

Facing Your Feelings

Module 2

Accepting Distress

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Introduction

We assume you are still reading because you have worked out that distress intolerance is a problem in your life. Now that you know what distress intolerance is, the next step is to learn how to become more tolerant. You probably don't realise that over time you have learnt to tolerate lots of different things (e.g., people you don't like, or physical pain, or not getting your own way, or doing things you don't feel like doing, or bad drivers on the road, etc), and so emotional distress will just be one more thing to add to the list. Learning how to tolerate distress when you have been in a pattern of constantly trying to escape it, may require practice, patience and persistence. This module will help you build your tolerance by learning strategies to help you accept emotional distress and face your feelings.

Seeing Emotions Differently

The first step to accepting distress is to start seeing your feelings and emotional experiences in a new light. As we discussed in Module 1, emotional discomfort is a very normal universal human experience. Negative emotions such as sadness, anger and fear are part of being human. These emotions are not just common, normal and OK, they are actually important and useful to us.



For example, fear is extremely helpful to our survival. Fear is helpful when it kicks in at appropriate times, like when there is a real threat to our safety (e.g., a gun pointed at us or a wild ferocious animal coming our way) or when the fear is proportional to the situation (e.g., nervousness before a big exam). At these times the fear we experience and all the physiological sensations that accompany that fear, help us to effectively deal with that situation. Heart pumping, breathing faster, feeling hot, sweaty, all these things are signs that the body has gone into 'fight or flight' mode. Being in this mode prepares us to either face the danger (e.g., study like hell) or escape the danger (e.g., run like hell from the gun or wild animal). In this way fear can be a very good thing. If we were really relaxed and didn't study or didn't try to get away from the gun or wild animal, we would have big problems.

Similarly, anger is a helpful emotion to have. Imagine if some wrong or injustice was being done towards ourselves or someone else, and we weren't phased at all by it. If we didn't experience anger then we would probably allow all sorts of bad treatment to come our way, or allow harm to be done to other people. Anger can spur us into action to try to change things for the better, for both ourselves and others.

Sadness is a tricky one. How on earth could sadness be helpful? Probably the easiest way to see how sadness is helpful is to think instead of what it would mean if we didn't feel sadness. We generally tend to feel sadness when we lose something important to us in some way (e.g., a person, job, possession, someone's attention or affection, etc). If we didn't feel sadness when these things occurred, it would mean that nothing was important to us. It would mean we didn't appreciate or value the things we had, and we weren't interested in or connected to our lives or other people. So sadness inadvertently helps us to live a fulfilling life, because it means we care about the things in our life and don't want to lose them.

I guess the take home message to remember is that **negative emotions are important to our survival, rather than something to be feared and avoided at all costs.**



Another way you might start to see your emotions differently is to recognise that your **emotions are not permanent**. Instead you might start to consider your emotions as changing experiences that are always fluctuating but eventually pass. When we feel distressed it can seem like the distress is going to go on and on forever, just getting worse and worse, until we emotionally combust. But we know this isn't how emotions work. Instead **emotions act more like a wave**, at times

increasing and becoming more intense, but inevitably always reaching some plateau, subsiding and finally passing. Some times the emotion may rear up again, setting off another wave or smaller ripple. But the key is that emotions move and change, they are not permanent. This is particularly so when you don't fight against and try to block the emotion. Sometimes just being able to remind yourself that emotions pass like a wave, may allow you to better tolerate whatever upsetting feelings you are experiencing.



What Is Acceptance?

First, let's consider what the effect is of urgently needing to get rid of your distress? If you were following Module 1 closely, you may now be realising that it just ends up making your distress worse. The alternative to urgently trying to rid yourself of your distress, may well be adopting an attitude of willingly accepting the distress. A radical concept we know given the likely long history you have with pushing your distress away. If you are still a little concerned about this notion of accepting distress, another question to ask yourself is whether pushing your distress away has worked for you so far? It is likely that you are saying "of course it hasn't worked or I wouldn't be reading this module!" So it might be time to try something quite different...like acceptance.

Accepting distress is not about having to like emotional discomfort, or being resigned to feeling miserable, or wallowing in negative emotions. Instead, accepting distress is about seeing the negative emotion for what it is, and changing how you pay attention to the emotion. Reacting in an accepting way towards your emotion, often changes the effect the emotion has on you.

