**OVERCOMING UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

Everyone experiences unpleasant emotions at times—such as stress, anxiety, depression, frustration, anger, and panic. Indeed, some of these emotions are useful. When anxious, people can identify and thus avoid problems better. When mildly depressed, people often set goals better.

However, when these emotions become too intense, a cycle of problems can unfold. So, most people apply a range of strategies to diminish the intensity of these emotions. However

* some of these strategies are effective initially but detrimental if utilized too often
* other strategies are effective and do not generate these problems

This document outlines strategies that you can apply to improve your emotions. As you practice these strategies, your capacity to alleviate unpleasant emotions improves rapidly.

|  |
| --- |
| **Strategies that diminish unpleasant emotions effectively** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Practice | Description |
| Repeat calming suggestions to yourself | * Repeat several times, “My right arm feels heavy”. Do not force your arm to feel heavy. Simply repeat this phrase and observe the feelings in your arm. Repeat this procedure with your other arms and legs * Repeat several times “My right arm feels warm”. Again observe rather than control the feelings in your arm. Repeat this procedure with your other arms and legs * In the future, gradually add other suggestions, such as “My heartbeat is calm and regular”, “My stomach feels warm”, and “My forehead is cool” * Practice this sequence of procedures often, perhaps several times a week * Then, in the future, when you feel stressed, repeat some of these phrases to yourself |
| Direct compassion towards yourself | * Express compassionate words to yourself--the same words you would say if someone you love was upset * For example, you might remind yourself that mistakes are an inevitable part of learning and development * You could remind yourself that deficiencies are an inevitable consequence of our strengths * Remind yourself, and perhaps other people, that exploring possibilities and initiating action is a more helpful quality in life than thinking too carefully and avoiding decisions |
| Direct compassion to other people | * Create a list of small gifts you can buy friends—and occasionally buy these gifts; these purchases tend to promote happiness |
| Develop a list of actions that calm your emotions but is not unhealthy. When distressed, initiate an action you have not undertaken for a while | For example, you could   * listen to music with your eyes closed * watch a movie * walk in a peaceful place * immerse yourself in a bath or pool * read a book or article * cook and eat a meal slowly * try a new hobby * visit a local attraction, such as a museum |
| Observe your feelings and thoughts without judgment | * Learn to observe and accept some discomfort—rather than deliberately suppress or avoid unpleasant sensations * If you feel distressed, shift your attention to another object, like a flower. Observe features you have not noticed before * Gaze outside and notice all the colours, patterns, and textures. Or attempt to describe the room with your eyes closed * In nature, orient attention to the smells, sounds, and feelings; visit natural environments that elicit a sense of awe * Savour the feelings you experience when you eat something you enjoy |
| Distract yourself with exercise, games, puzzles, or other physical activities | * Name as many animals as you can that begin with a vowel—or apply to songs, famous people, books, movies, colours, and so forth * Count backwards from 1000 by 7s * Collect as many jokes as you can * Explore every feature of a simple object, like a pen * Tidy or rearrange your room * Create something like a poem * Teach yourself something, like some sign language   One unusual physical activity, called tapping, has been shown to be especially helpful. In particular   * Tap rapidly on the side of one hand, below your little finger * While tapping, repeat something like “Despite my anxiety or pain, I deeply and completely accept myself”. * Repeat this procedure three times * Now, tap the top of your head 5 to 10 times while repeating “my anxiety”, “my pain”, or some other reminder * Repeat this procedure to other parts of your body in sequence: the space between your eyebrows, under your eye, under your nose, your chin, your collar bone, and on one side of your body |
| When distressed, initiate actions that conflict with your natural tendencies | * For example, when sad, people feel compelled to be alone. So, in this state, perhaps telephone a friend or laugh * When angry, people feel compelled to yell. So, in this state, perhaps speak more politely and supportively than usual |
| Express and describe your feelings and bodily sensations as precisely as you can | * Transcribe your feelings on paper and then tear or discard the paper * Transcribe your worries. Consider the extent to which these worries will bother you in one week, month, year, or decade * Repeat a word that bothers you many times rapidly * Decide to worry only at particular times, such Sunday at 3.00 for an hour * Express a worry aloud—and then consider 3 actions to initiate a solution * In general, resist the temptation to lie or to exaggerate. Do not concoct excuses. Expressing the truth tends to improve wellbeing |