

**STAYING**

WITH OUR

**FEELINGS**

By Meg-John Barker

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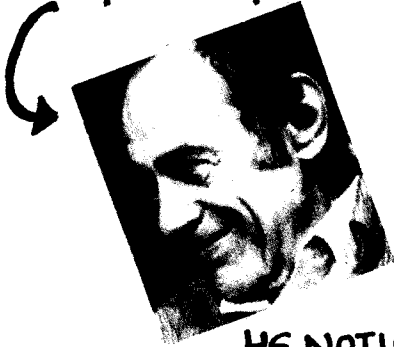
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WHY  
DO IT?

HOW  
TO  
DO IT

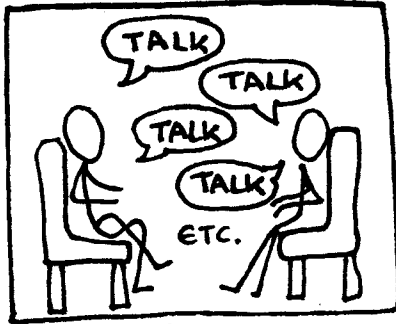
# INTRODUCTION

THIS IS HUMANISTIC  
THERAPIST  
EUGENE GENDLIN

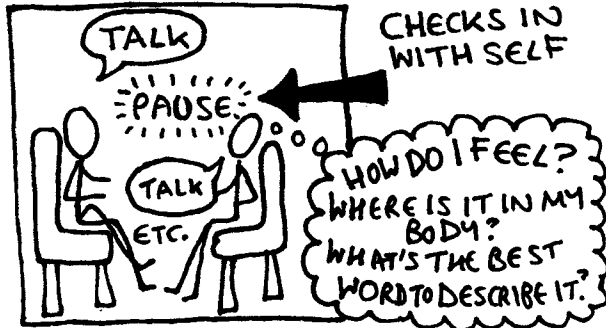


IN THE 1960s HE STUDIED  
THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN  
PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES  
IMPROVED AFTER THERAPY  
& THOSE WHO DIDN'T  
FEEL ANY BETTER

HE NOTICED THIS...



DIDN'T IMPROVE



IMPROVED

FOCUSING = GENDLIN'S TECHNIQUE TO HELP  
PEOPLE TO LEARN HOW TO DO THIS  
MANY THERAPIES & SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS HAVE  
DEVELOPED SIMILAR PRACTICES FOR SLOWING  
DOWN & TUNING IN TO OUR FEELINGS

This zine is all about *why* it's important to cultivate the capacity to stay with our feelings, and *how* we can go about doing that. Hopefully working through the zine will help you to figure out your own emotional landscape (which feelings you tend to prefer, and which you tend to avoid). It'll also give you several possible practices for learning to stay with your feelings. Different things work for different people so it's all about figuring out what works best for you.

# EXPERIENCING ALL OF OUR EMOTIONS

THESE KINDS OF PRACTICES ARE USEFUL BECAUSE WE TEND TO DO THE OPPOSITE



THIS LIMITS US IN MANY WAYS:

- WE AVOID SITUATIONS & PEOPLE WHICH TEND TO GIVE US 'NEGATIVE' FEELINGS
- WE GRASP TOO TIGHTLY ONTO SITUATIONS & PEOPLE WHICH GIVE US 'POSITIVE' FEELINGS PUTTING THEM UNDER PRESSURE



ONLY CERTAIN PARTS OF US DEVELOP  
WE ONLY SHOW CERTAIN SIDES OF OURSELVES  
TO OTHERS

CONSTRAINS OUR LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS

PIXAR  
MOVIE

# INSIDE OUT

FOLLOWS RILEY & HER  
EMOTIONS AS HER FAMILY  
MOVES CITY

WELL WORTH WATCHING  
IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IT



Previously Riley's inner world was dominated by Joy who made it her business to ensure that Riley remained as happy as possible, building up a store of mostly joyful memories which have, in turn, shaped her personality. However, following the move, many of these memories become tainted by Sadness – who can't seem to stop herself from touching them and turning them blue.

