

Wellness Tip Expansion

This wellness tip builds upon the past two installments – cultivating mindful awareness and opting out of struggle with discomfort. Both of those installments referenced tapping into your *observing self*. It is from this place we can choose effective action when confronted by painful feelings.

One such option is the practice of expansion and is drawn from Acceptance & Commitment Therapy.

To expand something is to make it bigger. Give more space. Expansion practice as a psychological skill is to make room for our emotional experience. As Dr. Russ Harris states in *The Happiness Trap*, “if we give unpleasant feelings enough space, they no longer stretch or strain us.” Rather than tensing or tightening (e.g., struggling) as a means of trying to control or expel painful feelings, we are making room.

By easing the pressure on our system, we invite those uncomfortable feelings to move around. Remember, they are not guaranteed to move or move quickly, but there is a much greater likelihood of them doing so using this type of skill compared to struggling with your emotional reality.

For expansion to be effective, you need to observe your feelings from a place of mindful awareness rather than thinking about your feelings (which instead anchors you to the narratives that your thinking brain spins). Of course, thoughts will still arise in this practice – simply acknowledge them and bring yourself back to the observing self.

The Steps of Expansion

1. **Observe:** In periods of emotional pain, start by scanning your whole body and notice where you are physically feeling your emotions. If you notice multiple areas of discomfort, choose the one that is most bothersome. Get out your metaphorical magnifying glass and examine it from a place of detached interest and curiosity. Does this sensation seem to have a shape? color? weight? temperature? Where is it placed? Is it still or moving? Get a real sense of it.
2. **Breathe:** As you inhale imagine a gentle pocket of air or fluffy little cloud surround that sensation. Take nice slow breaths, fully inhaling and exhaling. This breath practice helps provide a sense of anchoring and can ease our tension.
3. **Create Space:** Notice the extra space you have created by breathing in that air pocket or fluffy cloud. This is your system opening up, making room, and creating space for that emotion to simply be without struggle.
4. **Allow:** Let the sensation be what it is. While your thinking brain may encourage you to fight with it or try to change it in some way, remember you are choosing to drop the rope of this tug-of-war. You also don't have to put effort into “letting it go” – simply let the emotion be, even if you don't like it, want it, or feel okay with it. Be patient with yourself. Extend peace and compassion for the pain you are in.

The sensation may or may not change in intensity or quality. It may or may not go away. What is important is that you are giving up the struggle. You may find you need to do several rounds of expansion to make contact with the clean discomfort. That's okay. You also may want to spend time on other areas of your body where emotions emerge as bothersome sensations. You can do expansion practice as many times or as often as you need.

As Dr. Harris says, by practicing this skill “either your feelings will change, or they won’t. It doesn’t matter either way, because this technique is not about changing your feelings – it’s about accepting them. If you truly have dropped the struggle with this feeling, it will have much less impact on you, regardless of whether or not it changes.”

From this space, a sense of freedom can sprout. Despite the presence of discomfort – sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and so on – you can remain anchored in yourself and, with gentleness, choose to focus your attention on what’s meaningful to you.

With practice, this tool of expansion becomes easier. If you’d like some guided practice, feel free to check out this short tutorial (6:07): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUGOp8CgtNk>

If you’d like to talk with someone about more effectively managing emotions, or for any other questions / concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment:

Medical Student Counseling Center osac-mscc@uiowa.edu 319-335-8056 1240 MERF

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

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Pronouns: she/her