

Introduction

Fuck the expectations.

There—we said it. (And we’ll say it a few more times before we’re done.)

As coaches, change experts, and talent specialists fascinated by human transformation, we started our podcast, *The Break-out*, to discover the different ways that people have successfully created lives on their own terms. What they told us again and again was that forging their own path meant giving unwanted expectations the big middle finger.

Each found themselves at a pivotal moment when they could either choose to stay stagnant or embrace the lives they were meant to be living. To make that change, they first had to buck the expectations that stood in their way.

Whose expectations are we talking about? They might be those of our parents, our partner, our friends, our religion, society as a whole . . . and even expectations we put on ourselves. Expectations that dictate how we act, what we say, where we go, what we do, what we wear, who we love, and certainly what we’re “allowed” to accomplish in life. Expectations that often keep us locked in a tight little box labeled, “No, you can’t” or “Stop! You shouldn’t!” or “You don’t have the right” or “You’d never pull *that* off.” Or worse yet, “You aren’t good enough.”

But here’s the thing: Expectations are not the same as obligations. It can feel like an expectation is an absolute truth—something that you must fulfill no matter what. But if you look at it more closely, you will no doubt discover that it isn’t an

absolute truth at all. You are not obligated to fulfill anyone else's expectations of you if you don't want to. You don't have to marry anyone or even date to have plenty of love in your life. You don't have to hold a nine-to-five job or be a world-traveling influencer to produce meaningful work. And you sure as hell don't have to wear the latest trends because they are in style. You don't *have to*, but you definitely can if you *want to*.

You're not alone if you've encountered expectations from your family, friends, teachers, bosses, society at large, and yourself for how you *should* look, the type of person you *should* be, and the work you *should* do. But at the end of the day, *it's your life*, and this book is your permission slip to do and be *whatever the hell you want*.

In a world that's telling you no, we are telling you *yes*.

We're passionate about the opportunity to live fully, and we'd love nothing more than to see everyone break out from the expectations that have kept them trapped in a life that doesn't serve them.

Recognizing the ways in which we've allowed expectations to rule our lives and dictate our decisions isn't always immediately obvious, however. It requires a de-conditioning, a clearing away of old, fractured beliefs, and a new model for creating a life by your design—and that is exactly what we are here to help you do.

Take a moment to consider the quality of your own thoughts. When was the last time you were in the process of making a choice, big or small, from what to do next in your career to what to make for dinner, and a thought stopped you in your tracks?

"I can't go back to school; I'm too old to start a new career."

"I'm giving my kids frozen dinner again; I'm a bad parent."

"I'm thirty-five and still not married; maybe there is something wrong with me."

“I can’t get a divorce. It will mess the kids up, and they will grow to hate me.”

These internal scripts about what your choices say about you as a person came from somewhere. At the root of many of our biggest self-limiting beliefs are the expectations that others and we ourselves have accepted as rules for how to live. Yet, each of these predetermined invisible rules affects our day-to-day lives, challenges our self-worth, and slowly but surely keeps us from pursuing our dreams and being our whole and complete selves.

Maybe you still aren’t sure if or how expectations have stood in your way, but you recognize that you feel stuck, stifled, suffocated, stressed, or at least dissatisfied with some aspect of your life. Perhaps you feel like you never get to do what you want or that your talents aren’t being used or expressed in ways that you’d prefer. Or do you have ideas that you never manage to implement? Perhaps there’s a hobby you’d like to explore but are afraid of what your friends or partner might think. Maybe you’re in a job that’s highly competitive and sought after, but you just don’t enjoy it. Or do you feel doomed to have a boring life? Do you feel like you’re living a life that was prescribed for you? You might not know what’s wrong exactly, but you know you feel stressed out and restricted. Something’s just plain “off.”

If you identify with this, you are far from alone. Adam Alter, the author of *Anatomy of a Breakthrough*, conducted a survey in which 70 percent of the respondents said they could easily think of an area of their life where they felt stuck, and 50 percent said they had been stuck for years or decades.¹

The United States may still be the wealthiest country in the world, but even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Happiness Report found that Americans ranked only sixteenth among the happiest nations.²

Of course, it's one thing to have a vague sense we aren't happy. It's quite another to know why or what to do about it. You might be saying to yourself, "Okay, fine. Maybe I'm living in a little box and letting expectations hold me back, but I don't even *know* what the hell I want." We get that.

In fact, that is what this book is all about. Our goal is to help you discover what you truly want, break out of the little boxes, and discard the false beliefs that aren't serving you so that you can finally *live* this one life you've been given. Stop for a second to just consider how powerful that is! (*And pardon us while we tear up. This topic always gets us right in the heart because making the most of your life means everything!*)

WHO THE HELL ARE WE, AND WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO US?

