

EMOTIONAL REGULATION PRACTICES

Practices to Regulate Emotions, Raise Emotional Intelligence, and Move Toward Liberation from Suffering

There are many processes and practices that will yield results. No one practice is for everyone. But many of the best practices have a number of commonalities such as Awareness, Insight, Integration, and Purpose. . . .

AWARENESS

All treatment modalities, spiritual practices, and other healing arts start with attention. What you place your attention on is what you become. Awareness includes all forms of mindfulness and meta-awareness, which is observing your mind as it experiences people, places, things, situations, and ideas that trigger negative reactions. Awareness leads to Insight and Understanding.

INSIGHT AND UNDERSTANDING

Once we are aware of our condition it leads to curiosity of the nature of the self-narratives about who we think we are both positive and negative. We are drawn to research the origins of narratives from childhood, inquire into our condition by reading books and articles, starting a course of therapy, watching videos, and otherwise educating ourselves about our condition. This “self-knowledge” naturally leads to greater Integration and Connection.

INTEGRATION AND CONNECTION

Integration and Connection starts with reconciling the fearful little child inside with the powerful adult inside. We are able to set boundaries, adopt new healthy behaviors, develop spiritual practices, engage in hobbies and creative adventures, create new healthy relationships, recognize gratitude and positive affirmations. We will begin to sense a new meaning, direction, and purpose in life.

PURPOSE

Discovering our Purpose in life is finding our “True North.” This is about finding self-transcending meaning, purpose, and direction that’s bigger than the old ego-mind-body. We begin to consciously practice empathy, compassion, and lovingkindness. And ultimately there can be a true spiritual awakening. This is an experience of Love and Liberation!

1. Find a comfortable place for your body to be quiet and still. Whether that’s in a chair, seated on the floor, or even standing, allow your body to be both relaxed and attentive.

2. Allow for three gentle and full breaths in and out. Notice the sensation of the breath into the lungs and belly and back out again. With each inhale and exhale, allow the body to begin to settle down and more deeply relax. You may be noticing there are places where you are holding tension. Give yourself the gift of breathing in and out of those areas as you more deeply relax.

3. Now breathe naturally and deeply as is most comfortable and effortless. Allow the inhale of your belly to expand like a balloon and then gently exhale, allowing the belly to

contract. Continue to breathe from the belly and diaphragm as you move into any of the practices listed below.

STOP – BREATHE – REFLECT - CHOOSE

Dr. Herbert Benson (Harvard Medical School)

STOP Consciously give yourself a “time out.” The next time you feel stressed, imagine the picture of a stop sign and verbally say “STOP!” Calling a halt to your thinking stops the negative stress cycle. Bring your awareness to the difficult negative emotion as soon as possible. Begin to recognize the early warning signals of the emotional reaction. Remind yourself, “I need to pay attention to this – now!”

BREATHE Close your eyes and take several deep breaths. Slow, deliberate breathing naturally slows down the body and the mind. Take in a full breath through your nose, gently hold it for a moment, and slowly blow it out your mouth. Become sensitive to the natural softening quality of your breath. Send a message to your body to gently release and let go with the out breath. Relaxing into the exhale, allow the negative emotion to soften.

REFLECT Step back from the situation for a moment and ask yourself the following: What is the major concern? Why is this making me feel big emotions? Have I jumped to a conclusion? What evidence supports my feelings? Am I exaggerating the stress through negative thinking? Is there another way to view the situation? What is the worst that could happen? Does it help me to think this way? What is my old pattern of thinking here? Is my emotional reaction supported by old messages and narratives? What resources and options do I have right here in the present moment? Can I change my mind about how I see myself in this situation? What is the best wisdom about this situation in the present?

