

Working With Difficult Emotions

A mindfulness tool that offers support for working with difficult emotions

- Tara Brach Spring 2013

Imagine you just found out that your child was suspended from school. Imagine your boss just told you to “start over” on a report you’ve worked on for a month. Imagine you just realized you’ve been on Facebook for three hours and have finished off a box of cookies in the process. Imagine your partner just confessed to an affair.

It’s hard to hang out with the truth of what we’re feeling. We may sincerely intend to pause and be mindful whenever a crisis arises or whenever we feel stuck and confused, but our conditioning to react, escape, or become possessed by emotion is very strong.

Yes, there are times when being present feels out of reach or too much to bear. There are times when a false refuge (distractions) can relieve stress, give us a breather, and help lift our mood. But when we’re not connected through clarity and kindness of presence, we’re all too likely to fall back into old habits, more misunderstanding, more conflict, and more distance from others and from our own heart.

About 12 years ago, a number of Buddhist teachers began to share a new mindfulness tool that offered in-the-trenches support for working with intense and difficult emotions. The tool is called RAIN (an acronym for the four steps of the process), and it can be accessed in almost any place or situation. RAIN directs our attention in a clear, systematic way that cuts through confusion and stress. The steps give us somewhere to turn in a painful moment, and as we call on them more regularly, they strengthen our capacity to come home to our deepest truth. Like the clear sky and clean air after a cooling rain, this mindfulness practice brings a new openness and calm to our daily lives.

Here are the four steps of RAIN, presented in the way I’ve found most helpful:

Recognize what is happening **Allow life to be just as it is** **Investigate with kindness** **Non-identification**

RAIN directly deconditions the habitual ways in which you resist your moment-to-moment experience. It doesn’t matter whether you resist “what is” by lashing out in anger, by having a cigarette, or by getting immersed in obsessive thinking. Your attempt to control the life within and around you actually cuts you off from your own heart and from this living world. RAIN begins to undo these unconscious patterns as soon as we take the first step.

Recognize what is happening.

Recognition is seeing what is true in your inner life.

It starts the minute you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations are arising right here and now. As your attention settles and opens, you will discover that some parts of your experience are easier to connect with than others. For example, you might recognize anxiety right away, but if you focus on your worried thoughts, you might not notice the actual sensations of squeezing, pressure, or tightness arising in the body. On the other hand, if your body is gripped by jittery nervousness, you might not recognize that this physical response is being triggered by your underlying belief that you are about to fail. You can awaken recognition simply by asking yourself: “What is happening inside me right now?” Call on your natural curiosity as you focus inward. Try to let go of any preconceived ideas and instead listen in a kind, receptive way to your body and heart.

Allow life to be just as it is.

Allowing means “letting be” the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations you discover. You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away, but as you

become more willing to be present with “what is,” a different quality of attention will emerge. Allowing is intrinsic to healing, and realizing this can give rise to a conscious intention to “let be.”

Sometimes students support their resolve to “let be” by mentally whispering an encouraging word or phrase. For instance, you might feel the grip of fear and whisper “yes” or experience the swelling of deep grief and whisper “yes.” You might use the words “this too” or “I consent.” At first you might feel you’re just “putting up” with unpleasant emotions or sensations. Or you might say “yes” to shame and hope that it will magically disappear. In reality, we may have to say “yes” again and again. Yet even the first gesture of allowing, simply whispering a phrase like “yes” or “I consent” begins to soften the harsh edges of your pain. Your entire being is not so rallied in resistance. Offer the phrase gently and patiently, and in time your defenses will relax, and you may feel a physical sense of yielding or opening to waves of experience.

Investigate with kindness.

At times, simply working through the first two steps of RAIN is enough to provide relief and reconnect you with presence. In other cases, however, the simple intention to recognize and allow is not enough. For instance, if you are in the thick of a divorce, about to lose a job, or dealing with a life-threatening illness, you may be easily overwhelmed by intense feelings. Because these feelings are triggered over and over again—you get a phone call from your soon-to-be ex, your bank statement comes, you wake up to pain in the morning—your reactions can become very entrenched. In such situations, you may need to further awaken and strengthen mindful awareness with kind investigation.

Investigation with kindness brings focused attention of the heart to your present experience. Simply pausing to ask, You might ask yourself: “What most wants attention?” “How am I experiencing this in my body?” or “What am I believing?” or “What does this feeling want from me?” You might contact sensations of hollowness or shakiness, and then find a sense of unworthiness and shame buried in these feelings. Unless they are brought into consciousness, these beliefs and emotions will subconsciously control your experience and perpetuate your identification with a limited, deficient self...unwholesome states.

Some people may have problems with the investigation step. Thoughts may come up like “When fear arises, my investigation just takes me into thinking about what is causing it and how to feel better.” or “I can’t stay in my body long enough to investigate where an emotion lives in me.” For many, investigation triggers judgment: “I know I’m supposed to be investigating this shame, but I hate it. . . and I hate myself for having it.”

All these responses reflect our natural resistance to feeling uncomfortable and unsafe: thoughts swarm in our head, we leave our body, we judge what is happening. Investigation has an important key ingredient. In order for investigation to be healing and freeing, we need to approach our experience with an intimate quality of heartfelt kindness. We need to offer a gentle welcome to whatever surfaces. This is why we use the phrase “Investigate with kindness.” Without this heart energy, investigation cannot penetrate; there is not enough safety and openness for real contact.

Imagine that your child comes home in tears after being bullied at school. In order to find out what happened and how your child is feeling, you have to offer a kind, receptive, gentle attention. Bringing that same kindness to your inner life makes inquiry, and ultimately healing, possible.

Non-identification.

The lucid, open, and kind presence evoked in the R, A, and I of RAIN leads to the N: the freedom of Non-identification, and the realization of what I call natural awareness or natural presence.

Non-identification means that your sense of who you are is not limited or defined by any trapped habitual unwholesome patterns, emotions, sensations, or stories. When identification with the limited, constricted self is loosened, we begin to intuit and live from the openness and love that expresses our natural awareness.

The first three steps of RAIN require some intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result: a realization of your natural liberated awareness. There’s nothing to do for this last part of RAIN—liberating realization arises spontaneously, on its own. We simply rest in the state of liberated awareness.