The two of us met thirteen years ago while working for the same company in Wisconsin and have been best friends since. In that time, we've watched each other go through a *lot* of changes.

Keri hired Kelly and that is how the bond began! "We quickly developed a deep trust and respect for each other. Plus, we have so much fun together!" Kelly says. "We're so different, but we complement each other well. Keri is the big-picture thinker who's a great influencer and rule-breaker, while I'm more about the details, the process, and the structure. It makes for a great partnership!"

After a while, Keri got a job in Southern California and moved there with her husband and son. In a strange coincidence, Kelly was also offered a change management role in Southern California about six months later.

It felt great to be in the same city again. Our friendship no longer had to be restricted to phone calls and Zoom chats.

As it turned out, however, even though we liked California, those promising new jobs left a lot to be desired. We both felt constrained by the corporate machine, which felt like quite a tiny box to squeeze into. We didn't feel free to be our true selves, and everything moved at a snail's pace, preventing us from making any real impact in the Human Resources field. We admit that we groveled in our misery for more than a minute, grumbling to each other, "I can't believe we have to contact recruiters again!" Yes, we bonded over tears. And realistically, we had to concede that most companies would probably suffer from the same issues we'd already muddled through—uncomfortable corporate politics and an aversion to creative thinking, just to name two. How much of ourselves would we have to suppress in order to fit into the corporate mold?

The answer was staring us right in the face, but frankly, neither of us ever thought we'd start our own business. The prospect was damn scary. But it was even scarier to think we might get stuck again in the little boxes that corporate job expectations would require of us. To add to the mix, we had naysayers in our lives with their own doomsday predictions:

"Rents in southern California are sky high, so if you aren't successful, you'll be screwed!"

"You'll never make any money."

"It'll destroy your friendship, and you won't be besties anymore. Friends should never go into business together!"

"You'll be ruined, and you'll struggle to get a corporate job again when your business tanks."

Lots of people treated us like we were boarding the *Titanic*. But by that point, we'd both been around long enough to know these

people were just expressing their own fears. We didn't need that—we had enough of our own, thank you very much. Luckily, we had also learned how to put our fears aside enough to take action.

Of course, we knew starting a business would be a real risk, but we also knew that nothing amazing happens without risk. Despite the high rents, Southern California is also a big market. We both have an incredible work ethic, so we figured whatever odds might be against us, we still had plenty of good odds in our favor. Plus, our friendship and loyalty toward one another felt like our ace in the hole.

Seven years later, we are proud to say we work with individuals as coaches and still run Abbracci Group together, our boutique consulting firm driven by a mission to empower organizations, leaders, teams, and individuals to unlock their full potential for transformative and sustainable growth. We haven't lost our shirts, our friendship is stronger than ever, and we're no longer confined to a box.

I (Keri) now cannot believe that I would ever *not* have a company with Kelly. I don't have biological siblings, but I now have a sister. It's the best feeling in the world! There isn't anything we wouldn't do for each other.

We are iPEC Certified Professional Coaches (CPC) and Prosci®-certified change management practitioners. We understand how change works. Together, we have successfully implemented high-level change management models that worked beautifully in a variety of business environments, and we have coached individuals to break out of their own stuffy boxes due to unwanted expectations.

Prosci conducted a study which found that 93 percent of organizations that implemented excellent change management

programs (programs that exceeded objectives in each of the change management effectiveness categories) said they “met or exceeded project objectives.”³ With those kinds of results, we started to think, *Why can't these models we've seen work over and over in companies also work for individuals in their personal lives? Prosci combined with our individual coaching can be a winning combination.*

It turns out they can! In fact, when we looked back at what's worked for each of us in our own lives, for people we have coached, and for people we've interviewed on our podcast, we saw our change models in action. Applying the same method we have seen work time and time again, we will walk you through the practical steps to break out of your own boxes and create the life you want.

After more than twenty years of coaching people on this topic, we understand the expectations that people place on themselves as well as the expectations that are placed on them. For all these reasons, we need proven strategies for fucking the expectations if we're going to be who we want to be and live the life we choose. That's the whole point of this book. It's the difference between sleepwalking through your life and engaging passionately with it. Which would you rather do?

Yeah, we thought so.

The bottom line is that we believe in telling the status quo to suck it. We support anyone who desires to live a life defined by their own values. With self-awareness comes the knowledge of who you are, what you want, what you *don't* want, and the courage to make the decisions needed to live the best version of your life. You just need the right tools, information, and guidance. And now you've picked up the right book.

HERE'S YOUR ESCAPE PLAN

Fair warning: We aren't going to sugarcoat anything. Some of these chapters will go deep. Challenging the status quo is . . . well, challenging. But as you continue reading, you'll learn more and more that letting go of expectations and living on your own terms is so, so worth it.

