



So welcome to part two of “Regulating Difficult Emotions.” And regulating emotions is all about the ability to identify the feeling states that we’re in, to be able to hold and process them, and then finally to express them to others so that we can find our way to be with our emotional lives and connect with others in a really useful way. So today, in this talk, we’re going to go a little bit deeper into how difficult, painful emotions are stored and to what I like to call the shadow self, borrowing a term from Jung.

And we’ll explore ways that we keep difficult emotions tucked down in the shadow self, how we will know that there are emotions seeking our attention, and then finally we’ll explore ways to be with painful emotions as they arise. So what kind of experiences do we tend to suppress in life? Well, I could break them down into three. One would be unpleasant memories, the experiences of disconnection from others that are, of course, extremely traumatic for us when we’re infants and as we grow up.

Then there are the unpleasant or painful emotions that constantly lead to rejection. As I was talking about in the first talk, I, at a very young age, learned to suppress anger because it was not well tolerated by my father when I was growing up.

And finally, impulses or urges that we suspect will lead to abandonment, shunning, from others. If, for example, growing up in a heteronormative society we experience any same-sex urges, we might repress those if we feel they’ll lead to rejection. Or some people will suppress impulses that are likewise entirely natural. Created impulses, some people will suppress simply because they do not meet up with society’s very strict and rigid gender expectations. So I grew up in a culture where guys were supposed to like and enjoy sports and we were shunned from other kinds of creative endeavors. And so very often, as a young boy growing up in the 70s, I learned to suppress anything that I thought would risk my connection with other young kids. And I’d learned to, in essence, act out what Winnicott calls false self, behaviors that are not spontaneous or natural to me but were meant to allow me to stay connected. So I’d pretend to enjoy baseball, which frankly I don’t enjoy in the slightest. I learned to pretend that I like bands that I find to be truly awful like Jethro Tull and other such bands and I—and please don’t write how much you love Jethro Tull; I take it for granted that there’re people out there who enjoy them—but in general, you get the idea.

We suppress emotions, impulses, and memories that are associated with rejection, abandonment, and disconnection. Human beings are pack animals. We get our greatest feelings of security and



safety by connecting with others. We don't run particularly fast. We don't climb holes with any great—I mean, climb holes—dig holes with any great skill, or climb trees. So, essentially, our survival boils down to how well we can connect with others into packs, tribes, groups, and the positive emotions are generally the reward for secure connections with others. On the other hand, really negative, dark, painful emotions are almost invariably associated with experiences of disconnection, feelings of being left behind or being shunned.

So these impulses and memories that are unpleasant, how do we keep them out of our conscious awareness, keep them down in this realm of the unconscious which I'm going to be referring to as the shadow self—this repository of all the natural impulses that we keep at bay because we fear that, if we express them, other people will abandon us in life? How do we keep them out of our conscious awareness? How do we keep them away from us so that we don't act them out? Well, we develop a whole lot of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are an interesting psychological term. They're not really meant to defend ourselves so much from other people as they are meant to defend ourselves from impulses that we're frightened of. Our own urges, our own emotions are kept at bay by defense mechanisms.

Now Anna Freud wrote some wonderful papers on the nature of defense mechanisms and I'm not going to go over all of them because that would take up all of our time. So I'm just going to list a very few but I encourage you to familiarize yourself with them. Some of them are business, for example: overscheduling ourselves so that we're constantly rushing around completely caught up in the dramas and business and schedules of our lives so that we never have to stop and feel what's going on. One of the core themes of all defense mechanisms, as Winnicott noted, is that they keep us up here in the head and unaware of the emotions that are expressing themselves in the body. Because, indeed, emotions speak to us not in language—the right hemisphere lets us know of an emotional activation by changing the way we breathe, changing muscle contractions, changing flows of energy in the body. And it also creates different states of energy in the mind but it doesn't speak to us primarily through language.

