



Commentary Transcript: *Big Little Lies*

Clip 7: Season 1, Episode 5

In this scene, Renata is upset and eager to confront Jane Chapman, who is played by Shailene Woodley. Renata's daughter Amabella has identified Jane's son, Ziggy as a bully. Amabella has recently been bitten at school, and the assumption is that Ziggy is the culprit. At this point in the story, Jane is unsure if Ziggy is the bully, but feels worried that he might be.

Here's the scene.

[PLAY SCENE]

This short scene offers an exploration of self-management and giving ourselves—and others—permission to behave carelessly when strong emotions are present.

Let's break this down.

PAUSE: "We're all here to discuss the same topic, I assume..."

Here, Renata forces her way into the office, followed by her husband Gordon, both ignoring the fact that they are early for their appointment. They push by the Principal, who has asked them to come back later.

They seem to be acting on assumptions that they shouldn't have to wait their turn, and that it's OK to step on Jane's time with her son's teacher and the Principal.

They also don't seem to see that it's inappropriate to pounce on Jane in this way. Renata is ready for confrontation, but Jane is not prepared for this intrusion. Her attention was directed very differently before they pushed in, making it unlikely that she'll be able to skillfully defend herself, or assert her position, because she is unprepared for the interaction.

When we're driven by a sense of emotional urgency, it's easy to ignore others' requests, feelings, and needs. Through the lens of our urgency, we tend to believe that our emotions are the most important—if not the *only* important—element of a situation. Approaching communication from a triggered perspective encourages us to bulldoze the people around us with our emotions. It may feel satisfying to some folks to express strong emotions, but it doesn't allow for curiosity, new information, or strategizing about how to solve a problem.

PAUSE: "Excuse my wife, she's very upset."

Renata has taken control of the room and starts by talking down to both the Principal and Jane. Her insensitive approach is obvious because her husband feels compelled to apologize for her. Gordon is aware of Renata's lack of self-management, but he retains his self-control



trying to slow things down by introducing himself to Jane with a basic level of respect. When he does this, Renata gives him a nasty look, like showing respect for Jane, or questioning Renata's approach, demonstrates a betrayal or weakness.

Let's take this a little further...

Gordon's statement—and request that the other people involved give Renata a free pass because she's upset—is based on an assumption that many of us carry: Women can't control their feelings and they shouldn't have to.

In many cultures, there is a common expectation that when women are emotional, they can't control their words or behavior. We're just too fragile. This belief may have propagated a lack of self-management skills as generations of parents didn't bother to train girls and women in noticing, translating, or responding skillfully to emotional distress. We see the consequences of this training—and false belief in fragility—in the world. Women shouldn't be leaders because they're too emotional. Women make decisions based on their hearts instead of their heads. Women can't be trusted to do tough stuff without breaking down or becoming hysterical. Emotional management skills may vary, but the expectation that women are fragile is wrong, and plenty of women prove it every day.

Women's brains are adapted to make complex judgements that can frame logic through the lens of emotion. Girls, and women, can benefit from skill development that supports noticing and pausing when emotions arise. Listening to and translating the information provided by emotions, and responding in skillful ways. Women tend to be able to consider multiple perspectives, and are often aware of the nuances of a situation and the varied interests and needs involved. That's not what's happening in this scene. But, when we see women do this skillfully it's a real joy to watch. It's like they have a superpower that blends emotional intelligence, intuition, clear seeing, and logical reasoning. They aren't *underneath* their emotions—they're using the information provided by emotions as one aspect of a skillful response. That's self-management in action.

Though I love that subject and we could take it further, let's shift to considering what options might have existed if this situation were happening in real life:

First, Gordon might have prevented the whole thing by speaking with Renata on the way to the meeting. He may have said something like, "Renata, I know you're upset and so am I. But you have a tendency to pop off when you're angry, and I'd like us to keep our feelings in check so we can focus on a solution. This is about Amabella, not us." Then, the fight would have been between the couple, not them and the Principal, Teacher, Assistant, and Jane.



Second, the Assistant might have left the couple outside the door instead of interrupting the meeting in process.

Third, the Principal might have set boundaries and supported Jane with something like, “This intrusion is not acceptable. Please leave the office and come back at your appointment time.”

Finally, if Jane could have gathered herself quickly enough, she might have asserted her concern about the situation—and her right to be treated with consideration. She may have said something like, “Amabella should be safe at school. If Ziggy *is* hurting her, I will do *everything* I can to stop it. Let’s set a time to talk more about this. But, if we do that, I’d like it if you’d come to that discussion with a little bit more self-control so we can work together to figure out if Ziggy is involved and protect Amabella.”

The general idea here is that we don’t have to give a free pass to someone when they want to vent their feelings without consideration for the people they’re venting them on. But we also don’t have to *get* emotional to *stand up* to strong emotion.

Let’s rewrite this sequence with the assumption that Renata has stronger self-management skills.

