

Emotions are bodily sensations that evolved to get our attention to ensure our survival , while feelings and suffering occur in the mind after emotional arousal. Understanding this allows us to create new meaning when we experience our natural, human emotions.

Regulating our nervous system does not mean becoming calm; it means becoming connected.

How do we define regulated or connected? The ability to hold mindful awareness of whatever emotions we are experiencing while maintaining access to higher centers of the brain to remain grounded and connected in order to make decisions and respond in accordance with our values.

We can be angry and still connected to ourselves. We can be overwhelmed and still be connected to ourselves in our overwhelm and in our anxiety and our sadness. We can be connected to ourselves in our fear.

It is neurobiologically and behaviorally possible to be highly aroused and still be regulated and contained within one's window of tolerance. Discerning the difference between regulated activation of emotions as information and triggered states of emotional dysregulation that lie beneath awareness is a critical distinction.

Once we learn to reengage the body and our higher centers of the brain are back online, we can begin the work of emotional metabolism. Inside our window of tolerance, we are able to "digest" our emotions instead of fighting, fleeing, or freezing them into our bodies.

Emotional metabolism can be uncomfortable, but so is refusing to do it. This is the work that Resmaa Menakem, author of *My Grandmother's Hands* calls: clean pain. Resmaa says there are two kinds of pain: clean pain and dirty pain.

Clean pain is pain that mends and can build our capacity for growth. It's the pain we experience when we know exactly what we need to say or do; when we really, really don't want to say or do it; and when we do it anyway. It's also pain we experience when we have no idea what to do; when we're scared or worried about what might happen; and when we step forward into the unknown anyway, with honesty and vulnerability.

Paradoxically, only by walking into our pain or discomfort — experiencing it, moving through it, and metabolizing it — can we grow. It's how the human body works.

Clean pain hurts like hell. And it enables our bodies to grow through our difficulties, develop nuanced skills. In this process, the body metabolizes clean pain. The body can then settle and more room for growth is created in its nervous system, and the self becomes freer and more capable because it now has access to energy that was previously protected, bound, and constricted. When this happens, our lives often improve in other ways as well.

Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. When we respond from our most wounded parts, become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, we experience dirty pain. We also create more of it for ourselves and others.

MINDFULNESS OF EMOTIONS

To begin, please bring kind awareness to a distressful topic:

- why you chose this topic
- how your belly, chest, and head each feel when you reflect on this topic
- the emotions that you can associate with these visceral feelings
- the positive or negative impact of any stories you believe in regarding this topic
- the fact that many others are feeling similarly about this topic as you
- how you might feel with increased awareness around this topic
- when you can apply increased mindfulness to this topic in your day-to-day life

PURPOSE / EFFECTS

Emotions are an essential part of the human experience. For many of us, it's the part that we listen to most, that provides motivation and meaning.

When emotions are positive, all may be well, but when they're painful, they can send us into a spiral of hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal, leaving us feeling anxious, depressed, apathetic or confused. And, in spite of their importance in our lives, many of us don't know a lot about how emotions actually work or how we can learn to be with them in ways that cultivate our well-being and connection with ourselves and others.

It helps to know there are three parts to an emotional experience centered in different parts of your brain: physical sensations (like tightness), an emotion (like anger or grief) and the thoughts about it (like the story about what happened). Most of us have learned to focus on—and believe—the emotion and the thoughts

that surround it, and don't pay much attention to its physical sensations or what state our brain and body are in.

There are many traditional mindfulness practices designed to help balance and enrich our emotional life. One approach guides us to go deeply into these often-ignored physical sensations that arise from the oldest part of our brain-body system. When we pay attention to the physical sensations for a sustained period of time, it settles down, and the emotions and thoughts follow. We then have a greater balance of body, mind and heart to guide our understanding and behavior.

Here's a practice you can do any time you'd like to feel more grounded in the midst of a difficult emotion.

GENTLE BODY SCAN

- Find a comfortable position and take a couple of full breaths. Your breathing can become shallow when you're stressed or upset, so try to feel your chest and belly expand when you breathe in and really let go when you breathe out.
- Let your attention gently move through your body from your head to fingertips to toes, watching for places you may be tensing or holding. It's common to clench your jaw or literally sit on the edge of your seat if you're feeling a difficult emotion. Do your best to kindly notice the tension and relax just a little in those areas.

WHERE DOES YOUR EMOTION LIVE

Feel the emotion that's with you right now. Where do you feel it most strongly? There might be one place or several places where you feel the emotion's physical expression—around your heart, throat or belly.

See if you can be curious about the sensations. If you want to move away or resist them, that's totally natural. See if you can be with them with kindness and curiosity, just for a moment. Remember to breathe.

You can use words to help you stay connected to the physical part of your experience, like "tight" or "swirling" or "hard," whatever feels right for you. Refer to the Emotion-Sensation wheel for guidance.

