

3 Chapter

Mindfulness of Physical Sensation and Emotion

In Chapter 2, you experienced that fighting unwanted thoughts fuels them. The same is true of emotions. When we fight unwanted emotions, it typically makes us feel worse. Just observing our emotions often actually lessens them.

EXERCISE

Observing Feelings

If you are feeling anxious, depressed, frustrated, or other uncomfortable emotions, read the following script. (If you aren't feeling uncomfortable now, fold down the corner of this page or put a page marker here so you can come back to it when you are anxious or otherwise distressed):

Observing where you feel discomfort. Noticing where it is located in your body [pause]. Noticing how it feels [pause]. Observing how much space it takes up [pause]. Thinking about what color it would be if you could see it [pause]. What texture would it be if you could feel it? Visualizing your discomfort with color and texture.

Reread this script and then simulate what you remember with your eyes closed.

What did you notice from doing this exercise?

Were you able to just observe your emotion? Or did you find yourself trying to fight the discomfort?

Sometimes just observing how we feel is helpful. Noticing how the discomfort feels instead of fighting it will often relieve it. Sometimes observing feelings is easier than thinking of accepting them. However, the ultimate goal in the treatment of worry, anxiety, frustration, and all emotion is to accept the feelings. Part of this is surrendering by avoiding fighting the anxiety. In the next exercise, you can listen to the free recording “Observing Emotion.” The recording combines observation of physical sensations from the previous script with acceptance from the Accepting Emotions exercise in the script below. Alternatively, read the following script now or at a time in the future when you are struggling with unhealthy emotions:

EXERCISE**Accepting Emotions**

Observing your emotion. Noticing where it's located in your body and how it feels. Letting go of any efforts to try to change it, but if it changes allowing it to change [pause]. If it increases, allowing it to increase [pause]. If it decreases, allowing it to decrease [pause]. Doing the opposite of trying to change it [pause]. Don't try to push it away and don't try to make it stay. Giving up any struggle. Just observing it as if you're an outsider looking in. Even though it's uncomfortable, accepting it.

What did you notice? Did this help more or less than the previous script? Or did the recording help more than the scripts?

Did you find yourself resisting your anxiety (or whatever your targeted emotion was)?

If these scripts and recording were not helpful for you, you may find metaphors resonate in a way that will help the concept “click” for you. In all the following metaphors, like with emotions, the more you fight the problem, the more you fuel it. Your therapist may have more metaphors, but here are some favorites:

Devil's Snare from Harry Potter

Whether you're a fan of the Harry Potter franchise or not, the devil's snare plant in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (film released in 2001) is a great metaphor for acceptance. The young wizards get caught up in a root system in which the more they struggle to get free, the tighter the roots wrap around them. The roots can squeeze so tightly that they can even kill you! Hermione urges the boys to stop fighting and relax. When she and Harry surrender, they are quickly released as the roots loosen. Ron desperately struggles to free himself, causing the roots to squeeze him more tightly. Not familiar with it? Search for “devil's snare” on YouTube.

Antagonistic Sibling

Your brother is antagonizing you. If you tell him to stop it, whine, or tell your mom, it will only fuel him. The more he sees that he's upsetting you, the more he is fueled to keep doing it. If you pretend that what he's doing doesn't bother you, he will probably stop. Even consider taking it a step further: tell him to keep doing it, tell him you like it, or agree with his taunting (e.g., "You're right, I am a dork"). Then he will stop.

Bees

Swat at bees and they will be more likely to swarm and sting. Surrender and they will be likely to settle and less likely to sting.

These are all metaphors for illustrating the phenomenon that fighting anxiety fuels it. Like the devil's snare, antagonistic siblings, and bees, anxiety gets worse when you fight it and eases—sometimes even stops—when you stop fighting and accept it.

Finally, we can take this one step further: paradoxical intent. **Sometimes going a step *beyond* acceptance helps us more than just acceptance.** The idea here is to think of being brave and facing the uncomfortable symptoms head on. Usually when you're faced with a bully, if you put your hands behind your back and tell them to go ahead and take their best shot, they walk away. Anxiety is often the same way. If your heart is racing, tell it to speed up and go faster. If your chest is tight, tell it to get even tighter. If you feel shaky, think "shake harder." This can also work for crying, particularly if you feel your crying is an overreaction. If you cry about the fact that you're crying and give yourself permission to cry by trying to cry harder, the crying usually decreases or stops!

However, remember that crying is often a healthy response to sad life events or excessive frustration. See Chapter 11 for more on this.

If, after observing your anxiety and being guided to accept your anxiety, you are still fighting the anxiety, revisit the recordings or scripts, or look again at the metaphors if you felt they were helpful.