

Living With Difficult Emotions

Self-help booklet



Anger
Sadness
Shame
Fear
Grief Depression
Rage Anxiety Terror Emptiness Despair
Guilt

I grew up feeling scared of strong emotions, especially anger.

Then I experienced a terrible trauma in my early teens and was overwhelmed by shame and fear. I spent years as a young adult alternating between suppressing these emotions or indulging them. Neither worked. Eventually I 'went mad' and found my way into the mental health system.

Hardly anyone in mental health talked about emotions – it was all about 'symptoms' or 'behaviours'. My medication made me emotionally numb, and mostly I was told to 'distract' myself. It felt like my workers were as scared of my emotions as I was. Yet it was only when I was truly able to embrace my emotions - to understand, express, share, release and accept these difficult feelings – that I was able to begin healing my life.

I waited years for someone to help me navigate through my difficult emotions. I've written this booklet because I don't want

others to have to wait as long as I did. I have tried to share some of the ideas that helped me on my healing journey. It won't be right for everyone, and it's just a place to start from, not the whole deal. But I hope it helps at least a little.

About 10 years ago I was told that I would probably never recover, that I was unlikely to ever work again, and I was even made to give up my dog because I couldn't care for her, or myself, properly.

Today I am still in the mental health system – but not as a consumer. I manage a peer support service, deliver talks and training about recovery, and sometimes I am even hired by psychiatric hospitals to contribute my ideas. I live in a lovely little flat, with my grumpy little pet cat, Angus, and I love my life. Don't ever let anyone take away your hope. Change is not only always possible – it is inevitable.

I wish you well on your journey. Hang in there.

Indigo

May 2013

New ways to think about difficult emotions.

Difficult emotions sit at the heart of almost every mental health issue. How well do you understand and work with your difficult emotions?

'Bad' emotions?

I think one of the fundamental issues in coping with emotions is the way we tend to judge them as being 'good' or 'bad', 'positive' or 'negative'. Most people think, for example, that love and happiness are positive, while anger, sadness, shame & fear are bad.

Judging some emotions as bad encourages us to avoid them, rather than work with them.

All emotions are essential.

While it's true that some emotions definitely *feel* better than others, the truth is that *all* emotions are essential because they give us important information that we need to act on.

If we never got angry then nothing would ever change! Anger has driven all of the important human rights movements throughout history... like abolishing slavery, women's rights, and freedom of speech.

If we never felt fear then we wouldn't be able to keep ourselves safe when in danger – all our prehistoric ancestors would have been eaten by predators because they weren't scared enough to run away to safety.

Separating emotions from responses.

One of the reasons we think some emotions are bad is because we confuse the emotion with the response or behaviour that follows it. For example, someone gets angry and then they become violent. We are scared of the violence and so we also become scared of anger, and we decide that anger is 'bad'.

It is true that violence is almost never a good thing, but violence is only one of many possible responses to anger; violence is not the same thing as anger.

We need to remember that with support and persistence we can all learn new ways of responding to our emotions. Doing this can dramatically reduce emotional pain and transform our lives.

Changing the way we respond to emotions.



Changing how we respond to emotions takes time – but it is possible. I know because I've done it myself, and seen many others do the same.

No, it's not easy. It involves learning a new self-awareness, new habits, and then practicing them over and over. Some helpful first steps in changing the way we respond to difficult emotions include:

1. Don't suppress your emotions – this is a key contributor to mental health issues. The more we push emotions down, the more they 'pop out' in new & distressing ways.
2. Notice what emotions you are feeling and when you feel them. Keeping a journal can help to get a new perspective.
3. Listen to the messages behind your emotions – *why* are you feeling this? There are *always* reasons (but some may be difficult to acknowledge).
4. Address the issues behind your emotions. Denial does not work. Feeling sorry for ourselves makes it worse. But getting into 'problem solving mode' can really help.
5. Practice ways of responding to your emotions that really try to resolve the message behind the emotion, and the way that it impacts your mind and body.
6. Remember that just because other people may respond in unhelpful ways– and even if you have done the same in the past – does not mean you can't change.
7. Get support. This can be from good friends or family, from a support worker, a peer, a support group, counsellor or therapist. Getting help can make all the difference, but be aware that it can take a while to find the right person for you.
8. Remember the wise words of Sir Winston Churchill who also struggled with difficult emotions... **"Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give up. Never give up. Never give up. Never give up."**

Fear

Anxiety just a medical word for fear.

We feel fear when we don't feel safe.

Sometimes fear continues long after the danger is past, so then we need to learn how to be safe again.