You may find yourself moving easily through some of the chapters, while you might want to skip others because they feel too painful to handle. We ask that you read all of them because you just never know what you'll discover there. The shiniest gold for you may be in a chapter that doesn't seem worth the discomfort. But take breaks as needed and remember to be gentle with yourself if a chapter brings up difficult emotions.

While we have found that the mechanics of breaking expectations are similar regardless of race, gender, religion, or geographic location, we also want to acknowledge that we are white cisgendered women. While we'll touch on race a bit in this book, we are not experts on this subject. We recognize and acknowledge our privilege and know that the challenges faced by some are far more serious than anything we have had to endure. While we have done our best to become aware of our own biases, we know we may have some that are still unconscious. We suggest that every reader consider and seek out the resources and support that they need as they examine breaking the expectations in their lives.

Each chapter will have a similar rhythm. We will share some stories of people who have been suffocated in their little boxes and some who have busted out to live the lives they were always meant to. We'll also infuse the information with a touch (but just a touch) of research. (I mean, c'mon, Keri did get a PhD!) At the end of each chapter, we'll provide some exercises to prompt you to think about

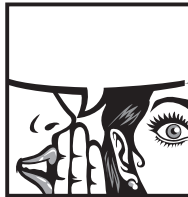
what expectations you have put on yourself, what others have told you, what you want for yourself, and how to make the changes that will make the difference.

If it sounds daunting, remember that we'll be with you as you read every page. After listening to more than one hundred stories on our podcast and countless stories of people we've coached, one of the key things we've learned is that none of us can make big changes in life alone. You must be willing to accept help and support. Through these pages, it's our intent to be that support for you. We hope you'll feel us cheering you on as you absorb each chapter and take the first step toward the life that's waiting for you—a life with the weight of unwanted expectations lifted from your shoulders. A life where there are no walled-in boxes to hold you back. A life of your own design.



Part I

Be Brave and Realize Your Expectations





CHAPTER 1

Introducing BREAK



Have you ever changed your plans for the day or sacrificed something you wanted to meet someone else's expectations? Have you ever done something just because it's what has "always" been done?

Of course you have! At some point (or perhaps at many points), we have all been influenced by our family, friends, partners, community, teachers, social media, and more to be, do, and behave in a certain way. Can't you just hear their voices now? *"You'll go broke if you start your own company!" "What? You can't just elope!" "Um, aren't you too old to pull off those sequins?"* But we all deserve happiness, security, joy, peace, and to live authentically as ourselves, which can only be achieved when we are living the life we have chosen. And this book is designed to help you live as *you* choose.

In this chapter, we will introduce you to our plan to help you BREAK away from the expectations that have prevented you from making this life what you really want it to be. Expectations that are like little boxes that you have squeezed yourself into (or like pants

two or three sizes too small), only to find yourself stuck and unable to move freely, or even breathe. We know exactly what that's like. We, too, have been stuck and have since spent years learning how to break free, while helping others do the same.

We know this path isn't easy. Bucking the status quo can be an uphill battle. While it's true that even at a young age, we both possessed a certain amount of sass (sometimes outright refusing to obey conventions), it hasn't been a walk in the park to always be exactly who we are and do exactly what we want. There have been plenty of times throughout our lives when we struggled to follow our own desires in the face of what others wanted us to do or be.

Becoming change experts and launching our own business didn't happen overnight, either. Identifying what works and why it works took us years of studying and observing hundreds of people as they made intentional changes for the better. Honestly, there's nothing more rewarding than helping people learn how to be truly free. Watching them break out of their boxes is just about the most exciting thing we do!

Still, our very first case studies were *ourselves*. Before we developed the strategies you will read on these pages, we lived them through trial and error.

Our stories are a reminder that choosing to break out of your boxes and live the life you want has nothing to do with being born a rule-breaker or having such a tough skin that you don't care what people think. You can be human, shed as many tears as needed, and still transform your life. Each and every one of us has this ability. For the two of us, it started with one choice we had to make for ourselves, and that we all must make at some point—the choice whether to live our life or someone else's.

FIRST, WE MUST BELONG TO OURSELVES

—Kelly

I've hardly been what you'd call a rebel throughout my life. I love schedules, color-coded sticky notes, and having a detailed plan. But even as a kid, I never quite saw life the same way as my family or friends did.

I was in third grade when my cousin got engaged, and while in the car one day, my mother, aunt, and sister discussed the wedding. Everyone started to guess how many kids the newlyweds might have, to which I said, "What if they don't want to have kids?" Everyone in the car went into a state of shock. Of course, my cousin and her husband would have children, they all insisted!

