

Louise Gordon PhD

"Where Education, Experience and Compassion Meet."

Dealing With Difficult Thoughts and Feelings

First of all, I want to tell you how glad I am to be here with you all today. This organization and the wonderful woman who leads it have become very special to me over the nearly 4 years that I've been in KC. So it's truly a pleasure and an honor to be speaking here today, and I want to thank you all for the opportunity.

As most of you know, I'm a clinical psychologist by profession, trained in a very traditional setting... One of my specialty areas is working with the psychological aspects of chronic pain and illness. Over the years my approach to therapy and to healing has changed considerably, and though I am grateful for and still use all the wonderful techniques and theories I learned as a graduate student, I find my self evolving into somewhat of a Buddhist. Hence much of this talk is based on this philosophy. I think the reason this has so much appeal for me is the emphasis on mindfulness, which simply means increased consciousness or awareness, as well as acceptance and compassion. For those of us with chronic illness, I believe these qualities to be indispensable. I want to be clear though that acceptance does NOT equal resignation, compassion does NOT equal having a pity-party. In the Buddhist philosophy, these terms have very specific and very ACTIVE meanings. Acceptance simply means acknowledging what IS, instead of what we think SHOULD be. Compassion means connecting at the heart level with ourselves and others, and being willing to feel our vulnerability, our softness.

SO. "Difficult thoughts and feelings." What could this possibly have to do with pain and illness?", you ask? We all know that even without chronic illness, difficult

thoughts and feelings, like anger, depression, and anxiety, are a natural part of daily life. But with symptoms such as those we are all familiar with, negative emotions and states of mind can be a real concern, often severe enough to constitute an illness of their own (such as depression, which I see throughout my practice among those with health problems.) This of course comes as no surprise. When our health is compromised, our lives are compromised, and it can feel like the joy and freedom we once took for granted has all but evaporated. The most beautiful sunny day can seem meaningless and empty when we are in pain or too tired to enjoy most any activity. Conversely, we've probably all had the experience of feeling good on a particular day, and noticing how this changed our mood for the better. What these two situations have in common is that our state of mind and emotion can be so easily affected, by our physical state, by the weather, by other people, by stress, etc. etc. And we know, based on scientific evidence as well as common-sense, that this in turn affects our health (i.e. mind affects body, body affects mind, because they are in effect one and the same). So the question then becomes, **how can we increase our mastery over our thoughts and feelings?** The Eastern answer to this question is very different from the one we've always heard in our culture, e.g., distract yourself, toughen up, etc. Few people are taught how to deal with tough emotions, and so we learn to ignore them, fight them, pour drugs on them, etc. A Buddhist would say, you gain control over these thoughts and emotions by LETTING THEM IN, NOT SHUTTING THEM OUT. We do this first, by becoming more mindful, or aware, of exactly what is going on inside of us at any given moment. This of course happens "up here". Now mindfulness is something that folks like us already have an advantage in, thanks to our illness. Why? Because our pain and fatigue force us out of denial and into our bodies and emotions. Not necessarily a pleasant process, but without it I don't believe that healing can occur. The next step in gaining mastery over our

thoughts and feelings, once we become more mindful, is to move from “here” to “here” (point to heart), connecting with our hearts or the quality of compassion, which I believe to be the source of all healing.

Someone who's written a lot about this is Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun living in Nova Scotia. I find her work so helpful, both in my work with clients and in my own personal growth. Her approach is not only very different from what we usually do in the face of adversity, it's pretty much the opposite of what we tend to do, which is, protecting ourselves against pain however we can, i.e., by reacting, avoiding, and resisting. When we're in pain, be it physical or mental, our tendency as humans is to want it to go away. (Answer: GO AWAY) And we usually do this by pushing it away shutting ourselves down, or striking back at whoever inflicted the pain. Let's take anger as an example, and let's talk about our friend Jane. Jane's mother says something critical about her, say about how she disciplines her kids. This ticks Jane off to no end. So what might she do? React by striking back? Avoid contact? Keep her mother emotionally at a distance and try not to think about what she said? In any case, she's trying to protect her wounded ego, and this is a natural and reasonable thing to want to do. She may in fact feel better after putting up this wall and closing up her heart. At the very least she'll probably feel less icky (i.e., vulnerable) than before. But let's take a look at what's going on here. She's made a choice to close her heart and shut down because of what her mother said. So, something in what she said or the way she said it, or both, touched something in Jane on a deep level. Pema C. calls this our “soft spot.” It's the place in us that feels most vulnerable, exposed, and tender. We usually associate it with the heart center or chakra, right here (point). The soft spot can feel great when someone tells us they love us, or we see our child do something or say something precious. Delicious. But when someone or something hurts our feelings, that's a different story, right?