This approach is often referred to as learning to watch your emotions "mindfully". *Mindfulness* is state of being where you are in the present moment, watching whatever you happen to be experiencing at that time, with an attitude of curiosity, and without judging or trying to change your experience. In this way our emotions are not some tumultuous chaotic vortex we are sucked into and from which we react impulsively. Instead we become the watcher of our emotions, noticing what is happening to us like a third person, observing and watching our distress with a sense of distance or detachment. As such we don't have to engage with, react to or stop our emotions. Instead we take the stance of just allowing, observing and making space for the emotion until it passes.

How To Accept Distress

There is no right or wrong when it comes to practicing accepting emotional distress, but below are some steps or guidelines that might help with the process. We stress that this is just a guide, and at the end of the day being able to watch and accept your emotions is something you will need to experience via trial and error practice, rather than something you can read about.

Watch or Observe

Foremost is adopting the stance of watching or observing your emotions, paying attention like a third person to whatever you are feeling in the present moment. Observing as the intensity might increase, hold its course, decrease or shift and evolve into a different feeling. Regardless of what the emotion is doing, you are not your emotions, you are the **watcher of your emotions** (Tolle, 2010).



Label or Describe

When being the watcher of your emotions you might find it helpful to label or describe to yourself the emotion you are experiencing. It is a little bit like being the commentator of your emotional experience. The self-talk that goes with this might sound something like "...there is fear, I can feel it in the fast beating of my heart", or "...there is sadness, I can feel it in the heaviness of my shoulders", or "...there is anger, I can feel it in the tightness of my jaw".

Curious and Non-judgemental

You'll notice that the language used to describe your experience has a sense of curiosity and non-judgement. The fear or sadness or anger that you feel is not deemed good or bad, or right or wrong, it is what it is.

Imagery

The use of imagery can often be helpful in allowing yourself to foster this detached observer perspective. Different images work for different people.

Some people like the image of an **ocean wave*** as we have already discussed. Previously you might have panicked in the wave, fiercely treading water and thrashing your arms against the wave, getting exhausted and feeling close to drowning. Instead when you are being mindful of your emotions you don't fight the wave, but instead allow the wave to carry you over its crest and down the other side, or you might choose to surf the wave allowing it to carry you into shore.

Others like to think of their distress as a **non-stop express train****, in that it is impossible to stop the train, and it would be very dangerous to try to get on board while it is moving. Instead you just watch your emotions pass by like an express train until it is safely through the station.



Some people like to imagine their emotions as **clouds in the sky**** or **leaves on a stream*****.



With either image you can't stop the emotions, but you can imagine each cloud or leaf as your emotions. As such, you can just watch your emotions floating by you in their own time, eventually passing out of sight.

Some people like to imagine themselves as **an empty room*** with a front and back door. Emotions enter through the front door and leave through the back, coming and going. Some emotions may take their time in the room, others may move quickly, and some may re-enter the room a number of times. But, they all eventually leave.

Or some like to think of their emotions like a **naughty child**** throwing a tantrum at the supermarket. There is no point trying to stop the child because the tantrum just gets worse, and it would be dangerous to abandon the child in the supermarket. Instead you might just keep a watchful eye over the child from a distance, until they exhaust themselves and settle of their own accord.



* These images are adapted from Eifert, McKay & Forsyth (2006)

**These images are adapted from Wells (2006)

*** This image is adapted from Eifert & Forsyth (2005)

Maybe you can think of another image that works better for you. This may require some trial and error to discover what image you identify with. You also don't need to be someone who can imagine things in vivid detail. Most people have trouble doing this, and a more general 'felt' sense of the image is ok. The key is that if you can relate to your emotions like they are a wave or cloud or express train or whatever image works for you, then you are watching them for what they are, paying attention to them in a helpful way, and ultimately tolerating them rather than trying to rid yourself of them.

Present Moment

Once you feel you have fully watched and experienced the negative emotion, feeling it come to its natural conclusion, it might then be time to gently direct your attention to the present moment. This could be anything sensory, a particular task you are doing, a sound, taste, smell, sight or feeling of touch you may not have realised you were experiencing that you can now tune into. And if you can't think of anything to be present-focused on, there is one thing you can guarantee will always be present to practice on...your breath. Whatever you choose to anchor you to the present moment, become aware of its sensory intricacies and details, and allow yourself to fully experience it.