Then, I shocked them even more. "I know I don't want to have kids," I said definitively.

My aunt quickly snapped back, "Well, that's why you were put on this earth."

Talk about a box to get stuck in! My only purpose in life was to procreate? No way. That comment just made me dig in my heels even more. *Now I'm for sure not having kids*, I thought.

In Wisconsin, where I grew up, it was the norm for little girls to say they wanted to be a mommy when they grew up. It felt like everyone was expected to get married and have children. But even as I got older, I remained crystal clear that I didn't want to follow the pack on this, and I've held to that decision all these years later despite the expectations of my extended family and community.

There's certainly nothing wrong with Wisconsin, but I felt suffocated there in many ways, both personally and professionally. It seemed that nearly everyone around me was focused on their babies. They talked about the best strollers on the market, which neighborhoods had the best schools, or whether timeouts worked

or not. I couldn't relate, which made it hard to find people in my age group with common interests who were willing to go out for a nice evening (especially since it meant hiring a babysitter). So, when my company offered me a position in California at age thirty-six, I jumped at the opportunity.

There was just one problem. In my family and greater community, you simply didn't move far away from your parents. I assume if I'd been married, and my husband got a job in California, that would have been considered more acceptable. But as a single woman moving to another state clear across the country, no one could understand it. It was yet another little box I was supposed to sit in quietly and dutifully.

When my company offered to relocate me, I thought, "It would be crazy not to do this." I could break out of the box, or I could stay where I was, complaining nonstop for the next twenty years. So, I took a deep breath, said "fuck the expectations," and went west.

After the move, I spent a *lot* of time crying. I was filled with excitement at how refreshing and altogether different California felt—and to reunite with Keri, who had moved to Los Angeles six months before—but I was also deeply heartbroken knowing that my family had doubts. Yet, despite my family's reaction, I knew it was the right thing to do for *me* and what I wanted out of my life.

It took them a long time to get over it, but I'm happy to say that now, they're 100 percent on board. Taking that leap allowed me to start a whole new and exciting phase of my life. I'm so grateful I had the courage to say no to what everyone else thought I *should* do and follow what felt right for me. It led to the founding of my company with Keri and many great adventures that I could have missed.

When I packed and walked away, I had no way of knowing if my parents would ever come around. I'm lucky they did. It's true

that sometimes, following our heart can cause others to cut us off. But if I had stayed just to placate them, I would have relegated myself to that little box, feeling like I was wearing a straitjacket. The tendency to shape our lives based on the expectations of others is responsible for a lot of the world's misery. For that reason, I believe the only choice we have is to be ourselves. The alternative is unacceptable.

We all want and need other people to help us feel we belong, but first and foremost, we have to belong to ourselves.

YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO WAIT

—Keri

In some ways, I have been a natural at turning my back on the status quo. When I was a kid, I brushed off the Brownies troop because they wanted us to pay twenty-five cents for playtime, and I thought that was dumb. “Why should we pay twenty-five cents when members can just come over to my house to play for free?” So, I started my own version of a Brownies troop when I was in second grade. “Join my troop,” I said, “and you won’t have to pay me anything!” (On second thought, that might have been a missed revenue opportunity.)

You’ll also learn more in a later chapter about how I threw tradition out the window when I planned my wedding in Vegas. But I don’t want you to think I just came out of the womb ready to give everybody’s expectations the finger. I know firsthand that what others expect of us (or what we expect of ourselves) can take a horrible toll.

When I was in my late teens, I was in an enormous amount of emotional pain. My parents had divorced when I was five years

old, and I lived with my mother. She had such high expectations of me since she saw any failing on my part as a reflection on her. I had to behave like a miniature version of her or she would be embarrassed. In her mind, any assertion of my own identity invalidated her own choices and self-image. She was disgusted that I didn't like orchestra concerts, and if I got sick, she took it as a reflection on her. "I can't believe you're sick. How will that make me look?" she'd say. She also graded my behavior from A to F, as if she was giving me a report card. At the same time, I felt I was failing to meet the expectations of my father and the new family he had built. I was supposed to just accept the new family without any negative feelings about it because my dad needed that illusion.

All I wanted was to be loved and accepted, but I felt very much alone. By my teen years, the weight of these expectations and my parents' conditional form of love built up my anger to a breaking point.

I wanted to shatter the image that my mother created with her friends and family, so I plotted my suicide. *That will show her*, I thought. And as someone who tends to follow through on goals, I intentionally crashed my car. Afterward I sat inside it, realizing I was barely injured. *Great*, I thought, *nothing will change*.

