



Work Life Services Newsletter June 2021

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COVID-19: Using Mindfulness to Cope with Big Emotions

There is no doubt that this pandemic has created a number of strong and difficult emotions within Americans. It's flipped lives, families, social circles, children's education, and workspaces upside down, backwards, and everywhere in-between. As people sit in their homes and wait for this difficult, painful, and scary life event to pass, many will inevitably feel deep negative emotions like grief, anger, fear, or sadness. And chances are, once that emotion hits, they will spend all of their time and energy trying to find ways to no longer feel that way. Sometimes, people will distract themselves from these emotions by putting time and energy into engaging activities. Other times, they may lash out from frustration or anger. They may even try to suppress the pain, uncertainty, or fear with food, alcohol, or other substances. Regardless of how people choose to cope, these actions are all just avoidance tactics that may provide brief moments of relief but will ultimately return those impacted back to an even more exasperated feeling of suffering or loss.

Mindfulness is a practice that can assist in this process and be used as a tool to break this unhelpful cycle, guiding practitioners towards a more effective resolution. According to leading researcher, Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.

The first thing mindfulness teaches is that there is a difference between internal experience and external expression. Mindful practice trains the mind so that the practitioner can observe and accept the internal experience, while also having the wisdom to choose a preferred external expression.

In other words, mindfulness creates a space between the event and the reaction, where one can observe thoughts, and feel and accept different emotions, building a capacity to act appropriately during an emotional experience. Based on the research around emotional well-being, the more aware people become of emotions and the more understanding they have of them, the more empowered, confident, and resilient people will be when they experience them.

As a part of developing awareness, think about the strongest, most painful emotions a little differently. While they may seem difficult to live through, they are not all bad. Think about some of the most memorable heroes and heroines out of history: peacemakers, activist, explorers, and innovators. Regardless of the circumstance, strong emotions were their fuel for action and, despite the pain it may have caused, those emotions led them to incredible, world-changing outcomes.

As you make your way through the uncertainty of this event, remember to practice this awareness and recognize the strong emotions that overcome your mind and body. As you do that, don't just accept them, embrace them and see what you can learn about them and from them. The more you understand your emotions, the better prepared you'll be to use them for fuel to create more positive outcomes now and in the future.

Finally, to support your growing awareness, keep a journal of your strong emotions, also referred to by prominent emotion researcher, Paul Ekman, as a trigger journal. Every time you feel yourself experience a strong emotion, write down the experience, including what happened (event), what you thought about during the event (thoughts, beliefs, and judgments), and your emotional and behavioral response. Be as detailed as possible.

Do this exercise for 2-4 weeks and then go back through and read your journal. As an outsider looking in, make note of the themes, triggers, and emotions that you recorded. Use this journal to broaden your awareness, to learn as much as possible about yourself, and to continue to deepen your mindfulness practice moving forward.

References

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