CHOOSE Decide how you want to deal with your stress. Consider the following as you weigh your options: How else can I think about this situation? Am I worrying about something that has not and may not occur? What would be a better way to handle these feelings? Do I need to balance my logic with my emotions before deciding how to act? Having calmed down, become more aware of my reactions, reflected on best wisdom in the moment, what is possible in this situation? What is the most effective and skillful strategy to get my needs met? Am I willing to let go of old patterns and make a new choice?

Once you have taken the time to Stop, Breathe, Reflect, and Choose, then ACT ON YOUR CHOICE!

THREE TENETS MEDITATION

Roshi Bernie Glassman (1939-2018 Co-founder Zen Peacemakers and Roshi Egyoku Nakao, Abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles)

NOT KNOWNING is to give up fixed ideas about yourself and the universe. Not-knowing trains you to continually set aside fixed points of view. Not-knowing is a flash of openness or a sudden shift into being present in the moment. This dropping away of the things you have relied upon for a sense of stability may lead you to examine what you have always believed is your center, a place of emptiness and profound silence, a place of the deepest rest where self-interest has not yet entered. This is not a void, but rather a silence where things are not yet separate or seen. By practicing in this way, you can create more space to become larger than your own reactivity and allow the points of view of others. Not favoring any one thing over another allows you to center yourself within a boundless net of interconnection and to expand your circle of caring. This practice of “not-knowing” can align you with the ever-changing interconnected nature of life. Practicing not-knowing may seem impossible to do, and yet, when you realize that life itself excludes nothing, practicing not-knowing over time will enable you to become more aware of what you choose to let in and open to what you had previously excluded.

BEARING WITNESS to the joy and suffering of the universe. The practice of bearing witness is to see all aspects of a situation including your attachments and judgments. You cannot live solely in a state of not- knowing, because life also asks that you face the conditions that are coming at you by being present with them. When you bear witness, you open to the uniqueness of whatever is arising and meet it just as it is. When combined with not-knowing, bearing witness can strengthen your capacity for spaciousness, thus enabling you to be present to the very things that make you feel as if you have lost your center. It can strengthen your capacity to listen to other points of view, thus allowing a more nuanced picture of a situation to emerge. Meditation trains you to bear witness by strengthening your awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise and pass. As your awareness strengthens, you begin to experience spaciousness and stability and see that you have a choice in your response to what is arising. Over time, you learn to bear witness to all the elements that are arising with a curious and compassionate attitude. This does not mean repressing the strong emotions that arise, but rather being aware of what you are choosing to feed. A wise old tale often attributed to the Cherokee warns that when many demons are struggling inside you, the one that you feed is the one that will become the strongest. You alone are responsible for what you feed. Bearing witness can allow you to eventually come to terms with the most difficult life circumstances. The practice is always available to you regardless of the time, place, situation, or people involved. There is nothing that you cannot bear witness to, from dusting the lint off your sweater to living in a pit for two years. In bearing witness, you are actively engaged and embodied, even struggling, with whatever is arising. Sometimes spiritual practices can have a neutralizing effect, flattening feelings rather than stimulating them. To hold to the center is not about becoming a spiritual zombie; it is about living the fullness of your own humanity. You are alive, so be fully alive.

TAKING ACTION arises from not knowing and bearing witness. It is impossible to predict what the action in any situation will be, or the timetable for when it will arise or what might result from it. The underlying intention is that the action that arises be a caring action, which serves everyone and everything, including yourself, in the whole situation.

Sometimes the action is as simple as continuing on with the practice of the first two tenets of not-knowing and bearing witness; the very practice of the Three Tenets is itself a caring action. And though the action that arises from the engagement of not-knowing and bearing witness is spontaneous and often surprising, it always fits the situation perfectly.

Training with the tenets is a matter of taking a backward step again and again and continually discerning your internal processes in the midst of acknowledging what is happening around you. An effect of ongoing and consistent practice of the Three Tenets is that when you lose your sense of center and fall into reactivity, you also regain your center more quickly. And when you continually perform this practice in the midst of all the activities of your daily life, the practice will be readily accessible to you during the most challenging circumstances. Training with the tenets brings about resiliency of the spiritual muscles and an ever-deepening sense of reality. As life unfolds around you, the Three Tenets are active inside of you, always directing you back to the center.

