

Praise for *Untangling you: How can I be grateful when I feel so resentful?*

‘In this book, Kerry Howells tackles a perplexing issue that humans must face in social life, but which scholars and philosophers have understood poorly – how to disarm complicated feelings of resentment and replace them with gratitude. She deftly empowers readers not just with the skills to reframe difficult feelings of inferiority, of being unappreciated, being excluded or treated unfairly, but also with the skills of inviting gratitude, healing and growth back into their lives so that they can live a truly joyful and optimal life.’

Giacomo Bono, Associate Professor and gratitude researcher, California State University, and co-author of *Making Grateful Kids: The Science of Building Character*

‘In normal human experience, resentment is the polar opposite of gratitude. Kerry Howells shows us that we are able, paradoxically, to locate and understand in the light of gratitude our own obstinate self-imprisonment in resentment. This is a wise and practical book, the fruit of decades of thoughtful research and experience. There are not many people who could rightly decide to do without it.’

Margaret Visser, author of *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude* and *The Rituals of Dinner*

‘It was such a pleasure to read this book. It is an innovative work which takes gratitude into a different sphere of depth and breadth, especially in terms of how it is intertwined with resentment. This has many therapeutic implications. Howells’ book is nuanced, uplifting and a much-needed resource in current challenging times.’

Tayyab Rashid, PhD, clinical psychologist, University of Toronto Scarborough, and co-author of *Strengths-Based Resilience: A Positive Psychology Program* and *Positive Psychotherapy: Clinician Manual*

‘A must-read for anybody who has dealt with conflict in their life, whether personal or professional. The reader will discover the often misunderstood power of gratitude and the role it can play in allowing us to lead a healthy and happier life.’

Sarah Bolt, Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Equal Opportunity Tasmania

‘Dr Kerry Howells has written a critically important book for us all. Her book takes the message she so cleverly crafted in her first book, *Gratitude in Education: A Radical View*, and mines ways to recognise how our lives and the lives of all with whom we relate can be enhanced through gratitude. I recommend all to read both this superb book and her first book, and then universally practise gratitude.’

John Hendry OAM, Co-founder of Positive Education and UNESCO facilitator on quality relationships

‘Resentment can rear its head in so many places in elite sport, and yet there is so little understanding of how to address it effectively and healthily. These concepts, and this book, should form an essential part of coach and athlete development.’

Laurence Halsted, Performance Director, Danish Fencing Federation, two-time British Olympic fencer and author of *Becoming a True Athlete: A Practical Philosophy for Flourishing Through Sport*

‘The concept of restoring joy of life and reducing friction in relationships is very refreshing. It has provided many positive changes in my personal and family life. It has also helped me improve the culture in my workplace. As a physiotherapist, I was able to recognise resentment as a big challenge in the lives of many of my patients. I believe the concepts of resentment and gratitude explored in this book will bring a new dimension to the treatment of many sufferers of chronic health conditions.’

Roy Daniell, MACP, pain and musculoskeletal physiotherapist

‘To read this book is a privilege and a gift. It is transformational. Research-based and thought-provoking, it compels us to investigate both our possible current resentments and our ongoing gratitude practice.’

Bonnie Jeffrey, School Principal and External School Review Leader

‘In an ever-polarising world, Dr Kerry Howells brings clarity to the much-needed social skill of gratitude. Reading this book, I often stopped in thoughtful reflection, especially as I read Kerry’s chapter on cross-cultural differences.’

Michael Grinder, National Director of NLP in Education and author of *Charisma: The Art of Relationships*

‘I found *Untangling you* wonderfully thought-provoking, and the framing of gratitude in the context of resentment really eye-opening and new. It’s a brilliant read that I would recommend to athletes, business leaders, teachers and parents.’

