

What to do when you are feeling bad...

So you just put all your energy into a work project, only to have your boss say: "I don't think this approach is going to work, you'll need to rework this from the opposite angle." Or you finally get up the nerve to email that woman you met out last week and you hear nothing back. When these things happen, we feel disappointed. Often too, we make ourselves feel even worse with self-criticism "I'm no good at this job" or "I'll never get a date." Clearly this self-criticism isn't helping anything - but what really is the healthy way to deal with disappointment, loss, rejection?

It turns out that we can rely on the Serenity Prayer when we are feeling negative emotions: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things (emotions) I cannot change, to change the things (emotions) I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Negative feelings are often preceded by thoughts. Often these thoughts happen so fast we don't even quite realize we are thinking them. Other times you know you are thinking them. In the example of your boss asking you to redo your work, some of the thoughts that may lead to feeling bad are: "My boss didn't like my work. If I do this again it could jeopardize my job. Maybe I'm not good enough for this field." These thoughts then cause you to feel disappointed and bad.

The Serenity Prayer sums up two of the main psychotherapies in the US today for dealing with negative emotions: 1) Cognitive-Behavioral based therapies and 2) Acceptance/Mindfulness based therapies. 1) When you have control over your situation or the subsequent thoughts and emotions "to change the things (emotions) I can", then cognitive therapy techniques are useful like cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring helps you to see reality more realistically rather than with a negative spin. So for your negative thoughts about your work and job, cognitive restructuring involves your looking at the practical evidence against the thoughts. Evidence against the thoughts would be: "One poor performance only gives you evidence about that one project, not about future ones that have not occurred yet, not does it say much about your overall competence in your field. You have performed well many times in the past and you will in the future." "Others have turned in one bad report and overall are still competent in this field." So a thought/emotion is controllable when you can really believe the evidence against your thought and then view your situation more realistically rather than with a negative spin.

For those thoughts and emotions that keep popping up and you don't seem to be able to control all that easily, then you: "accept the things (emotions) I cannot change" which makes use of techniques from Acceptance and Mindfulness based therapies like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. From this perspective, the idea is that what we resist persists...so by resisting

negative thoughts and emotions you actually cause them to stick around for longer and get even bigger. Let me give you an example of how this works. Right now, I'd like you to look down for 20 seconds and not think about a pink elephant. You can think about anything while you are looking down—just don't think about Big Pink Fluffy Elephants. OK - Go - 20 seconds - no Pink Elephants.

You're back--great. So in that 20 seconds, did you think about a pink elephant? And how many times in the last month did you think of pink elephants? Most people report that they thought of a pink elephant in the 20 seconds, yet they did not think about pink elephants once in the last month. Funny how the mind works--huh. Interestingly, in order to not think about something, your mind actually calls up the thing you don't want to think about first, and then attempts to put a "not" on it. So when you are having recurrent thoughts that you don't want like: "She rejected me, I'll never get a date", sometimes it's just best to face your reality as it is. To accept that you will have stressful thoughts and emotions and to not spend your precious time and energy trying to "not" have them. It is better to just let them arise and fall within you, and spend all of your energy and attention on activities that are enlivening and meaningful for you. Like put all of your attention on playing music or exercising and don't pay much attention to the "She doesn't want to go out with me" thoughts as they arise and fall in the background. So if you feel disappointed that the woman didn't e-mail back, let yourself fully have your thoughts and feel the disappointment with no resistance. Even let yourself get teary for a minute. It is a disappointing situation for us all to not get emailed back. Funny enough, if you don't resist it at all, the disappointment moves through your system much quicker.

In sum, when you are feeling bad, notice the thoughts that are related to your feeling bad. Then, if you can really believe the evidence against the thought and see it much more realistically rather than through a negative lens—do that. In the other case, if the thoughts/emotions feel more like an old audio tape playing that you have heard 1000s of times before and are not going to go away anytime soon, then an acceptance/mindfulness approach is likely to work better. Don't fuel the old audio tape by struggling against it and trying to "not" have it. And for your wisdom—you can try cognitive restructuring out first, and if that doesn't work, then use acceptance.