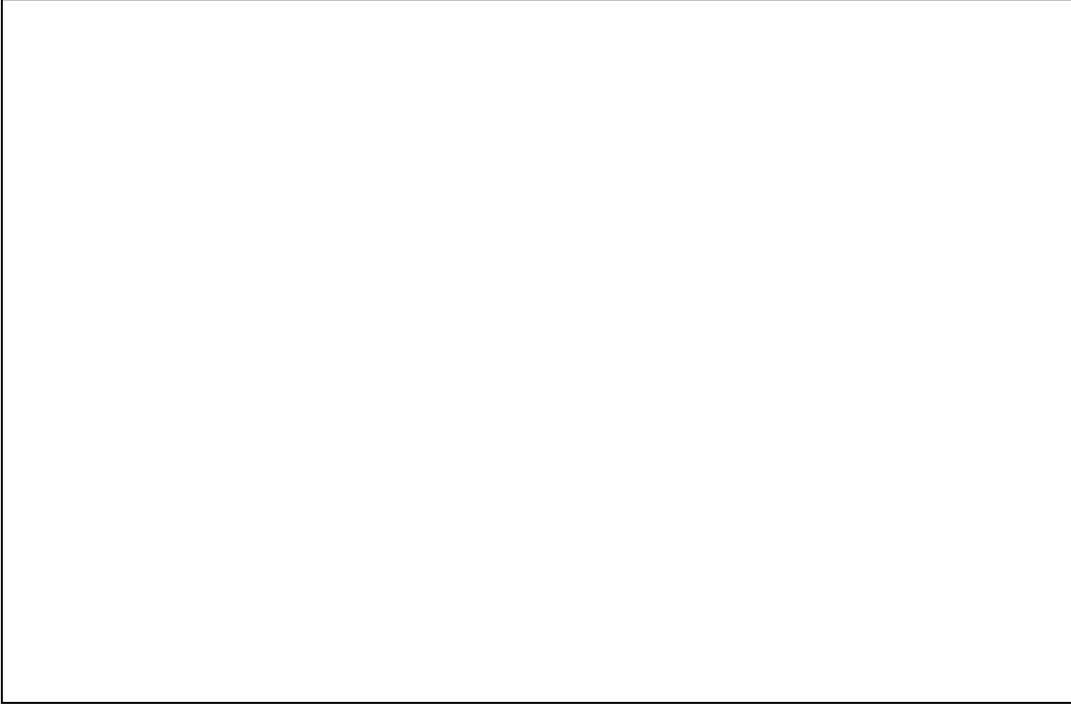
You're just listening to your body's expression in this moment. You're not trying to make anything happen or stop anything from happening.

- You may have an emotional label come up, like “grief” or “fear.” That’s all part of the practice. Notice the label and bring your attention gently back to the physical sensation that’s here now.
- Does your experience change in some way when you apply an emotional label, like “sadness,” or a physical label, like “tightness?”
- You may have a thought or a story come up, remembering what someone did or said to you. That’s part of the practice, too. Just notice it and, if you can, also notice if the thought creates an echo in your emotions or physical sensations. Then come back again to whatever physical sensations are most prominent.
- If an emotion is physically uncomfortable, you can try to create a little space around it. Gently explore the area to see what else is there, any relaxation or openness. Or, see if you can find the edges and, right there, soften a little. Breathe into that space.
- You can do this practice for as long as you like: doing the best you can to let your thoughts and emotions go, and stay connected with the physical manifestation of your emotion.

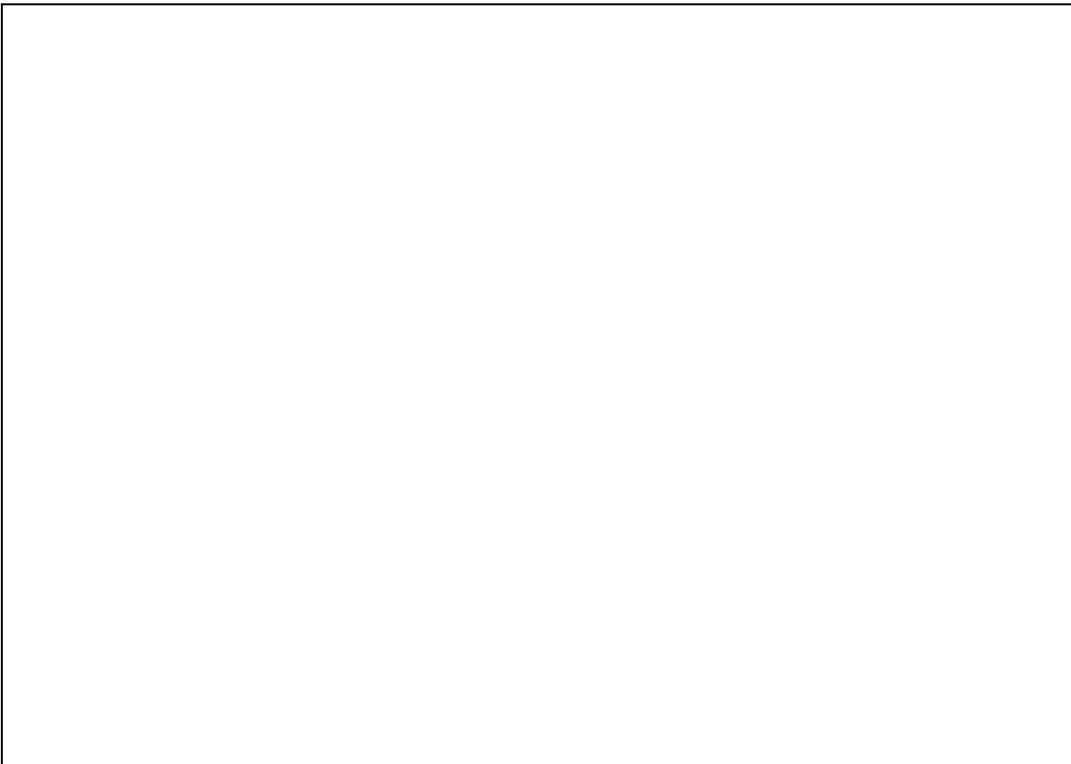
Big emotions can seem like impenetrable experiences that “just happen.” This practice will help you recognize the physical, emotional and mental components of your emotion, and what is calling most for your attention and self-compassion.

REFLECTIONS

When you were able to stay with the physical sensations, did your experience of the emotion change?

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Did you notice any thoughts that triggered an emotion or a physical sensation?

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Riding The Waves of Sensation

