

JONATHAN ARENBURG

WIRED TO BE HUMAN Jonathan  
Arenburg Free Chapters 1-3

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#### *Author's Note & Disclaimer*

*Wired to Be Human is grounded in my lived experience, my work and education in mental health, and the best research available at the time of writing. This book explores mental health, trauma, and the challenges of modern life through both a scientific lens and the realities of personal struggle. Some chapters may challenge widely held beliefs or touch on sensitive subjects.*

*My intention is never to minimize anyone's experience or to provoke division. Instead, I hope to invite honest conversation and greater compassion—for yourself and for others. Every perspective matters, and I encourage you to approach these pages with curiosity, not judgment.*

*This book is not a substitute for professional help. If you are struggling with your mental health, please reach out to a qualified healthcare provider or counselor. The information and stories shared here are meant to inform, encourage, and empower—but not to replace individualized care or medical advice.*

*Above all, I invite you to read with an open mind and a kind heart.*

*Thank you for joining me on this journey.*

*— Jonathan Arenburg*

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# Preface

If you’re holding this book, there’s a good chance you’ve felt it too—a nagging sense that something about the way we live doesn’t quite fit. Maybe you’ve struggled with anxiety that seems to come from nowhere, or watched people drift further apart even as technology claims to connect us. Maybe, like me, you’ve spent years wrestling with invisible battles, blaming yourself for not living up to some impossible modern ideal.

*Wired to Be Human* was born out of those questions and struggles. As a writer, counselor, and—most importantly—a fellow traveler through the mess and beauty of being human, I have seen firsthand how easily we lose ourselves in a world that never slows down. I’ve lived through trauma, worked on the front lines of mental health, and listened to countless stories that echo the same quiet ache: Why is it so hard to simply feel okay?

What I’ve come to understand is this: The human mind and body evolved in a world radically different from the one we’ve created. We are not defective, lazy, or broken because we find modern life overwhelming. We’re not alone in feeling lost, disconnected, or anxious. In truth, we are responding—often unconsciously—to a mismatch between our ancient wiring and today’s relentless pace.

But let me be clear: this book does not dismiss or discount the powerful influence of culture, social pressures, trauma, or personal history. Reality is not shaped by biology alone. Every day, our lives are impacted by economic forces, family dynamics, education, politics, inequality, discrimination, and the accelerating demands of technology. The world imprints itself on us at every turn—through the communities we grow up in, the stories we’re told, the roles we’re expected to play, and the historical traumas that echo through generations. Issues like social justice, rapid cultural change, media

saturation, and shifts in gender, race, and class all have a profound effect on our well-being—often in ways that biology alone cannot explain. To talk honestly about the human condition is to recognize the complex interplay between our ancient wiring and the realities of the societies we build.

We are products of both nature and nurture—of neural circuits evolved for survival, and the social and cultural landscapes we’re born into. This book is not an argument for biological determinism. Instead, it’s an invitation to see the full picture, so that we can meet ourselves and each other with more understanding and less shame.

You’ll find no easy answers here. What you will find is honesty, curiosity, and a call to question the stories you’ve been told about who you’re supposed to be. You’ll see why small changes—connecting with others, honoring your limits, and embracing your own nature—can be the most radical acts of all.

Most of all, you’ll be reminded that you’re not alone on this road. We are all, in our own way, wired to be human. And that, despite everything, is a reason for hope.

—Jonathan Arenburg



# Chapter 1

## Biology Before Belief

*“We are not thinking machines that feel; we are feeling machines that think.”*

—Antonio Damasio

We like to believe our decisions come from a place of reason and reflection—that we act according to our values and beliefs. If someone asked why you feel the way you do, you might point to your upbringing, personal history, or philosophy of life. But beneath those explanations lies a deeper truth: much of what we think, feel, and do emerges from the ancient architecture of our brains—structures built for survival, not for the world we live in today.

If you’re reading this, you likely know what it’s like to wrestle with thoughts and feelings that don’t always fit the expectations of modern life. Maybe you find yourself irritated by things that “shouldn’t” bother you, overwhelmed by everyday pressures, or haunted by memories that won’t fade. Maybe, like

so many of us, you've wondered why you react so strongly to things others seem to shrug off.

