

Managing Difficult Emotions Using Mindfulness as Our Guide

Getting Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable

In March, COVID-19 emerged as a serious public health threat. Of course, we didn't know much about it at the time, and we certainly had never experienced what it means to cope with a pandemic. In the beginning, many felt a similar range of emotions, somewhere along the spectrum of fear and anxiety. Fear of the unknown, the health of ourselves and our loved ones, and anxiety about all the acute and stress-inducing changes to our daily lives.

Throughout the last nine months, this fear and anxiety remains for many. But perhaps the initial shock has given way. We've adapted and strapped ourselves in for a longer ride than intended. In many ways, this is a step up from our initial reactions, but it also brings with it a new set of emotions, such as anger, loneliness or hopelessness. Many have experienced profound feelings of grief and loss through the death of a loved one or simply mourning the life we once knew. These feelings are normal and expected but left unmanaged, they can have a profound and long-term impact on our overall well-being, and our ability to recover. We may be doing what we can and stepping up each day for the challenges we face, but how well are we really managing? Do we have the right tools to address those sometimes intense and overwhelming feelings that might be taking their toll?

Feelings have a history of being labelled as either positive (happy, confident, joyful) or negative (sad, scared, hurt, angry). In reality, all emotions are healthy and serve a purpose.

They help us to get in touch with and understand our internal feelings. Unpleasant emotions we experience are helpful and adaptive because they signal us to danger ahead, or that we may have veered off track. They allow us the opportunity to pivot and make changes so that we can survive and even thrive. Protecting our emotional health is so important because it's directly connected to our physical health. The stakes are high. Of course, It's easy to experience positive emotions, but what do we do with the ones that don't feel so good? How can we get comfortable with being uncomfortable?



Mindfulness as a Tool

Mindfulness is simply an awareness. This awareness arises when we pay attention to the present moment with curiosity and openness. We tune in to our emotions and try to experience them without judgement. We're often taught that the experience of some feelings is somehow wrong – (“You have nothing to be sad about”, or “Don't be scared/hurt”). Conversely, we may have learned that positive feelings are more accepted by others– (“Be happy/brave,” “Lighten up,” “Move on/get over it.”) These cues can sometimes cause us to try to bury any difficult or “bad” emotions. In mindfulness practice, feelings are not good or bad; they just are.

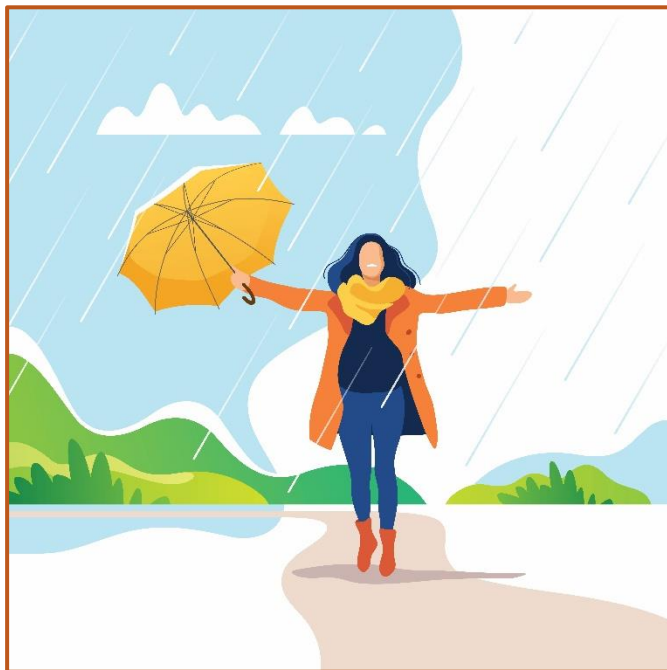
Why is this important?

A major component of mental well-being is our ability to be mindful of our emotions. If you don't know what you're feeling, it's difficult to do anything about it. Additionally, if we can identify the emotions that are coming up for us, it puts us back in control, so we can use that information to move forward in a healthy way. Tuning into, identifying and sitting with our emotions might be contrary to what we've been doing, which is finding ways to distract ourselves enough to *not* feel. Distraction may be a useful tool to care for ourselves at times, but if we never allow ourselves to feel, there may be trouble ahead. Challenging emotions always find a way to make themselves known. You may find yourself arguing more with friends or family. Activities you once found pleasure in may have lost their luster. Or maybe your physical health has seen a noticeable decline. More often than not, emotions we haven't dealt with are the culprit.

