



SELF-HELP EXERCISE: MANAGING EMOTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Mike is watching the news and a segment about a service member being killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan comes on, reminding him of some of his combat experiences in Iraq and the friend he lost. At first he feels sad, and then he starts to feel guilty. He blames himself for not protecting his fellow soldier, even though there is nothing he could have done, and he feels guilty for feeling bad when others had similar or even worse experiences. He turns the TV off in disgust and tries to continue with his day, blocking out these feelings and thoughts. Later, he finds that he is still angry and it's getting in the way of things he needs to do. Mostly, he feels guilty – “How is it that I got to live?” he asks himself. Mike is also angry for letting the news report get to him. He is so distracted by these reactions that he finds himself being detached, disinterested, and irritable on the phone with his wife, who had just called to talk.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR TO YOU?

This example shows how an understandable and human reaction to a trigger situation lingers and ricochets into a worse state of affairs. What happened? Let's break it down:



BEING JUDGMENTAL – Setting expectations that are too high for oneself.

For example, getting angry about being sad or upset, or feeling unworthy and guilty about having human reactions. While the thought, “many others suffered too (some maybe even suffered more or lost their lives)” may be accurate, can you see how this thought didn't help but, in fact, made things worse?



AVOIDING/BLOCKING EMOTIONS – Attempts to block or reject emotions always have the opposite effect. Reactions intensify, linger, and get distorted, performance is affected, and innocent loved ones are negatively impacted. Avoidance solves nothing and ends up making things worse.

So, what else can you do when you have an uncomfortable human reaction to a trigger? An alternative is to be accepting and mindful of emotions.

Part of being “mindful” of your emotions is paying attention to your emotional reactions.

The goal is to learn to experience emotions without judging them. By letting the emotions happen without trying to JUDGE or BLOCK them, you'll find that they are much easier to deal with. Over time, painful emotions will be less intense and shorter lasting. By not doing anything in response to your emotions, the emotions can run their natural course and pass more easily, like a wave. It's all about learning to step back and notice your emotions come and go without trying to stop or fix them. Think of watching a rollercoaster instead of riding it.

WHAT YOU CAN DO?

Accept and let it go

The best way to manage uncomfortable emotions is to accept them without judging them, and then let them go. The basic steps in letting go are:



STEP 1. Notice the emotion.

STEP 2. Observe the experience.

Rather than trying to jump on or stop the rollercoaster, just watch it and wait for it to end. Try not to block or suppress the emotion, don't hold on to it, and don't amplify it. Just observe.

STEP 3. Then let it go.

Remember to separate yourself from the emotion. You are not the emotion. The emotion does not define you.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE



It can be hard to simply observe a painful emotion without reacting to it or trying to get rid of it in some way. This is a skill that will improve with practice. When you experience a negative emotion, look at it as an opportunity to practice accepting how you are feeling without judgment. In time, you will notice that upsetting feelings seem to go away more quickly and aren't as disruptive as they used to be. Developing this skill will help you feel less reactive to the people and events around you and more balanced and in control of your emotions.



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