Have you ever caught yourself thinking, "Why can't I just let this go?" or "What's wrong with me?"

Pause and consider: What if these responses aren't flaws, but signals from a deeper biological wiring that most of us have never been taught to recognize?

For years, I believed that my habits, moods, and fears were just my personality. If I felt anxious, I saw it as a flaw. If I struggled to keep up with life's demands, I blamed myself. The idea that my biology might be driving my experience was something I never considered. It wasn't until I began learning about the brain—and how its wiring shapes every aspect of our lives—that I saw how much of us is shaped by forces deep beneath our conscious awareness.

## **The Myth of the Rational Actor**

Modern culture loves the story of the "rational actor." We're told that with enough willpower, self-improvement, or positive thinking, we can control our destiny. But the truth is much messier. What we call "personality" is often just biology in disguise. Our stress responses, our need for connection, even the urge to withdraw or fight when threatened—these all come from brain circuits that evolved long before anyone wrote a self-help book.

Take the everyday experience of road rage. You're sitting in traffic, another driver cuts you off, and your heart pounds with anger. Logically, you know it's not the end of the world. But your body reacts as if you're facing a true threat. That surge isn't a character flaw—it's your amygdala firing, a structure designed to keep your ancestors alive in the face of danger.

Pause and reflect: When was the last time you reacted strongly to something small? How did your body respond before your mind even had a chance to catch up?

That flash of irritation when someone skips ahead in line? The tension you feel after a stressful day, even though you "know better"? These aren't moral failings—they're the nervous system at work, responding to cues it interprets (rightly or wrongly) as threats. This is as true for children on a playground as

it is for adults in a boardroom.

## How In-Groups and Out-Groups Shape Our Empathy

This wiring doesn't just affect our personal lives—it shapes how we relate to the world around us. Take, for example, the ongoing crisis of missing Indigenous men and boys in Canada. Public attention often centers on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls—as it should, given the scale of tragedy and the overdue focus on these injustices. But the stories of men and boys who vanish, especially in regions like Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and northern British Columbia, are too often overlooked or lost in the background.

It's estimated that more than 600 Indigenous men and boys have gone missing or been murdered in Canada—lives cut short, families torn apart, and communities left in limbo. Why do we pay less attention to their stories? As hard as it is to admit, this blind spot isn't only the product of media cycles or politics—it's deeply human. Throughout history, our brains have been wired to prioritize the suffering of our “in-group”—the people we most easily relate to or see as vulnerable—while unconsciously turning away from those we perceive as outside that circle.

Reader pause: Think about how the news stories that move you most tend to reflect your own background, values, or identity. This isn't just bias—it's biological wiring at work.

This doesn't mean we're heartless. It means our ancestors survived by protecting their kin and tribe above all else. But what once served us now leaves some tragedies unseen, some griefs unacknowledged. For the families left behind, the pain isn't just about loss; it's a state of unending stress, grief, and uncertainty. This is not just a cultural or social issue—it's a biological one. Our brains are wired for connection, for knowing that our loved ones are safe. When those connections are violently severed, our bodies respond as if we ourselves are under attack: the heart races, sleep vanishes, appetite disappears, and the mind is consumed by vigilance and sorrow—a response that once drove us to action, but now often leads to silent suffering.

## **Culture, Biology, and the Crisis of Disconnection**

We live in a society that rewards us for ignoring our biology. We're told to toughen up, to power through discomfort, to keep moving no matter what. But what happens when our biology won't let us? What happens when our brain's wiring is at odds with the expectations of modern life?

I remember a client—let's call him Dave—who spent years white-knuckling through corporate burnout, convinced that asking for help was weakness. Only when his body finally gave out, sending him to the ER with chest pains, did he realize that biology always has the last word.

Reflection: Where in your own life are you fighting your biology instead of listening to it?

The noise, the speed, the relentless demands and distractions keep our bodies in a state of chronic alertness. Our ancestors may have faced real, physical threats, but today we're under siege from emails, traffic jams, notifications, and constant comparison. Our bodies respond the same way they always have: tension, anxiety, insomnia, anger, and eventually, exhaustion.