First, Renata wouldn’t have pushed her way past the principal to get access to Jane. She would have controlled herself and waited her turn, just like the children at the school are expected to.

After Jane’s meeting, when she emerges from the office, Renata might say something like, “Jane, we all know that Amabella said Ziggy is hurting her. If that’s true, I expect you to figure out what’s going on and keep him away from my daughter.”

Jane might respond with, “I totally understand your concern and I would feel terrible if Ziggy were responsible. The thing is, he still contends that it wasn’t him and it doesn’t seem to me like he’s lying. Maybe something else is going on that we don’t understand yet.”

Renata might reply, “Well, you need to figure out what’s happening with your son because this has to stop. Now, excuse me, we need to speak with the principal.”

Renata has a right to be angry. She has a right to be protective. But she doesn’t have a right to bulldoze everyone around her with her emotions.

She can tell Jane that she needs to take action if Ziggy is bullying Amabella.

She can have some steel in her voice.



But she could protect Amabella's interests without villainizing or talking down to Jane, or assuming that she had all the facts.

If Renata knew how to control her emotions, and form clear statements that express boundaries and expectations, her husband wouldn't have had to "excuse" his wife's behavior and there would have been a little room for curiosity and problem solving.

A few more thoughts about this exploration...

We all have moments when our strong emotions overcome our ability to think clearly. That's how brains work.

And, we've all had moments when our lack of self-control hinders our ability to consider other's feelings or important nuances of a situation that we might be missing. That's where self-management comes in.

Self-management is a multifaceted skill, applied in a huge variety of situations. One important element of self-management is an understanding of what emotions *are*.

Emotions are information; they're not truth.

Let me say that again because it's a really important concept... emotions are information, even though they do a good job pretending to be truth, disguising themselves as knowledge, and encouraging us to act on them as if they're logical thoughts. They are indications of action that needs to be taken, unmet needs, or simply short-hand evaluations of experiences.

If we look at Renata's emotions in this scene, the information being conveyed to her by her agitation and intolerance is something like, "I must protect my daughter."

If she translated her emotions to get to the, "What should I do?" statement inside them, her focus would be on taking action to protect Amabella, not on venting her feelings. She would use the information behind her emotional response as an indication that she needed to take action.

She could immediately protect her daughter by pulling her out of school for a week.

She could take Amabella to see a play therapist to support her daughter's emotional needs.

She could ask that a teacher's aide, or family friend, accompany Amabella throughout the day until they understood what was happening.



She could host a gathering of parents, raise her concerns about her daughter's experience, and ask the parents to talk to their children about bullying.

Sniping at Jane satisfies the *expression* of Renata's emotions but it doesn't act on the information *provided* by those emotions: Protect Amabella.

We're all learning as we go and there is no perfect way to think, feel, be, or communicate. This commentary is not meant to criticize the writing or Renata's behavior. Mom is highly triggered by the idea that her daughter is not safe at school, and that makes sense. Bullying is unacceptable and has lasting consequences on victims, and bullies. The lesson here is that Mom will be much more effective in *protecting* her daughter if she can get out from under her emotions, problem-solve, communicate boundaries and expectations, and take thoughtful action.

How we behave when we're upset says a lot more about us than it does about the person, people, or situations we're upset about. Self-management is essential if we want to identify problems correctly, come up with good solutions, and meet our needs and the needs of the people we love. Without taking a free pass to vent our stuff on others.

Here are a few questions you're invited to consider related to these topics...

- When something happens that you don't like, what's your typical reaction style? Quick and emotional? Blame and attack? Consideration and curiosity? Knowing your style is the first step in shifting it to a more productive approach that allows you to skillfully protect yourself and others, stand up to injustices, or question inappropriate behavior.
- Do you behave in ways that result in people apologizing for your outbursts or lack of consideration? If so, when is that most likely to happen? Why do you give yourself permission to let emotion drive your behavior? If this is something you deal with, consider learning more about compassionate communication, also known as Non-Violent Communication, to practice slowing down, identifying and translating feelings so you can get what you need without big reactions.
- Are you on the other end of that spectrum, with a tendency to swallow your feelings and not use emotions or words to stand up for yourself? Why? Is it lack of experience? A belief that your needs don't matter? Consider learning more about assertive communication, a practice that can help you voice your needs and feelings skillfully, even in the face of confrontation.

If you're interested in learning more about processing difficult emotions into actionable statements, there's a resource on this website that might be helpful. It's a technique in our Self-Harm Intervention program called NPLTR, or No Place Left to Run. Download the free workbook and check out Chapters 11 through 15. Even outside of its intended context, there might be information there that resonates with you.



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Remember, emotions are important—not because they’re a great weapon—but because you can use the information behind them to help you clearly communicate boundaries, needs, requests, and expectations. With that information you can more effectively manage your responses and navigate difficult situations skillfully.

OK, that’s the end of this exploration of self-management and getting to the information behind emotions rather than asking for permission to behave carelessly when strong emotions are present. I hope you found some tidbits that you can apply in your own life.