And nothing did. My parents blamed it all on stress. "She just does too much," they claimed, in complete denial. Meanwhile, I was shamed by my grandparents for being a bad driver. I came out of the hospital feeling just as unlovable as before. Inside, I wanted to scream, telling them all, "I did it on purpose to show you all that your pressure and expectations are bullshit!"

But I didn't. I carried that secret with me, along with the belief that I was unlovable, and I didn't tell anyone until much later in life. At the age of twenty-eight, I finally started dealing with the

pain of my upbringing and the expectations that provided me with such a shaky foundation. There were a lot of tears, some heavy drinking, and a hefty amount of avoidance before I finally got enough therapy to help me break out. But I did it. Bye-bye, boxes!

From where I sit now, I'm so grateful I didn't die in that car crash. I would have missed the beautiful life I have today with my husband, son, friends, and my bestie, Kelly. My life is kick-ass because I get to be myself with the people I love most. I finally have the unconditional love I wanted so much as a kid. And this is what propels me to pay it forward. I hate for others to be in the kind of pain I experienced, and I know that far too many people are. I know how many try to mold themselves into what others want. But like Kelly, I've learned that living a lie is an awful life sentence. Breaking out and being who we are might feel difficult in the short term, but in the long term, it gives us the gift of freedom. Ultimately, that's the only way to be truly alive, and I'm just glad I survived and gave myself the opportunity to discover the rewards of being me rather than someone else's picture of me.

My choice to break out of the boxes that others had chosen for me and build a life on my own terms ultimately saved my life, and I'm so glad I didn't wait any longer to do it. Luckily, for most of us, breaking out of our boxes and refusing to abide by unwanted expectations is not quite so dramatic, but it can still be so stifling that we settle for less than the full life we're capable of enjoying. We simply can't afford to wait to find out who we are, what we truly want, or to take action to design our life accordingly. *If the only choice for a full life is to be yourself, then the only time to be unapologetically you is now.*

With that in mind, let's take a look at the process that will serve as your foundation while you walk through these chapters with us.

THE BREAK METHOD

Throughout this book, you will learn how to identify the little boxes of expectation that have kept you trapped. Then, you will prioritize what you want and map out how to get it. This is how you will finally live a life of unwavering choice and lasting freedom.

To help you get there, we have created a process we call BREAK. Each letter stands for one part of the process that you will follow as you continue reading.

Where did BREAK come from? In our Human Resources jobs, we have followed what are called “organizational change management models.” That might sound like a big yawn, but they’re actually pretty cool. Even when working with a Fortune 125 company to transform an 1,800-person business delivery model, we discovered that organizational changes are still all about individual *people*. Companies don’t change; humans do. So, as we started to work with individuals, worked on transforming our own lives at the same time, and interviewed our many podcast guests, the steps that truly work to help people change and break out of those confining boxes became clearer and clearer. We borrowed a bit from the change models we knew, like those of Dr. John Kotter, Kurt Lewin, and ADKAR (part of the Prosci® model), but our version is all about saying au revoir, sayonara, and adios to the expectations that are between you and the life you deserve. That’s how BREAK was born.

BREAK stands for:

- **Brave**—be brave enough to think about making a change
- **Realize** which expectations stand in your way
- **Explore** the possibilities available to you

- Act to get out of those stuffy boxes
- Keep it going and live free!

Let's talk a bit more about each of these.

The first three letters—B, R, and E—represent the pre-change stage of the process and Part One of the book. The A represents the actual change stage, and the K is the post-change phase. Part 2 of the book will focus on the change and post-change phases.

Whether it's one person or a whole organization, it seems to be human nature to want to jump to the action part, skipping the pre- and post-change bits. After all, that feels like the meatiest segment, doesn't it, where you'll see the most results? But we have learned the hard way that skipping the pre- and post-change stages is a whopper of a mistake because it's difficult to sustain changes without the right kind of preparation. That's why we will spend the most time on the pre-change part. *You simply can't break free of even one expectation without each of these steps.* Let's now look at each letter a little more closely.

Be Brave Enough to Think About Making a Change. This first step of pre-change is about taking a deep breath and being brave enough to just *think* about changing. We'll start by asking how you are *really* feeling about the different areas of your life. Do you know you're stressed out or dissatisfied in some ways but have no idea why? In this step, you will begin to take an honest look at where you are *right now* and start to muster up the bravery to think about what needs to happen next.

