

Apply Opposite Action to Painful Emotions

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“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” – *Kahlil Gibran*

Emotions can often be experienced so suddenly or deeply that little time or energy is given to question the facts or happenings that prompted the emotional experience. When emotions feel visceral and real in this way, we may not question them much at all. In fact, they may be subjectively experienced as so powerful or “right,” that we feel the need to take immediate action on them. Mindfulness allows us to take a step back from this type of emotional fusion and develop greater observational awareness. Within this

awareness lies our ability to make mindfully informed choices about how we truly wish to proceed.

When emotions are painful or uncomfortable, there is often a tendency to cognitively and behaviorally respond to those painful emotions in ways that only serve to intensify suffering. For example, if you feel particularly depressed, you may feel that you are completely justified in choosing not to get out of bed for the day. Maybe you even decide to avoid contact with people you are close to. You might even sit around ruminating on all of the reasons that you feel depressed. Does your intuition tell you that these cognitive and behavioral choices are going to make you *more* or *less* depressed?

The idea is that when you are fused to emotional experiences, it is as if your emotions are a big thick blanket that you have tightly wrapped around your entire body. You are so “stuck” to those emotions that they become all you are able to experience. When you make the choice to step outside of yourself and become a mindful observer of your experience, it is like gently unfurling that thick blanket – freeing up your arms, legs, and vision. With mindfulness, you can calmly lay that emotional blanket down next to you, look upon it with openness and acceptance, and *decide* how you wish to respond to that emotional experience.

Sometimes, painful emotions cause such intense suffering that there is a need to apply the Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) principle of opposite action. This technique is particularly useful when your emotions are (1) extremely painful or intense, (2) causing extended suffering to you or others, or (3) don’t “fit the facts.” Dr. Marsha Linehan often makes reference to the importance of mindfully checking in with your emotional experience to see whether or not what you are feeling “fits the facts.” It is not to say that your emotions are somewhat invalid if they aren’t factually supported, but rather that they may not be working in your best interest.

Consider applying opposite action the next time that you notice yourself experiencing an emotion that is counterproductive or causing you unnecessary suffering. Perhaps your emotional experience of depression is well supported by the “facts,” yet continuing to delve deeper into the outward expression of depression is causing other areas of your life to be adversely impacted. Part of learning to effectively regulate emotions is becoming more connected to whether or not wise mind (your sense of deep intuitive knowing) is telling you that there is something to be gained from this emotional experience or if it is only serving to keep you stuck or hold you down.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy: Opposite Action

Marra (2004) suggests the following 8 ways to apply opposite action to painful emotions:

(1) Acknowledge whatever emotion(s) you are currently experiencing. Don't deny what you are truly feeling inside. State to yourself as clearly as possible what the feeling is like. Describe what the emotion feels like in your body, what urges to take action you are experiencing, and what thoughts are associated with the emotion(s).

(2) Make a list – in your mind or on paper – of all the reasons that you have for wanting to feel differently. The idea is for this to serve to increase your motivation and courage to act opposite to the emotion you are currently experiencing. Describe how your life would be different in this present moment if you were feel differently.

(3) Remember and reflect on all the various ways that the emotion you would *like* to experience tends to be expressed. Visualize what it feels like, looks like, and sounds like to feel that specific emotion. How is your behavior different when you are feeling that opposite emotion? What is your body language like when you feel the opposite emotion? What sensations do you notice in your body? What common thoughts are experienced with the authentic expression of that emotion?

(4) When you make the decision to take behavioral action (truly act oppositely to the painful emotion) do it with complete acceptance and willingness. Half-hearted and sarcastic attempts at “pretending” to act opposite to the painful emotion will not be nearly as effective. Remember that you are not being manipulative or dishonest; you are genuinely throwing yourself in to what it is like to feel the opposite emotion. Your authentic enthusiasm and willingness to engage in the opposite emotion will bring success.

(5) Give it an adequate trial. Don't give a brief or half-hearted attempt at opposite action to the emotion and then sulk about how it “isn't working.” Remember not to give up in the early stages of opposite action just because you don't immediately feel differently. Genuine change is the result of persistence, enthusiasm, and authenticity. You have to really mean it and give it a bit of time.

(6) Avoid comparing the feeling to a time in the past when you have had a similar feeling. Comparisons tend to lead to judgments about the emotion being “right” or “good enough” in some way. The point is not to judge the

experience, but to allow yourself to wholeheartedly experience the feeling in the present moment just as it is. Be patient with yourself.

(7) Mindfully move your attention back and forth between the opposite action you are engaging in, the emotion you are attempting to create, the reasons you would like to feel that way, and the emotion you are *currently* feeling.

(8) Predict the positive. Make the choice to take an optimistic stance toward the long-term usefulness of these strategies. Allow yourself to delve into your inner wellspring of hopefulness. Remember that no matter how painful your current emotion is, it will not last forever. Remember that there were times in the past when you felt differently in a positive way. Allow yourself the gift of believing that you will feel that way again.

As you become more confident in being able to gather intuitive knowledge from your inner resource of wise mind, you will feel better equipped to discern between times when it is in your best interest to take opposite action to emotions versus times when it is best to fully embrace your emotional experience. Emotions are never “wrong,” even when they are not backed up by factual information. Your emotional experience is valid by the simple virtue that you are experiencing it in this moment. No matter how valid, emotions aren’t always *effective* in bringing about healthy outcomes. Allow wise mind to be your teacher.

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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.

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