

Accepting Your Feelings When You Grieve

Objective

To identify the feelings that accompany your grief and to learn strategies to accept them for what they are.

You Should Know

Many people are overwhelmed by the difficult feelings that accompany a loss. Sometimes the feelings are so strong, it is hard to even sort them out. Perhaps you are feeling sadness, anger, regret, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, or a combination of those emotions.

If you have experienced a loss, you might have the urge to run away from your feelings altogether. That is an understandable and natural response. You might search for ways to “get over it” or “move on,” which, paradoxically, might result in your avoiding or postponing the true experience of your feelings.

How do you do that? The first step is to know what it is that you are feeling. This worksheet is designed to help you identify your feelings and practice strategies for accepting them, including a simple mindfulness technique.

What to Do

Identifying your feelings, especially when you are distressed, is not always easy. Some emotions blur into one another and it can be confusing to know whether what you are feeling is, for instance, “normal” sadness or “depression,” which can have more serious consequences.

Here are the main categories of feelings, drawn from Robert Plutchik’s “Wheel of Emotions:”

JOY
SADNESS
ANGER
SURPRISE
SHAME
FEAR

Which of these emotions are you feeling most strongly at this time? There is no right answer (and it might change from day to day, or hour to hour). _____

Now write a few sentences about the emotion you are feeling most strongly at this time.

What other main emotion might you be experiencing that is related to your loss? _____

Write a few sentences about your experience of that emotion.

Below is a list of some other words to describe the range of emotions for the feelings of SADNESS, ANGER, FEAR, and SHAME, which are often connected to grief and loss. Have you experienced these feelings? Check off the emotions that resonate with your experience at this time (from the “Wheel of Emotions”):

SADNESS

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grief | <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless | <input type="checkbox"/> Despair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abandoned | <input type="checkbox"/> Despondent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scornful | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | |

ANGER

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | <input type="checkbox"/> Jealous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated | <input type="checkbox"/> Provoked |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Resentful | <input type="checkbox"/> Vengeful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bitter | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

FEAR

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vulnerable | <input type="checkbox"/> Exposed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Isolated | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abandoned | <input type="checkbox"/> Threatened |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Insecure | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weak | |

SHAME

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disgust | <input type="checkbox"/> Disrespected |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt | <input type="checkbox"/> Unlovable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed | <input type="checkbox"/> Violated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scorned | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rejected | |

Now write a few sentences about the feelings that you checked off.

So, how do you move toward ACCEPTING your feelings as they are?

You have already taken the first step in identifying *what the feeling is*. Good for you! Now, you might be thinking, “I don’t like these feelings, I want to be rid of them! What good does it do to focus on them?”

One saying might help you: “What you resist persists.” That is, the more you try to dodge or avoid your true feelings, the more they are likely to hang around.

Mindfulness can help, meaning noticing what is happening right here and now with acceptance and without judgment. The exercise below can help you practice acceptance.

Name It to Tame It

Pick one of the feelings you identified. Now, get in a comfortable position in a place where you will not be distracted or interrupted. Take a few deep breaths, settling into your body. Relax as best you can. There is nothing you need to change. Now pick one emotion to focus on. Perhaps you are feeling “vulnerable.” Close your eyes and repeat to yourself, “I feel vulnerable” —say it softly, kindly, and with meaning. Really feel what you are feeling. You might want to put your hand on your heart or hug yourself as you repeat this phrase. You might begin to cry or get tense. That is OK. Just BE with the feelings, thoughts, and sensations in your body right now. You are safe. You can feel your feelings without needing to do anything to change them. As psychologist Christopher Germer, who specializes in mindful self-compassion, says, “Soften, Soothe, Allow.” That is, soften into the feeling, soothe yourself in whatever way feels natural to you, and allow the feeling to be ... just be.

Practice this exercise at a time when you feel safe enough to experience some mild emotional distress, or with someone you feel comfortable with, such as a loved one or therapist. Try the same exercise for different emotions as they arise. Take it slowly. Be kind to yourself throughout. Notice how naming and experiencing the feelings *as they are* helps them to move

through and then diminish in intensity—like a wave washing ashore, rising, cresting, then disappearing.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What emotion is causing you the most distress at this time of loss?

2. Did you have a difficult time expressing this emotion before your loss? If so, describe.

3. Are you currently avoiding dealing with any particular emotions? How do you think this is holding back your healing?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