Realize the Expectations Standing in Your Way. This is the step where we really lean in on increasing your awareness of the expectations you have faced in the different areas of your life and the harm they may be causing you. These include family,

religion, and various aspects of society. Like peeling an onion, after we've cut to the center, you will have greater self-awareness. And we all need more awareness! Psychologist Tasha Eurich, author of the book *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*, conducted a series of surveys and came to the conclusion that 95 percent of us think we're self-aware, but only 10 to 15 percent of us actually are.¹ Yikes! As our podcast guest and Own Your Amazing Coach Dr. Denise Moore Revel told us, "You've got to stop and get to know who you really are—outside of your husband, outside of your kids, outside of your career. Who are you really *for you*? That's the first question, and that's the hardest question for a lot of us to answer." In other words, are you living the life you want for you, or are you trying to be who everyone else wants you to be? That's what you'll answer in this part, and you'll find it has the most chapters of any part of the book because it's just that important!

Explore the Possibilities Available to You. It's one thing to realize you have undertaken a career because it's what your parents expected of you, or that you have been restricted under the weight of gender expectations or your religion's requirements. But it's another thing to unravel what you might want instead. This step is when you'll start to think about what truly matters to you. With the expectations taken out of the equation, what the hell do you really want?

Act to Get Out of Those Stuffy Boxes. Now, we finally move out of the pre-change phase into the stage everyone wants to jump ahead to. This is when you will devise your escape plan and decide how to make whatever the hell you want a reality. What do you need to *do* to finally be free?

Keep It Going and Live Free. As we said, the post-change phase is another one people like to skip, much to their detriment. You'll learn just how easy it is to fall back into old habits and let those confining expectations take over your life again. After all, society is always trying to lock us back up in restrictive boxes, and you probably have some family members who would feel more comfortable with you in an old familiar box. So that means it's up to you to stay free by learning how to reinforce the changes you've made and to sustain your new life. In other words, post-change is all about sticking the landing and living the life you choose for the rest of your days.

That's the plan! We hope you're as excited about it as we are and ready to roll up your sleeves because we want you to roll them up right now.

BE BRAVE

How many of us sleepwalk through our days, barely even noticing if we've had a single moment of enjoyment? We're so busy filling up the dishwasher, rushing to a meeting with our boss, and fighting with customer service over the cell phone bill that we don't have time to think about what's working in our lives . . . and what isn't. Hey, it's easy to do, and we're all guilty of it at least some of the time.

But before you can figure out what you need to do differently in order to make the most of this life, you've got to STOP and be brave enough to take an inventory of how you feel right now. And we mean *really* stop and give it more attention than just lip service. That's where the bravery really comes in.

You may not even realize yet that in one or more areas of your life, you're sitting in a box so little that your inner badass has no

room to play, fight, or maybe even breathe. Let's assess how big or small your life's boxes are from where you sit at this moment.

THE SQUEEZE

In the following exercise, you'll look at a few key areas of your life and ask yourself just how boxed in you feel. These areas include your family of origin, your religion/spiritual background, your community, love/marriage, and your career/work life. How do you know if you're stuck in a box? Do you feel burned out, stressed, dissatisfied, or like you aren't free to be yourself in this aspect of your life? We believe that your level of satisfaction is likely to correlate with the number of unwanted expectations that you face in that aspect of your life. So, for each one, we have created an image that represents the little boxes you might find yourself stuffed inside.

You are sitting in the center. For each, you'll choose one of the following:

SMALL is for the areas of your life where you feel super-duper boxed in—suffocated and crushed by the walls closing in on you. If this is the case, you're sure this aspect of your life isn't working, even if you have no idea why yet.

MEDIUM is when you feel pretty boxed in but are still handling your shit. This box isn't as small as the previous one. You have a little more breathing room, but at the same time, you're stressed out. This part of your life isn't exactly making you want to dance to your favorite song even if, again, you aren't quite sure what's causing that boxed-in feeling.

LARGE is when you can feel you're on the verge of breaking out. The box is pretty big, you're near the edge of its walls, and you're *almost* free. There isn't much left that's holding you back.

OUTSIDE THE BOX is when you're free and on the outside of the walls. No damn box at all, baby! You have wings and can go wherever you want without restrictions.

Now we realize that you might also look at one or more of these aspects of your life and say, "I don't have a clue." There's a big question mark over your head, and you're wandering around lost, thinking, *Am I in a box here? Hell if I know!* That's okay, too. It will become clearer as you turn each page and discover more about the expectations that may be keeping you from flying freely wherever the hell you want to go in life.