There are three types of reactions to fear:

Fight: Attack the threat, violence

Flight: Run away or hide

Freeze: (or 'dissociate') Go numb, don't move, float away in our minds

Helpful responses

- ▶ If you are not safe right now, leave the situation. If your home situation is not safe find support to get into a safer situation.
- ▶ Slow steady breathing helps your body to relax. First focus on breathing out slowly, then breathing in deeply and slowly.
- ▶ Understand what makes you feel unsafe (people, situations, feelings) and why.
- ▶ If you are afraid of a threat that is now in the past, get support or counselling to process your feelings. It is common for fear to continue long after a significant danger – but this can change.
- ▶ Give yourself small challenges to confront little fears. Ask loved ones to help you do this.
- ▶ Create a safe space at home for comfort.
- ▶ Create an imaginary safe space in your mind, complete with lots of detail, then recall it when you need to – imagine the sights, smells & sounds.
- ▶ Build up your physical strength in your body.

Unhelpful responses

- ▶ Avoiding life
- ▶ Drugs and alcohol
- ▶ Staying in unsafe situations

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers it."

Nelson Mandela

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.

Marie Curie



More about Fear

Fear is our mind's way of telling us it thinks we're in danger. Fear can completely overwhelm us. Fear is giving us a strong and simple message – GET SAFE!

If a car is speeding towards us then we need to be driven by fear - it will help us jump to safety. But if fear is crippling us all the time when everyone else seems OK, then it can be a big problem. We can even end up hiding for our whole lives because we are so scared.

A lot of people say that the best way to conquer fear is to confront the thing that scares you. Exposure therapy is based on this idea, as is a good little self-help book by Susan Jeffers called 'Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway'. I think sometimes this can really help if done gently.

My own experiences have shown me that sometimes it is also necessary to look deeper into our fear and understand why it is there in the first place. I am a big believer that knowledge brings power – and power is a great tool against fear. What has happened in your life to cause such strong fear? Have there been times when it was not possible for you make yourself safe? Have you been in unsafe situations over long periods of time? If this is the case then your fear responses today may be out of proportion – but understandably so.

There could be great value for you in understanding the historical sources of your fear and addressing those issues in a therapeutic environment. Perhaps your fear is actually a messenger about unresolved issues that need to be addressed. Address them, explore them, take the chance.

Am I safe in my life right now... Physically? Emotionally? Mentally?
If not, what can I do to get safe? Who could help me?

What things, situations, people, times or places make me feel fearful?

Why am I afraid of these things? Are they hiding deeper fears or past dangers?

How do I respond to my fear? *Think about 'Fight – Flight – Freeze' responses*

How would I like to respond to my fear?

Are there small steps I could take to challenge my fear and test my strength? Who could support me to do this? How can I get started?

Shame

Shame tells us when we think we've betrayed our values.

Shame makes us think we are 'bad' in the eyes of others.

Shame makes us want to hide or punish ourselves.

Helpful responses

- ▶ Take time to understand what you feel ashamed about – really spell it out.
- ▶ If your shame is about your responses to being hurt or abused, learn more about how abusers trick us into taking on their shame.* Put the shame where it belongs.
- ▶ Shame is a social emotion – you can't release it on your own. Share your feelings with others you trust.
- ▶ If you genuinely did something wrong: do what you can to put things right... then forgive yourself & let it go.
- ▶ Practice self-love, even when it feels inappropriate (that's when you need it most).
- ▶ Go to public places or support services – don't be alone.
- ▶ List your strengths, gifts and achievements – no matter how small.
- ▶ Find a counsellor or therapist or support group that works for you. Let others in and find ways to recover.

Unhelpful responses

- ▶ Isolating yourself
- ▶ Punishing yourself
- ▶ Going over and over your 'sins'
- ▶ Drugs & alcohol

*Survivors of abuse often feel shame that really belongs to our perpetrator/s, not to us. Perpetrators are skilled in making us think it is our fault. It is not. If you were abused, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Many of us who have survived abuse also feel shame about our responses after the abuse. You may be surprised to find out your responses are common and nothing to feel ashamed about. It can be extremely helpful to get counselling to understand and process these feelings, and it can be a wonderful release when we discover that we are not alone.

"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it."



Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable.

Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."

Brené Brown

More about Shame

Shame is helpful in reminding us to be true to our values and those of the society in which we live. Shame drives us to reflect on our actions and to do the right thing. This is very useful. But sometimes we can feel shame that is not appropriate and which can become way out of proportion.

My own mental health issues were driven by shame. I felt ashamed for having been sexually abused, and for my responses to that abuse. At my worst I was convinced that I was 'evil'. My shame drove me to self-harm, to hide away, to give up on life, and to get lost in another world inside my mind, to get stuck for years in the mental health system.

It wasn't until I received a lot of support and did a lot of work myself that I could see that I had nothing to be ashamed of at all. I **was** a victim and I **am** a survivor – all of the shame I felt really belongs to the man who hurt me. It was long and arduous journey to work this out, but I cannot recommend it highly enough to others.

