

SIX MINDFULNESS STEPS TO WORKING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

There are moments in life that are hard, painful, scary and difficult to endure. There are times when we feel anger, anxiety, grief, embarrassment, stress, remorse or other negative emotions.

In these trying times we often want to escape the pain, drown it out or push it away somehow. We may begin a mental struggle with the pain trying to mentally talk our way out of it, or we distract ourselves with activities or drown it out with food or drink or something stronger.

All these ways of avoiding pain only perpetuate it in the long run. Avoidance creates suffering and keeps us from living fully this miraculous and precious life that we have.

Through mindfulness you can learn to turn your difficult emotions into your greatest teachers and sources of strength.

How?

Instead of 'turning away' from pain in avoidance we can learn to gently 'turn towards' what we're experiencing. We can bring a caring open attention towards the wounded parts of ourselves and make wise choices about how to respond to ourselves and to life.

Here is a six step process for mindfully dealing with difficult emotions.

1. Stop, Turn Towards

Once you have become aware of the feeling, stop for a moment. Take a deep breath and then 'sit with' the anger, shame, guilt, anxiety, frustration or fear. Don't inhibit it, suppress it, ignore it or try to conquer it. Just be with it with an attitude of open curiosity and acceptance.

2. Identify the Emotion

Acknowledge that the emotion is there. If you are embarrassed, you can specifically recognize that feeling. You can mentally say to yourself, for example, “I know there is embarrassment in me.”

3. Acknowledgement of What Is

When you are embarrassed, or feeling another difficult emotion, you don’t need to deny it. You can acknowledge what is present. For example “I can acknowledge that I am embarrassment right now.”

Through your mindful acceptance, you can embrace or hold the feeling in your awareness— this alone can calm and soothe you. This is an act of self-compassion and responsiveness to your own distress, and it is so much more effective than punishing yourself for having this feeling.

See if you can be open to feeling what you feel. Opening to it means to see what is there fully without suppressing, rejecting, ignoring or trying to be ‘stronger’ than the emotion.

By opening up to the emotion, you create a mental space around it and witness it instead of being enmeshed in it. By creating this space you’ll discover that you are not your anger, your fear or your pain. You are much larger than that.

4. Realize the Impermanence of All Emotions

Acknowledge that all emotions are impermanent. They arise, stay for a while and then disappear. They come and go in you, like waves in the sea, cresting and receding.

Your task is simply to allow this current wave to be and to witness, with patience, as it stays, changes form and eventually disappears.

We often take emotions (especially difficult ones) very personally. But mindfulness invites us to view them as simply mental events passing through- temporary waves in our ocean of awareness.

Psychologist and mindfulness teacher Elisha Goldstein suggests, it can be helpful to say to ourselves, “While this is a temporary feeling, it is here right now, how can I care for it? What do I need?”

5. Investigation & Response

When you are calm enough, you can look more into your emotion to understand what has brought it about and what is causing your discomfort.

It may be that particular kinds of thoughts were the cause. You may have been worrying unnecessarily about something or someone and that generated feelings of anxiety. Perhaps you were ruminating on a comment a friend made which resulted in you feeling anger or embarrassment.

You may also find that you have particular values, beliefs, expectations and judgments about how you should behave or be seen by others that contributed to the emotion.

Perhaps an event has happened and your response is perfectly natural or perhaps an old habitual reaction. Allow the light of your mindful awareness to help you gain insights into the emotion.

You may then reflect on how you want to respond to what is happening. This may take the form of simply realizing that your thoughts are not reality and therefore not taking them seriously.

It could be that the simple embracing of the emotion is all you need to do for now, or it could be that a response is needed to a situation that has arisen in your daily life.

6. Trust Yourself to Choose the Appropriate Response

Adopted from Everyday Mindfulness: Melissa O'Brien

The Counselling and Personal Development Service, Dublin City University:

Website: www.dcu.ie/students/counselling

E-mail: counselling@dcu.ie

Glasnevin Campus

E-mail: spd.counselling@dcu.ie

St Patrick's Campus

Phone: 01 – 700 5165

Glasnevin Campus

Phone: 01 – 884 2299

St Patrick's Campus