Dealing with Emotional Comebacks

Be aware that no matter how expert you are at doing all the previous steps just mentioned, it is normal for negative emotions to sometimes reappear. This does not mean that you have failed at being mindful of your emotions. The key is to be aware that the emotion has made a comeback, congratulate yourself for catching this rather than getting sucked in or swept up in the emotion, and repeat the steps as before. It doesn't matter how many times you have to catch and watch your emotions, because that in itself is the task...**catching and watching your emotions**. Sometimes people mistakenly think the goal is to be so completely absorbed in the present moment that they don't feel any emotions, and hence they get frustrated by any resurgence of emotion. When an emotion pops back it is just another wave, or express train, or cloud, or whatever it is that allows you to again be the watcher of your emotions.

And remember, if you do get *frustrated* by an emotion popping up again or *bored* when doing your mindfulness practice, just realise that these too are emotions that you can practice watching mindfully.

Practicing Acceptance

A good way to develop the skill of accepting distress is to start by being mindful of your emotions generally when you are not feeling distressed. This will give you some practice at the skill of watching your emotions under easier circumstances (i.e., when you are not distressed), so you might be better able to apply the skill under harder circumstances (i.e., when you are distressed). Over the page is a short script to guide you through the process of being mindful of your emotions at any time. You could start by practicing this new approach to your emotions daily when you are not distressed, and record your experiences on the Diary provided below. It may be helpful to record the mindfulness script onto tape, and then listen to the tape as part of your practice.

Mindfulness of Emotion Daily Diary

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Time							
Duration							
Experiences							

Mindfulness of Emotions Script

Position yourself comfortably in the chair...feet flat on the floor, arms placed comfortably, chair fully supporting your body... allow your eyes to close...begin by paying attention to your breathing, taking a few long breaths to get settled...

Now gently guide your attention to how you are feeling emotionally within yourself at this moment...note whatever feelings arise within you whether they be positive, neutral or negative...whether they be strong or weak in intensity...they are all just emotions...all just feelings to be felt. Whatever feelings arise, remind yourself that it is OK to allow yourself to feel it. Remember that you are not your emotions, you are the watcher of your emotions. Take some time just to observe your emotional experience, making no attempt to change how you are feeling...

You might label the emotion to yourself (i.e., “ah there is calmness/ happiness/ indifference/ surprise/ boredom/ frustration/ fear/ sadness, etc”)...You might describe where and how you feel the emotion in your body...take time to notice the physical signs that you are feeling the way you feel...

Watch as the emotion changes in intensity and nature. Bring whatever image to mind that helps you be the watcher of your emotions (e.g., *seeing your emotion like an ocean wave, express train, cloud floating in the sky, leaf floating on a stream, an empty room, a naughty child, etc*)...

You don't have to buy into your emotions and get swept up in them. You don't need to change your emotions, fight them or get rid of them. You are just here to watch, observe and experience what is going on right now. See if you can make some space for the emotion, seeing it as part of a broader landscape within you that contains lots of things like other feelings, thoughts, memories, body sensations, etc. Your emotions are just emotions...your feeling just feelings...nothing more and nothing less...

When you have fully experienced whatever emotion is there, and the experience has run its natural course, redirect your attention towards your breath...note each inhalation and each exhalation...bind your attention to the back and forth movement of the belly as you breathe in and out...note the sensations in your body as you draw breath in and then out again. Take some time now to allow your breath to be your anchor to the present moment...

If your mind wanders away from the breath to an emotion, or thought or sensation. That's ok, that's what minds do. Congratulate yourself for noticing, and give your mind the time to again observe and watch what you are experiencing... Once that observation has run its natural course, again gently bring your attention back to the breath as your anchor to the present...

Try to continue your mindfulness practice for the next 10 minutes or more...

When you feel ready, you can gradually open your eyes, bringing this mindfulness exercise to a close...



Practicing Acceptance When Distressed

Now that you are getting a good sense of how to be mindful of your emotions generally, another way to develop the skill of accepting distress is to plan specifically how you will extend this new attitude to dealing with the distressing emotions you most often struggle with. To help with this, you can devise your own step-by-step mindfulness plan of what to do when emotional distress arises for you. This is really about jotting down a few key words, phrases or images that will cue you into being mindful of your negative emotions at times when it is harder to do.

Below is an example of the types of phrases that might be helpful. Take a look through the example script and then see if you can draft a script personalised to your needs on the next page. Your personalised script should be short and to the point, as you don't want to read through a mountain of stuff when you are distressed. You can draft your personalised script by either picking out the phrases from the example scripts that best suit you, or coming up with your own phrases. The aim is to find a few phrases that help get you in the mode of being the non-judgemental watcher of your distress.