## **When Biology Becomes Identity**

Over time, repeated exposure to trauma, stress, or social disconnection shapes not just how we feel, but how we see ourselves. Many people, myself included, begin to weave their trauma response into their identity. "I'm just an anxious person." "I'm always angry." "I don't like crowds." We come to believe that the way we are is the way we've always been—and the way we'll always be.

But biology is not destiny. Just as our brains can be shaped by experience, they can also be reshaped by understanding, compassion, and deliberate change. The science of neuroplasticity tells us that it's never too late to learn new patterns, heal old wounds, or see ourselves in a new light.

## **Why Compassion is the Antidote**

The first step to healing is not willpower or positive thinking—it's self-compassion. When we understand that our struggles are not signs of

weakness, but evidence of our humanity, we can begin to treat ourselves with the kindness we'd offer a friend. Anxiety is not a flaw, but a signal. Anger is not a failure, but information. Grief isn't a burden to be hidden, but a testament to the depth of our connections.

This shift in perspective isn't always easy. It goes against much of what we're taught. But it's the only way forward. When we align our lives with the reality of our biology, we create space for healing—not just for ourselves, but for those around us.

Reflection: Next time you find yourself beating yourself up for a “bad reaction,” try this: Pause and ask, “What is my body trying to tell me?”

It won't change things overnight, but it's the first step toward shifting the story from shame to self-understanding.

### **A Roadmap for the Chapters Ahead**

This book isn't a prescription or a step-by-step guide. It's an invitation: to become curious about your own biology, to question the stories you've been told about who you are, and to discover what happens when you align your life with the truth of your wiring.

You'll read about how belief systems can empower and trap us, how modern culture often amplifies stress, and how ancient neural patterns drive everything from friendship to fear. You'll see how small changes—honoring our need for connection, creating rituals that calm the body, learning to say no—can reshape a life.

If so much of who we are begins with our biology, what happens when the world we live in is out of sync with that wiring? In the next chapter, we'll explore why disconnection hurts so much—and how the need to belong is at the core of what it means to be human.

I hope that, as you turn these pages, you'll find something that feels familiar, something that gives you hope, and something that helps you see yourself not as a bundle of flaws, but as a human being—wired to be exactly who you are.

# 2

## Chapter 2

### The Social Brain—Connection, Survival, and the Costs of Disconnection

*“We cannot exist in isolation; our sense of self is stitched together by the bonds we share.”*

—Jonathan Arenburg

If there's one truth that unites all people, it's this: we are wired for connection. For most of human history, our very survival depended on our ability to live, cooperate, and belong to a group. Despite what modern culture often claims about the power of the individual, the story written into our cells is older and more collective. Our brains evolved in the context of tight-knit tribes, where social bonds meant safety, and isolation meant danger.

Pause for a moment. Think about a time when you felt deeply connected—maybe it was a childhood friend, a trusted mentor, or simply a warm gathering

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around a dinner table. Now think about a time when you felt excluded or alone. Notice how those memories bring not just emotions, but a physical sensation in your body. Connection and disconnection are not just abstract ideas—they are lived, felt, embodied experiences.

The structure of the human brain reveals just how deeply our need to belong runs. Deep within, regions like the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex collaborate to constantly scan for threats—not just from predators, but also from social rejection or exclusion. Oxytocin, the so-called “bonding hormone,” surges during moments of closeness and comfort, reminding us that love and acceptance aren’t just nice feelings—they’re essential to our survival.

If you’ve ever felt your heart race after a cold glance, or your stomach sink when you’re left out, that’s your social brain at work. Humans are not built to be alone; when we’re isolated, our bodies react with real, physical discomfort. Even subtle cues—a missed invitation, a half-hearted response, a closed-off body language—can trigger feelings of exclusion. Our ancestors lived in small groups where being left out meant real danger. The descendants of those who were sensitive to social threats survived and passed down their genes. Today, this ancient wiring makes us highly attuned to the approval, attention, and acceptance of others.

When did you last feel “out of the loop”? How did your body respond? Did you replay the moment in your head, searching for clues or ways you could have acted differently?

