

## Wellness Tip

### The Struggle Switch

The Struggle Switch is a concept popularized by Russ Harris, MD, and can be useful to consider when you are facing unpleasant emotions. As he describes in his book *The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living*, when faced with challenging circumstances and unpleasant emotions we have a tendency to dig in and struggle against it. As he says, “the more we struggle with them, the more trouble we create for ourselves.”

He likens it finding yourself in quicksand. *The worst thing to do is struggle – it will pull you down faster.* Rather, what is effective for freeing yourself is to “lie back, stretch out, keep still, and float to the surface.” In other words, you need to recognize the situation you find yourself in and make full contact with the source of distress.

To be effective in moving through a painful situation, we need to be aware of our experience. He describes the Struggle Switch like this:

*Imagine that at the back of our mind is a switch – we’ll call it the ‘struggle switch.’ When it’s switched on, it means we’re going to struggle against any physical or emotional pain that comes our way; whatever discomfort we experience, we’ll see it as a problem and try hard to get rid of it or avoid it. Suppose the emotion that shows up is anxiety. If our struggle switch is ON, then that feeling is completely unacceptable. So we could end up with anger about our anxiety...or anxiety about our anxiety...or guilt about our anxiety...or maybe even a mixture of all these feelings at once. What all these secondary emotions have in common is that they are unpleasant, unhelpful, and a drain on our energy and vitality. ...Now imagine what happens if our struggle switch is OFF. In this case, whatever emotion shows up, no matter how unpleasant, we do not struggle with it. Thus, when anxiety shows up, it’s not a problem. Sure, it’s unpleasant and we don’t like it, but it’s nothing terrible. With the struggle switch OFF, our anxiety levels are free to rise and fall as the situation dictates. Sometimes they’ll be high, sometimes low, and sometimes there will be no anxiety at all. But more importantly, we’re not wasting our time and energy struggling with it. (pg. 86)*

Dr. Harris calls the unavoidable experiences of emotional and physical discomfort *clean discomfort* – they will happen. You cannot have a human life without experiencing pain of some sort (e.g., sadness in response to a loss, fear in response to a threat).

But once your thinking self digs in and starts struggling, the intensity of that pain can amplify greatly and compromise your ability to respond to that challenging circumstance effectively. We often find ourselves resisting those feelings we personally think to be “bad” or “negative.” Dr. Harris labels the outcome of this struggle *dirty discomfort*.

In Buddhism this concept is captured by the sentiment *pain x resistance = suffering*.

When you are engaged in struggle against unpleasant emotions your feelings get sticky, pain becomes suffering, thoughts & emotions become overwhelming, and you burn through energy that could be spent elsewhere in an attempt to achieve emotional control. *I will make this feeling stop* we tell ourselves. And the strategies to make it stop can be very ineffective and destructive.

If you find yourself at a place where emotions are intensifying, ask yourself if your struggle switch is ON.

If so, notice the emotions you are feeling and try labeling that emotional experience as “unpleasant,” “uncomfortable,” or “painful” rather than judging it as “bad,” “terrible,” or “negative.” As Dr. Harris states: “No emotion is in itself ‘bad.’ ‘Bad’ is just a thought; a judgment made by our thinking self. But if we fuse with that thought – if we literally believe that the feeling is ‘bad’ – then, naturally, we will struggle with it all the harder. (And we know where that leads.)”

Ask yourself *What is the clean (primary) pain here, and what is the dirty (secondary) pain?*

If you notice your thinking self judging your experience, simply acknowledge and say to yourself “judging.” Acknowledge what your mind is doing and refuse to play along. Drop your end of the rope in that tug-of-war game. Make the space for clean discomfort and no more.

To feel empowered in managing unpleasant feelings *practice making direct contact through your observing self* (i.e., noticing/observing via mindful awareness) instead of turning over the driver’s seat to your thinking self – which likes to spin narratives and resists in a multitude of ways.

When making contact with clean discomfort you will often find it is not as scary or horrible as you may expect. Painful? Yes. Unpleasant? Yes. The end of the world as you know it? No. By acknowledging and naming the painful feelings (e.g., *this is sadness*) and making space, you actually invite them to resolve, move along, or decrease in intensity. This is an act of accepting your reality for what it is in that moment, rather than trying to control it. From this space, you are free to turn your focus and attention on a more meaningful, soothing, or useful activity.

If you would like to hear more about the Struggle Switch, feel free to check out Dr. Harris discussing it in the YouTube link here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCp1l16GCXI>

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](mailto: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*