



So welcome to the fourth and final part of “Regulating Difficult Emotions,” and this talk will be about how we can show up for others. Talk three was about how to make sure that other people with whom we want to develop secure connections will be reliable, and for this talk, we'll talk about how we can show up, listen, and help other people be with their painful emotions, without needlessly suffering ourselves.

I do a lot of work with people who are working through some very difficult material in their lives, and it's very important over the last decade that I've learned to develop tools that allow me to be with and provide support for people while they are in emotional pain. Yet, at the same time, not become so caught up myself that I become deregulated or wind up needlessly stressed. It's a real balance and I hope to share some of the tools in this talk. Now, in general, there are two types of suffering, the Buddha said.

In the *sallatha sutta*, he talks about the first arrow pains, which are essentially the essential unavoidable pains that will happen in every life, which are things like chronic pain, losses, separations—the experiences where out of the blue an extremely frustrating event happens through absolutely no cause of our own. For example, the Buddha, in the “Daily Recollections,” says, “I am of the nature to grow old, sick, die. I will be separated from the people I love, and all that I own at the end of the day are my actions.” So the Buddha's reminding us that in life, there will be really painful events that we will learn how—have to learn how to feel the inevitable emotional activations that occur.

If I lose a friend or a loved one, I will feel grief, I will feel sorrow, I will feel lamentation, as the Buddha noted in the first Noble Truth. These are universal experiences that cannot be avoided. We will all experience loss in life. We'll all experience, as the Buddha said, “frustrating events.” We'll be separated from the loved; we'll be stuck with people we don't particularly love that much, we'll have all kinds of plans go awry, we will experience difficult pains in the body. There'll be all kinds of messes that will happen.

But then, there's the second arrows that occur, which are the ways we exacerbate and make inevitable disappointing experiences even more difficult to bear. In fact, we can make them intolerable. We do this by trying to avoid the inevitable. Many people avoid difficult conflicts or important conversations. We can take the completely universal setbacks of life very personally. For instance, we can take aging personally. We can take bad news, which happens to everybody, personally. We've all gotten fired or dumped, and yet we can take these experiences as if there's something particularly wrong about me. We can mistake very impermanent experiences as permanent, and we can also, of course, just live in a kind of overweening negativity that is the whole mark of the survival brain.

As many neuroscientists and behavioral psychologists note, the brain has what's known as negativity bias. We tend to remember negative experiences, the traumatic, the experiences where we feel threatened, and we don't tend to focus very often on positive experiences. So as a result, we can add a great deal of suffering to life, which is already



going to be filled with many disappointing experiences. And so we will encounter people that are very often around us, suffering in various stages. Whether the perfectly natural and necessary stages of grief after loss, or they might be caught up in just constantly re-narrating a relationship that's broken apart or a job where they've gotten fired through—from, and in any event, these people will have needs of connection to help them process the emotional activations.

So how do we help people process difficult emotions? Essentially, it boils down to five key tools or skills that we need to develop. The first is maintaining proximity. People are made to feel safe and secure, which will release a greater degree of comfort and calm if they feel somebody is sitting with them or nearby. Just being with somebody is a gift, while they're suffering. Very often, we feel we need to do more; we need to be reassuring, we need to say stuff, we need to be comforting with our words. But actually, just practicing being and sitting with someone who is in emotional pain is a very important exercise.

The second tool is attunement, which is the ability to sustain attention, to lock glances, to keep someone's eye-to-eye contact, to be hooked up visually, and to monitor someone, to let them know they're being seen. Obviously, we don't want to do this in a creepy way. We simply want to reliably return to give them eye-to-eye contact, as they talk about especially difficult experiences.

The third skill is sympathy, which is being capable of understanding the difficult experiences that somebody is going through. Sympathy is, in essence, a very intellectual ability to understand the variances of experience that people can go through. The key to being sympathetic is to not allow my mind to get caught up in preparing how or what I'm going to say, or to get lost in thought. If I am to give you sympathy, I must put aside my need to plan and rehearse in my mind while you talk what I'm going to say or how I'm going to cheer you up. None of that will be helpful. Sympathy is based on simply opening and being with—and hearing—another's story, and just following along. When we are sympathetic and not judgmental or critical in our minds, people will see that. They'll be able to know.

The next is empathy, which is mirroring back the emotions that you're feeling. We don't do empathy with too much effort. It's a natural ability to allow ourselves to feel and show some of the emotions that someone is expressing. So if you're expressing sadness, I will, if I'm empathetic, begin to show some of the signs of sadness in my face. It requires me to allow myself to feel some of the sadness that you're expressing, to ask myself, "How would that feel if I was in your shoes?" When I can express empathy to you, it does an enormous amount of good in helping you regulate and modulate your emotions. While sympathy lets you know that I understand, empathy mirroring back what you're emotionally expressing tells the right hemisphere of your brain, which is largely unconscious, that your emotional states are not unusual, that you're not going to be isolated or shunned or rejected. By seeing my emotional concern, you unconsciously get

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that you will still be tolerated, even though you're feeling sad or wounded or despairing or lonely.

