

Make Every Session Count: How Does Therapy Help?

From Distress to Healing

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From Distress to Healing

STRESS IS A PART of everyone's life.

We all encounter ordinary daily stresses and, sooner or later, everyone will experience especially difficult (sometimes tragic) events. Some degree of emotional suffering is unavoidable. This is just the truth...part of the price of membership in the human race.

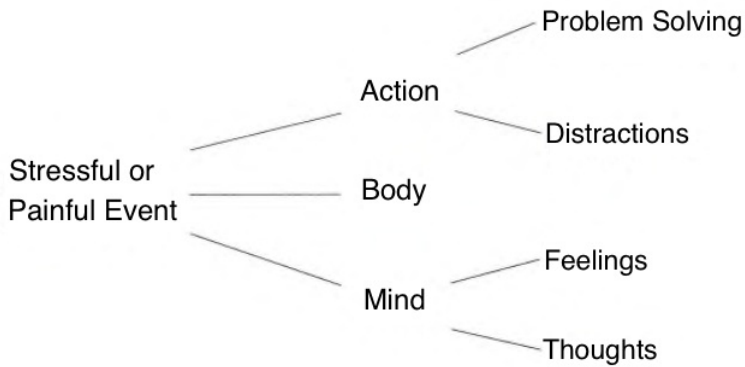
Job stress, marital conflicts, on-going medical problems or chronic pain, financial worries, fears about the future, betrayal by a good friend, the list goes on. As we go through difficult times, we all have inner reactions. Whether or not our emotions are expressed outwardly has a lot to do with our culture and society, our upbringing (some people are raised to stifle emotions, grit their teeth, and be "tough"), and personality style (some folks are simply private people, who prefer to deal with emotions in an internal way).

However, *major stressful events nearly always have an impact on people*. It is rare to simply feel no effect of major distressing events. If the event is devastating enough, some individuals will bury their emotional responses. Nevertheless, those responses almost always find an outlet—somehow, at some point in time.

To successfully make it through hard times and to benefit from therapy, you must to a degree face the reality of your pain (sadness, frustration, anger, fear, loneliness...). At the same time, let's be clear: *There is nothing inherently noble about suffering great pain*. Some people say that it builds character or is some kind of spiritual test of strength. But the bottom line is that pain hurts, and it is very normal to want to reduce suffering.

Dealing with Emotional Pain: Mind...Body...Action!

There are three main paths we follow as we try to deal with emotional pain. Whether a conscious choice or an "automatic response," the key avenues are the mind, the body, and direct action:



Action

Overt action generally has two aims: problem solving or distraction. Problem solving may involve going directly to a person with whom there is a conflict, speaking with him or her, and asking for some kind of change in behavior or other resolution. Distracting actions, on the other hand, are usually taken to help ignore or minimize emotional pain or distress. Examples of such actions include: workaholism, watching TV, engaging in sports, numbing oneself with alcohol, tranquilizers, and other drugs, overeating, taking the focus off yourself by picking a fight or arguing with others, or sexually acting out. (A quick romantic involvement with a new person in the aftermath of a divorce may be a temporary distraction from inner feelings of sadness and loss.)

Body

Physical changes are a natural part of emotional responses (increased blood pressure, insomnia, tension headaches, fatigue). When people go to great extremes to avoid feeling inner emotions and, in essence, grit their teeth, a common result is the emergence of stress-related physical symptoms. These symptoms can range from discomfort and annoyance to life-threatening conditions (severe high blood pressure, heart attacks, etc.).

Mind

The final major outlet for emotional pain is in the mind, experienced either as *feelings* or as *thoughts*. Those

who notice mainly inner **feelings** may find that powerful emotions erupt: waves of sadness, panicky feelings, outbursts of anger. Those who are aware mainly of their inner **thoughts** typically experience continual fretting, recurrent painful memories, and/or worries about possible future calamities.

If the only way to deal with emotional pain is through distracting actions or by stressing your body, it's likely you won't fully heal from emotionally painful events, and that you'll continue to hurt on a deep inner level. If you're carrying a burden of unresolved distress it's hard to truly heal emotional problems.

Most therapists agree that our best shot at emotional healing and resolution lies in facing the reality of painful feelings, the truth of inner emotions, and processing the experiences through the mind (assessing inner feelings *and* thoughts). We'll explore more about how this is done shortly.

Most therapists agree that our best shot at emotional healing lies in facing the reality of painful events and processing the experiences...

We've found it helpful to talk about two different kinds of emotional pain: "necessary pain" and "unnecessary pain." *Necessary pain* is basic, common, honest human

anguish virtually anyone would feel when they encounter a tough life event, like the loss of a child, being fired, going through a divorce, major surgery. If you get burned, it hurts. You have little choice but to feel the pain. Certain life events just hurt.

Unnecessary pain is suffering that goes beyond the core emotional response. It is exaggerated, intensified, and prolonged suffering that, generally, is due to extremely self-critical thinking. In the wake of a seriously distressing personal event, many people launch into a ruthless attack on the self, either with actual statements spoken aloud to others or with private inner thoughts and beliefs. Examples of this include, "I'm so stupid," "I'm so screwed up," "Nothing I do is right," "What the hell is wrong with me?!" "I'm being silly and childish to feel so upset about this," "I hate myself"

An almost constant inner barrage of self-condemning thoughts represents one of the most common sources of human emotional suffering. While facing the truth of necessary pain is probably essential to successful emotional healing, unnecessary pain only intensifies and prolongs suffering.

One way to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary pain is to ask some basic questions: Even though this emotional pain hurts a lot, is it understandable? Does it make sense to me that I'm feeling this way given the

fact that I'm going through a very stressful time in my life? Does this pain lead me to take corrective action? Does expressing the pain result in any sense of relief/release? Does it bring me closer with loved ones?

Of course, these are difficult questions to answer with certainty, since a good deal of necessary pain initially hurts so much that it's hard to imagine that it can serve any helpful purpose.

As one client put it, "For a long time after my divorce, I kept saying to myself, 'You've gotta get over this!'... But eventually it dawned on me...how is a person supposed to feel after her husband leaves her?! Of course, this hurts like hell. It's normal to feel upset."

An important facet of most courses of brief therapy is to help you sort through inner feelings and thoughts...to confront, feel, acknowledge your legitimate necessary pain, while learning effective ways to stem the tide of inner selfcriticism. (We'll talk a lot about strategies for reducing selfcriticism in chapter 12.)