

## Dealing with afflictive emotions during the day

This page is distilled from the advice of many meditation teachers.

Afflictive emotions include but are not limited to anger, irritation, disappointment, resentment, shame, guilt, frustration, grief, anxiety, worry, doubt, despair, disgust, depression... I prefer “afflictive” over “negative” because the former term is more descriptive vs. judgmental.

### Three important notes

1. In general, try direct contact first and suppression last; learn which ones work best for you.
2. The *intention* is to be more present with what is happening (with curiosity and non-judgment) as opposed to getting rid of the emotions, which is never helpful in the long-term.
3. In all steps, try to remember kindness and compassion.

**Direct contact-virtually no cognitive activity** Some call this this mind-body bridging.

a. Bring attention to the breath. Focus more on the outbreath.

This allows you to step back and get some space (perspective) around whatever the issue is.

b. If this doesn't help, bring attention to strong sensations on the body. Whenever we feel an emotion in the mind we also feel that same emotion in the body. Remember not to push away emotions but rather acknowledge them and then go back to direct contact.

**Emotion-focused attention** The intention here is to activate “heart” energy.

This can be practiced in many ways: from practicing loving-kindness (may you be happy...) or remembering a favorite quote or story. The intention is to bring an antidote to the afflictive emotion to bring balance to your system. For example, if a friend has done something unkind, you might focus on the positive qualities of that person.

**Problem-focused attention** The intention here is to reconnect to your inner wisdom.

One way to do this is through skillful self-talk, e.g., I'm having the thought that I am angry (vs. I'm angry); thoughts are not facts, I'm not my thoughts, this too shall pass, I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, or I'm pouring gasoline on the fire instead of water. We can personalize the comments, e.g.,: I'm crazy *right now*; or I'm such an idiot *right now* AND laugh at yourself. You might read or write, or write a letter (which you might never send).

**Contemplative Inquiry** The intention here is to listen without suppressing or judging.

Ask yourself a question: “what is really going on?” or “what is needed now?” or “why does this keep coming up?” Then bring attention to your breath (or other anchor) and just listen to what arises from within. This is not the same as analytic thinking. Rather the attention is toward our intuitive self which many people believe resides in the heart.

**Change the environment** especially if you're overwhelmed!

Talk with someone, read, turn on the TV, eat something, take a walk-notice the beauty, go to a coffee shop. Some of these might be considered more ‘skillful’ than others, but when you feel beaten down, a bowl of ice cream or watching TV can give you a needed break.

**If all else fails, get the fire extinguisher--don't throw more gas on the fire that's burning.**

Suppression, as a last resort, can be especially important in interpersonal situations where it is often wise to simply repress the words that are starting to come out of your mouth. This does not mean that you have failed or done something wrong. It just means that at this point, this makes the most sense

## Strategies and tools for investigating our experience

These could be used to investigate: a thought with a lot of juice, a persistent story, an afflictive emotion, e.g., anxiety, anger, frustration, resentment, sadness, etc.

Note: The same thought can have different effects on different minds. To an agitated mind it will proliferate; to a still mind it will just pass through.

1. Simply being with it, curious, accepting vs. repressing/fighting/hating it. Ask: What is happening?  
Note: acceptance does not mean passive and resignation; it means accepting that this state is currently present and fully feeling it before taking appropriate action.
2. Getting to “know” the mental phenomenon by experiencing it in the body.  
This includes recognizing—physical, mental, and/or psychological discomfort/pain.
3. Look for patterns (in relationships, in your conditioning) that led to the arising of this issue: for example, “Why does this keep coming up?” Over time, we lose our fear/dread of it, we see its story and the conditions that led to this arising again, and what causes it to grow & what helps it to ease.
4. Bring questions: How does it feel? So how is this working for me? What else is going on?
5. Be kind and direct to this part: “I’ll come back to you later.” “Not this, not now.”
6. Persistent stories need skillful efforts. Negativity—sometimes it’s just a habit and even that part of us is really sick of it; if this is true, simply say “stop it” with compassion to yourself; think of the metaphor of the circuit breaker.
7. Witness its impermanence maybe with a mental note: this anger, anxiety, etc. won’t be here forever!
8. Compassion (may I be peaceful, free from suffering) can change your relationship to what has arisen and can bring less identification with it, i.e., *my* problem.
9. Reframing our perception, e.g., practicing metta to shift from seeing the other as the enemy.  
The story of the boys running around in the subway; when admonished, the father apologized and said “we’re coming home from the hospital where their mother just died.” The anger of the other passengers melted. Ultimately, we don’t have to know the full story, just that there is more of the story than we know.
10. Be creative, e.g., feel the spaciousness of the sky which holds everything, visualize clouds which come and go so quickly.
11. See the universal—relate to your story in less personal terms. Recall the mustard seed story.
12. Acknowledge how much energy this pattern costs and how little it gives you *but* do acknowledge what it gives you. For example, my resentment pattern made me feel better about myself in comparison to others.
13. You’re not just *working* on the afflictive emotion but also cultivating the lovely, appreciating when this emotion is not present.