Modern life, for all its supposed convenience, is filled with subtle forms of disconnection. We can text, email, or video chat across continents, yet so many of us feel profoundly alone. The very systems that once protected us are now firing constantly in a society that prizes surface-level contact and relentless busyness, but so rarely offers the deep sense of belonging we truly need.

During my own struggles, disconnection became my norm. When my mental health was at its lowest, my instinct was to withdraw, to retreat from everyone. My nervous system—primed by trauma and stress—interpreted every ambiguous message, every delayed reply, as evidence that I didn’t belong.

This can quickly become a vicious cycle: the more isolated you feel, the more you pull away, and the harder it is to reach out when you finally want or need to.

But this isn't just the experience of those with trauma or depression; it's a nearly universal feature of modern living. The constant background noise, competition, and societal expectation to "keep up" can leave us feeling isolated and out of sync. Our brains, which evolved for village life, are being asked to make sense of a world that is anything but communal.

I once met a young woman at a community mental health workshop. She described moving to a new city, eager for opportunity but finding only closed doors and shallow conversations. "People are everywhere," she said, "but no one really sees you." Her story, echoed in dozens of faces around the room, revealed a silent epidemic: surrounded by people, but starved for true connection.

Social media, for all its promises of connection, often deepens the wound. Scrolling through highlight reels of other people's lives can amplify the feeling of being left out or unwanted. The pain of exclusion—real or perceived—can be devastating, because the brain registers social pain much like physical pain. Rejection literally hurts.

Contemporary Western culture loves to celebrate the individual—the lone hero, the self-made success. From the moment we're young, we're taught to stand out, be unique, and "make it" on our own. Yet human beings are not designed to thrive in isolation. I call this toxic individualism—the belief that the self should always come before the group, no matter the cost. Some might call it "hyper-individualism," but to me, toxic individualism better captures the damage this mindset can do.

In recent years, the idea of isolating oneself has almost become trendy. Whether it's "quiet quitting," announcing a "hermit mode," or posting about "cutting everyone off to protect my peace," social withdrawal is often sold as a badge of empowerment on social media. While self-care and boundaries are important, there's a real risk in normalizing and glamorizing isolation. What starts as a coping strategy can quickly turn into a pattern that deepens loneliness and mental health struggles.

Have you ever found yourself scrolling through posts that romanticize being “unbothered” or cutting off relationships? How does that message land when you’re already struggling with loneliness?

When strength is defined as never needing help, reaching out starts to feel like failure. People struggling with anxiety, depression, or trauma may become ashamed to ask for support, believing their difficulties reflect a personal flaw. But needing others isn’t weakness; it’s an inescapable part of our biology.

Mounting research has shown that chronic loneliness and social isolation are as harmful to our physical health as smoking or obesity. Loneliness is linked to heart disease, a weakened immune system, and even early death. The psychological costs are just as steep: people who feel disconnected are at far greater risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide.

Social pain isn’t just a metaphor. Studies using brain scans reveal that the pain of rejection or exclusion activates the same regions of the brain as physical pain. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense: our ancestors who felt the sting of being left out were more likely to work hard to regain acceptance, and thus survive. Today, this same sensitivity can backfire, leading to chronic rumination, self-doubt, and the corrosive belief that we are fundamentally unworthy.

What’s tragic is how many people suffer silently, thinking their pain is unique or shameful. The truth is, the ache of loneliness, the longing for acceptance, and the fear of rejection are universal experiences, woven into our biology.

If you’re struggling with loneliness, know that it isn’t just “in your head.” Your body and brain are responding to a real, unmet need. What might change if you treated this pain with the same compassion you’d offer to a friend with a physical wound?

For some, social pain is more than just everyday slights and awkward moments. Trauma—especially the kind that involves betrayal, neglect, or abuse by trusted people—can fundamentally alter how we relate to others. If your early years taught you that reaching out leads to pain, your brain may become hyper-vigilant, always scanning for the next threat or disappointment.

What was once a survival skill becomes a prison, locking you away from the very connections you need.

