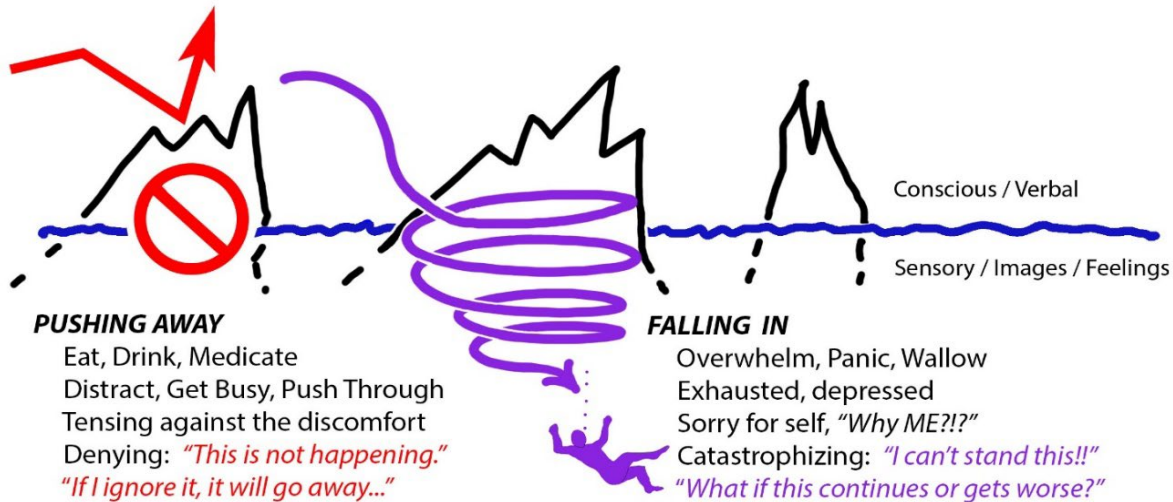


The Four Ways of Responding to Emotional or Physical Pain

Pushing Away / Falling In / Recognizing & Letting Go / Turning Toward
by Dave Potter

The Two Typical Responses: “Pushing Away” and “Falling In”

Typically, when we encounter something difficult emotionally or physically, we react in one of two ways: by “*Pushing Away*” or “*Falling In*”.



“Pushing Away”

In “*Pushing Away*”, we push through our discomfort by force of will or we distract ourselves with activity or indulgence: busying ourselves, convincing ourselves we don’t have a problem, and/or by self-medicating with food, alcohol, or drugs. This “solution” is problematic in itself and is ultimately unsatisfactory, not just because of unwanted side-effects, but because nothing has been done to resolve the underlying cause of the pain:

“Falling In”

The second way of dealing with difficulty is “*Falling In*”. This is not a conscious choice, but the result of not having sufficient resources to deal with the painful condition. In “Falling In”, we are consumed by the difficulty: overwhelmed with the discomfort and its associated fears and/or judgments. Often accompanying the physical and/or emotional pain are feelings of helplessness and judgment (“I can’t stand this!”, “What if this continues or gets worse?”, “How could they/I have been so stupid?!”, etc.). In the end, we can find ourselves feeling hopeless and powerless about how to take care of our own pain.

Often, it’s not just “Pushing Away” or “Falling In”, but a swinging from one to the other. For instance, after a period of overwhelm (“*Falling In*”), there can be a retreat into eating or self-medicating (“*Pushing Away*”), which is only effective temporarily, after which another round of overwhelming emotion begins (“*Falling In*”), and when that gets to be too much, there’s escape with distraction (“*Pushing Away*”), and so on. This can be a never-ending cycle.

The Two Alternatives: “Recognizing & Letting Go” and “Turning Toward”

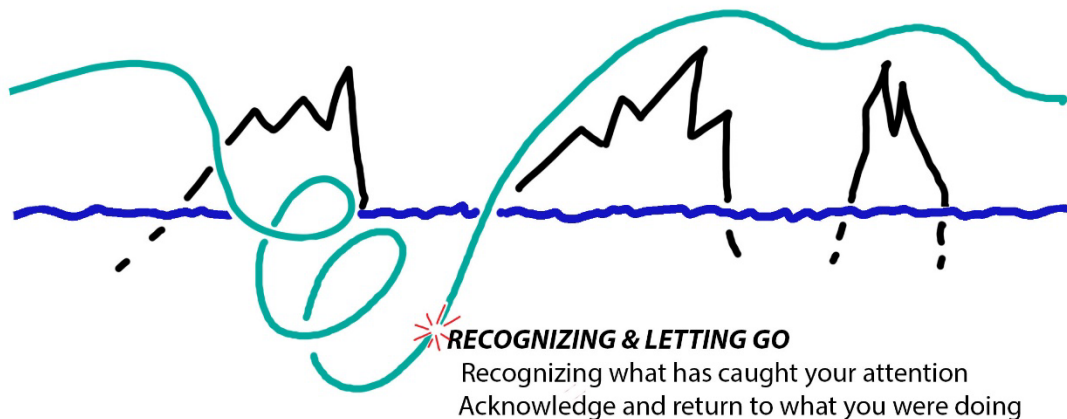
Both of these two alternatives to “Pushing Away” or “Falling In” involve accepting the difficult emotions or sensations in a special way. This kind of acceptance is not acquiescence or giving in (“Falling In”), nor is it not trying to banish them (“Pushing Away”). “Recognizing & Letting Go” and “Turning Toward” both begin with a

gentle acknowledgement of what has come up and honoring its presence, staying with it for long enough to get a sense of what is happening.

