

## Soothing Distressing Emotions\*

When people experience heightened stress, their typical response is fight or flight. Fighting against what hurts increases unhealthy arousal and can be exhausting. Fleeing, or avoiding, pain is also exhausting and leaves the inner distress unchanged. This exercise teaches a new way to respond to disturbing emotions: to allow yourself to sit with a distressing emotion without fighting against it or trying to stop, change, fix, or avoid it. In holding a distressing emotion in compassionate, accepting awareness, you'll reinforce the idea that you are strong enough to calmly face and soothe the pain, rather than fight or flee from it. You will not try to change the emotion or the circumstance that triggered the emotion. Rather, what changes in this exercise is *your response* to the emotion.

### Instructions

1. Sit comfortably and peacefully with your hands resting unfolded in your lap. Your feet are flat on the floor. Your spine is comfortably erect, but not stiff. Your muscles are relaxed—shoulders, neck, jaw, arms, and belly. If it is comfortable, allow your eyes to close (otherwise simply lower your gaze). Imagine that your body is just like the mountain—dignified, serene, majestic, the same mountain whether in storm or sunshine.
2. Further calm yourself with two easy deep breaths. Know that this will be a pleasant and soothing moment...a moment of kindness.
3. Think of a time recently that was *moderately* disturbing, and is still distressing to think about. Perhaps you felt rejected, embarrassed, disappointed, fearful, or any other distressing emotion. Create a space to hold this emotion—to fully feel whatever uncomfortable feelings come up. There is no judging, no gritting your teeth to let yourself feel this for only a brief moment. Rather be fully aware of this emotion and embrace it with complete and kind acceptance. Think, “Whatever I feel is okay. Let me feel it.”
4. Notice where in your body you feel it...perhaps in the stomach, chest, throat, shoulders, or head. No judging, only kind acceptance. Let the region of your body that holds the discomfort soften.
5. Breathe into that region which holds the emotion...calming, soothing breaths.
6. With each in-breath, breathe into that region compassion...or you might call it loving-kindness, gentle friendliness, caring, or love. With each breath, let that compassion settle in that region, soothing your distress.
7. Silently repeat:
  - “This is a moment of suffering.”
  - “Suffering is part of life—I am not alone.”
  - “May I bring compassion to this moment.”
  - “May I give myself the kindness I need.”
8. Continue to breathe compassion into the region holding your unpleasant emotion. Repeat the four statements in step 7 above once or twice more.
9. When you are ready, take a more intentional in-breath....on the outbreath let awareness of that region dissolve as you turn your awareness to a region of your body that feels pleasant or neutral.
10. You smile...you know that you'll be okay...as you repeat:
  - “May I be happy in this moment.”
  - “May I be free of suffering.”
  - “May my day unfold with ease.”

**Note:** This skill is a very effective preparation for sitting with the distressing emotions linked to disturbing childhood memories. Once you've learned to sit with whatever unpleasant emotions arise—with kind acceptance—you'll be better able to acknowledge and rewire old disturbing memories, either on your own or with the assistance of a skilled mental health professional, as needed.

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