Catherine Bishop, British Olympic medalist in rowing, diplomat, leadership coach and author of *The Long Win: The Search for a Better Way to Succeed*

‘A much-needed book for our times. In my experience as a psychotherapist, resentment is pervasive yet, paradoxically, so often either underestimated or ignored. Kerry Howells, through her extensive experience and research, has brought it fully into consciousness and richly explores the myriad of ways its toxicity destructively infiltrates our lives.’

Peter O’Connor, PhD, psychotherapist and author of *Facing the Fifties: From Denial to Reflection*

‘The benefits of deep relational gratitude and developing a gratitude practice, as explored in *Untangling you*, are immeasurable, particularly in deepening relationships and feelings of interconnectedness, and recognising that we can only change ourselves, our attitude and our responses, and that this can have a profound impact on others.’

Jo Gaha, Facilitator and Executive Coach, The Potential Project

Untangling you

Dr Kerry Howells



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Resentment

Dictionary definition:

‘The bitter indignation of being treated unfairly.’

Resentment is explored here more deeply as:

‘A lingering emotion in response to a shock and sense of injustice caused through broken expectations or a sense of being made to feel inferior. More clearly understood in terms of its conceptual opposite: gratitude.’

Resentment is distinct from:

Anger, disappointment, disillusionment and envy

Resentment thrives in cultures of:

Competition, stress, self-centredness, entitlement, isolationism, judgment and perfectionism

Gratitude

Dictionary definition:

‘The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.’

Gratitude is explored here more deeply as:

‘A sincere and meaningful practice in which one acknowledges what one has received and gives back in ways that are not necessarily reciprocal. More clearly understood in terms of its conceptual opposite: resentment.’

Gratitude is distinct from:

Positivity, optimism, praise and kindness

Gratitude thrives in cultures of:

Cooperation, calmness, other-centredness, appreciation, interconnectedness, acceptance and humility

Introduction

*The deepest principle in human nature
is the craving to be appreciated.*

– William James

I grew up in the 1960s as the eldest of five children, with a father who was often absent and a mother who struggled with her own worries and demons. She always had to work hard to make ends meet, which meant she could bring very little of herself to parenting. I saw the closeness my friends had with their mothers and imagined how it would feel to be nurtured by that intimacy, but all I felt was rejected and neglected because mine had very little energy or time to give to me. My mother and I would argue often. I never felt that she understood me, nor I her. I learned resentment till I knew it well: for me, the taste of resentment was the bitter indignation of being treated unfairly. It coursed through me like a toxic stream until all hope of reconciliation was abandoned. And there we stayed, together but alone, our relationship all but broken, for year after wasted year.

I knew there was a problem – of that I had no doubt – but I had absolutely no idea what to do about it. My pride and stubbornness blocked any way forward. I was not going to be the one to take the

initiative to pick up the phone, to make the first move. I was the one who had been wronged; I was the one owed an apology. Until my mother tried to make amends, I was not prepared to forgive her.

I carried this murky feeling with me wherever I went. It cast a dark shadow over all my relationships, and eventually over the parenting of my own daughter. It sat in a pit at the bottom of my stomach. I just couldn't see that there was any way to release myself from it.

Oddly enough, the key to a new understanding of how I felt came from my experience as a young academic teaching a philosophy course to groups of students who had to take my course for their degree. They resented the fact that they had to do a compulsory subject they had no interest in. Eventually, out of sheer frustration, I asked them why they didn't take the opportunity to learn something new. Their response changed my approach to teaching, my career and my life.

They said they wanted to be engaged but they didn't know how. I responded that while they didn't have a choice about doing the course, they did have a choice about how they were going to approach it. So, we started exploring their feelings of resentment and how these were playing out through complaint and dissatisfaction. I invited them to reframe their feelings to ones of gratitude. Surprisingly to me at the time, they wanted to know more.

When I asked what they felt most grateful for, a common answer was 'my parents'. This left me feeling deeply pained that I didn't feel this about my own mother. The ease and enthusiasm with which many of my students spoke about gratitude stood in stark contrast to the glaring absence of gratitude I felt towards my mother. I started to wonder if this was so significant that it blocked my ability to truly feel gratitude for all the other aspects of my life.

