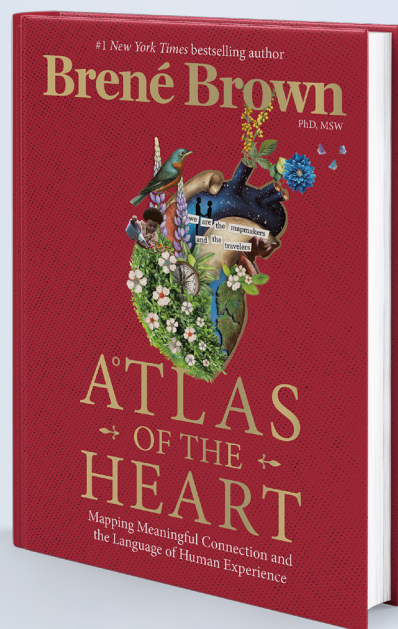


BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



Atlas of the Heart

By Brené Brown

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, where she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair at the Graduate College of Social Work. She is also a visiting professor in management at The University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business. Brown has spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy and is the author of six #1 New York Times bestsellers. She hosts the *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead* podcasts, and her TEDx talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks in the world. Her Netflix special, *The Call to Courage*, is the first filmed lecture by a researcher on the streaming service.

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Mapping Meaningful Connection

You would be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't have at least some knowledge of Brené Brown and her message. As one of the most successful and widely respected personal development thinkers and authors in the world, Brown has made a career out of sharing powerful insights that have the ability to change lives. Her TED talk on the power of vulnerability is one of the most viewed of all time, her Netflix special is the first filmed lecture by a researcher to be featured on the streaming service, and she's published six #1 bestsellers on the New York Times list. Now, Brown has set her sights on the power of human connection and how to create and sustain relationships in more meaningful ways, with *Atlas of the Heart*.

Throughout this book's pages, Brown unpacks the ways that emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and experiences combine to influence the way we interact and connect with the people around us. And while she's not afraid to dive into some of the thorniest elements of human nature, she does so with her usual panache for subtlety, humor, and emotional depth that keeps the book from ever straying into emotional manipulation.

Meanwhile, Brown doesn't shy away from getting into the weeds—she covers 87 total emotions and universal human experiences, after all—and doing so with her usual brand of empathy combined with her signature talent for turning a phrase and dropping a memorable line that you'll want to write down on a post-it and stick to your mirror to read each morning.

Places We Go When Things Are Uncertain or Too Much

Brown isn't one to ease readers in by starting with the pleasant and comfortable. She starts with some of the most difficult-to-process emotions a human being can experience—stress, anxiety, worry, dread, fear, and vulnerability, to name a few. Throughout this section, she provides powerful insights and anecdotes ranging from stories that her followers have shared to her own personal experience. One of the most impactful examples of this is when Brown shares stories of her early years working in food service, trying to manage the incredibly high-stress environment of the kitchen.



She effectively highlights the differences between being stressed and overwhelmed, both in the frame of human connection. When you're stressed, you ask for help—like her experience as a waiter asking her fellow employees to help meet the needs of some of her tables and their orders. When you're overwhelmed, sometimes you must bow out completely for a time—like when Brown would tell the back staff that she was 'blown,' and they would instantly take over for ten minutes while she recovered.

Through anecdotes like these, Brown highlights the fact that allowing yourself to acknowledge our stress, dread, worry, and other negative emotions are far from signs of our being incapable—in fact, they require a great deal of strength. As she says in closing out this section and its final chapter, "Vulnerability is not weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage."

Places We Go When We Compare

"Nothing that celebrates the humiliation or pain of another person builds lasting connection," Brown says, succinctly summing up much of what's wrong with our current culture that celebrates beating down others in order to make ourselves stronger. As a culture, we've been celebrating the humiliations and pains of others for a long time. Why? Because we think it will make us feel better about ourselves, and by celebrating others' pain we can feel, for a moment, that our pain isn't as significant. But as Brown artfully lays out in this section and its chapters on comparison, envy, jealousy, and resentment, this mindset will only ever lead to disconnection and lack of human engagement.

However, Brown says that not all comparisons are negative. When we experience admiration and reverence for people or institutions, we see them as something to aspire to, someone that can serve as a lighthouse to follow on the way to our goals. Brown keeps this pattern going in future sections, reminding us that every negative emotion has a positive mirror.

Places We Go When Things Don't Go as Planned

This section is all about control. Brown effectively reframes some of the most common human experiences—feeling bored or disappointed, not having our expectations met, regret, discouragement, and frustration—as a response to having control taken from us.

Consider, for example, her introduction to the chapter on boredom: "Boredom is the uncomfortable state of wanting to engage in satisfying activity, but being unable to do it." Inherent in that definition of boredom is the lack of control. We want something we can't have. Brown then compellingly shows how many other negative emotions begin the same way—despite our best efforts, we end up disappointed. Someone fails to meet our expectations for them. We try our best but ultimately fail all the same.

But Brown goes on to show that these emotions aren't always negative. Once again, take a passage on boredom:

"If it weren't for boredom, you wouldn't be reading this book... Mundane activities can allow our minds to wander, daydream, and create."

