



## SITTING WITH FEELINGS

### Introduction

Most of us have seen a scene where a young child has hurt himself but calms down very quickly when his mother calls him over to kiss it better. This only happens because the mother is able to see that the injury is minor and subsequently everything about her behaviour, such as the soothing tone in her voice, the kind expression on her face and her gentle touch all convey calmness. They provide a holding space in which the young child is also able to calm down.

*Note: [Sitting with Emotions](#) is also available as a soundtrack under our [Multimedia resources](#) section.*



The mother did not try to whitewash the distress or pretend that it didn't exist. She actually acknowledged it and gave it space. That is the beginning of sitting with a feeling.

When we use techniques of whitewash or distraction without acknowledging the original distress, it will almost inevitably lead to increased distress. We can then be left with a sense that the original feeling was not real or valid. The suppression of an emotion without allowing it to be processed will usually result in increased muscle tension and internal physical stress. This in turn makes us vulnerable to a variety of physical and psychological illnesses. Moreover all emotions have adaptive value. If we habitually suppress a distressing emotion we never can learn to tune into that emotion skilfully and use it appropriately. For example low levels of anxiety can actually improve performance.

When we try to avoid an unpleasant feeling we often paradoxically end up experiencing more of that feeling. For example when we try to avoid situations that make us feel anxious we don't develop mastery of those situations. So we end up remaining anxious about those situations. When we try to avoid the feeling itself we end up getting anxious about being anxious. The feeling feeds off itself and escalates. We actually need to turn around and face the feeling with an attitude of openness and curiosity like the loving mother. Then at the very least, the anxiety stops feeding off itself and settles to a lower level. Indeed it often settles down altogether.

It is also valuable to sit with pleasant feelings. When we do that we can really take them in. When we allow ourselves to feel the joy of birds singing, children laughing, or of a cold drink on a hot day, our lives become enriched. We then don't need to crave the new bigger flatscreen TV or the more expensive car for our lives to feel worthwhile.

### Setting Yourself Up

When setting ourselves up to sit mindfully with our emotions, it is crucial that we orient ourselves correctly with the right understanding and right attitude.





The first thing to understand about sitting mindfully with emotions is that we are not trying to change our emotions but rather we are changing our relationship with our emotions. To do this, we need to not only create an open space for our feelings, but also we need to remain compassionate towards ourselves when our capacity to hold our feelings is overwhelmed. Otherwise we run the risk of becoming mindfulness Nazis. Strategies that we can use to deal with being overwhelmed are mentioned at the end of this article.

### **Actually Sitting with Feelings**

Actually sitting with feelings is nothing mystical or magical. It involves paying attention to the body sensations that go with the emotion. For example, when you feel happy you may feel an openness in the chest with an ease of breathing or anxiety may cause knots in the stomach and tightness in the chest. These physical sensations vary from person to person.

To sit with an emotion we need to identify the major physical sensation and pay close attention to that, as if we were a loving mother observing her baby. Alternatively you can think of the interested scientist, like David Attenborough, interested in observing and describing an animal or insect some distance in front of him. So the attitude we try to cultivate is one of open loving curiosity.

We then need to pay attention to the physical sensations that go with this feeling in exquisite detail. First we can notice its location and its borders. We can notice the quality of borders, i.e. whether they are well-defined like the surface of a football or fuzzy like the surface of fairy floss. We can notice the exact nature of the sensation, whether it has a temperature or a quality of pressure or tingling, for example.

Then we can notice if the sensation varies with the cycle of breath. For example, pressure in the chest associated with anxiety often feels greater on the in breath and less on the out breath. Interestingly most people are so caught up in the anxiety that they don't notice that there is a slight relief on the out breath. To notice any regular patterns associated with our breathing we really need to pay close attention over a number of breaths.

We can also notice how the sensations vary over time. They may even travel to a completely different part of the body. It is particularly helpful to notice how the sensation has changed when we come back to our body awareness after our mind has become lost in thoughts. Generally people do not do this as they are so happy to be not noticing an unpleasant feeling that they prefer not to return to it. However, if they did return to it they would often find that it had actually decreased substantially. This can be a major step in developing emotional mastery.

Sometimes, however, some emotions can be so intense that it is impossible to sit with them without feeling overwhelmed. As we practise mindfulness, we develop our capacity to hold emotions until we get to the point that we can sit with almost anything. In the meantime, as it is not useful to be overwhelmed, we can use the following strategies to manage:

- Allowing ourselves to fidget or move, which allows some of the feelings to discharge.
- Practise sitting with less intense emotions first until we develop a greater capacity to hold.
- Not trying too hard to focus. When the mind naturally wanders it can give us a break. The important thing is to return to the focus once we realise and to notice how the feeling has changed while we have been distracted.

With this technique we can enjoy the full richness of our emotional lives as well as being more emotionally skilful to boot.