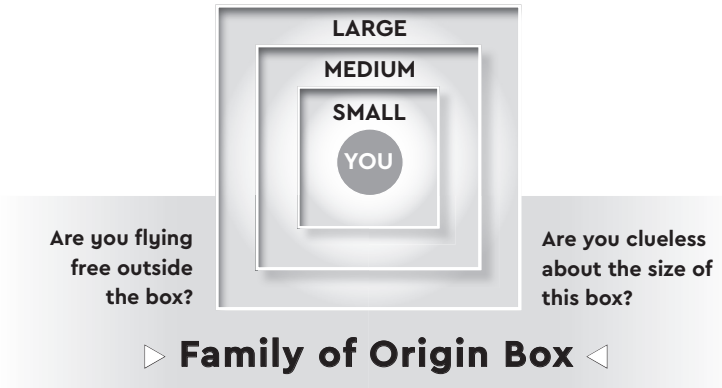
As you look at each box, you will see visually just how much breathing room you have or how restricted you are. We invite you to get messy and defy the expectations of a buttoned-up book owner. Go ahead and write all over the pages of this puppy. If you need permission, here it is.

We know this exercise might mean some uncomfortable truth-telling for you, but breaking out from what's holding you back has to start with the hard truth. (Be brave, remember?) For each of the boxes, trace a line around the outside walls if you feel your box is large, the middle walls if you feel your box is medium, or the inside walls if you feel your box is small. Or if you feel clueless about this one, circle the person with a question mark over their head. If you're flying free outside the walls, congratulations! Circle the person with wings.

Family of Origin Box

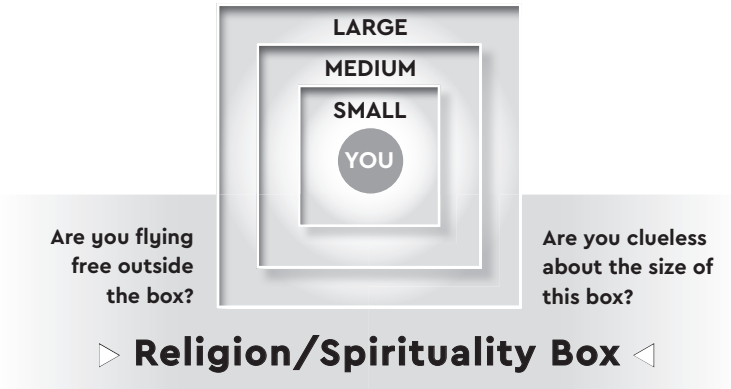
This box represents how you feel about your life with your parents, siblings, and extended family. Even if you're no longer in touch with anyone in your family—whether parents, siblings,

aunts, uncles, or cousins—you're still emotionally affected by what happened in the household where you grew up. Are you stressed out or burned out in relation to your family? Do you feel your box is small, medium, or large, or do you feel free to express your true self with them? If you are no longer in touch with them, do you think what you experienced in your childhood home still has a significant hold on you?



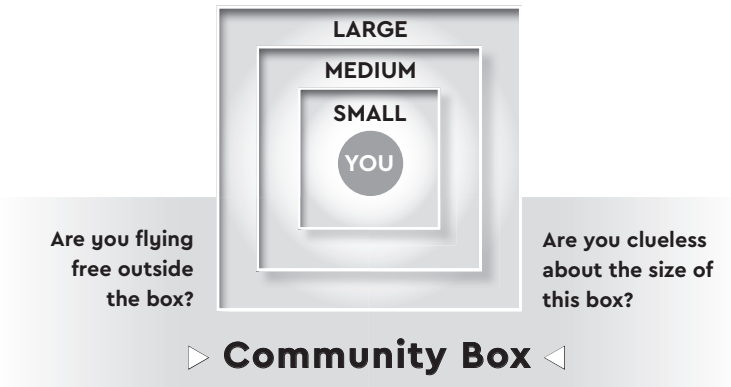
Religion/Spirituality Box

This box is all about how boxed in you feel in your religious or spiritual life. Think carefully. Are you free and flying outside of the box, or are you stressed and restricted in this area of your life? Is your box small, medium, large, or open with no walls at all? For example, in Kelly's case, she felt restricted in a tiny box when she was young, but she has blown those walls wide open so that she's now free to be who she wants to be in her religious/spiritual life.



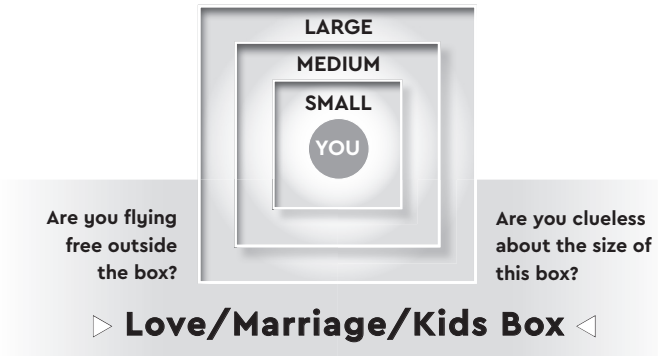
Community Box

This box represents how satisfied you feel about your community and culture. Do you feel connected to the people in the area where you live, or do you feel suffocated by your community/culture? For example, maybe you feel you have to act a certain way to be accepted by the people in your community. How big is your box for this one?