This is why childhood trauma, bullying, or chronic social rejection can have such lasting impact. The brain, always learning, remembers what is safe and what is not. If connection brings danger, isolation starts to feel like the only option—even if it also brings pain.

I have lived this cycle. For years, I couldn't tell the difference between protecting myself and sabotaging my own need for connection. The longing to belong was there, but it felt impossible to reach, so I built walls instead of bridges.

If our biology can trap us in cycles of disconnection, it can also help us break free. The brain's plasticity—its ability to change and adapt—means we are never truly stuck. Forming new connections, practicing vulnerability, and small acts of trust can begin to rewire the social brain.

Science shows that simply spending time with others, having meaningful conversations, or showing empathy increases the release of oxytocin and serotonin, the very chemicals that calm the nervous system and foster feelings of safety. This process is gradual and sometimes uncomfortable, but connection truly heals.

Sometimes, the most radical act of self-care is to seek out safe, supportive relationships. That could mean joining a group, reaching out to a trusted friend, or simply letting yourself be seen—even with your imperfections. Most of us don't need dozens of friends or to be the center of attention. Even one or two genuine, nurturing connections can change everything.

One of the hardest truths I've learned in my own journey is this: isolation, while it feels safe and familiar in the moment, almost always makes things worse over time. Depression, anxiety, trauma—all of these conditions push us to withdraw. Our brains whisper that it's easier and safer to be alone, and sometimes that's all we want.

But the reality is that being alone too much can fuel the cycle of illness. This is where what I call forced socialization becomes crucial—not in the sense of being pressured by others, but as a personal commitment to do what's healthiest, even when it's the last thing you feel like doing. Forced

socialization means making yourself reach out, join the group, or meet for coffee, even when your instincts scream for solitude. It's not about masking or pleasing others, but about overriding your brain's immediate desire for isolation, because you know from experience and science that human connection is what will truly help you heal.

It might feel awkward or unnatural at first. The impulse to stay home, avoid the phone, or skip gatherings can be overwhelming. But each time you push past that impulse, you're not betraying yourself—you're choosing the hard path of healing. The more you practice, the more your brain learns that social contact is not always dangerous, and genuine connection slowly becomes possible again.

What's one small step you could take this week to connect with someone—a call, a coffee, even a short message—despite your brain's push toward solitude?

Healing the wounds of disconnection doesn't happen overnight. For many of us, it starts with a single, tentative act—a message sent, a coffee shared, a story told. Sometimes it's simply about daring to admit you're lonely or struggling, even when you're not sure how it will be received.

If you've spent years protecting yourself, reaching out can feel risky. Your nervous system might insist that it isn't worth the effort, that rejection is inevitable. But every new, safe experience helps to overwrite the old scripts.

Start small. Notice those fleeting moments of ease or acceptance with another person, and let yourself appreciate them. They're proof that connection is possible, even if it feels rare. With practice, your brain will gradually learn a new story: belonging is possible, and you are worthy of it.

We live in a world where staying "in touch" has never been easier, yet rates of loneliness and isolation are soaring. The paradox of our age is that true connection takes effort. We have to fight for it—not because we're broken, but because our ancient brains still expect a circle of familiar faces and shared experience.

Our challenge is to honor that need for belonging in a society that too often overlooks it. This may mean carving out time for real community, allowing yourself to be vulnerable, or simply recognizing when your brain is trying to protect you in ways that don't serve you anymore.

This book invites you to examine your own patterns of connection and disconnection. It's a reminder that beneath all our differences, the need to belong is what makes us human. The journey to wellness isn't just about fixing what's "wrong" inside you—it's about rebuilding the bridges that keep you connected to the rest of the world.

If disconnection can leave us feeling lost and unwell, what about the stories we tell ourselves—about who we are, who we trust, and how we belong? In the next chapter, we'll look at how beliefs—formed from both biology and community—shape every part of our lives, sometimes without us even knowing it.

# 3

## Chapter 3

### The Biology of Belief — How Ideas Take Root and Shape Our Lives

*“We do not choose our beliefs as much as our beliefs choose us—filtered through the lens of biology and the world we inherit.”*

—Jonathan Arenburg

A five-year-old clings to her father’s leg at a family gathering. She doesn’t understand the jokes or the politics, but she senses the tone, the alliances, the people to trust and the ones to avoid. Before a single belief forms in her conscious mind, her need for belonging is already at work. This is where belief begins—not as an abstract idea, but as a survival instinct shaped by biology and experience.