In her attempts to prevent Sadness from causing any more damage, Joy manages to get both of them ejected from the control room to the outer reaches of Riley's inner world. This leaves Anger, Fear and Disgust in charge while Joy and Sadness try everything they can to get back before Riley runs away from her new home. We see how Riley – and Joy's – attempts to keep her joyful tragically have the opposite effect. By trying to sustain her joyful persona in the face of great pain she actually becomes angry, anxious and cut-off, and risks losing the love of her parents as they don't recognise her anymore.



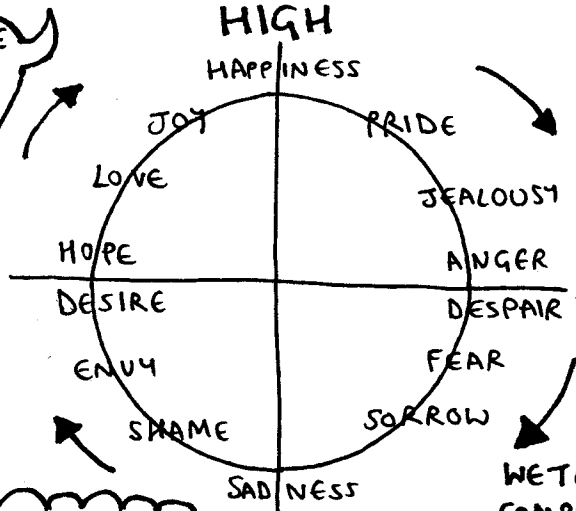
## MESSAGE:

- WE NEED ALL OUR EMOTIONS
- NOT JUST THE 'POSITIVE' ONES
- THINGS GO BADLY WHEN JUST SOME TAKE CHARGE
- MUCH BETTER WHEN THEY ALL WORK TOGETHER

# THE EMOTION COMPASS

(EXISTENTIAL THERAPIST GEMMY VAN DEURZEN)

ALL FEELINGS ARE SENSIBLE & HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL US



DEPRESSION  
DISAPPOINTMENT  
DISENGAGEMENT

↑  
ANXIETY  
EXCITEMENT  
ENGAGEMENT

↓  
WE TRAVEL ROUND THE COMPASS ALL THE TIME

WHICH EMOTIONS DO YOU FIND EASY/DIFFICULT?  
WHERE DO YOU GET STUCK?

Critically, Van Deurzen argues that we need to be able to experience all of the emotions to go around the compass like this. If there are emotions which we shut down or avoid then we're likely to get stuck in one place. Paradoxically if we disallow one emotion - like sadness - we're likely to get stuck and find that we stop experiencing other emotions - like joy - much too. If we lose the capacity to experience some of the emotions entirely we risk falling into depression and all of our emotions becoming shut off.

WE DON'T ALWAYS TRAVEL IN THE SAME DIRECTION  
WE CAN EXPERIENCE 'OPPOSING' EMOTIONS SIMULTANEOUSLY

E.G. JOY & SADNESS      ANGER & HOPE  
FEAR & DETERMINATION

WE NEED TO LEARN TO STAY WITH ALL OUR EMOTIONS  
E.G. DECISION-MAKING

EMOTIONS DRAWING US TOWARDS THIS CHOICE  
EXCITEMENT      HOPE  
GUILT



EMOTIONS PUSHING US AWAY FROM IT  
WORRY      SELF-LOATHING  
INDIGNATION  
HOPE THAT CHANGE ISN'T NEEDED

# SHUTTING DOWN OUR EMOTIONS PROBLEM

WE LEARN THROUGH OUR LIVES THAT CERTAIN FEELINGS AREN'T OK TO EXPRESS — OR EVEN — TO EXPERIENCE

CAN YOU REMEMBER TIMES IN CHILDHOOD/ ADOLESCENCE WHEN YOU LEARNT THAT CERTAIN FEELINGS WERE UNACCEPTABLE?

