



DIMMING VERSUS UNDIMMED: THE EIGHT AWARENESSES FOR FREEDOM FROM UNWANTED HABITS

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Dimmer is the term I use to name the unhealthy use of any behavior or substance in order to self-soothe, to avoid difficult feelings, or to seek relief from pain. These habits and behaviors dim our experiences, our relationships, our capability for impact and connection, and even ourselves. My primary dimmer of choice was alcohol, arguably the most prevalent. Over time, I've recognized other common dimmers in my repertoire, including productivity, perfectionism, and even certain types of generosity.

This journey revealed something deeper: I've come to believe after years of personal experience and research that we all dim in a variety of ways. Dimmers might be escapist use of work, media, snark, exercise, sex, shopping, drugs, or even food. I wrote a book, *Undimmed*, as an invitation to develop our awareness around how and why we use these things and then to courageously listen to ourselves. What are we avoiding and why? Is there a discomfort we are trying to diminish? Is there a change we should be considering? Am I living a life that is true to me? What would a freer and truer existence mean for me, my loved ones, my life's work and expression? And lastly, how do I reframe my relationship with my dimmer(s) of choice without accepting a label that doesn't fit with my experience?

The use of any dimmer exists on a spectrum from abstinence to addiction, but that in-between area can also get in the way of living our best lives. By waiting until a problem such as addiction is evident, millions of people miss the opportunity to choose a life free of their unwanted habits. This includes the practice of "proving" to ourselves that we're not addicted if we can take an extended break before it might be more difficult to do so.

The prevailing “problem” language, and the false binary it corners us in, creates a sense of powerlessness. We aren’t broken victims in need of fixing. We are human beings wired to seek relief from discomfort and pain, whether we turn to wine or media. You don’t need to be addicted for those habits to become problematic in your life.

When I took a break from drinking, it became clear that countless people were struggling in a way I had, wanting more connection, authenticity, and presence. Further, there were few resources or frameworks available for the many of us who don’t abstain but are also not addicted and in need of serious mental or physical support to shift these habits. My conviction grew that many, many people were using dimmers and wanted a change; they were dimming the hidden possibilities in their own lives.

By the time I had this insight and wanted to keep living undimmed, and help others do the same, I was doing hard personal work. I was drawing on my analytical skills honed over years of leading legal, operations, and revenue teams within large startups blended with decades of dharma studies and meditation practice to get to the bottom of it all. All the while, I was asking myself big questions and allowing ample time and space to tune in to the answers. *Why did I drink in the first place? Did I have a problem? Was I an alcoholic? What happened to my social life? Will I ever drink again? Is life actually better without alcohol? Were those people I used to feel close to just drinking buddies?* It was in this period that I attended a handful of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, started hosting monthly gatherings for fellow nondrinkers, and read or listened to everything I could find on recovery and sobriety, my library spilling over with “quit lit.” As the months progressed, I also began to better understand and develop compassion for my mother, who died several years earlier from a combination of depression and esophageal cancer, likely attributable to her own decades of habitual, then ultimately addicted, alcohol abuse.

Yet “I didn’t know you had a problem” would be the typical response when I told people I was taking a break. It turns out alcohol is the only drug we need an excuse to *not* take. Given I’d chosen to make these changes from a place of agency and freedom, not failure or surrender, I was offended by these assumptions and similarly bristled at labels such as *sober*, *in recovery*, and *addict*. Why was what I was experiencing as a healthy lifestyle choice being framed as a life sentence, as a step away from a troubled path rather than a step toward a positive one?

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I never entered rehab or self-identified as an addict or alcoholic—or even as “sober.” I still don’t. However, I did long for a framework with which I could explore my newfound clarity, navigate relationships I was redefining, and guide the profound changes underway as I continued to live without alcohol. I wanted to better understand the genesis of the patterns I’d been living in, the role my upbringing played, and the underlying reason(s) I’d been drawn to drink for so many years in the first place.

I dove deep into my family history, exploring and considering our many generations of accomplished yet stoic ways, peppered with puzzling cover-ups of trauma and loss. As I was, prior generations were strong and well-presented, yet often covering up pain from death, loss, disappointment, or shame. Our clan knew how to achieve and look great while doing it but suffered from a lack of safe places to be vulnerable and real. I devoured books on addiction, healing, and transformation, hunting for relatable stories and perspectives. I reread my decades-old journals, saved letters of my own and three generations before me. I consulted with visionaries and renowned dharma teachers. I started to understand why so many people are uncomfortable and drawn to ways to soften the sharp edges of life. With my newfound clarity, I felt like I was finally piecing together some of the waypoints of my own journey.

To help process and understand it all, I invested in therapy with an addiction expert, who educated me on different ways to consider self-medication and family patterns with compassion and empathy rather than shame and regret. I wrote letters of apology and gratitude to former bosses and ex-lovers, most of which were never sent. I started the process of forgiving those who had hurt me the most, specifically my mother for what felt like a life of abandonment and my ex-husband for his lies and infidelity, and ultimately shed a pervasive sense of victimhood. I was remapping my priorities and starting to design a life that reflected them, one I had no desire to dim or escape from.

As this process unfolded, it became increasingly clear that my journey had little to do with alcohol after all. The root of my habits was an effort to dim out the difficulty and pain beneath the surface. Like many, I had been self-soothing, evading discomfort, softening life's edges with what was not only available but socially and culturally encouraged.