Humans crave the comfort of certainty. Belief isn’t just a set of opinions—it’s a shortcut for navigating chaos, a map for making sense of the world. Our minds, ancient and vigilant, are wired to seek patterns, to find safety in

agreement, and to avoid the risk of social exile. For most of history, the cost of disagreeing with the group could mean isolation, or worse.

From birth, we soak up the stories, fears, and assumptions of our families and communities—not necessarily because they’re true, but because they are the price of belonging. This wiring is so fundamental that it shapes what we see, how we feel, and even who we become. The comfort of belief is primal. Even when new facts contradict our stories, our instincts resist. We defend our tribe’s truth because—at the deepest level—belonging feels safer than being right.

When our beliefs are challenged, it doesn’t just feel like a disagreement—it feels like a threat to who we are. Our bodies react: heart pounding, jaw tightening, a deep urge to push back or shut down. It’s not just mental—it’s physical, inescapable. This is why changing your mind, especially about something core to your identity, can feel so difficult.

Studies show that when people are confronted with ideas that contradict their beliefs, their bodies react as if they’re facing danger. It can be almost impossible to have a rational conversation until we feel safe again. Even something as simple as naming our emotions can help calm these reactions and open us up to new perspectives.

#### Belief and the Boundaries of Us and Them

History is built on the boundaries that beliefs create: who is “us,” who is “them,” whose pain matters, and whose can be ignored. Across centuries, those within the group receive empathy and protection, while outsiders are met with suspicion or contempt. We’re rewarded for loyalty—mirroring the language, values, and rituals of those around us—while questioning or doubting can make us feel unsafe.

This ancient dynamic is alive in modern politics, online outrage, and every divided community. Social media has only supercharged it, creating echo chambers that reward conformity and punish dissent. Algorithms feed us comfort and outrage in equal measure, deepening our sense of certainty while cutting us off from anything that might challenge it.

But this wiring isn’t just an abstract problem. It shapes lives—and it leaves suffering in its wake.

### When Belief Erases Suffering: Men, IPV, and the Invisible Victim

One of the starker examples of collective belief blinding us is the case of intimate partner violence (IPV) against men. In public discourse and policy, the dominant narrative frames IPV almost exclusively as a women's issue—urgent and deserving of resources (rightly so), while the suffering of men is often sidelined, denied, or even mocked.

Men and their families are urged to break their silence, but too often, when men and boys finally speak up, they are dismissed or met with disbelief—deepening their isolation and compounding the harm. Sometimes the dismissal isn't just social, but institutional.

Some years ago, I found myself sitting in my psychiatrist's office, finally feeling safe enough to share the truth I'd been carrying in silence: I had been sexually assaulted in the workplace. Saying it out loud was an act of courage I never thought I'd manage. I braced myself for compassion, maybe even understanding. Instead, just after my vulnerable admission, she looked at me and said, "Well, we have to get you back to work."

Stunned, I pushed back. "Wait a minute—if I were a woman, would you be advocating for me to go back into the very environment I was assaulted in?" A pause blanketed the room, heavy and unspoken, until she replied, "No." I pressed: "Then why would you advocate that for me?" She looked at me for a moment and simply moved on.

In that instant, the trust she'd built was shattered. My pain was swiftly repackaged—pushed back into the box of silence and shame I'd tried so hard to break open. Society claims it wants men to own their struggles, almost as if we're always to blame for them. But my experience, and so many others like it, prove that there are deeper forces at work—forces that shape not only how men are treated, but how the very systems meant to help us can end up silencing us instead.

When the mental health care system fails anyone, the impact is profound. If I, after mustering the strength to be honest, was dismissed so easily, how many others are lost in the shuffle? We all deserve the same level of care and compassion—regardless of gender or circumstance.