And it doesn't even have to be someone important. Remember the guy or gal who cut you off on I-35 on your way to work the other morning? We have no idea who that person is, we've never seen them before, we'll probably never see them again; why on earth do we want to do something really nasty back? Because they touched our soft spot. It may not feel soft; it may feel like road rage, nothing soft about it. But what's the feeling behind the anger about being cut off? There's usually fear, and a sense of vulnerability, because we could have gotten into an accident and been hurt by this person's thoughtless act. So maybe the real feeling is, "How could you be so selfish and uncaring as to put me in a position where I could have been hurt?" THAT'S the soft spot. It's coated with anger and indignation, but at the core, soft all the way. And if you observe your anger and become mindful of it, you'll probably discover things like fear, sadness, and hurt underneath. Especially when it relates to important people in your life. I think we're all much softer than we want to admit. And what's crazy about that is that we learn, in our wonderful culture, that "soft" equals "weak" equals BAD. Be tough, you're in the Army now. Men get the brunt of this indoctrination but as women we are, sadly, victims of it as well, and it really does us a disservice, because we don't get to experience the kind of inner strength that comes from allowing ourselves to feel vulnerable and truly feel what's in our hearts.

OK, so what's wrong with shutting down to protect ourselves, you ask? First off, you pay a price by shutting down. You may feel less pain, but guess what? You've closed yourself off from the good stuff as well. What's more, shutting down and avoiding doesn't really work all that well. Chances are that whatever is making you mad will continue to have an effect on you, even without you realizing it. And you may pass on the negative feelings to other, also without being aware of it. This is the classic, if somewhat dated, case of the guy whose boss criticizes him at work, so he comes home,

yells at his wife, who yells at the kid, who kicks the dog. Nobody really knows how it got started, it's an unconscious thing. But damaging nonetheless.

SO. What can we do different? Is there an option to shutting down/avoiding/protecting, etc.? The good news is, yes there is. The bad news is, you have to be willing to try something new, and be willing to give up the old myth that "tougher is better" and "soft is for sissies." It's not easy, but it's the key, I believe, to healing. And how does one do this in one's everyday life, you ask? By moving toward the painful feeling, instead of away from it. By being willing to feel your feelings, the good, the bad and the ugly, and feel that soft, tender spot that we all have but we don't want anyone to know about it. Now, I'm here to tell you that amazing things can happen once you are open to this. When we embrace the uncomfortable feeling and are willing to face it head-on, something magical happens. We connect with our heart. This will hurt initially, but we feel it, and it's very alive and very real. After a while, after we've connected with the anger, hurt, etc., we start to notice something else enter into the equation, namely, compassion. Now, it's probably not going to happen the first time you try this technique, but eventually it will happen, and it will keep getting easier the more you practice. So as you're feeling how angry you are, for example, you may feel compassion for yourself, for having to feel and carry that hurt, which is not easy to do and takes courage. This is already quite different from what we usually do, which is to either be hard on ourselves just for feeling a "bad" feeling toward someone else, or be hard on the other person by striking back in retaliation. So we have this anger, and don't know what to do with it and it creates this awful tension, so we either turn it against ourselves or against the other person, in order to discharge some of that anger. What is suggested in this practice is that you become mindful not only of your own hurt/anger but of all the other people on the earth who are also feeling that same emotion at the very

same time you are. Millions of people, who may also be dealing with fights with a spouse, a bad day at work, unruly kids, the car breaking down, or worse. You feel compassion for them too, and for yourself. At this point, you may not even feel pain anymore, but something quite different, like some space has been opened up where there was no space before. You feel free. Now you can move on. Also, if something good comes along, you're more receptive to that as well. You're in a more positive (or at the very least less negative) frame of mind, which in turn you may pass along to others without effort. You might even notice that you feel better physically, because instead of the emotion being blocked and getting stuck somewhere in the body (headache, neck ache, etc.), things flow and there is a sense of greater freedom in the body as well.

OK. So now we've talked about the benefits of embracing negative emotions instead of fending them off. The next question is, how the heck do we put this into practice in our every day lives? Well, there are some basic steps. Please remember that this will not happen overnight, unless you are extremely lucky, and if so I want to know about it. More likely it's going to take some practice, just like any other new skill we're trying to learn. This is particularly true when we're trying to replace an old habit, a way of doing and being that's been with us for many years. So it may feel really strange and awkward at first, like writing with your left hand when you're right-handed. The key is to just keep practicing and not judge yourself when you can't pull it off. So, here are some ways to get started. I'm going to read them off as if they were sequential steps, but they're really not. You don't have to do them in any particular order; it's more of a process where one thing is flowing to the next, and there's a lot of back-and-forth movement. As I read these, perhaps you can think of a situation where you have a hard time not reacting by striking out or shutting down, and see how these steps might apply or feel in relation to your particular scenario.