R.A.I.N. MEDITATION FOR SELF-COMPASSION

Dr. Tara Brach (clinical psychologist and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, DC)

1. Find a comfortable place for your body to be quiet and still. Whether that's in a chair, seated on the floor, or even standing, allow your body to be both relaxed and attentive.

2. Allow for three gentle and full breaths in and out. Notice the sensation of the breath into the lungs and belly and back out again. With each inhale and exhale, allow the body to begin to settle down and more deeply relax. You may be noticing there are places where you are holding tension. Give yourself the gift of breathing in and out of those areas as you more deeply relax.

3. Now breathe naturally and deeply as is most comfortable and effortless. Allow the inhale of your belly to expand like a balloon and then gently exhale, allowing the belly to contract. Continue to breathe from the belly and diaphragm as you move into the practice of **R.A.I.N.**

R stands for Recognize

Recognize what is going at this moment. Recognize and Allow (below) work together. To recognize is to say "Yes!" to the experience of this moment. As you begin to recognize, you may notice sensations, thoughts, or feelings in the body. See if you can notice, identify, and name those sensations, thoughts, or feelings in your body when you say: "Yes!" (NOTE: A "No!" can be a positive protection from trauma. In effect you are saying "Yes!" to a "No!") What is your experience when you honor the part of you that is trying to protect you?

A stands for Allow

Allow those experiences to be as they are, without an overriding narrative. Whether that narrative be judgment, editorializing, explanation, justification, rationalization, blame, righteousness, confirmation, or anything that places a label of right or wrong on the experience. Allowing the experience to be just as it is, becomes a gift that allows you to

be curious and open. As you allow, you may notice thoughts or images that arise that feel aligned with your belief systems. Just be with each feeling and thought as reflective of the vast spectrum of ego-mind-body narratives present in your life. What happens when you visualize loving yourself just as you are? Relax into any brief moment of softening and openness to loving and accepting that part of yourself that has been a source of shame. Even allow feelings of undeserving. Just allow and observe them with detached compassion. How does this feel in the body? Can you feel a little bit of spaciousness opening up around the feelings?

I stands for Investigate

Investigate things you are struggling with using kindness and curiosity. Investigate and Nurture (below) work together. Investigating with kindness and curiosity isn't just about how you perceive others but also about noticing what is present within yourself. How do you recognize, allow, and investigate that part of your inner world that needs to be tended to and cultivated and nurtured? This is the part of the process in which you look deeper into the origin and nature of the narratives from childhood. Investigate means to research into your condition using reading, therapies, spiritual practices, and any other means that presents itself. Ask yourself: "Who am I when I don't believe something is wrong with me?" When a habitual rambling story starts spinning in the mind – STOP! BREATHE! Focus in on the immediate emotions related to the story. Keep asking: "What does this feel like in my body right now?" "How long have I felt this way?"

N stands for Nurture

Nurture is a loving awareness that comes from not attaching your identity with your experiences or narratives. Nurture is an individual exploration or experiment. Everything you think of as Self-compassion is part of Nurture. Nurture is consciously practicing exploration of your curiosity, empathy, self-compassion, and loving kindness. What messages would you most want to hear right now? What do you need right now? What would your adult self say to your child self? Practice telling yourself that this is a safe space. Just call in some nurturing presence that can help soften the tension of resistance. This is also a good time to know that you are not alone. Whatever struggles you are working with are shared, to some degree, by all humanity. We are all works-in-progress! Bring to mind any persons or persons, living or ascended, seen or unseen who you know loves you unconditionally. Bring that being fully to your attention. What do they have to say to you today?

