

Five Steps for Managing Emotions

Step 1 Notice. The first step is being aware of your emotional process. This may seem obvious, but it is easier to say than to do. Often, we move along on autopilot, a bit zoned out, with a vague sense that there is suffering just below the surface.

Of course, sometimes suffering hits us over the head and is impossible to miss. Whether emotions we carry are hard to miss or subtle, they call out for attention.

When possible, give the emotion a name like sadness, anxiety, guilt, or anger. It can help us get our arms around the experience so we feel a bit more grounded. When we are not sure what feeling is happening, simply say, "There is suffering happening now."

Step 2 Breathe. Bring your attention to your heart center. It is the area just below your sternum, and concentrate on breathing into it. Visualize or feel your in-breath as it enters the body and flows into and then fills the heart. Then, visualize or feel the breath rising from the heart and out of the body. Continue breathing this way as you follow the remaining steps.

Step 3 Observe. Notice where you feel the emotion in your body. Do you feel it in your head, throat, chest, or somewhere else? What is the quality of the sensation, that is, do you feel pressure, contraction, or movement? Does the sensation have a color, shape, or texture? How does the sensation change as you observe it?

Step 4 Stay grounded. Remind yourself that you are not defined by the emotion. Say something silently to yourself like, "The sadness (anxiety, guilt, anger) is only a part of me." Our emotions don't define us. Even when an emotion is present, there are parts of ourselves that remain stable, grounded, and strong.

Step 5 Allow. Continue to breathe into the heart. Giving the emotion your attention in this way permits it to be there however it is while bathing it in support and care. Say something silently to yourself like, "I got you.", "I'm with you.", or "You are not alone."

These steps provide a useful structured way of being with difficult emotions as they arise throughout the day. Practicing these steps for 60-90 seconds often leads to a diminishment of the intensity of the emotion or its dissolving entirely.

Remember, the goal is not to get rid of difficult emotions when they arise. Rather, these steps are a way to be with emotions so they get the care and comfort they need.