WORKING WITH EMOTIONS: ALLOWING THINGS TO BE AS THEY ALREADY ARE

Adapted From:

When we turn toward painful emotions and aversion patterns as experienced in the body, sometimes they dissipate or disappear, almost miraculously. The central message is this: it is our relationship to what is difficult and unpleasant that keeps us stuck in suffering—not the unpleasant feelings and sensations themselves.

Allowing and Letting Be. We willingly let difficult inner experiences remain in awareness without demanding that they change or be other than how they are. Rather than getting into an argument with life, we allow experience to be just as it already is.

This is not the same as resignation. In resignation, we don’t want to be having the experience we are having, but we feel helpless to do anything about it—all we seem to do is passively put up with it. Allowing and letting be involves an active, willing gesture of acceptance and openness to experience. It takes conscious commitment and effort. In this way, we choose to respond rather than letting ourselves be victims of automatic, habitual reactions. Holding something gently in awareness is an affirmation that we can face it, name it, and work with it.

“The Guest House”
by Jelaluddin Rumi

This being human is a guesthouse
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor
Welcome and attend them all!

Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

Welcome difficulty,
Learn the alchemy True Human
Beings know:
The moment you accept what troubles
You’ve been given, the door opens.

Welcome difficulty as a familiar
Comrade. Joke with torment
Brought by the Friend.

Sorrows are the rags of old clothes
And jackets that serve to cover,
And then are taken off.
That undressing
And the beautiful
Naked body
Underneath is the sweetness
That comes after grief.

(translated by Coleman Banks)
Exercise 1: “The Guest House” Reflections
Take some time to reflect on your reactions to the above poem by Rumi on page 34. What kinds of thoughts, memories, feelings, and sensations did the poem bring up for you? What especially grabs your attention about the images that he uses? Where might you find yourself having difficulty, resistance, confusion, or frustration with what Rumi is suggesting? Write down some of your thoughts here. Allow yourself to be expressive without worrying how it sounds or if it makes sense:

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PLEASE NOTE: It’s very important to understand that we are talking about allowing our own feelings and thoughts – not necessarily allowing any kinds of behavior, actions, or treatment, by ourselves or others. The first step in allowing and accepting is seeing clearly what is actually happening. From there, if there is something harmful happening, we may need to take action to address it. Many of us put up with things for too long because we don’t allow ourselves to see what is actually happening in a situation. We may get stuck in patterns of blaming ourselves or others, or trapped into thinking that we can change someone else or that continually hoping that things will improve. Allowing the feelings and thoughts to be present with gentleness and compassion may allow you to see the way forward more clearly.

The Choice Point in Life’s Journey

• **Choice 1**: We react automatically with aversion and avoidance – the need to get rid of negative feelings, physical sensations, or thoughts. With this reaction, the mind and body engage in a chain of habitual patterns that often lead to familiar forms of confusion, frustration, disappointment, and overall suffering.

• **Choice 2**: We consciously embody the intention to allow negative feelings, sensations, and thoughts to be present even if we don’t like them. Taking this path, we take a significant and powerful step to incline the mind in a new direction – we shift our basic stance from one of “not wanting” to one of “opening.” This allows the chain of habitual, automatic reactions to be broken and we are less likely to fall into traps of self-blame of depression, terrors of anxiety, the righteousness of anger, or the exhaustion of stress.

Important Truths to Discover through Meditation Practice

- All unpleasant feelings pass of their own accord if we do not force them.
- There is peace and contentment we can experience even in the presence of unpleasant feelings.
- “Allowing and letting be” frees us from the contraction and inflexibility of aversion, creating a space where unpleasant feelings can be held more kindly and with less struggle.

Working with Pain and Discomfort
The first step in working with pain is to assess whether it is acute or chronic. Acute pain usually has a physical cause and is often associated with a recent injury or physical problem. It may require immediate medical attention. While chronic pain may also have a physical cause, it is likely to be associated with cognitive and emotional components such as grief, anger, fear, or confusion.
Mindfulness meditation has been shown to be helpful with chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1986). There are three important steps in applying mindfulness to chronic pain: (1) Investigation – sensing your body and how you hold tension and pain; (2) Working with Emotional Reactions; and (3) Living in the Present Moment.

