

Living with emotional ups and downs

“I just want to be happy!”

In our culture we have developed a confusing concept of happiness. We frequently believe that if we are not feeling relaxed and joyful that something is wrong with us and that somehow we have failed. The reality is that most people hide their inner struggles behind a mask of coping, and it can sometimes seem that everyone is happy, but us. Some feelings are enjoyable but there are many types of emotions that may cause distress. These can include: disappointment, hurt, despair, guilt, shame, grief, etc. While most people don't want to experience these less pleasant emotions, they can serve an important role in alerting us to problems that may need to be solved. They can occur as a consequence of us behaving badly (e.g. we got too drunk and flirted with our friend's partner), or they can motivate us to make positive adjustments or changes (e.g. our anger may motivate us to be appropriately assertive). These emotions can be important to our survival e.g. anxiety is a natural part of life and allows us to take the necessary action to deal with a threat or crisis.

“I don't want to feel this way!”

However, there is a difference between not liking these difficult feelings but accepting they are an inevitable and unavoidable part of life, as opposed to experiencing these emotions as being extraordinary, unbearable, and desperately trying to get rid of them. While it makes sense to try to get away from emotions that feel unpleasant, there is a paradox, in that the more we struggle with and try to avoid any emotional distress, the greater the distress. Learning how to tolerate emotional discomfort is an important life skill.

We can try to escape the unpleasant emotions in many ways but sometimes these avoidance strategies cause even greater problems for us. For example, avoiding socialising because it makes us feel apprehensive results in us becoming socially isolated and lonely. Or we can try to distract ourselves from a fear of failing academic units by engaging with a mental or physical activity (online games/Facebook) but then fall further behind in our studies. We can also try to escape feelings by injuring or harming ourselves (cutting, hair pulling, etc). We could also try to vent and numb ourselves with food, alcohol or drugs, and these “escape” strategies can cause huge personal, social and criminal issues in our lives (e.g. eating disorder, alcoholism, addiction etc).

“I will lose control!”

There are many ways of living with painful emotions and here are some ways that people have found to be helpful:

- **Riding the wave.** When we experience an unpleasant feeling it can seem that this emotion will become stronger and we will become overwhelmed. However, it can be helpful to remember that feelings are not permanent, they do fluctuate and they do pass. It can be useful to think of emotions as waves that rise and gain height, then taper off and recede. Our habit may be to let emotions build up such that they feel more like a tsunami than a wave. However, imagine yourself riding each emotional wave like a surfer or bobbing gently on the ocean to then see the waves flow into smaller ripples towards the shore
- **Lots of weather about!** We can compare emotions to the weather, that they are ever changing and always present. When we are feeling upset it can be helpful to look at our self-talk or what our thoughts are saying at these moments, as our thinking can lead to psychological suffering. Our thoughts can be words and images which make up stories. These stories can be true or false but we can often get caught up in these stories and they can lead to distress and dominate our lives. (For example: the “no one will ever like me” story, “I am not good enough” story, “how dare they!”, “I can't do it”, etc.). It is normal for 80% of our thoughts to have some negative content. Don't get caught up or hooked into these negative thoughts. Do accept that thoughts are often not true, not important, are not orders, and definitely are not worth dwelling on. One way of dealing with unhelpful stories is to take 10 slow breaths and focus fully on deep breathing. Now visualize the thoughts coming and going (visualize them passing like clouds or cars), acknowledge them but stay focused on your breath, don't get caught up in the thoughts, and give the thoughts or stories a name (such as the “I'm not good enough story”). By practicing this exercise you can just let your thoughts come and go and not get caught up in unhelpful thoughts that lead to negative feelings.