Getting started

Leaning into our feelings is not as difficult as we think. Try the R.A.I.N. technique to start learning how to be present with your emotions

- **R=Recognize:** Sit quietly and try to note (or label) a feeling you are experiencing
- **A=Accept:** You don't have to like any challenging emotions that emerge. But if they show up—see if you can accept that the feeling is here and now.



- **I=Investigate:** To deepen your awareness, notice how your feeling is affecting your body. Notice the areas of tensing muscles, or how your breathing changes. As you observe, see if there are any additional thoughts or feelings that may be present.
- **N=Not-Identify:** Don't overly personalize the emotion. Remember that this is just a reaction. It is like a wave that rises and eventually falls. The idea is to ride the wave without being drowned by it.

Mindful Tips to help regulate challenging feelings

Even when we master the art of being present with our sometimes-unpleasant emotions, we may still struggle with how to manage them, or worry that they may overpower us completely. Below are some additional mindfulness techniques to help calm ourselves when we're feeling overwhelmed:

Slow down. Take a few deep breaths. Deep breathing exercises allow us to create some space between a feeling and a reaction. Deep breathing also allows more oxygen to get to the brain, which helps with problem solving and short-term memory.

Try some grounding exercises. Grounding exercises help restore a sense of safety and security and are great tools to handle those spikes that happen periodically. Try slowly walking and paying attention to sensations at the soles of your feet. Or use your 5-senses to connect back to the present moment if you find that feelings of anxiety are taking control. Taking time to notice the sights, sounds, and smells in your environment, and touching or tasting things slowly can help heightened emotions to settle.

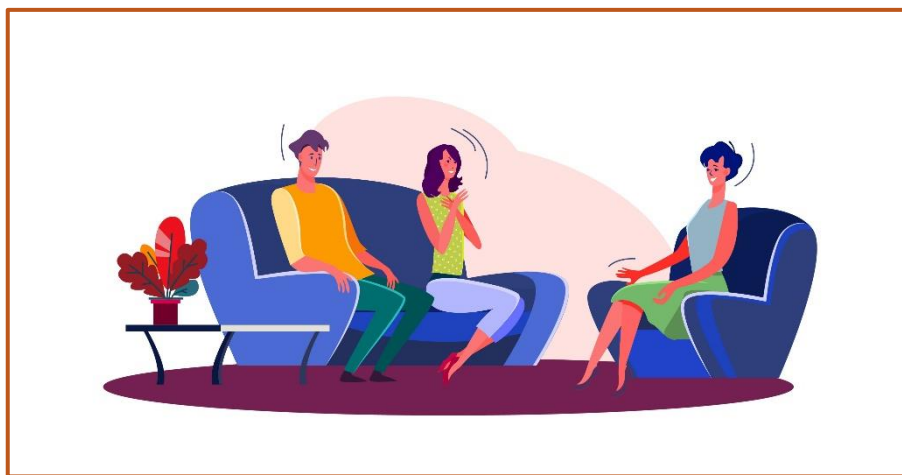
Incorporate Guided Meditations into your day. Guided meditations can be helpful to those who may be having trouble quieting their mind on their own. With this type of meditation, a facilitator provides you with the framework that you can follow. [Try this short guided meditation](#)

Set up predictable challenges. Try practicing your new emotional mindfulness skills at predictable times of stress, when the stakes are lower. For example, tune into your body while studying for an exam or commuting through heavy traffic.

Expect a few setbacks. Don't lose hope if you backslide into old habits now and then. It happens. Instead of giving up after a setback, vow to start fresh next time and learn from your mistakes.

When in doubt, return to your body. If you're struggling to manage your mood in a tough situation, take a deep breath, and apply quick stress relief.

Talk to a licensed professional. Utilize your Ulliance benefit to speak to a counselor, especially if you're feeling overwhelmed, or are experiencing a difficult time managing your emotions on your own.



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for you & your family.**

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