

Week 5 - Dealing with Difficult Emotions/Sensations  
**Soften, Soothe, Allow**



You can have compassion for yourself - which is not self-pity. You're simply recognizing that 'this is tough, this hurts,' and bringing the same warmhearted wish for suffering to lessen or end that you would bring to any dear friend grappling with the same pain, upset, or challenges as you.  
- Rick Hanson

The most intimate relationship we will have in our entire lifetime is with ourselves. No one hears our hearts the way we do. No one knows our hurts the way we do. We are the sages of our soft spots and our edges. Self-compassion is showing up to that relationship with honesty and with love.  
- Jamie Ridler

**Mid-way assessment**

We are now at the halfway point, and this is a good time to reflect on what's been happening so far for you in doing the practices and in your daily life. So far, you have experienced the three main formal practices (body scan, sitting meditation, yoga) and a number of informal practices (simple awareness, mindful eating, awareness of pleasant/unpleasant experiences, STOP/one minute breathing space).

Taking the time now for reflection will help you to notice and appreciate any positive changes that may have resulted from the practices. A likely outcome of this awareness and active appreciation will be a strengthening and reinforcement that can naturally carry forward to the end of this course and beyond. Also, now would be the time to reflect on those areas where you may still be struggling, and allow the possibility of appropriate mid-course corrections. **It can be helpful to actually write down your thoughts at this point, reflecting on your personal learnings as well as the things you may still be struggling with.** As you do this, you may recall a specific incident in your life that stands out, that somehow relates to the work you have done so far in this course.

**Dealing with physical and emotional discomfort**

This week's topic has to do with dealing with discomfort, both physical and emotional. We normally react to pain or discomfort in one of two ways:

**Blocking:** We try to block or deny the discomfort by pushing through it through force of will, by distracting ourselves, or by self-medicating with food, alcohol or drugs. This is ultimately unsatisfactory since as soon as you stop "pushing through" or your distraction or self-medication wears off, it can come back even stronger. In cases where the discomfort is a signal indicating corrective action needs to take place, missing the signal can result in injury or disease. And, of course, self-medicating can create many problems, including complex side-effects or even addiction.

**Drowning:** We become overwhelmed by it, drowning in the discomfort and its associated fears or judgments ("I can't stand this!", "What if this continues or gets worse?", "How could they/I have been so stupid?!?", etc.). This leads to incapacitation and a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness.

It's bad enough that neither of these strategies are very effective or satisfying, but a continuing reliance on them usually makes things even worse than they already are. There is a middle ground, a place where you are neither pushing away difficult feelings/situations, nor being subsumed by them. This "middle way" involves learning to feel the sensations or emotions, but not being swept away by them. 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 often lessens, or sometimes can even disappear.

**NOTE:** If a primary reason for you taking the MBSR course is dealing with physical pain (e.g., chronic pain, fibromyalgia, serious injury or physical disability, etc.), you can find alternative videos, readings and practice assignments by going to **Week 5b (Special Instructions for Physical Pain)**. Otherwise, continue on here...

**Videos**

In **Turning Toward Difficulty**, Vidyamala Burch of **Breathworks** describes this counter-intuitive "middle way". Her mindfulness teaching is primarily concerned with chronic physical pain, but this presentation applies just as well to emotional pain. In **Surrender to the Monkeys**, Tara Brach addresses our wanting for things to be different than they are and the wisdom of taking things just as they are. In **The Three Components of Self-Compassion**, Kristin Neff talks about the importance of dealing with difficult emotional and physical issues with self-kindness and gentleness. Finally, in **Awakening Self-Compassion**, Tara Brach describes RAIN, a particular way of tapping into this "middle way", again emphasizing the importance of self-compassion.

**For further exploration:** The most sophisticated and transformative method I know of for tapping into this "middle way", well worth exploring, but beyond the scope of this course, is **Focusing**, a process created by Gene Gendlin and refined by Ann Weiser Cornell. See **"Inner Listening" - An Introduction to Focusing** in the supplementary materials.

**Readings**

The readings for this week include **Thinking with the Heart**, by Chris Germer, which describes the origination of the **Soften-Soothe-Allow** process. **The Soften, Soothe, Allow process** is a one-page description of the process that will be used for the informal practice this week. **Buddhism's Pain Relief** describes this "middle way" of dealing with pain, relating recent advances in neuroscience with ancient Buddhist teachings. If you or a loved one is dealing with back pain, **The Strange Case of Chronic Back Pain** is a must-read. If so, see also Ron Siegel's book, **Back Sense and Lower Back Ache? Be Active and Wait It Out**, in the supplementary materials.

## Daily Practices

For the **formal practice**, we focus a little more on the sitting meditation, alternating it with your choice of one of the other practices. On the first day, though, if you have something that happened that is mildly difficult, try the **Soften, Soothe, Allow Meditation** (see it on the menu to the left). The situation doesn't have to be a major issue, in fact, it's best if it's mild or moderate. For instance, it could be impatience while waiting in line or being mildly annoyed by some minor event.

The **informal practice** will be to try the **Soften, Soothe, Allow process** at times when you are experiencing an unwanted emotion. As mentioned above, it's best not to start with the most pressing issue in your life. *If, at the end of the day, no unwanted emotion comes to mind, take the time to feel gratitude for something that happened that day.*

Below are your materials for this week:

## Videos

- Turning Toward Difficulty** - Vidyamala Burch [10 min]
- Surrender to the Monkeys** - Tara Brach (4 min)
- The Three Components of Self-Compassion** - Kristin Neff [6 min]
- Awakening Self-Compassion** - Tara Brach [23 min]

## Reading

- Thinking with the Heart: The origin of *Soften, Soothe, Allow*** by Chris Germer
- The Soften, Soothe, Allow process** one-page description of the Soften, Soothe, Allow process
- Buddhism's Pain Relief** by Rick Heller
- The Strange Case of Chronic Back Pain** by Ron Siegel

## Practice sheets

- Formal Practice [PDF] [or WORD format]** - Various (*Soften-Soothe-Allow Meditation on 1st day*)
- Informal Practice [PDF] [or WORD format]** -see **The Soften, Soothe, Allow process**

## Supplementary materials related to this week's topic

- "Inner Listening" - An Introduction to Focusing** article and videos by Ann Weiser-Cornell
- The RAIN of Self-Compassion** article, video, and guided meditation by Tara Brach
- Living Well With Pain & Illness** book by Vidyamala Burch
- Back Sense: Halting the Cycle of Chronic Back Pain** book by Ron Siegel
- Lower Back Ache? Be Active and Wait It Out** *New York Times* article
- How To Be Sick** book by Toni Bernhard

**NOTE:** If you are compiling a manual based on the suggestions in **MBSR Manual**, you would print a copy of this page as well as the Readings and Practice Sheets given above. For a version of this page which has been reformatted for your manual go to the **printer-ready version of this page**.