Finding people I trusted and sharing my story with them was essential to overcoming my shame. I needed to see my story in the eyes of others – it helped to forgive myself. It was enormously hard, but worth every moment of pain.

Read my personal recovery story to find out more about my thoughts on shame. I also found that peer support, and the writings of Brene Brown, Judith Herman, Babette Rothschild, Helen Bass & Laura Davis were a great help and comfort to me.

How does shame affect your life? Would you like it to be different?

What has happened in your life that has contributed to feeling ashamed?

What are the things you feel ashamed about? *It can be helpful to get shame out of our heads and onto paper. You may find you have many things to list here (I know I did).*

Would you consider talking to a counsellor or therapist about your shame (if you could find someone you really trust, someone non-judgemental and loving)? How could you make this happen? Who could help you find the right person?

Have you ever talked about your shame with people who have been through similar experiences – such as a support group? How could you make this happen?

Are there small steps you could take to challenge your shame and affirm your goodness?

Anger

Anger tells us that something feels unfair.

Anger motivates us to make changes.

Anger builds up lots of energy or pressure in our minds & bodies.

Lots of people are scared of anger but actually anger can be a good thing.

Helpful responses

- ▶ Step away from situations that make you feel angry – get somewhere that feels less threatening.
- ▶ Try to avoid immediate responses to anger – give yourself time to calm down and think.
- ▶ Take slow, steady breaths.
- ▶ Work out what it is that feels unfair or wrong – the heart of the issue.
- ▶ Find respectful and constructive ways to right the wrongs if possible.
- ▶ Talk over your anger with others who care or who have 'been there'.
- ▶ Release physical energy safely. things that can help include martial arts, exercise, dancing, singing and laughing.
- ▶ Learn about and practice assertiveness, which is very different to aggressiveness.
- ▶ Practice acceptance & compassion.

Unhelpful responses

- ▶ Violence or disrespect to yourself or others
- ▶ Suppressing feelings; pretending everything is OK.
- ▶ Judging your anger
- ▶ Drugs & alcohol

Sometimes we are powerless to change the things that make us feel angry.

In these cases we have a choice: stay angry and miserable, or accept the situation and let it go.

Acceptance can bring release and emotional freedom.

It is not the same as approval.



"If you try to get rid of fear and anger without knowing their meaning, they will grow stronger and return."

Deepak Chopra

More about Anger

Anger is a great emotion because it lets us know when something is not fair. Then it motivates us to take action and put things right. Of course if we respond to our anger with violence then that is not good. And if we don't respond to our anger at all it can literally drive us mad.

It was not until about eight years ago that I learnt anger is not to be feared but to be embraced. This learning has changed so much about how I think about the world and how I go about my life.

I think there are 3 common responses to feeling anger:

Destructive: Hurt others or ourselves.

This is when we try to get rid of the thing that's unfair, or hurt people to try and make them stop. This is what I used to think anger was all about because this was how I'd seen others respond to their anger. It is the common view of anger which gives anger such a bad name.

Avoidance: Pretend that nothing is wrong.

This is how I used to respond to my own anger and was a reflection of my own fear of anger. I think it was part of why I was 'mad' for so long (pun intended).

Constructive: Create peaceful change.

These are the wonderful responses I have learnt in recent years – to take my anger and use it as a motivating force to try and bring about positive change. Gandhi used constructive anger through non violent protest. Peaceful rallies are also constructive uses of anger. Talking out our issues with respect, assertiveness and non-violence is another example.

These days when I feel angry I stop and ask myself *'Why do I feel that this is unjust? Is this something I want to take action about? What can I do that is respectful and nonviolent to bring about change?'*

I have been particularly delighted to find that, for me at least, acting on my anger in constructive and positive ways seems to be a great antidote for depression. It has helped me to become a writer and activist, and to have renewed dedication for my work. More than this, learning to channel my anger into positive change has increased my sense of personal power, and helped me to think of myself as a survivor rather than as a victim.

How does anger affect your life? Would you like it to be different?

What has happened in your life that has contributed to feeling angry?

What are the things you feel angry about?

Is there anything you think you 'should' feel angry about – but don't? This could be a clue that you are suppressing your anger. If you are suppressing your anger, in what other ways might it be coming out or affecting you?*

How do you respond to feeling angry? Are you destructive? Do you avoid it? Are you constructive with it?

If anger is a big problem in your life, have you ever talked about it in a support group? Would you like to? How could you make this happen? Who could you ask to help you?

List some constructive, non-violent responses that you could use next time you feel angry.

List some safe ways that you could release the energy you feel when you get angry:

* If you are not used to expressing your anger it can feel really scary when you first release it. Practice expressing your anger with someone you trust or in a safe space.



The most glorious moments in your life are not the so-called days of success, but rather those days when out of dejection and despair you feel rise in you a challenge to life, and the promise of future accomplishments.

