

EMOTIONAL RESOURCE

2.3 EMOTIONAL TOLERANCE

(Distancing)

Emotional tolerance means being able to stay with, or put-up with, a difficult emotion. It is an essential part of emotional awareness. It is important because sometimes changing or coping differently with our emotions means having to “sit with” them for a time. Being unable to tolerate emotions means that we may get trapped in patterns of trying to escape or control them, which eventually become autopilot reactions.

While emotional acceptance is about being willing to open yourself up to experiencing unpleasant emotions and letting them in; emotional tolerance is about being able to stay with them once they arrive. Both are essential in the process of changing emotional reactions. Lots of the exercises we will cover in the group will help us to do this. However, distancing is one idea that can help us to think about the mindset we are aiming for.

Distancing is any technique that helps us to help us stand back from our emotions. This is not the same as suppression or avoidance, however. In suppression or avoidance we are disconnected from the emotion. In distancing we aim to stay connected with the emotion, but in a way that prevents us from feeling overwhelmed. In this way distancing is a type of mindfulness exercise. It is about taking a mental step back, or developing an ‘observing mindset’. There are lots of different techniques that can help you to foster this mindset. For example, imagining the emotion you are feeling (and any thought, memories, bodily feelings or urges that go with it) from a third person perspective, like it is on a TV or cinema screen.

Whatever technique you use, it should help you to “sit with” and tolerate your difficult emotions. An exercise that helps us to think about developing this mindset is on the next page.

“Bubbles” Distancing Exercise Instructions

For this exercise you will need a pack of blowing bubbles.

- Blow some bubbles and watch them for a few minutes.

Try to focus on each part of the experience. Pay attention to the process of dipping, blowing and exhaling. Notice how some bubbles float in different directions and some fall quicker than others. Some pop quickly, while others stay together even after they land. Some clump together and others separate, some are small and some are large, some are quick and others slow. Try to think about how this is similar to your experience of your emotions.

Be aware of how you can notice all of these things about the bubbles easily, because you are looking at them from an outside perspective. Imagine how hard it would be to observe all of this from inside a bubble. With practice we can learn to observe our own emotions like we do the bubbles.

Try this by imagining your difficult emotions as the bubbles you are blowing. Blow some bubbles for a few minutes again:

- Watch them take shape. Imagine that one of these is a common emotion of yours. Watch it grow like a sensation, thought or urge taking shape.
- Notice the bubble separate and begin to drift off on its own, like an emotion taking on a life of its own.
- Watch how it behaves, moves away, joins others or separates. Be aware that it is always moving, never still.
- Watch it grow weaker and eventually disappear. Notice that bubbles, like emotions, can't stick around forever.
- Blow more bubbles now, as many as you can. Try to think about all the different emotions that fill your mind being inside these bubbles. Notice how impossible and pointless it would be to pay attention to them all equally.
- Instead, try to stand back and observe them from a distance. Watch them and notice that they all float towards the ground before they eventually pop.

In the future when you experience a difficult emotion, it might be helpful to try to think about your emotions as being like these bubbles. They can follow you around, but that doesn't mean you have to avoid them or chase them. Try to remember that this emotion, like all bubbles, will pop eventually.