So the ways we tend to keep difficult emotions at bay is by keeping ourselves unaware of the body. Another way we can mask or keep emotions out of consciousness is through projection. When we feel the underlying emotion as unpleasant, we will project those emotions onto people around us and judge them. So people who repress their feelings of sadness or loneliness might very well project those emotions onto friends or family members, and then even cast judgment on their friends for being too needy or for being depressed. Another tool we talked about a little bit in the previous talk is reaction formation, which is simply replacing an unsafe emotion with a safer emotion, emotion that we feel good about.



Many people I've worked with over the years will replace or swap feelings of sadness due to abuses and injuries in childhood and they'll replace that emotion with anger. Now, why do we do that? Well, anger feels like a much safer emotion because it feels like we can do something about interpersonal experience. Sadness is an emotion that is associated with essentially acknowledging a loss, a disappointment, and an acceptance that we can't get our needs met in that situation. So anger very often feels safer to many people than experiencing their sadness. There's also the tendency to intellectualize or use humor to get rid of difficult emotions.

Now, what happens when we continually suppress all these impulses and the unpleasant memories and emotional states is that we begin to feel a sense of lack, something missing. Because, in essence, there is something missing from our lives when we suppress our core natural spontaneous emotions. We all work from essentially the same basic emotional pallet and if we continually try to get rid of core emotions such as anger or fear or disappointment or grief, not only will we find those emotions come flooding up in inappropriate situations, but we will also find that these emotions that have been suppressed leave a sense of lack and hollowness, a sense of something's missing from life because, in essence, something is missing from life.

So the core emotions need to be returned to, need to be acknowledged. We need to give them attendance. We need to open to them. How do we know when there's a shadow self-energy that is seeking our attention? Well, we'll know from a lot of different ways. People will feel what's known as anxiety signals when an underlying repressed emotion is seeking to rise up. Very often, if we've kept acknowledging that a relationship is not working for us, that we're not getting our needs met, or if we're unhappy in a job but we haven't acknowledged it, when these emotions start to surface, what we'll experience is agitation, insomnia, worry. Because the repressed, when it starts to return, creates all kinds of havoc in the defense mechanisms that've been seeking to keep these emotional states down, people will often—when a underlying emotion is arising—start to feel or experience regression, which is essentially they'll return to an earlier state of development. When we've been keeping our sadness or fear at bay and it starts to return, people often will regress to early states of development where they'll become very needy or frightened or feel very vulnerable.

Very often, when shadow self emotions are arising, we'll isolate because we're scared that these emotional energies will come popping out at any moment. So we'll seek to hide from other people. We'll isolate from each other. And, of course, another tendency is to act out. When we've been compartmentalizing difficult emotions and just hoping that we can act them out slightly and they come exploding out. They won't come out in a regulated way. They'll come out



in a very overbearing, disproportionate way and then, very often, we'll seek to undo the damage that's been done.

So, for example, if we've been suppressing, repressing, keeping at bay experiences of anger and then the anger suddenly comes flowing out, the next thing we'll have to do is try to seek to undo, to rationalize, explain, why we exploded. Very often, men who cannot hold difficult painful experiences of frustration, often abuse, at the hands of their fathers, will years later take out these repressed experiences in incredibly intolerant and inappropriate ways with their loved ones and then they'll seek to undo the damage.

So the most important tool is to develop the ability, when we begin to note that we're experiencing the agitation, anxiety, the regression, the acting out, the isolation, even the sudden spike in substance abuse—people will start to drink or use drugs heavily when an underlying emotion that hasn't been acknowledge starts to flood up—is when we realize we are in a state of dysregulation to turn towards what needs to be felt and to create a safe container for it. So these exercises that I'll go into are very similar to what we talked about in the first week, but they're more based on really opening towards the most painful emotions as they arise.

Now, the Buddha had his own shadow self. His shadow self was called Mara. Mara was the repository of all the Buddha's materialist, sensual, cravings, desire to give up on the spiritual path and Mara would visit the Buddha frequently. Even on the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, Mara returned and basically tried to discourage the Buddha. So the Buddha, when Mara would arise—this appearance or returning of the repressed would be encountered—the Buddha would say, “I see you, Mara.” This is important. The Buddha wouldn't try to suppress, scold, chase away. He'd simply say, “I see you,” and he would acknowledge Mara as Mara appeared. And this gives us a very good way to start working with difficult, painful emotions as they arise.