As I shed my dimming habits, I felt everything intensely again—like a child, almost—the difficult and the beautiful parts. It was as if my experience aperture had widened, allowing in more of the extremes of a spectrum of feelings. It wasn't easy. But it wasn't bad either. It even began to feel good. Dimming keeps us in a “safe middle.” I was starting to feel clear, with a newfound access to extremes that I now can embrace as part of what makes being a human being such a gift. The key to freedom was getting to the bottom of what I'd been trying to avoid and making peace with that. Only then could I start to live from a place of true agency and alignment and finally reacquaint myself with both ends of the life experience spectrum again. And maybe help other people do the same.

But first I had to create a system that worked for me and that might work for others.

The process of developing the Eight Awarenesses was fairly mundane. One afternoon, alone at home, I made myself a cup of tea in my favorite mug and opened my laptop at the kitchen counter. Facing the window, I could see our little town off in the distance. It felt like perspective. After once again searching for a framework that matched my experience of wanting to change my behavior from the inside out, yet fairly certain I wasn't addicted to my dimmer of choice, I opened and copied the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous into a new document. While I respect AA and its process, and certainly know that many millions of people have benefited from it, the approach didn't feel like a fit for me. Before I knew it, and without any agenda or plan, I started editing the steps to better fit my experience. My first revision was about awareness, agency, and freedom, not powerlessness, failure, and surrender.

Over four years, I further refined these revisions to arrive at the Eight Awarenesses, a set of pocket-size mantras that remind us of the inner work available to all of us on any kind of an undimming journey:

- My Life Is Better Clear
- I Choose What I Consume
- My Intuition Defines My Priorities
- My Trauma Isn't My Identity
- Forgiveness and Letting Go Are on the Path to Liberation
- I Do Not Judge or Impose My Orientations Upon Others
- Time Is Our Most Precious Currency
- I Seek Ways to Support Others

With reflection upon how these awarenesses might apply to our own lives, we can transform our relationships with any dimmer.

I was part of an enormous global population that still had the freedom to choose to change habits—in my case, stop drinking—without having to be diagnosed and treated for addiction. Where were the resources for us? For years, I kept returning to this document, revising, simplifying, then revising and simplifying again, all reflecting what I was learning from experience and others on similar journeys in hosting themed gatherings, building an online community, and connecting one-on-one with friends, family, and strangers alike. Our stories are remarkably similar, even if our dimmers are different. One person might be in Thailand, evolving their complicated relationship with food as a dimmer, while the other is in New York trying to cut back on screen time. The result is the set of practices offered in *Undimmed*: the Eight Awarenesses, a path to understanding, embracing, and embodying what I call a *clear life*—or as they call it in Japan, a *chosen sober life*.

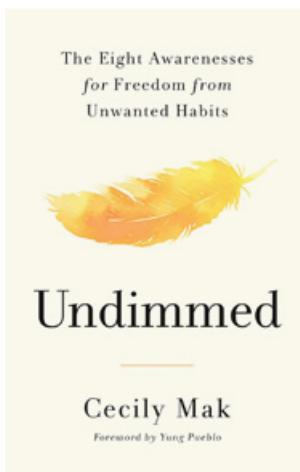
As a result of all my new chosen clarity, I made several bold changes. I ended a troubled relationship with someone who should have remained a rebound lover but instead had become its own unhealthy escapism. I left a job, then an entire career and corresponding identity (its own crutch), as a successful start-up lawyer and C-level executive for riskier but more purposeful work as a writer and impact investor. I moved three times in three years (all in the same town!) as I found my financial footing again, navigating out of debt and a tiny cottage into financial stability and a home suitable for my sons and me. As I began to trust myself more than ever before, I also established fresh boundaries around others' expectations of me (no, I won't plan and cover the cost of shared vacations; phone calls with loved ones *before* cocktail hour, please; and no more offensive political emails) and learned to uphold them while still doing my best to be kind. And then I started to focus even more intently on how I might be of service to others on their own journeys.

With reflection upon how these awarenesses might apply to our own lives, we can transform our relationships with any dimmer. We hold the power to overcome any current or future means to escape—whatever it may be. Through this transformation, a shift that is available to anybody who wants to change for the better, we can be freer and more intentional and live a dramatically more fulfilling and present life. A life less burdened by resentment because we've transformed victimhood to empathy and understanding, letting ourselves develop a less tainted relationship with those who may have hurt us. A life of deeper connection with our family members and friends because we are authentic, real, and honest with them—and ourselves, asking for space and time—or togetherness when needed, rather than just getting through discomfort with a glass of wine or other distraction. A life with fewer hours spent passively consuming media, but rather enriched with experiences that bring learning and expansion because we listen to our intuition and pursue explorations that may have previously felt intimidating, indulgent, or out of reach. A life in which we can participate in family gatherings brimming with genuine curiosity and conversation about one another, community, or global concerns, free from surface-level snark, keeping each other's real feelings and concerns at bay. **A life of presence, clarity, and joy. ☺**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cecily Mak is the founder of the ClearLife movement, which invites people to live dimmer-free with intention and presence, free of the stigmas of addiction. She is also the co-founder of Wisdom Ventures, a venture fund devoted to building a future of greater human connection and well-being.

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