Gustave Flaubert

More about Sadness

In many ways sadness is the most difficult of all the difficult emotions because it is so demotivating. Sadness doesn't drive us to do anything, rather it takes away our drive.

Sadness is a message that we need to stop, reflect, grieve and gather ourselves - rather than 'do'. The problem is that sometimes we stop and get lost in the sadness rather than reflect on and learn from it. And other times we can reflect for what feels like an eternity without being able to see a way out of the darkness.

Sadness has become very pathologised in the modern western world. There seems to be a social expectation that we should always be happy and positive, yet we live in a world that contains cruelty, loss, isolation, extraordinary disadvantage, war... the list goes on. Positivity and optimism are great things, but they are not always appropriate.

I think sadness is a natural response to devastating circumstances, and that sometimes we need to give ourselves time to stop and feel the sadness. With grief, for example, we are given space to reflect on who and what we have lost and the value it had in our lives.

Sometimes though, like with the other difficult emotions, sadness can become overwhelming and out of perspective – a labyrinth of darkness that is hard to escape from. When this happens we need to take action. Not because we have a disease of depression, but because life is more than loss, and there are wonderful things in this world as well as horrid things. There is children's laughter, crunchy autumn leaves, the exuberance of a dog running at the beach, hot soup on a cold night, belly laughs, friends and love.

We must push against the lack of motivation and force our way back into the world, into social situations, into activities that interest us, even into things that anger us (remember, anger is motivating – a great countermeasure against sadness). This takes a huge sustained effort, but hey – it really **is** worth it.

Depression is a medical term that includes extreme sadness, despair, grief and sometimes a vast gnawing emptiness.

Sadness tells us that we have lost or never had something that we fundamentally need, such as love, safety, connection or purpose.

Sadness takes away our motivation and so it can be hard to overcome.

Helpful responses

- ▶ Think about what you are missing or have lost... what do you need to fill your heart?
- ▶ Find long lost dreams or create new ones. Take tiny, little steps towards these dreams.
- ▶ Find someone to share your dream with and who can help with motivation.
- ▶ Acknowledge what you grieve for but also try not to dwell on it too much.
- ▶ Make plans for your future.
- ▶ Be with other people more often.
- ▶ Set '5-minute' challenges to raise your energy – have a shower, walk to the letterbox...
- ▶ If it feels comfortable, ask others for hugs or positive feedback.
- ▶ Visit funny sites on the internet.
- ▶ Read or watch inspiring stories.
- ▶ Let yourself cry when you need to.
- ▶ Do kind things for others.

Unhelpful responses

- ▶ Ruminating/dwelling on problems.
- ▶ Oversleeping.
- ▶ Being alone too much.
- ▶ Drugs and alcohol.
- ▶ Seeking sympathy instead of solutions.

But what we call our despair is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope.

George Eliot

How does sadness affect your life? Would you like it to be different?

What has happened in your life that has contributed to feeling sad, empty or despairing? Who or what have you lost? What important things or people have been missing from your life?

If you could wake up tomorrow as a completely new person in a completely new life ... who would you be? What would you do? Who would be around you? What can you do in *this* life to move closer to this dream life?

What '5-minute' challenges can you set for yourself to raise your energy? Who can you enlist to help you stay motivated?

What people are in your life that you can share your feelings with, seek comfort from, and share time with? If you don't have many people in your life, what could you do to start to meet new people in a safe space? Eg, join a club or interest group, start a short course...

What makes you laugh? How can you bring more laughter into your life?

What do you find beautiful or inspiring? How can get more of this in your life?

Suffering is not enough. Life is both dreadful and wonderful...How can I smile when I am filled with so much sorrow? **It is natural - you need to smile to your sorrow because you are more than your sorrow.**

Thich Nhat Hanh



"The capacity for hope is the most significant fact of life. It provides human beings with a sense of destination and the energy to get started."

Norman Cousins

"Worry will not reduce my chance of pain tomorrow, but it will certainly increase my chance of pain today."

Unknown

"It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Rivers carve their own valleys. Water flowing over rock and soil cuts channels, which grow deeper with every passing year. The contours of the channel then define the course of the river. The river creates the banks, and the banks create the river.

Our emotions are like rivers that create gullies for themselves. The more water flows in a particular direction, the more likely it is that water will continue to flow in that direction.

But as irrigators can change the flow of water, so too can we change the way that our thoughts and feelings flow."

www.wildmind.org



"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.

If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

The Dalai Lama

The positive value of anger is not limited to peace activists, but is relevant to all who work for social change. It may be argued that anger is the personal fuel in the social motor that resolves the institutional contradictions that arise in the course of history. As such it applies to the activists who rid the world of slavery, and who moved the political economic systems from feudalism to capitalism and from capitalism to socialism, and who are fighting today to rid the world of racism and sexism.

David Adams



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