The first step is mindfulness. Basically this just means becoming more aware and conscious of what's going on inside us RIGHT NOW in terms of thoughts, feelings, even body sensations. In our culture this is not an easy thing to do, or even an accepted thing to do. Mindfulness requires slowing down enough to actually connect with ourselves, even briefly, and become aware of our thoughts and feelings in the moment. **(Try it now for 30 seconds)**. We're usually preoccupied with something that happened yesterday or this morning or a week ago, or we're preoccupied with something that we want or don't want to happen in the future. Without mindfulness, we're on automatic pilot, simply reacting to the world around us without giving it a second thought. Someone honks at me, I'm angry and honk right back, which gives me a momentary feeling of relief or satisfaction so I can forget about it and rush on to my next activity. What can help get us past knee-jerk reactivity and become more mindful? Getting in touch with what is often called the "observer self." This is the part of us that is sort of detached, not as in, disinterested or aloof necessarily, just able to be more objective. So, for example, you're in the middle of a screaming match with your husband, and you're just fuming, boiling mad, and giving him hell for his many wrongdoings, including of course leaving the toilet seat up. In the midst of all this, there's a part of you that's kind of on the sidelines, watching you do your thing, just watching, as though it were a tennis match. That's the observer self. This part of us is important because it show us that there is more to us than the part that's angry and screaming. There is more to us than that, and that's very good news, and allows us to feel more tolerant of our intense emotions, because we know there's more to us and we're not going to die from the intensity of what we feel. For example (and here's yet another driving scenario, these seem to be my favorite) recently I found myself getting really impatient with the driver ahead of me who was driving way too slow (in my opinion). As I felt the annoyance and impulse to tailgate rise, I was able

to say to myself, “This is me, feeling annoyed and impatient.” Doing that helped me create some room between me and my feelings, thoughts, and impulses, helped me get some distance. Yes I was impatient and annoyed, but there was another part of me that was “above it all,” watching, observing from a distance. I might still tailgate or honk, but it would be more of a choice rather than a knee-jerk reaction. Another great thing about the observer self is that this part, unlike the ego, knows how to just “drop the story line”. By this I mean, it doesn’t insist on being right. So you’re having this knock-down drag -out fight with your husband because he said this or did that, and you KNOW that you are right and he is wrong. Well, the ego just wants to hold onto this and keep trying to prove its point. The observer-self, on the other hand, can detach and just “drop the story-line”: all the drama, the who-said-and-did-what-when. In effect this part can say, you know, it doesn’t matter who’s right. I want to maintain a connection with this person MORE than I want to be right about this particular thing that happened. Once you contact this part of yourself, you can practice accessing it until it becomes natural. The first time I was able to “drop the story line,” after a painful confrontation with a close friend, it really had an impact-- it felt so liberating, like I was no longer a prisoner of my need to be right. I had hurt someone’s feelings, someone important to me, and that was all that mattered.

Once we’re aware of what we’re thinking and feeling (e.g., “I’m so mad I could _____”), then we go to the next step, which Pema calls “holding your seat.” This just means not reacting, as you’ve done a million times before. Instead of honking back or trying hard to focus on something else, I just “sit with” the feeling, fully aware of it and neither reacting nor suppressing. She also calls this “not setting up a target for (another’s) arrow. If I don’t honk back, or yell back, there’s no target for the other person to aim at.

If I do honk/yell back, I've set up the target again, and we just keep going back and forth, and of course that's how wars start.

The next step is very crucial, and really goes hand-in-hand with Step 1. And that is, to connect with your heart in the moment. So, you're hit with a feeling, and instead of pushing it away or reacting, you sit with it, and feel your heart. Feel the feeling (anger, etc.), whatever it is. You may find yourself experiencing hurt, sadness, and finally, compassion, which just means there's a sense of caring for yourself, recognizing and acknowledging that you are experiencing some kind of pain, and that's not easy. At the same time, think about how many other people, all over the world, are struggling with the very same emotion as you. On the planet at any given moment, millions of people are experiencing anger, grief, sadness, or even just having a really hard time. You can even include visualizing the earth from the perspective of the astronauts on the moon or out in space somewhere, where the earth looks so small. You may then find yourself feeling compassion for yourself and also for others. You MAY even feel a drop of compassion or at least understanding for the person who ticked you off! (That's when you know you're on the right track!)

Again, these are not sequential and don't worry about how you're going to "remember" to do all this in the span of a minute or two. You will inevitably forget to do one or more steps, and that's fine. The important thing is to decide you're going to do something different than what you've done before, and then you just do your best. Even if you only remember to do one thing, like become mindful, that's a HUGE piece of progress.

Last but not least, Pema urges us to see life's obstacles and annoyances, and even catastrophes as teachers. Sounds corny, I know, but everything and everyone we experience has something to teach us. Adopting this perspective can really help us feel

less like victims when things go wrong, or when uncomfortable feelings/people/situations are demanding our attention. So the next time you find yourself feeling upset, frustrated, irritated, exasperated, depressed, or whatever else it might be, take a time-out to connect with your heart and ask yourself, “What can I learn from this person/experience/situation?” And if you can, allow yourself to be just a little more gentle and compassionate with yourself in the midst of it. In time it will make a difference, I promise you.