

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

2.1 EMOTIONAL ACCEPTANCE

(Confronting Emotions)

Emotional acceptance means allowing yourself to experience difficult emotions. It is an essential part of emotional awareness. This might not seem right at first; after all, nobody really wants to experience unpleasant emotions, and everyone avoids them at times. However, we all have to experience unpleasant emotions as part of ordinary life and nobody can really avoid this. However, if you have felt emotionally overwhelmed too often in the past, then you may have learned to cope by avoiding unpleasant emotions too much of the time. You may have learned to become “non-accepting” of almost any unpleasant emotions and their triggers – we call this “emotional avoidance”.

Although we might be able to avoid an emotion temporarily, this usually doesn't last. Over time it can actually make the emotion more intense and long-lasting when we do experience it. This can quickly grow to the point where many different situations and emotions start to feel too much for us. It is also a problem because when emotional avoidance becomes an autopilot reaction, then we end up blocking out the pleasant emotions too.

Accepting difficult emotions is not the same as giving-in to them, or giving-up hope that they can change. In fact, the only way to really change your emotions is to first accept them. When you allow those emotions to be present you are creating an opportunity to change them or cope differently.

Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant emotions that you struggle to accept, our goal here is the same - to allow these emotions to be in our life. This might mean trying different ways to bring them out. One way to do this is to actively approach some of the things that are triggers for you. This is an essential part of the mindset of emotional acceptance. The instructions on the next page will help you think about how to do this.

Acceptance - Instructions

In order to practice acceptance, you will need some sort of trigger for a difficult emotion, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant (e.g. sadness, fear, disgust, pride). This could be something very personal, such as a photograph of a person or place. It could also be something less personal, such as a sad piece of music, a movie clip, or a YouTube video. What's important is what it triggers in you, and how much. The trigger should be something that generates an emotion that is not overwhelming, does not take you too far out of the zone, and does not make you unsafe!

The aim is to allow yourself to be triggered so that you can open yourself up to difficult emotions and their thoughts, feelings and urges. Knowing that this might be difficult, you are showing yourself that difficult emotions are a normal and unavoidable part of life. You are showing yourself that avoiding difficult emotions doesn't really work, and makes things more difficult over time. You just want to try and let these emotions arrive and notice what you feel in the emotion triangle (in your body, mind and urges), without struggling to try and change them or control them.

Remember that if you start to feel overwhelmed, you should stop the exercise and return to it when you feel able. If you keep feeling overwhelmed and this doesn't get any easier, you may need to choose a less intense trigger.