DIFFERENT TIMES & DIFFERENT EMOTIONS FOR EACH OF US

MAY HAVE BEEN GRADUAL OR SUDDEN OR BOTH

STILL HAPPENS IN ADULTHOOD

I REMEMBER STOPPING MYSELF FEELING EXCITED BECAUSE MY DAD WAS ALWAYS PROMISING THINGS AND THEN LETTING ME DOWN

YOU HAD TO BE TOUGH AT OUR SCHOOL. YOU COULDN'T SHOW ANY FEAR

I HAD A BIG HIPPIE FAMILY & WE WERE NEVER SUPPOSED TO BE ENVIOUS OF WHAT SOMEONE ELSE HAD OR HOW THEY WERE DOING

WHAT DID SHUTTING DOWN THESE EMOTIONS MEAN FOR...

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF  
YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS  
YOUR LIFE CHOICES  
WHAT YOU REMEMBER & DON'T?

- SOMETIMES WE MANAGED TO SHUT OFF THESE FEELINGS
- OTHER TIMES TRYING TO SHUT THEM OFF MEANT THEY EXPLODED OUT OCCASIONALLY, OR THEY BECAME DEFINING PARTS OF

# LEVELS 0

On the outer level our wider culture gives us strong messages about which emotions it is okay to express or feel and which it isn't. Generally in western cultures we're encouraged to express happiness and 'positive' experiences and not 'negative' ones. The British 'stiff upper lip' also discourages expressions of fear, and perhaps anger. Also messages differ depending on our individual identities, with certain emotions being seen as more or less acceptable for people of certain genders, classes, ages, or nationalities, for example.

WHAT MESSAGES DO YOU RECEIVE FROM YOUR WIDER CULTURE ABOUT EMOTIONS?

WHAT COMMUNITIES & INSTITUTIONS HAVE YOU BEEN PART OF? HOW WERE EMOTIONS POLICED THERE?

WIDER

COMMUNITIES

INTERPERSONAL

INTER  
WORK

On the next level in, our communities and institutions also reinforce many of these messages. For example in school we might have been judged for being too enthusiastic and uncool. In the workplace there might be no place for 'becoming emotional' or we might be encouraged to look like we're all in a constant state of anxiety and overwhelm. We might have community norms about whether it's good or bad to express anger or jealousy.

It's easy to find ourselves joining in a kind of *tone policing* in our communities – of whatever kind – whereby certain emotions are deemed unacceptable to admit to or express – for certain people or across the board. It's worth being mindful of this whenever we find ourselves judging how somebody 'should' or 'shouldn't' feel about something.



# F EXPERIENCE

WHAT EMOTIONS WERE  
ACCEPTABLE/UNACCEPTABLE  
IN YOUR FAMILY?  
WHAT ABOUT IN YOUR  
RELATIONSHIPS NOW?

CULTURE

INSTITUTIONS

RELATIONSHIPS

INTERNALISED

At the interpersonal level we learn a great deal about acceptable and unacceptable feelings from our close relationships, particularly from the family and friends who are around us growing up.

It's important to remember that our parents – and the other close people in our lives – also live in the same wider culture as we do with all of its crappy messages about unacceptable feelings. They're also part of institutions and communities that have done a number on them. And they're in their own family systems wherein certain emotions have been deemed too dangerous or threatening. So they may well have responded by giving us a clear message that our fear, sadness, anger, joy, disgust, or other feelings, were not something that they could be around, that they couldn't love us if we expressed them, or that we should protect them from those feelings.

Systemic therapy also talks about how people in family and friendship groups often become fixed in relation to certain feelings, for example as 'the happy one', 'the problem one', the person who has to worry about everybody, or the person who everyone is scared of upsetting. The system as a whole can keep us stuck there.

WHICH OF THESE MESSAGES  
DO YOU GO ALONG WITH?  
WHICH DO YOU RESIST?

We will have internalised all of these messages from the other levels. Either we'll have managed to find a way of shutting down the 'bad' emotions entirely, or – perhaps – in trying to shut them down we'll have managed to make them shout more loudly so we've become defined by them. There are so many ways that this can go.

# HOW TO STAY WITH OUR FEELINGS



SO HERE WE ALL ARE AS ADULTS WITH THESE IMBALANCES, EXAGGERATIONS & SILENCES IN OUR EMOTIONAL STATES

## SOLUTION: PRACTISE STAYING WITH FEELINGS

(TECHNIQUES LIKE FOCUSING & F.E.A.R.) →

CAN BE DONE IN MANY WAYS E.G.

