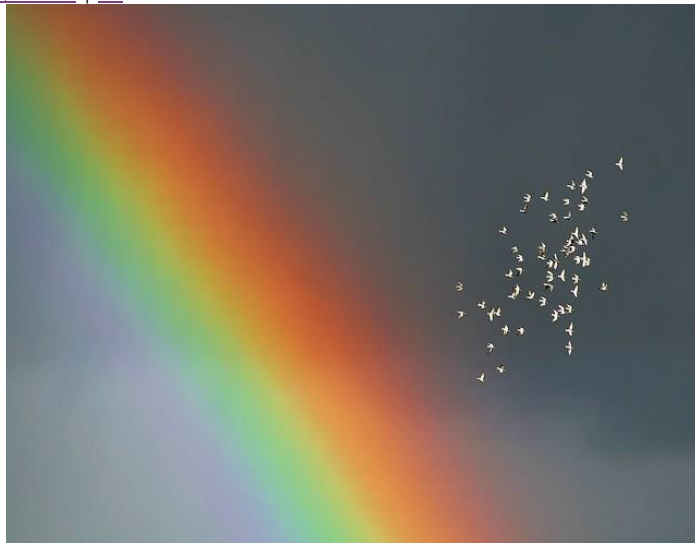


Opposite Action Transforms Powerful Emotions

By [Laura K. Schenck, Ph.D., LPC](#) | 4



“There can be no transforming of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion.” – *Carl Gustav Jung*

Emotions color our experience of life with a diverse nuanced range of expression. We are capable of feeling the heights of excitement, love, and pride, as well as the deep lows of sadness, anger, and guilt. It is our experience of this full range that allows us to *appreciate* both the highs and the lows. If we never knew the penetrating emotions of guilt or loss, the heights of love and happiness would be less sweet and grand. On average days, most of us live somewhere in between the two extreme ends of the emotional spectrum, which is fortunate for us. If we were to be frequently operating from a place of heightened emotional intensity all of the time, we would feel drained and exhausted. That kind of intensity cannot be sustained. It is the *balance* of the middle range of emotions where we can experience calm contentment and peace.

So how do we handle our internal experience when we *are*, in fact, experiencing powerfully intense emotions? [Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#) (DBT) provides us with excellent tools with which to accept and transform intense emotions. It is worth noting that transforming emotions does *not* mean invalidating or denying their existence. What it *does* mean is redirecting the energy of intense emotions in a healthy manner.

Most often, it is the *negative* intense emotions that we are most interested in redirecting, although there is something to be said for managing and redirecting intense positive emotions as well. When we are in the throes of an intensely negative emotional

experience, it is common to want to avoid seeing other people or to engage in self-destructive behaviors. Neither of these strategies will provide long-term relief.

When emotions are so overwhelming that urges to isolate or behave in a self-destructive way are overpowering, taking [opposite action](#) to emotions can be a helpful strategy. Below are some examples for utilizing this DBT tool, adapted from the workbook *Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life* (Spradlin, 2003).

Opposite Action:

- Practice mindfulness to the emotion (observe & describe)
- Change body language and posture
- Change facial expression
- Engage in behaviors *opposite* to the emotion you are feeling

Opposite action is a simple concept that can have a powerful effect on our experiences and consequences of intense negative emotions. The next time that powerfully negative intense emotions threaten your well-being, try practicing the basic tenets of opposite action. Begin to mindfully notice your emotional experience from the perspective of an observer, without judgment. If you are clenching your jaw in anger or hunching your shoulders with sadness, *notice* this and actively *change* your bodily position. Relax your jaw, unclench your fists, and stand calmly upright. How do these subtle changes in physical posture affect your emotional experience? Again, opposite action is not intended to negate or deny powerful emotional experiences, but to *transform* emotions that are temporarily too intense to be processed or may result in severe negative consequences if unregulated.

Featured image: [Regenbogen-Tauben](#) by Pink Dispatcher / CC BY-SA 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.

<https://www.mindfulnessmuse.com/dialectical-behavior-therapy/opposite-action-transforms-powerful-emotions>