“Recognizing & Letting Go”

This is different than the “Pushing Away” response which involves denial of the difficulty and instead begins with a special acknowledgment of it, a kind of “hello”, like you might give to someone coming to your door who you didn’t expect. Although you might say, “I’m busy right now”, you wouldn’t say it gruffly or, even worse, just slam the door in their face. It’s bringing a gentle but brief awareness to the discomfort or uncomfortable thought, at least long enough to recognize what it is. After acknowledging it in this way, you can bring your awareness back to what you may have been doing before.

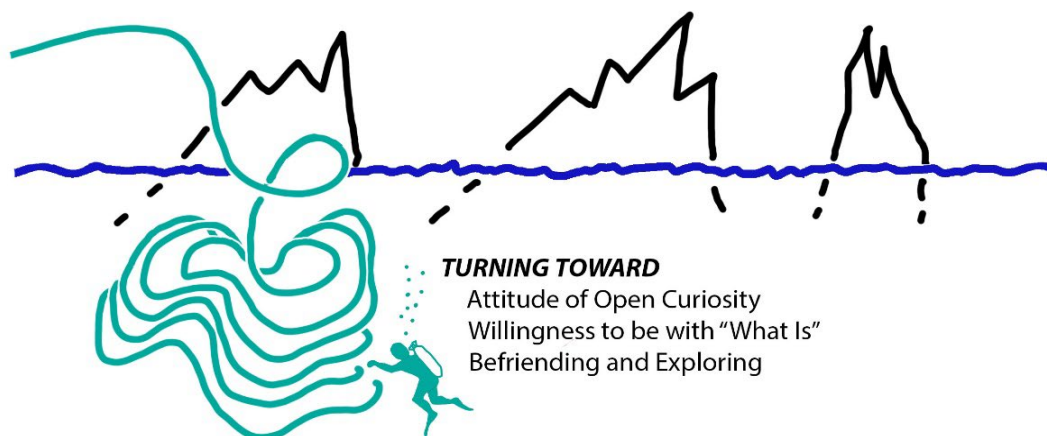
In some kinds of meditation, this acknowledgment is followed by bringing attention back to a pre-determined object of awareness such as breath (as you might with a sitting meditation), body (as in the body scan or yoga), mantra (Transcendental Meditation), prayer (Christian centering prayer), or visualization (some forms of Tibetan meditation).



This approach strengthens grounding, stability and resilience, and can lead to very pleasant, even blissful states of absorption. And if the acknowledgment is done gently in a truly non-reactive way, and with a brief excursion acknowledging the difficult area, the difficulty may actually shift or dissolve. But if it is a long-standing pattern, the underlying dynamics remain in place, to be encountered at another time, strong as ever.

“Turning Toward”

For issues that require more than a simple and gentle acknowledgment, there is another approach, which we call “*Turning Toward*”. This is a powerful method, but it is deeply counter-intuitive, because the last thing we think we want to do is to move closer to what’s been troubling us. Instead of moving away from the difficulty that has arisen, we move toward it. Although such an exploration might sound scary and uncomfortable, this is a gentle process, and is done in a special way, one that draws on the skills of awareness and non-judgment that you have been strengthening so far in this course.



In “*Turning Toward*”, there is an attitude of open curiosity and a willingness to be with and to explore what is being encountered, even if it is uncomfortable. A surprising and counter-intuitive result of staying with something in this way is that the "I've got to get out of here" component of the discomfort lessens, and sometimes even disappears, even while staying in contact with it, and a successful encounter of this type can sometimes unravel long-standing problematic patterns.

“Turning Toward” difficult emotions or sensations in a way that is non-reactive and productive is an art in itself and merits some study and practice. Of course, it’s not always possible in terms of timing and setting to engage in this kind of exploration, and it may be appropriate, if possible, to set aside the difficult sensation or emotion, until there is time and there are resources to deal with the difficulty (in which case, the “Recognizing & Letting Go” response might be appropriate).

The “[Turning Toward](#)” meditations described in this course are an adaptation of Vidyamala Burch’s “Five-Step” model, and they guide you in explorations of physical and emotional difficulties in a way that brings in personal resources to help keep you grounded as you practice this approach.

There are a number of other approaches which involve a “turning toward” our inner landscape, including [RAIN](#) (as taught by Tara Brach), [Soften-Soothe-Allow](#) (as taught by Kristin Neff), and [Focusing](#) (as taught by Ann Weiser Cornell). Of all of these methods, the most sophisticated and complete method I know of is **Focusing**. It is well worth learning and Ann has some great resources, including some excellent online trainings. Becoming completely comfortable and skilled with Focusing takes significant time and work, but if you are interested in exploring it, see [Inner Listening](#).