Example Mindfulness of Distress Script

Recognise & Allow Emotion:

Aha! I'm feeling...[angry/sad/scared]. It is OK, I can allow myself to have this feeling...I can make space for it...I don't have to be afraid of it or try to get rid of it.

Watch Emotion:

I can just watch this feeling and see what it does, I don't have to get caught up in it.

Let's see, where do I notice the emotion in my body?

This is just an emotion, just a feeling to be felt, nothing more and nothing less.

I am not my emotions, I am the watcher of my emotions.

The feeling is just like a...[ocean wave...I don't need to fight the wave frantically...I can just go with the wave, letting it bob me up and down, or riding it into shore]

Be Present:

I will turn my attention back to the task I am doing now ...noticing what I can feel...hear... see... smell... taste...

OR

I will turn my attention towards my breath...the breath being my anchor to the present moment...noticing each in breath and each out breath

Deal with Emotional Comebacks:

I feel the emotion returning...that's OK, that's what emotions do, they like to rear their head again. I will just go back to watching it again...it is just another [ocean wave]...

Personalised Mindfulness of Distress Script

Recognise & Allow Emotion:

Watch Emotion:

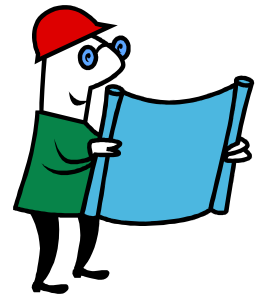
Be Present:

Deal with Emotional Comebacks:

Now you know how to watch your emotions generally, and have a script for how to adopt this attitude when distressing emotions arise, it is now time to get some practice with the emotions that distress you. There are 2 ways we can get this practice. One is putting what you have learnt into practice as best you can the next time distressing emotions spontaneously arise for you. The other method is to gradually seek out distressing emotions with the intention of practicing your new acceptance skills. The first option we will look at now, the second option we will look at in Module 4.

The Next Time I Am Distressed...

This involves having a clear plan for the next time you feel distressed. You might make a commitment to yourself that the next time I feel distressed I will get out my personalised mindfulness script and try to watch my distress instead of engaging in my old escape methods (e.g., avoidance, numbing & withdrawing, harmful releases). If you think this will be a very difficult thing to do, you may decide to put a time limit on how long you will try to be mindful of your distressing emotions (e.g., “I will just do it for 5mins to start off with, at the end of those 5mins I will see if I can try it for another 5mins”). In this way you can gradually and gently start to ‘expose’ yourself to the distress you have been dreading. If you get to the end of your time limit and find you just can’t go any longer being mindful of your distress, that is OK, you have made a start at accepting rather than avoiding your distress. If this is the case, try using skills from the next Module (Improving Distress), rather than going back to your old escape methods.



Having made this plan to be mindful of your distress next time it arises, be aware if there is anything you will need to make your plan work. For example, a timer if you are setting a limit on how long you will practice being mindful of your distress. Also, consider the best place to keep your mindfulness script so it is easily accessible to you no matter where you are when you next feel distressed (e.g., on the fridge, stored in your mobile phone, on a piece of paper in your wallet). Take a moment to think about the logistics of making your plan work. Good luck!

Please note. If the distress you experience is extremely intense unbearable emotional pain, such that you are currently unable to apply the acceptance strategies outlined in this module, then skip ahead to the next module on tips for how to improve your distress. This is particularly relevant for people who engage in self-harm, or drug and alcohol use to manage their distress.

Module Summary

- Remember that negative emotions are important to your survival, rather than something to be feared and avoided at all costs. Also remember that distress is not permanent, but a changing experience that is always fluctuating and eventually passes.
- Accepting distress is about seeing the negative emotion for what it is, and changing how you pay attention to the emotion. In essence you become the watcher of your emotions, and this skill is often referred to as “mindfulness”.
- Being mindful of your emotions involves: watching or observing your emotions, labelling or describing your emotions, being curious and non-judgemental towards your emotions, using imagery to detach from your emotions, focusing on the present moment, and dealing with emotional comebacks.
- Being mindful of your emotions is about learning to catch and watch your emotions, not about being so absorbed in the present moment that you don’t feel any emotions.
- Being mindful of your emotions is a skill that takes practice, patience and persistence. It is best to practice when you are not distressed, so you might be better able to apply the skill when you are distressed.



Coming up next ...

In Module 3, you will learn specific techniques to help you improve emotional distress...

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behavioural and Mindfulness-Based Therapies. These modules are based on the approach that distress intolerance is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references that informed the development of modules in this information package.

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