This realisation haunted me for some time until I decided to actually do one of the practices I had been recommending to my students: write a gratitude letter. I sat against a tree in a tranquil spot for a good half-hour before I could bring pen to paper. I felt ashamed when I realised that I couldn't remember the last time I had thanked my mother for anything. Where could I start? When I wrote the first line – that I was sorry I hadn't really thanked her for giving me life – the tears started to well up. I started sobbing when I wrote the next line, saying that because she had given me my life, I was now able to be a mother to my own daughter. Then the floodgates opened for many of the other things I was grateful for in my life – my friends, my studies, my students, my love of swimming in the sea – all because of her.

When I visited my mother a week or so after sending her the letter, she hugged me and cried, and thanked me for my words. She told me she felt better than she had for a very long time. I told her that I had the same feeling. As we sat down to dinner, I felt a softening of both our hearts. From that moment, our relationship gradually grew stronger and more harmonious right up until her sudden death six months later.

It was from this point on that I started to truly feel grateful, to feel what I call 'deep gratitude' – not only for my mother, but for many other things in my life. I had tried counselling, meditation and numerous self-development courses to resolve the negative feelings inside me, but I discovered through this experience that it was gratitude that let the light in. It helped us both move past our resentment.

Why this book?

This initial discovery of the power of gratitude launched me into 25 years of researching its role in education and other fields, and

offering workshops and programs to a range of different cohorts: high-school and university students, teachers at all levels of education, including pre-service teachers, elite athletes and their coaches, and healthcare professionals.

For the first decade of exploring the significance of gratitude in education, most of my fellow academics thought I was mad or some kind of weirdo. Fortunately, we've come a long way since then. Hundreds of studies in differing fields have demonstrated the positive benefits of gratitude to our physical, emotional and social wellbeing. Yet there is very little discussion of gratitude in terms of its conceptual opposite: resentment.

Emphasising the benefits of gratitude without also telling the story of when it's a struggle gives a simplistic, one-dimensional view of gratitude. It also leaves us with an impoverished sense of ourselves as human beings. It's only when we experience the discomfort of not being able to find gratitude that a path opens for growth and transformation. We can learn just as much from our 'negative' states as we can from our joys.

One of the most important roles that gratitude can play in our lives is to illuminate where we feel the opposite: it's often the only thing that can bring resentment to light so that we can do something about it and address its negative impact on our lives. If you have underlying resentment about someone, it's impossible to genuinely express gratitude to them.

In the process of trying to sincerely practise gratitude, you become aware of those you feel effortlessly grateful for and those for whom it seems impossible to muster any gratitude – which, for me, was my mother. In the act of writing a gratitude letter to her, I realised how

much my resentment had stopped me from seeing any of her goodness or acknowledging what she had done for me as a mother.

Looking at gratitude as the counterpoint to resentment helps to make gratitude more real and attainable. This is why – no matter the context – the questions I most often hear are: ‘How can I be grateful when I feel so resentful?’ and ‘How can I let go of my resentment in order to practise gratitude?’

I have written this book to try to provide some answers to these questions. I know how hard it can be to make the first move when we feel another person has wronged us. However, as I see it, this humble questioning prefaces a commitment to try to change, to try to repair the relationship, to take action rather than waiting around for the other person to change or apologise.

In the following chapters you will see how, as intuitive as these questions are, we can reverse their order: practising gratitude is itself crucial to the freedom of letting go of resentment, and not the other way round. In other words, the question, ‘How can I let go of my resentment in order to practise gratitude?’ can also be phrased as ‘How can I practise gratitude in order to let go of my resentment?’