1. **Investigating Pain and Tension in the Body:** Why would you want to bring awareness to discomfort when it seems better to distract from or get rid of it? If you don’t know how you are holding pain and tension in the body, you may be increasing it unintentionally. One common reflex is to clench and tighten in reaction to pain. This can both increase the physical pain and can also lead to a cycle of increasing anger, fear, sadness, and confusion. Getting tight constricts the muscles and restricts blood flow, which may cause spasms and pain, even in other areas of the body. In time, you may discover you are constricting and tightening not only in painful areas, but throughout the body.

   Once you are aware of how you hold pain in the body, you can start to figure out how to work with it. Mindful awareness will help you soften and possibly release tension in the areas where there is no actual physical pain. Mindfulness also teaches that if you cannot release tension, you can practice riding the waves of pain, just observing them, letting them be, and allowing them to ebb and flow however they need to. You can give space to sensations and let them go whichever direction, like watching the ripples in a pond. Learning to be with pain is a fundamental step in healing. Rather than fighting or resisting the pain, learn to go with it. This may feel counterintuitive, but only because it is not familiar or comfortable. Such is the case with growth, change, and healing.

2. **Working with Emotions in Physical Pain:** We receive many cultural messages that we need to suppress, avoid, ignore, deny, overcome, or fix our pain and other unpleasant feelings. Mindfulness offers a pathway to relate with uncomfortable emotions that arise with physical pain, like anger, sadness, confusion, despair, grief, worry, and fear. As with physical pain, resistance to difficult emotions often causes more pain and complication in our lives. Rather than fighting with how you feel, repeatedly work on allowing and acknowledging whatever you feel, letting the waves of emotion go wherever they might need to.

   In the practices of allowing, acknowledging, accepting, letting go, and letting be, it all comes down to **making space** for your emotions to be what they are without falling into habitual patterns of trying to make them different; taking things as they are. This helps create the possibility for deeper compassion, understanding, and peace with time – but these are not the goals. With time and practice, you learn to feel the pain and suffer less. “Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.”

3. **Living in the Present Moment:** This practice is about learning to live in the here and now, moment to moment, with whatever is happening – painful or pleasurable. “Let’s see if I can be with pain in this moment. Let’s see if I can let go of what will happen in the next moment. Let me be here with what is.” As you deepen your practice of mindfulness, you reconnect to yourself naturally and you are not at odds with your experience. Rather than feeling victimized or taken hostage by your experience, you can begin to see that fundamentally any situation is workable – meaning that you can be with it, experience it, learn from it, and move forward from it. This brings about a growing sense of freedom and possibility in life, which renews our sense of vitality and meaning. Ultimately this has the potential of transforming you, your pain, and your relationship to difficulties and challenges in life.

**Common Barriers to Being Aware of Emotions**

- Our emotions are sometimes or often invalidated or discounted by others. We feel (or are told) that there is no reason to be experiencing our emotions and that we ought to ignore them or suppress them.
- We can easily confuse emotions with our thoughts or judgments. For example, we are prone to respond to the question about how we feel with statements like “I feel stupid,” “I feel worthless,” or “I feel helpless” when the actual emotion behind those thoughts are probably more like shame, sadness, or fear.
- Since emotions are intangible, it can be challenging to describe and define them. Emotions are often a very subjective experience, though we can try to have more objective way of labeling them based on some common characteristics.
- Finally, we may not have an adequate vocabulary to express the emotional experience we are having. We might have grown up in a family or culture where discussing emotions was not encouraged, so we did not learn to describe feelings.
Exploring Our Emotional Vocabulary.
Finding the language that best fits our experience can be a valuable way of seeing emotions clearly and relating to them in a more precise and direct manner:

- **Afraid**: apprehensive, anxious, restless, distressed, panicked, edgy, jumpy, nervous, tense, uneasy, worried, frightened, overwhelmed, terrified, troubled, petrified
- **Confused**: bewildered, uncertain, puzzled, mystified, perplexed, chaotic, foggy, cloudy, spacey, unaware, disorganized, mixed up, tangled, jumbled
- **Angry**: aggravated, agitated, annoyed, frustrated, irritable, grouchy, grumpy, raging, hateful, fuming, mad, livid, irate, heated, cross, snappy
- **Sad**: gloomy, desperate, lonely, insecure, down, hopeless, alienated, disappointed, unhappy, rejected, melancholy, dejected, discouraged, disheartened, wretched, blue, depressed
- **Ashamed**: guilty, embarrassed, humiliated, invalidated, remorseful, mortified, humbled, chagrined
- **Jealous**: envious, covetous, resentful, desirous, bitter, green, invidious
- **Loving**: affectionate, tender, fond, aroused, attracted, caring, compassionate, adoring, warm
- **Joyful**: amused, covetous, resentful, desirous, bitter, green, invidious

Exercise 2: Sitting Meditation – Inviting and Working with Difficulties
(Audio: Track 12 from The Mindful Way Workbook)

- Begin with practicing mindfulness of breath and body as described earlier, until you feel reasonably settled.
- Until now, when you have been sitting and have noticed your mind being pulled away to painful or uncomfortable thoughts or emotions, the instruction has been to notice where the mind has gone, and then gently and firmly bring the mind back to the breath and body.
- Now you can explore a different way to respond. Instead of bringing attention back from a painful thought or feeling, now allow the thought or feeling to remain in the mind. See also if you can become aware of any physical sensations in the body that come along with the thought or emotion.
- When you have identified this area of the body, consciously bring the focus of attention to the part of the body where the sensations are strongest. Perhaps imagine you could “breathe into” this region on the inbreath and “breathe out” from it on the outbreath. You are exploring and noticing sensations.
- If there is no significantly difficult or painful experience arising for you in the moment, you can also experiment with bringing to mind something challenging or difficult in your life right now. It does not have to be an important or critical situation, but something you are aware of as unpleasant or unresolved.
- Now, allow yourself to take some time to tune into any physical sensations in the body that the difficult situation evokes in you.
- See if you are able to engage the physical sensations with a welcoming, open attitude.
- This attitude may include breathing into that part of the body on the inbreath and breathing out from that part of the body on the outbreath.
- Once your attention has settled on the bodily sensations, you might try deepening this attitude of acceptance and openness by saying to yourself every so often: “It is here now. It is okay to be open to it. Whatever it is, it’s already here. Let me be open to it.” Do your best to soften and open to the sensations, intentionally letting go of tensing or resisting.
- You do not have to like these feelings – it is natural to not want to experience them or have them in your life. “Ok you’re here. Let me allow you to be here, even though I don’t like you.”
- When you notice that the bodily sensations are no longer pulling your attention, simply return to sitting with the breath as the primary object of attention.
- Every day, after your sitting meditation, jot down a few notes on your experience:
  - Where in the body did you sense pain and difficulty? Aversion and resistance?
  - What, if anything, happened to the pain and the aversion with time?
  - What happens when you resist unpleasant feelings?
  - When you become aware of your patterns of aversion and avoidance, what do you do?
Exercise 3: Breathing Space – Extended Instructions

1. **Awareness:** As you focus your awareness on your inner experience of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, try describing and identifying what is arising for you. Try putting your experience into words, such as “A feeling of anger is rising” or “I’m having self-critical thoughts.”

2. **Redirecting Attention:** When you practice redirecting your attention from thoughts, feelings, and emotions to the breath, try noting in your mind “Breathing in” and “Breathing out.” You might also try counting breaths, like “Inhaling… exhalting…1” then “Inhaling…exhalting…2” and so on, until you get to 10. Once you reach 10, you can start over. If you lose your place, simply start again at 1.

3. **Expanding Awareness:** When practicing allowing your attention to expand to the whole body and all physical sensations that arise, try extending this practice to include discomfort, tension, pain, or resistance. Try breathing into these sensations on the inbreath and breathing out from them on the outbreath. As best you can, bring this expanded awareness to the various moments of your day.

**Daily Practice:** Practice each of these exercises for 6 out of the next 7 days.

1. The Guest House Reflections
2. Sitting Meditation – Inviting and Working with Difficulties
3. Three-Minute Breathing Space
4. Breathing Space – Extended Instructions
5. “STOP”
6. Mindful Walking

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**Wild Geese**
by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.