The first thing we need to do is simply to acknowledge, “I see you.” I see you, Fear. I see you, Sadness. I see you, Grief. Very often, we can learn to tell which emotions are present through seeing which parts of the body have become activated. And if we did the tools from week one, where we begin to develop what's known as emotion identification—when we are feeling agitated, instead of staying in the stories that the mind is creating, we go into the body and we see which parts of the body are activated. And from this somatic awareness we can begin to discern exactly what kinds of repressed content are seeking our attention.



For instance, when I am frightened, I invariably know that fear is present because my stomach gets tight. When I am feeling, though, a sadness over an emotional disconnection, I'll feel a tightness at the base of my throat, a clutching in my upper chest. When there is anger, I'll feel my jaw lock. So, very often, the first way of greeting a difficult, painful emotion is simply developing body awareness and simply welcoming whatever we encounter. If it's a very obsessive, repetitive thought and it won't let us move our attention away from the thought into the body, I simply welcome the thought and allow it to be there. I won't argue with it, nor will I push it away. So if I'm having a obsessive argument with somebody or disagreement, or I'm feeling a sense of shame over some behavior of mine, I'll simply note the story that's coming up in the mind. If I'm having a discussion with somebody in my mind and they appear, I'll just simply say, "Welcome. There you are. You're allowed, yes. I give you full welcome to be there." No suppression, but I don't let them dominate my awareness and I bring my awareness into the body.

The next thing I do to create a safe container is I relax the exhalations. This is really important. The vagal vagus nerve runs right down the front of the body and, if we want to tell the mind and the mid-brain that everything is okay, the simple tool of extending the out breath as long as I can, breathing out as long and smooth as possible, has a way of helping me modulate an emotional energy. I'll still feel what's present but it will be softened. I'll very often note each of the underlying states. So I'll note what's going on in the torso, the face. I'll note states of discomfort in the body. I'll even note the amounts of energy in the mind and as they shift with each emotion.

For instance, sadness creates a sense of heaviness and sluggishness in the mind, whereas anger creates a sense of energy and a need to do something. So all of this awareness, breathing slowly, becoming aware of discomfort and then, finally over time, slowly beginning to relax the body using the breath, breathing into the areas that are tight—over time creates a safe container where I can be with rather than continue to consign to the shadow self all the emotions that I find unpleasant. Once again, it's very important to know when to pull back. If an emotion is too great, if an activation feels too strong, one tool is to simply go back to breath meditation or Metta or to any other visualizations that you know restore a sense of security. Another really wonderful tool that helps us discern and hold difficult emotions is called self-soothing.

If a really unpleasant state arises that is completely difficult to hold, such as grief over the loss of somebody we love, and the grief is so great that it's difficult to be with, self-soothing means finding a set of sensations or a place where we can do the internal work but there is a kind of padding or a palliative effect where we are a little bit less overwhelmed by the inner emotion. So, for example, I once worked with somebody who was grieving a family member's loss and

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they couldn't hold the emotions while they were at their own apartment. The emotions felt too overwhelming. One's apartment can very often feel like one's own mind. But when they left their apartment and they went to a large body of water, say to the beach or by a river, and listened to the sounds of the waves and felt the rays of the sun, they created the soothing sensations that were just enough to give them a little bit of distance from the emotions so that they could create a safe container to hold what was arising.

Again, you can find self-soothing in many different places. Some like to float in a pool. Some might ride a bike. Some might sit in the sun. Some might use tools like gardening or drinking a cup of tea. There's so many different activities that don't pull all of our awareness away that we can still feel and be present with what needs our attention. So these are some of the techniques that allow us to turn to and be with the contents of the shadow self as they arise. I hope that the second talk was of interest, and for the next two talks we're going to be discussing how we can seek and establish secure connections with other people to further the process of regulating difficult emotional states. Thank you for listening.