Places We Go When It's Beyond Us

The next section turns the idea of things happening beyond our expectations onto its positive edge, covering feelings of awe, wonder, curiosity, and surprise. This beautifully written series of chapters is a tribute to many of the experiences that make life worthwhile—the feeling of awe and wonder we feel when taking in beautiful art, natural landscapes, spiritual experiences, or thrilling ideas; the experience of curiosity as we begin to explore some of those ideas and yearn to find answers; the surprise we feel when something doesn't happen as expected and causes us to question what we thought we knew.

Brown acknowledges that even some of these feelings can initially leave us feeling a bit off balance, but they ultimately enrich our lives and set us up to form more meaningful connections with the people around us. After all, what are human beings but a collection of creatures experiencing wonder and curiosity together?

Places We Go When Things Aren't What They Seem

In the introduction to this section of *Atlas*, Brown introduces the concept of feeling two competing emotions at the same time. "The problem starts when we don't have the skills or experience to tolerate the uncertainty and ambiguity and we give in to the cravings for neat, mutually exclusive categories," she says. "There's nothing more limiting than tapping out of tension and oversimplifying the thoughts and feelings that have the power to help us understand who we are and what we need."

This powerful message imbues the entirety of *Atlas* with a sense of subtlety that doesn't allow Brown's big ideas to get lost in the complexity of her message.

Places We Go When We're Hurting

Now is the point in the book where Brown dives deep on some of the most painful emotions—anguish, hopelessness, despair, sadness, and grief. It's during this section that she shines most, with her experience in social work giving her a depth of understanding that many other 'self-help' writers simply can't match.

She brings together art, psychology, and the science of trauma to help readers understand where these deep-seated emotions spring from and how we can allow ourselves to fully feel them, rather than running from them, so that we can begin to heal through them. Brown even speaks powerfully about her own personal traumas, and the time when she felt true anguish. Still, she never stumbles into 'sadness porn' but instead uses real-life traumas to illustrate greater points about the role of pain and grief in life.



...while some people struggle with perfectionism, others struggle with guilt about the things they haven't been able to achieve.”

Places We Go with Others

Now, enough about pain and suffering. Brown's next section focuses on the beauty that comes from human connection. Diving into compassion and empathy, boundaries and comparative suffering, she discusses the many ways that human beings place themselves among those that are like them and not like them and the way it influences our understanding of ourselves.

It's when speaking on empathy that Brown delivers one of her most timely messages. “Empathy...is about understanding what someone is feeling, not feeling it for them. If someone is feeling lonely, empathy doesn't require us to feel lonely too, only to reach back into our own experience with loneliness so we can understand and connect.” Affective empathy, feeling something along with the person who is struggling, is a slippery slope towards becoming overwhelmed and not being able to offer meaningful support.

Places We Go When We Fall Short

Shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment— these are some of the emotions covered in this section. But Brown also includes self-compassion and perfectionism, two potentially positive traits that can be turned on their heads to cause negative results if we're not careful.

This section is yet another reminder of what's made Brené Brown one of the leading voices in self-development— she understands that her message isn't being delivered to a series of identical readers or listeners. She recognizes that while some people struggle with perfectionism, others struggle with guilt about the things they haven't been able to achieve. In this section, she speaks to all of them in equal— and equally effective— measure.

Places We Go When We Search for Connection

“Any discussion of belonging has to start with acknowledging that love and belonging are irreducible needs for all people,” Brown says in this section. “In the absence of love and belonging, there is always suffering. Expanding on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, recent research shows that finding a sense of belonging in close social relationships and with our community is essential to well-being. What makes belonging essential for us is the fact that we are a social species. We can't survive without one another.”

From connection and belonging to disconnection, insecurity, and loneliness, Brown covers the full spectrum of human emotion as it relates to how we interact with one another. In another

of the book's most powerful quotes, she espouses the need for love in a world that seems to be lacking: “We need more real love. Gritty, dangerous, wild-eyed, justice-seeking love.”

Places We Go When the Heart is Open

While love and human connection have been discussed previously by this point in *Atlas*, this is when Brown focuses her attention on interpersonal relationships— not just the grander love for our fellow human beings and our planet as a whole. We won't dive into every one of her insights on the topic here, but suffice it to say that when Brené Brown speaks on love, it's worth listening— or in this case, reading.

Places We Go When Life is Good, When We Feel Wronged, and We Self-Assess

The final three sections of Brown's book are combined here not because they don't all have their own powerful individual insights, but because by this point *Atlas* has covered many of the most central emotional drivers behind a human life and is now filling in the edges with additional vibrant colors. In these final sections, she focuses on the importance of celebrating our joys and successes, while also acknowledging the moments when we feel we've been treated unfairly and taking steps to rectify those injustices.

Finally, she ends with a section on assessing ourselves. Most compellingly, she redefines the often misunderstood relationship between pride and humility, arguing that both are equally positive and important traits— pride in what we've accomplished or attempted, humility as openness to new learning and new experience. In the end, readers are left with a guide for navigating the complex tides of self-image that can make or break a healthy, fulfilling life.

Conclusion

No surprises here— Brené Brown has done it again. With a book that's at once a deep dive on the inner workings of the human soul and also an easy-to-digest guidebook broken into manageable chunks, she's shown once more why she's one of the most beloved writers on the topic of the self, inward and outward compassion, and personal development. With her *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown has given us all a map worth following.