A man reporting abuse might be met with laughter, skepticism, or told to

“man up.” The belief that men can’t be victims, or that their pain is somehow proof of weakness, is as damaging as any physical wound. In Canada, men and their families find few safe havens. Shelters are rare; most are built for women (with good reason), but the result is that abused men and their families are often left with nowhere to go—policy, funding, and public compassion shaped by story, not by reality.

#### Media, Narratives, and What the World Sees

The media acts as a mirror and a filter, deciding which stories reach the public eye. Men’s experiences with abuse rarely make headlines. When they do, the stories are presented as outliers or punchlines, reinforcing the idea that male suffering is an anomaly—if it exists at all. Advocacy, news, and entertainment lean hard on the narrative of female victimhood, leaving male victims feeling isolated and invisible.

#### A Pattern Older Than Politics: The 1950s and Beyond

It’s tempting to think this selective empathy is new or ideological. But the same pattern played out decades ago in reverse: in the 1950s, policy and public concern focused on men’s well-being and success, while women’s suffering—whether through violence, depression, or isolation—was dismissed as “hysteria” or a private matter. Abused women had almost nowhere to turn; society simply ignored their pain.

Now, roles have shifted, but the underlying dynamic is unchanged. What matters is not who is at the center of compassion, but that compassion itself remains rationed by trend. This is the cost of belief rooted in identity: every era leaves someone in the shadows.

#### The Biology of Violence: Beyond Gender

Violence is not male or female. It is a human problem, with infinite forms—physical, emotional, psychological. When we frame violence as a gendered or political issue, we ignore its universal roots and create new blind spots. When anyone’s pain is erased, cycles of harm are allowed to continue, families are broken, and children—of any gender—grow up believing their suffering is invisible.

#### The Ripple Effect: Children, Trauma, and the Next Generation

The cost of ignored suffering is not limited to one group. Boys growing up

in homes where male pain is silenced learn to mask their own, to bear abuse without hope, to confuse stoicism with strength. They grow into men who don't ask for help, sometimes repeating cycles of harm or disappearing into isolation.

Girls, too, are wounded by these stories. Watching fathers, brothers, or friends suffer in silence can teach daughters that men's needs don't matter, that love means enabling pain, or that only certain types of suffering are worthy of attention. The result is intergenerational trauma—shaping not only beliefs, but bodies, relationships, and entire communities.

### Selective Empathy and Its Toll

This is not about minimizing the real and ongoing needs of women and girls, nor is it an argument against the progress made. It's a call to break the cycle of selective empathy. When compassion is rationed, suffering is perpetuated. The health of any society depends on our ability to see every story, every pain, and to resist the temptation to divide care along the lines of fashion or identity.

### The Trap of "Personal Truth" and Toxic Individualism

Modern culture encourages us to build identities around belief—to "stand in our truth," never back down, and put the self above all else. But this kind of hyper-individualism, while empowering on the surface, creates its own form of isolation and rigidity. We become more invested in defending our stories than in connecting or healing.

Self-help culture pushes "believe in yourself" as a universal cure, but ignores how trauma, exclusion, and inherited pain can warp self-belief from within. Not everyone can simply "choose" a new mindset; the work is deeper, slower, and almost always relational.

### Belief and the Body: Stigma, Shame, and the Challenge of Change

Many of the people I've supported—including myself—have struggled with beliefs inherited from family, culture, or history. The belief that asking for help is weakness, that men shouldn't cry, or that depression is a personal failing, is written deep into us—felt not just in our thoughts, but in our bones. Changing these beliefs is not just a mental exercise—it's a full-body reckoning. The shame and fear of stepping outside the group can be as real as any injury.

## The Hope of Change

But there is hope. We aren't locked into our old stories forever. With time, support, and genuine safety, we can build new beliefs—beliefs grounded in reality, compassion, and collective well-being, rather than comfort or trend.

The first step is curiosity. Not judgment, not force, but a gentle asking: Is this belief serving me? Where did it come from? Does it help, or does it hurt? Change is slow, but it is possible—especially in relationships that make room for doubt, vulnerability, and growth.

## The Real Work: Expanding the Circle

If belief is the soil of the self, it must be tended. That means challenging old stories, seeking new perspectives, and—most of all—asking who is left out of our care. True progress is measured not by how fiercely we defend our own, but by how bravely we include the forgotten, the silenced, and the inconvenient.

