

11 Chapter

Acceptance of Healthy Emotion

Emotions are healthy. Anxiety and anger, in particular, help us to protect ourselves. It's normal to feel sad when we experience loss. While guilt is usually an unhealthy emotion, sometimes feeling guilty can motivate us to be more respectful and mindful of others.

You might find it surprising to learn that people who experience unhealthy levels of anxiety and depression often have a more difficult time accepting *healthy* emotions. In fact, this may be the primary cause of some people's anxiety and depression. Some people refuse to feel healthy emotions and purposefully avoid and repress their emotions—that is, they hold in emotions instead of expressing them in a healthy way. Others repress emotion involuntarily and have difficulty accessing the emotion; they may be unaware that it's there. Either way, repressing emotions has been proven to be particularly unhealthy. In fact, an interesting study on the cognitive treatment of depression (Castonguay, Goldfried, Wiser, Raue, & Hayes, 1996) found that people who express more emotion during the course of therapy enjoy greater improvements than those who hold their emotions in. Similar studies of treatment for anxiety have found that those who hold their emotions in during a course of cognitive-behavioral therapy don't improve as much as those who express their emotions (Newman et al., 2011).

Marsha Linehan (1993), the original developer of dialectical behavioral therapy, refers to our healthy emotions as "primary emotions" and the unhealthy reactions to them as "secondary emotions." Ideally, mindful acceptance of emotions will help us to accept healthy primary emotions, such that we experience them even though they are uncomfortable while also avoiding unnecessary, unhealthy secondary emotions. The best way to identify primary emotions is to ask yourself: "What would almost everyone feel if this happened to them?"

For example, let's say that your dog was playing in the front yard inside an electric fence and a drunken speeder lost control of his car and killed your dog. What are the two emotions that anyone would feel?

1. _____ 2. _____

If you are like most people, you wrote "sadness" or an equivalent such as "grief" or "heartbroken" or "depressed" (I like to think of grief and sadness as healthy emotions and depression as being unhealthy). You also probably wrote "angry," "mad," or a similar emotion such as "livid" or "pissed." If you experienced this situation and you accepted those emotions, it is likely that you would only feel these two emotions. Furthermore, you would be able to process the grief for your dog more quickly, thereby healing more quickly.

If instead you didn't accept your sadness and anger, you would have additional emotions in response to them. For instance, you might get frustrated that you are sad or maybe you would be embarrassed that you cried. You might even get sad that you feel sad, such that your sadness turns into depression. Likewise, you might feel anxious about your anger, or you might feel guilty or embarrassed about expressing it. You might hold your anger in and feel depressed. Then you might feel depressed and hopeless about your guilt and frustrated with your depression.

The secondary emotions can become more intense than the primary emotions, and, moreover, instead of processing the event, you're focused on all the emotions you're feeling and may even forget about why you started feeling all of those emotions in the first place.

Quite often there is a negative thought or judgment about the primary emotion that leads to a secondary emotion. Judgments can include phrases such as "This is awful" and "I can't stand it," but they most often include a "should." You might think that you *shouldn't* feel your emotion or that you should be stronger. However, the reality is that if the emotion you're experiencing is one that most people feel, it is healthiest to allow the feelings even if they are uncomfortable, because the alternative will be much more painful in the long run.

If you believe you have a difficult time accepting your primary emotions, it is recommended that you see a therapist. However, the following worksheet will likely be helpful.

This next worksheet is also helpful for learning to process and express emotions about recent events and events that may occur in the future. Many people who are suffering from anxiety and depression have repressed emotions from past traumatic events. In fact, you may have repressed emotions from difficult times in your life that you wouldn't consider to be traumatic.

In my practice and in conversations with colleagues, I have seen and heard about several clients who finally turned a corner after eventually crying or getting angry about something that happened to them in the past, often decades ago. Speak to your therapist if you think this applies to you. If you do not have a therapist, hopefully you will find this workbook helpful. If you complete the workbook and are not satisfied with your results, it may be that you could really benefit from doing some deeper work to process your emotions with a therapist.

Dealing with Difficult Emotions

1. List the emotions that you have been struggling with in recent days:

2. Now list the event or events that triggered these emotions:

3. Circle the emotion or emotions under question 1 that you believe anyone would feel in response to the event or events in question 2. It's okay to get some help from your therapist or a friend for input if you're not certain.

4. What are the "shoulds" or other negative thoughts you have about your primary emotions (the emotions you circled)?

5. What are some B³s about the emotion or emotions (see Chapter 8)? Include, "It is normal and healthy to feel these emotions."

6. Close your eyes and get in touch with the memory of the situation (if there is more than one, choose one). Remember the events in as much detail as you can. Allow yourself to feel the emotion or emotions you felt at the time. (If this is overwhelming, wait to do this with the support of a therapist. If you don't have a therapist, please consider finding one.) If it's not overwhelming, do this now.

7. Write what you remember about the event, focusing on your initial emotions. If you felt secondary emotions during the event, be sure to focus on the primary emotions.

8. Talk about the event and your feelings with your therapist, if you have one. Otherwise speak with a trusted friend, family member, or religious leader.

Daily Self-Monitoring 2

Hopefully you are still using the "Daily Self-Monitoring" worksheet from Chapter 1 to keep you on track. This new monitoring form is identical except that it adds another column, "Healthy Emotion." In this additional column, simply list the healthy emotions you experienced during the day. These could be anxiety, irritability, or other healthy emotions (e.g., anger, embarrassment, regret) you experienced in response to difficult circumstances (being treated unfairly, making a mistake). Also use this column to write more positive emotions, such as "happy," "relieved," "connected," and "appreciated."

As in the worksheet in Chapter 1, in the other columns, rate each emotion on a 0–10 scale with a 10 being the most anxious, depressed, or irritable you have ever been and 0 being completely relaxed, very happy, and not at all irritated. If one or two of the emotions aren't problematic, feel free to skip rating them. For "Applying Strategies," you can give yourself a grade (e.g., B+), or rate yourself on a 0–10.

Date	Anxiety	Depression	Irritability	Applying Strategies?	Healthy Emotion
11/1	3	4	NA	B	Sad, Connected, Loved