

10 Practical Examples of Opposite Action – Part Two

By [Laura K. Schenck, Ph.D., LPC | 0](#)



“Almost all of us long for peace and freedom; but very few of us have much enthusiasm for the thoughts, feelings, and actions that make for peace and freedom.” – *Aldous Huxley*

In my last post, “10 Practical Examples of Opposite Action – Part One,” we explored a variety of distressing, intense, or difficult emotional experiences and how they can be moved through with the application of opposite action. When emotional experiences are unpleasant or serve to keep us stuck in some way, there is often a tendency to think and act in ways that only serve to intensify or prolong the unpleasant emotional experience. For example, if you find yourself stuck in a repetitive cycle of feeling socially isolated and depressed, you may notice yourself engaging in a variety of thoughts and behaviors that essentially keep you feeling socially isolated and depressed. Thoughts such as “no one wants to be around me anyway” and behaviors such as avoiding people or staying in bed all day tend to *support* the unpleasant emotional experience. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) encourages the use of opposite action to counteract emotional experiences when they are maladaptive or otherwise unproductive. Sometimes an emotional experience such as sadness and social isolation can provide a temporary respite from the world that enables you to collect your thoughts and heal. It is not the

experience of sadness, per se, that is “bad.” The idea is that emotional experiences – whatever they may be – have the potential to be both constructive and destructive, depending upon how they are used.

As you read through five more practical examples of opposite action to emotional experiences, continue to reflect on your own personal tendencies. Consider your habitual patterns of emotional responses to people and events. Mindfully notice the responses that your emotional expressions elicit in others. Honestly ask yourself how your sense of happiness and well-being may be positively impacted by applying opposite action to maladaptive or unhealthy expressions of emotion.

(6) Shame

The emotional experience of shame may be experienced when you feel as though something about you or your behaviors is frowned upon or unacceptable in some way. Many people learn to feel ashamed as children for engaging in completely normal and healthy behaviors. These early experiences of shame can carry over in adulthood and lead to maladaptive experiences of shame. The emotional expression of shame may be experienced as wanting to hide from the world, run away, or otherwise avoid having to face the supposed ridicule or judgment from others.

Taking Opposite Action:

When shame serves to keep you stuck, try applying opposite action by acknowledging your experience of shame while also reminding yourself that you are having an understandable emotional response to an event. Take the time to examine what specific event or chain of events has led to your experience of shame. Take the risk of applying opposite action by choosing to approach and engage in the behavior that caused you to feel the shame. If your shame is “unjustified” (i.e., not factually supported), then the choice to approach the situation or behavior that elicited the shame response can decrease your emotional experience of shame.

(7) Depression

Depression is often experienced as feeling sad a great deal of the time, perhaps even for no apparent reason. There may be accompanying thoughts to the experience of depression such as “nothing is going to work out” or “everyone else has it better than me.” Notice how these thoughts intensify and prolong the emotional experience of depression. Actions associated with depression may include sleeping or eating more or less than usual, feeling a lack of enjoyment in previously pleasurable activities, and avoiding contact with people.

Taking Opposite Action:

Try making concrete choices to counteract the emotional experience of depression by changing the ways that you choose to think and behave. While your emotions are not subject to your direct control, your thoughts and behaviors can be freely chosen by you.

Your emotions are then indirectly affected by changes in your ways of thinking and behaving. Try taking opposite action to depression by challenging cognitive distortions that feed the depression. Actively cultivate and express gratitude by mindfully noticing small things in your daily life for which you feel grateful. Choose to pay attention to others and actively engage in your life. Try “showing up” to the present moment and notice the way this mindful connection to your present moment experience changes your emotions associated with depression.

(8) Anger

The emotion of anger can create physical sensations such as feeling hot, breathing rapidly, or noticing your heart racing. There are often accompanying thoughts to anger such as “I hate this” or “this has to stop.” Notice that anger fueling thoughts often carry a common theme of denying experiences or insisting that things must be different than they truly are. Anger can be constructive when it serves as a motivating force to take action to right a wrong or protect yourself from real threats. Anger can easily become maladaptive when it results in feeling out of control, lashing out at others inappropriately, or turns into self-hatred.

Taking Opposite Action:

If you find yourself consumed by persistent or overwhelming anger, make the choice to apply opposite action to snuff out the burning flames of anger. You can make the choice to cultivate an attitude of calm and acceptance. Take a few slow deep breaths and allow yourself to settle into acceptance of what is. You can actively reduce your state of hyper-arousal by taking slow breaths, self-soothing, and thinking positive thoughts about others. Rather than protecting yourself in the barbed wire of denial, choose to open yourself up to the reality of your experience. Treat others as you wish to be treated, *even if* you feel anger toward them. Notice how your experiences and interactions change as you consciously and deliberately apply an attitude of love and acceptance.

(9) Feeling Inadequate

The experience of feeling inadequate can be connected to core beliefs about your sense of self-worth or self-efficacy. When you repeatedly or persistently feel inadequate, it is possible that you may be engaging in a form of self-invalidation or passive aggression against the self. As an emotional experience, feeling inadequate may result in sadness, feelings of failure, or beliefs that other people are “better.”

Taking Opposite Action:

The opposite of invalidating your self-worth and abilities is directing compassion and love toward yourself. Even if you “don’t feel like it,” make the choice to remind yourself of your accomplishments, abilities, and positive qualities. Reflect on the positive feedback that you have gotten from others in the past as you consider your talents and strengths. Make the choice to focus on the things that you do well, rather than excessively focus on your

perceived weaknesses or faults. The outward expression of confidence can result in the genuine internal experience of confidence with consistent practice.

(10) Disappointment

The emotional experience of disappointment may be experienced as a deep painful feeling of being let down by yourself or others. Disappointment can be especially painful when you enter situations with high expectations. When you have unreasonable expectations of yourself or others, it is common to feel a crushing sense of disappointment when you or others don't live up to those expectations. There may be accompanying thoughts such as "I knew this would happen" or "he always does this." You may find yourself engaging in behaviors that only serve to intensify the disappointment, such as withdrawing from others, expressing anger, or giving up.

Taking Opposite Action:

Mindfully observe which thoughts and behaviors that you are engaging in are intensifying and prolonging the emotional experience of disappointment. When you become a mindful observer of your internal experience in this way, you free yourself to choose different thoughts and behaviors. Become aware of how your mental expectations may be fueling the experience of disappointment and actively adjust your expectations to more reasonably reflect the capabilities of yourself and others. Notice if you are withdrawing from others, and actively choose to reengage with the world, even if you "don't feel like it."

Opposite action is all about deliberately choosing alternative ways of thinking and behaving when emotional experiences are causing unnecessary suffering, keeping you stuck, or are persistent in nature. When you mindfully think and behave in ways that are opposite to the undesired emotional experience, you are indirectly influencing how you feel. Thoughts and behaviors are subject to your direct control. Try to apply new ways of thinking and behaving and notice the effect you are capable of exerting on your emotional experience.

Featured image: [Smile & Frown](#) by Steve Snodgrass / CC BY 2.0

About Laura K. Schenck, Ph.D., LPC

I am a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) with a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Northern Colorado. Some of my academic interests include: Dialectical Behavior Therapy, mindfulness, stress reduction, work/life balance, mood disorders, identity development, supervision & training, and self-care.