

Observing and Accepting Your Emotions

Objective

To observe and accept overwhelming emotions so you can begin managing them in healthier ways.

You Should Know

When emotions are overwhelming, it can feel impossible to sit with the feelings. You may seek out ways to avoid your emotions, or numb them with unhealthy or harmful behaviors. When you begin to recognize and accept your feelings, you can identify healthier ways of managing your emotions and responding to situations that cause upset, distress, or overwhelm.

What to Do

Before you can accept your overwhelming emotions, it is helpful to understand what is causing them. The following exercise will help you identify the situations that contribute to your distress and overwhelm. You can then identify how you typically react or cope. For the next two weeks, keep track of your emotions using the following chart, noting situations that trigger your emotions; the emotions you experience; and finally, your response or reaction. Make copies of this chart, as necessary. Then, review the completed chart and answer the following questions.

Date	Triggering Situation	My Emotion(s)	My Coping Response
<i>February 12</i>	<i>Today is the first anniversary of my divorce</i>	<i>Sad, rejected, lonely</i>	<i>Called out sick from work and slept most of the day</i>

What emotions did you experience most often?

What coping responses did you use most often?

Did those coping responses improve how you felt about yourself and the situation? Explain.

When difficult emotions show up repeatedly, or your coping responses cause even more distress, it is time to face those feelings. The following visualization exercise will help you observe your emotions, and any accompanying physical sensations, without analyzing them or becoming preoccupied by them. When you stop trying to fight or avoid your emotions, the feelings become less intense, and it is easier to let them go.

Find a quiet, comfortable space to sit where you will not be disturbed or distracted, and set your timer for five minutes. As you become more comfortable sitting with your emotions, you can set the timer for longer periods of time. Focus on your breath and your body's sensations throughout this exercise.

- Take several deep breaths and notice how your breath feels in your body.
- Notice your body's physical sensations, including any tightness in your neck or shoulders.
- Observe your emotion as it arises. Describe the feeling to yourself, as well as the intensity of that emotion.
- Notice whether the emotion is increasing or decreasing as you continue breathing.
- Observe any new emotions that join or replace that feeling.
- If you notice a need to push away the emotion, or to act on a harmful urge, that is normal. Keep observing the emotion a little longer, describing those feelings to yourself.
- Observe how it feels to be aware of your feelings, watching them come and go without acting on them.
- Remind yourself emotions are like waves that ebb and flow, and you have faced other emotional waves before.
- Notice any judgments you have about yourself, other people, or the emotion itself, and let them go.
- Keep watching your emotion until it changes or decreases.
- Finish with a few intentional, deep breaths.

Describe any physical sensations you noticed as you observed your emotions.

Describe any urges or impulses that arose as you observed your emotions.

Describe what it was like to observe your emotions without acting on them.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise change the way you regard your overwhelming emotions? Explain.

Did this exercise change the way you react to your overwhelming emotions? Explain.

Can you think of ways to cope with overwhelming emotions in the future?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