## Reflection Toolkit: Rewriting the Stories That Shape Us

When you notice a strong reaction to a belief being challenged, pause and ask: Where do I feel this in my body? What fear or need is being activated?

Think back: Whose approval shaped your beliefs growing up? Are those expectations still guiding you today?

Who, in your world or community, is left out of compassion because they don't fit the dominant narrative? What would it mean to include them?

Consider the cost of old beliefs—on your own life, on your family, and on the wider community. Are these costs still worth it?

Practice curiosity. When confronted with a new perspective, can you hold it with openness, even if just for a moment?

Remember: Changing beliefs takes time and safety. Seek out spaces and people who let you question and grow.

Belief is both prison and possibility. It is the map we inherit and the map we redraw. Healing—personal and collective—begins when we are willing to see whose stories have been erased, and when we find the courage to bring them back into the light.

## CHAPTER 3

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## About the Author

Author, Speaker, Trained Counsellor - Jonathan Arenburg

**Jonathan Arenburg** is a writer, speaker, and trained counsellor known for tackling mental health with honesty and zero sugar-coating. He is the founder and chief content creator behind *The Road to Mental Wellness* ([theroadtomenタルwellness.com](http://theroadtomenタルwellness.com)), a blog that documents his ongoing journey with PTSD, depression, and the realities of recovery in a world that often gets mental health wrong.

Jonathan's work is rooted in lived experience and informed by years supporting people with cognitive challenges, behavioral issues, and invisible wounds. He's not interested in platitudes—his writing cuts through the noise, drawing on science, real-world stories, and a deep respect for the human condition. As the author of *Wired to Be Human* and *The Road to Mental Wellness*, Jonathan calls out the cultural myths that leave so many struggling in silence, and he makes the case for a society that works with—not against—our

biological wiring.

Now retired from direct care, Jonathan dedicates his energy to writing, public speaking, and mental health advocacy, with a focus on honest conversation and real solutions. His message is simple and uncompromising: **Social connection and cooperation aren't luxuries—they're essential for healing, for meaning, for being fully human.**

Explore his writing, insights, and advocacy at:

[jonathanarenburg.com](http://jonathanarenburg.com)

QR Code for [jonathanarenburg.com](http://jonathanarenburg.com)

&

[theroadtomentalwellness.com](http://theroadtomentalwellness.com)

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*“Let’s create a world where mental health conversations are meaningful, accurate, and empowering.”*

— Jonathan Arenburg

You can connect with me on:

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-  [https://www.facebook.com/TRTMW](http://www.facebook.com/TRTMW)

## Also by Jonathan Arenburg

What's the Book About?



## The Road To Mental Wellness

Discover the transformative power of “The Road to Mental Wellness” by Jonathan Arenburg, a book that stands as a testament to overcoming mental health challenges. Arenburg, with his diverse background as a trained counsellor, speaker, retired firefighter, mental health writer, and long-term care worker, shares his intimate struggle with PTSD, depression, and anxiety, offering a beacon of hope for others navigating similar paths.

This book delves into the author’s personal journey, breaking down the stigmas surrounding mental health and promoting a culture of openness and understanding. “The Road to Mental Wellness” is more than a memoir; it’s a guidebook filled with insights and strategies for those looking to understand and combat their own mental health issues.

Arenburg’s narrative is characterized by its honesty, empathy, and the clear vision with which he addresses the complexities of the human psyche. The book encourages readers to confront their inner challenges, fostering a journey towards healing, self-acceptance, and ultimately, self-love. It serves as a compelling companion for anyone touched by mental illness, providing a deeper understanding of the mind’s inner workings and the pervasive impact of mental health on overall well-being.

“The Road to Mental Wellness” is an essential read for those affected by mental health issues, whether personally or through a loved one. It’s a critical tool for anyone seeking to grasp the profound effects of mental health on individual lives and society at large.

Embark on this enlightening journey towards understanding and healing with Jonathan Arenburg. This journey promises not just insights but a community of support and shared experiences. Read What people are saying about *The Road To Mental Wellness*

