder "*What this situation reminds me of is . . .*" and you will likely find that your current experience is connected to a backlog of disappointments dating from your early years. Let yourself feel those disappointments and share them with your partner.

The person listening needs to put aside any old strategies—fixing, defending, or withdrawing—and be curious with an open heart. Breathing deeply helps. Staying with someone while they tune into their inner avalanche of frustration, grief, and self-judgment—and not colluding with them in it—is the best medicine of all.

—JOY HOSEY

## Your practice Disappointment Is Yours

"I am so disappointed in you."  
"You have disappointed me, again."  
"You are such a disappointment."

These are words too many of us heard in our early years, words whose disapproval left us feeling defenseless. In hearing these "you" statements, we came to believe that another's disappointment was somehow our fault. When disappointment is masked with disapproval of another, it robs both the person experiencing it—and the person hearing it—from authentically feeling it. If we come to believe that we are the source of another's disappointment, we develop a listening bias that has us hearing "you" statements, even when they are not being spoken.

Learning to identify our feeling states—and take responsibility for them—increases our chances of getting heard by our partners. In deconstructing disappointment, what seems true is that the person expressing it is feeling both frustration and sadness coupled with a belief that an outcome in a situation is flawed or unfair. Shifting our attention from the story we have about an incident to the underlying feelings it evokes is key to embracing disappointment as a tool for positive connection.