(The concepts and strategies in this handout have been developed from both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy)

- **Just making room!** Another way of dealing with a strong feeling is to just accept the sensation. The first step is to breathe deeply. Focus on the sensation and notice where it sits in the body, and where it starts and ends. What does the emotion look like, is it warm or cold, is it moving or still? Then take deeper breaths and stop struggling with it. Imagine your breath flowing around it. Allow the emotions to be there and make room for them. Remember you don't need to like the feeling or want it. Just allow it to be there. This exercise is not about changing your emotions, it's about accepting them. Thus observe the feeling in your body, breathe into and around the feeling. Make room for the emotions and allow them to be there and make peace with the sensation.
- **Dropping the anchor!** Another helpful technique when we feel overwhelmed is to drop the anchor. Sometimes we are so involved in emotional distress it's important to come back into contact with the present. We can be so caught up in our thoughts and emotional waves that it seems like we are in an emotional storm. It can be helpful to drop an anchor. We can become 'present' by pushing our feet into the floor to feel the ground. Sit up in a chair and notice how you are sitting, look around yourself and notice what you can see, hear and smell. This exercise just grounds us in the present, as our fears and anxieties are often related to the past or the future.
- **Making time to feel!** There are some feelings that we just need to experience (for example, grief). We will all need to face grief in life no matter how our lives unfold. However, sometimes it is not an appropriate time (for example, to cry for a broken relationship in the middle of an exam). We may need to put aside these feelings but revisit them at a convenient time and feel our loss. Perhaps a ritual might help such as writing about the loss, lighting a candle or filling a vase with flowers. These rituals can help you find some peace. Some people believe that feelings have an energy and we need to act out these feelings: for example: twist a towel, pound a pillow, scream into a pillow. In the North American Indian culture they privately dig a hole in the ground by a bush or tree and pour their feelings and grief into the hole. They then fill in the hole and thank the Mother Earth and the universe for listening. Most cultures have a traditional way of dealing with grief which can be helpful.
- **Soothe thy self!** Another way of helping you cope with what seem like overwhelmingly negative emotions and intolerable situations is to self soothe. Self-soothing has to do with comforting, nurturing and being kind to yourself. One way to think of this is to think of ways of soothing each of your five senses:
 - ⇒ For vision: Walk in a pretty part of town and look at the nature around you. Sit in a garden, buy a flower, visit an art gallery, paint or draw, light a candle and watch the flame.
 - ⇒ For hearing: Listen to beautiful or soothing music, or to tapes of the ocean or other sounds of nature. Sit by a waterfall. Listen to someone chopping wood. When you are listening, be mindful, letting the sounds come and go.
 - ⇒ For smell: Notice all the different smells around you. Walk in a garden or in the woods, maybe just after a rain, and breathe in the smells of nature. Light a scented candle or incense. Bake some bread or a cake, and take in all the smells.
 - ⇒ For taste: Have a special treat, and eat it slowly, savoring each bite. Cook a favorite meal or drink a soothing drink like herbal tea or hot chocolate. Let the taste run over your tongue and slowly down your throat.
 - ⇒ For touch: Take a bubble bath. Pet your dog or cat or cuddle a baby. Put on a silk shirt or blouse, and feel its softness and smoothness. Sink into a really comfortable bed. Float or swim in a pool, and feel the water caress your body.
- **Time to take action!** Once you are able to tolerate rather than escape your negative emotions, and your distress has somewhat subsided, it is worth looking at any action you can take to improve how you are feeling. Weigh up whether the cause of your distress is a situation that you may have some control or influence over. In other words, identify the problem; look at options for solving the problem and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Finally, decide if you will take action to help your situation and evaluate the outcome (e.g. if you have been unreasonable and thoughtless to a friend, then apologise and take responsibility for your action, try to be more considerate in the future but remember that we all make mistakes, and forgive yourself and move on).

It takes time and practice to work out the best method to suit your personal situation, so give the techniques plenty of practice. You will find some things work better than others for you. Some techniques don't work at first, but over time and practice you will see some results. We all experience a range of emotions which are an important part of being human.

If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed by strong feelings, phone 6773 2897 to make a free appointment with UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services.

The support you need to succeed