Although gratitude usually starts with a feeling of delight, appreciation, awe or surprise, deep gratitude is more than a feeling: it is an action. In my case, it wasn’t enough to simply *feel* gratitude for my mother, as my resentment towards her was the stronger feeling and had a more powerful pull. It was the action of writing the letter as an expression of gratitude *to* her that caused my gratitude to start to flow. In relationships where we feel resentment, it is when we acknowledge what we are grateful *for*, and then act upon it, that gratitude can have a truly transformative power.

In exploring the interplay between gratitude and resentment, this book focuses on the smaller ‘everyday’ resentments, not resentment that arises from personal or collective trauma, violence, gross inequities, discrimination, degradation or abuse, or the collective resentment of groups of people who have suffered genocide, historical injustices or wholesale violence for decades. Even though the strategies we explore in this book may be relevant to this kind of resentment, it requires a different kind of context and consideration that is not within the scope of this book.

No doubt you have experienced the everyday kind of resentment in your life: a brother or sister who appeared to be favoured by your parents; a partner who left you for another person; a neighbour who won’t deal with their barking dog that keeps you awake for hours; a best friend who betrayed you by sharing your secrets with others; a workmate who was promoted ahead of you (when everyone knew you were the best person for the position); a boss who constantly undermines you; a partner who doesn’t do their share of the housework or looking after the children... and the list goes on and on.

These everyday resentments keep simmering away, robbing us of joy and wreaking havoc on our health, relationships and workplaces. Most importantly, they can build over time and contribute to the more traumatic and larger resentments.

They can also dominate many of our decisions. We might not go for that fabulous job because of the resentment we hold towards one of the managers there; or we might not go on that fantastic holiday because of the resentment we feel towards someone who is also going on the trip and who used to be a friend. In my relationship with my mother, my resentment stopped me from going to many family

gatherings, particularly as an adult, and I missed out on developing stronger relationships with my siblings and strengthening my feeling of belonging to my family.

This book offers practical strategies to enable you to gracefully start to untangle yourself, bit by bit, and move from resentment towards gratitude. You will:

- discover the important role of gratitude in helping you to identify what resentment looks like and how to attend to its underlying causes
- explore how gratitude can help you take responsibility for the choices you are making in how you respond to situations that would normally give rise to resentment
- uncover the interplay between gratitude and resentment and how this unfolds in the context of daily dilemmas. These include dealing with betrayal, disappointment, bullying, sibling rivalry, perfectionism and workplace conflict
- gain strategies to address self-resentment, as well as the resentment you might experience from others
- acquire more skills and confidence to address some of the difficult relationships in your life
- develop an understanding of how cross-cultural differences influence the dynamic between resentment and gratitude.

I need to emphasise that practising gratitude isn't about trying to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Gratitude should never be used to try to wipe out our resentment, or as a way of putting a positive veneer over negative situations that are crying out for our attention. My journey with my mother took time. The newfound

acknowledgment of the gratitude I had for her gave me the insight and courage to push through my resentment and make my relationship with her more important than my grievances. It wasn't a quick fix, though, as my resentment was quite entrenched and I needed to untangle it over time.

As the book title suggests, think of addressing your resentments as if they were a tangled ball of string. Some parts are harder to untangle because one instance of deep-seated resentment is often intertwined with resentment in other relationships. Other parts may just need a slight pull and the ball will start to untangle quite easily.

If you're wondering where to begin, I strongly suggest you start with some of these easier situations and build up your skills, so that later you can work on the tangles that are harder to loosen. If you are filled with pain or anxiety from even contemplating a difficult relationship, it's clear that for now it should be left alone. You may also feel the need to seek professional support.

The following chapters are aimed to help you to shift the dynamics of relationships that have been stuck in pain for a long time, even decades. I encourage you to read each chapter in order, as each builds upon the understanding and strategies of the previous chapters.

My sincere hope is that as you practise gratitude through the strategies you learn in this book, you discover the significant benefit this has on your relationships with others and yourself. In fact, I feel that gratitude is one of the most powerful ways of helping us to achieve sustainable health, harmony and peaceful coexistence.