The final state is the ability to mentalize, which as described by Peter Fonagy, is the ability to look beneath sometimes your actions and your words and see the true emotions that are going on. So sometimes people present to me as very angry, but I can see by taking them in and listening to their words, that in fact, what's present is a core sadness that's not being acknowledged. So we need to put aside the inner chatter, the preparation, the stuff we want to say. We need to open, allow ourselves to naturally empathize, and when I can mentalize, when I can see the core emotions and mind states that are motivating what is your behavior—and I do this by taking in everything that you're saying and sometimes noting when things don't add up. I can be very forgiving. I can create a lot of space. I can allow you to say things that will be painful for me to hear.

So once again, the tools are proximity, which is staying present; attunement; sympathy, which means understanding what someone is saying; mentalizing, which is being able to read the underlying emotional states; and empathy, mirroring back another's emotions.

I don't need for any of these to continue to keep an underlying dialogue in my head, preparing me what to say. Nor do I need to cheer you up or to say things that will make you feel better. When we're helping other people regulate difficult emotions, in fact, the need to constantly say things that we believe will be uplifting or soothing, often gets in the way, in my experience. What most people need first is simply the safe container to express and be heard, and much of my work in offering people help during times of crisis involves simply creating a safe space, where they can talk about their experience without being interrupted, without feeling that I'm going to tell them what to do or instruct them. It's only when somebody asks me what my opinions are or what I think they should do that I offer them. I don't like to give easy solutions to when people are in difficult emotional states.

Now, an important question might arise now: How do we listen to people who are suffering, are in great distress, even opening and empathizing to these emotions, without their emotions consuming us? Without allowing ourselves to be, in essence, pulled down into a state of deregulation ourselves? People like myself who work all the time in one-on-one settings with people who are anxious, agitated, fearful, distressed, in denial, or various different states, if we don't have tools to help us stay emotionally balanced, we will very quickly become yanked around. We won't be able to establish what the Buddha called equanimity or *upekkha*. So how do I stay balanced while people are in distress when they're talking to me?

The first thing is I keep them in, but I keep also part of my awareness relaxing the body. Again, I use out-breaths, very long out-breaths, to calm myself. I soften the belly; relax the shoulders. I've found that if my body is relaxed, I can hold your suffering without it consuming or taking me over. I can be with you and sustain awareness, even when people

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are really, really distraught, if I am relaxed. I also tend to name, as quickly as possible, the emotional state that I hear you're expressing, which will help you identify the emotion and help us understand what's going on. So I will, at a certain point, without telling you what to do or how to act in the world, but I will say what I hear you saying is that you sound very unhappy, you sound very frightened. To me, what I hear is sadness. To me, what I hear is grief. By simply naming the emotional state, I help you identify it, but I also help remind myself of what I'm in the presence of, and that also, the naming and identifying makes the experience less somehow contagious, and makes it easier for us to work with the experience.

At the end of each period that I work with someone, I make sure that I keep a half an hour before I move on to my next one-on-one work, and I'll do exercises that are meant to help me let go of the buildup of emotions that may have accrued during our interaction. So I'll often go to a quiet place. I'll close my eyes, and I'll find where the emotional activations might have landed in my internal experience, whether suddenly I start to feel tight in my belly or anxious in my shoulders, and my throat has become contracted or my chest hollow, and I'll breathe into those areas and relax them. I might visualize someone with whom I associate a great state of tranquility and evenness in life, such as some of my teachers, Ajahn Sucitto, Amaro, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Tara Brach—people that I admire. I'll just visualize them.

Or I'll visualize a safe place where I can breathe and relax, and this ability to calm the body and restore the mind to a state of balance, the Buddha called *upekkha*, is really useful. If I don't take time off in between each conversation, if I just run from one person to the next, I won't be able to restore my emotional palette to a more neutral state. It's very, also, important to develop a sense of understanding that there's only so much we can do for anyone. The Buddha, essentially, calls this karma. No matter how much attention and sympathy and empathy I give you, if you have been acting unskillfully in your life, or if you've endured a great deal of suffering, or if your mind, throughout decades of practice, has been trained to worry or be anxious, there'll be very little I can do to mitigate the suffering other than simply offer my attention.

So to be able to offer caring and compassion to others, we have to understand that there's only so much we can do, and we have to be willing to place a limit on our availability and how much we try. We have to be willing, in other words, to let people process and move through the stages of their suffering, rather than to feel that if somebody's discomfort is not immediately alleviated that it's somehow our fault.

We show up, we listen, we empathize, we take in. When people ask, I'll offer some input if I believe it's helpful. But at the end of the day, the core emotional work lies in each of our hands to work with our own emotional states. We have to keep seeking and establishing connections with multiple people, not just a single therapist or a single spouse or a single girlfriend or boyfriend. We need many core support people to help us work through and maintain a safe container for difficult emotions.

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So I hope that this series of talks, which have been about the nature of difficult emotions, creating a safe container for them, how to find secure connections, and how to provide compassion for others, will have provided some foundation or will, at least, have activated some interest in the topic. There are certainly so many wonderful books and material available on the topic. You can read about attachment theory, read about Winnicott's work on the "false self" and read about Heinz Kohut's self-psychology, and all of these rich traditions will give you some of the core contemporary Western approaches. You can also find a great deal about the Buddha's theories of emotion and some of the core suttas of the Majjhima Nikaya, which are available on "Access to Insight."

So I hope this series was of interest, and please, if you have any questions that arise, feel free to write or connect. My email is always on the website, and I love hearing from practitioners. So thank you very much.