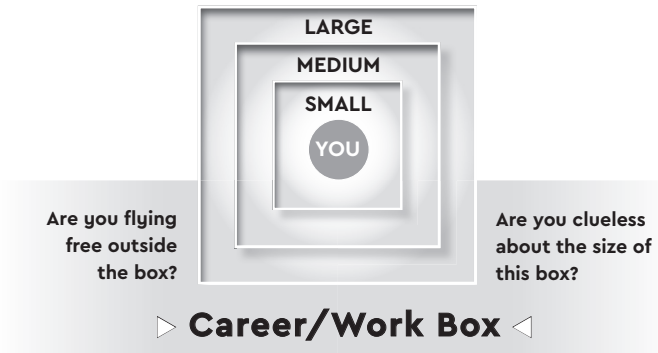
Love/Marriage/Kids Box

How satisfied do you feel right now about your love life or marriage/partnership? Bear in mind that this applies even if you aren't in a relationship. If you're very satisfied with your relationship or singlehood, you'll be free without a box at all. Otherwise, choose a small, medium, or large box based on how you feel in this area.



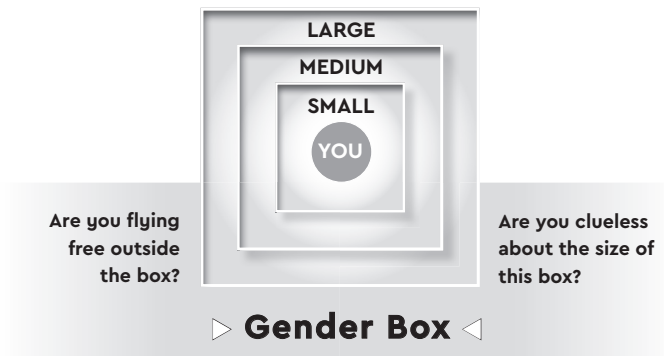
Career/Work Box

Do you enjoy your work, or is it a drudge? Do you love what you do, or do you wish you were doing something else? How you answer these questions will help you determine if your box in this area of your life is small, medium, large, or nonexistent.



Gender Box

Do you feel that gender expectations in your life have put you in a box? This can mean expectations that make you act a certain way or hold you back from being yourself, whether you're male, female, nonbinary, or any gender expression. It might mean that you have experienced discrimination in your life. Do you feel your box in this area of your life is small, medium, large, or nonexistent?



Your Breaking Point: Slow Burn or Box on Fire?

If some of your boxes are small, medium, or large, you are in one of two situations: (1) a slow burn—feeling vaguely unsettled, maybe even frustrated for years, but not willing to do anything about it yet, or (2) with a box that's on fire as you sit in the center with the burning walls rapidly closing in on you. With number 2, there's no question you're fed up.

The truth of the matter is that we often refuse to take action until we reach that number-2 state. In change management, we call this the “burning platform.” It's when the situation gets hot enough that we truly hate it. That's when we're willing to finally jump out of the box and change for the better. If you've picked up

this book, chances are you have a burning platform in some area of your life—something that’s eating at you and calling for change sooner rather than later.

But you don’t have to wait for the walls of your boxes to catch fire. You can be in a medium or large box and still make changes if you figure out what you need in order to fly out from within those walls. And that’s what we’re prepared to help you do.

And no matter what you discovered in this exercise, don’t judge yourself! We have all stuffed ourselves into boxes in life, and there’s no shame in doing what you had to do to get where you are now. In this moment, you’re revving up your bravery to make your life better. Give yourself a big gold star for that because not everybody’s willing to fight for the life they want. *You are.*

You’ll notice that we haven’t included some areas that are often included in these kinds of exercises, such as health/fitness and money/finances. We wanted to focus on the places where people we have interviewed tend to fall prey to expectations. But the BREAK process will work for these areas, too, if you’d like to try it at any time.



Before you dive into the next part of the pre-change process, we want to make something else crystal clear: As you read these pages, don’t you dare convince yourself that you’re exempt from having the life you want. Don’t tell yourself it’s a pipe dream or that only some people get to fulfill their dreams. That’s the worst kind of B.S. None of the people we know who have broken out and found freedom from expectations, including the two of us, have felt they had some kind of special sauce or magic to make

it happen. They just did the work. And that's what it takes. The magic is all in your commitment to yourself.

The next chapters will help you unravel the expectations in different aspects of your life that have almost certainly resulted in any of the small boxes you've found yourself stuffed inside. Then, you'll know exactly where you need to break free in order to live the authentic life you're after. Take a deep breath, let your anticipation be your guide, and just be brave enough to turn the page.