Finally, if there is too much trauma, in the moment, start with Nurture. When in doubt – Nurture! Bring your focus of attention back to effortlessly regular breathing in and out. The habitual stories of unworthiness are fueled by long ingrained thought patterns. Mindfulness is a process to help you get behind the thoughts, to rest in conscious awareness. Thoughts are real, but not always true. And, you don't have to believe everything you think. Try saying to yourself: "I don't have to believe everything I think!" Notice how this feels in the body. Then move back into the practice of R.A.I.N. Continue to hold yourself in the loving kindness of a nurturing awareness. This is the beginning of freedom!

SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

Gail Brenner PhD (psychologist, author)

ATTENTION TO EMOTIONS IN THE BODY When emotions arise, notice that they are primarily sensations in the body that are related to fears of the future, regrets about the past, or disconnected judgements about the present. We don't have to believe the content of these thoughts. Liberation is unhooking from these habitual thought patterns or stories by coming back into the present awareness of emotions as sensations in the body. These thoughts, stories, or narratives create a mistaken identity of separation. For example, we might be habitually telling ourselves: "If I stop blaming myself or criticizing others, change will not happen." Carl Rogers said: "It wasn't until I accepted myself as I was that I was able to change." Our true nature is the conscious awareness behind the thoughts.

WELCOME EMOTIONS Walk on the earth. Be in the environment. Be present. Practice softening around blame messages, whether toward ourselves or others. Look for ways to create more safety to express authentic emotions in relationships. Practice opening and allowing feelings to be present and accepted just as they are in this moment.

INVESTIGATE Look at our strategies to cope with conditioned patterns that we use to feel safe and comfortable. What is a feeling? What is a thought? Are we willing to see this situation differently? Are we holding onto suffering that is familiar instead of risking liberation that is unknown? Are we able to choose love over fear?

MINDFUL SELF COMPASSION

Dr. Kristin Neff (Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and pioneering researcher into Self-compassion)

Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others. Think about what the experience of compassion feels like. First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can't feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain. When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience.

Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?

Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect?

You may try to change in ways that allow you to be more healthy and happy, but this is done because you care about yourself, not because you are worthless or unacceptable as you are. Perhaps most importantly, having compassion for yourself means that you honor and accept your humanness. Things will not always go the way you want them to. You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.

MINDFULNESS VS. OVER-IDENTIFICATION Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This is a process of relating our personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, which puts our own situation into a larger perspective. This is a process of willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mental state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for that pain at the same time. At the same time, mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.

SELF KINDNESS VS. SELF-JUDGEMENT Self-compassion is being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or criticizing ourselves. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of our expectations. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.

COMMON HUMANITY VS. ISOLATION Frustration at not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation. We sometimes feel that we are the only person who suffers or makes mistakes. All humans suffer, however. The very definition of being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone.

GRATEFULNESS PROCESS

Brother David Stendl-Rast (Benedictine Monk, anthropologist, psychologist, founder of Network for Grateful Living)

STOP Pause and be present. We need to slow down enough to notice all the things for which we can be grateful, to breathe and awaken to the moment.

LOOK Becoming more aware of what is happening around and inside us, reminds us that life is a gift and that opportunities abound. Enlarging our perspective to take nothing for granted and acknowledge that life is short and uncertain, we become more grateful each day. This step is also about being aware of our privileges, starting with our ability to see, hear, move about, and function. It keeps us aware, awake and alert. Consider how we feel when electricity returns after an outage or when we can use our hand or foot after a cast comes off. Within minutes, we can forget how appreciative we were for those things, so we need to build reminders into our lives.

GO Taking action in our lives that reflects this greater awareness and “great-fullness,” generates even more possibilities by finding new actively grateful ways to express appreciation or nurture something we care about. Even when we suffer hardship, shifting our awareness to notice whatever is sufficient, abundant, and beautiful enables us to be grateful. This creates a ripple effect, bringing more reasons to be grateful.