-   
 SITTING OR MEDITATION
-   
 THERAPY
-   
 WALKING WITH A FRIEND
-   
 WRITING / DRAWING
-   
 STRETCHING YOUR BODY

ALSO

ON THE SPOT WHEN THE FEELING COMES UP



OR



LATER WHEN REMEMBERING IT

- BUILD UP SLOWLY FROM EASIER / LESS LOADED EMOTIONS
  - REMEMBER HOW LONG WE'VE SPENT SHUTTING OFF EMOTIONS - IT'LL TAKE A WHILE TO PRACTISE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT
- INGRAINED HABIT (9) GO EASY ON YOURSELF

# FOCUSING

## ① ARRIVING

- Sit comfortably and quietly and bring your attention slowly to your body and how it's feeling.



## ② MEETING

- Ask what wants your attention. Focus in on any sensation or 'felt sense' that you notice in your body  
(YOU CAN SCAN THROUGH YOUR BODY IF THAT HELPS)
- Say 'hello' to that sensation: welcome it warmly. Check in with yourself whether it feels okay to spend some time on that sensation now (if not it's fine to stop, or to focus on something different).

HM... I NOTICE TIGHTNESS IN MY THROAT... A BIT OF CURNING IN MY STOMACH... IS IT OK TO FOCUS ON MY THROAT? ... OK...



IT'S LIKE A SENSE BALL STUCK IN MY THROAT



## ③ BEING WITH

- Really listen to the sensation, try to find the best way to describe it
- Check back in with the sensation to see whether that description fits well enough, or whether you need to change it or add to it
- Stay with the feeling, with interested curiosity, not trying to change it, or to force it to communicate: just being with it gently and curiously. Try to understand it from it's point of view. Notice any words, images, or metaphors that come to mind. Acknowledge everything that comes up, e.g. further feelings or lack of feelings.

AS I FOCUS ON IT IT FEELS A LITTLE LOOSER & LESS STUCK

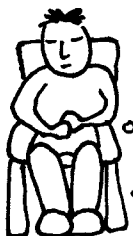
IMPORTANT - YOU MIGHT REACH SOME UNDERSTANDING OR SHIFT & YOU MIGHT NOT - IT'S FINE EITHER WAY

NOT STUCK, RAMMED IN LIKE A CORK IN A BOTTLE

THERE'S A SENSE THAT IT'S PLAYING A ROLE - STOPPING THINGS FROM OVERFLOWING

## ④ CLOSING

- When it feels ready to finish you can check in whether there's anything more that wants your attention.
- If not, express gratitude to the feeling, and to your body, and reassure it that you'll keep coming back to listen to it - and other feelings - in this friendly way.



ANYTHING ELSE?

THANK-YOU, I'LL BE BACK

# FOCUSING PARTNERSHIPS

IT CAN HELP A LOT TO HAVE A FRIEND SIT WITH YOU & LISTEN WHILE YOU TAKE YOURSELF THROUGH FOCUSING PRACTICE YOU CAN TAKE IT IN TURNS TO BE THE LISTENER

- Sit comfortably and quietly opposite the other person, trying to be present with them, and with your own body, feelings, and responses.
  - Let them know how much time they have (perhaps 10-15 minutes).
- Wait till they speak and make sure you pause before responding, often just with minimal prompts (mm, yes, uhuh, etc.)
  - Reflect back what they've said, using the same words that they've used to describe the emotions, bodily sensations, or images that have come up for them. If they say a lot of things, just reflect back the last thing.
- Let them know when they're reaching the end of the time so that they can move towards the ending.

Don't ask questions, interpret or analyze what they're saying, or give suggestions or advice.



# FOCUSING ON A MEMORY

IN FOCUSING YOU CAN EITHER START FROM A BODILY SENSATION OR FROM A SPECIFIC RECENT MEMORY

EITHER WAY IT'S USEFUL TO NOTICE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING THINGS THAT COME UP FOR YOU... \*

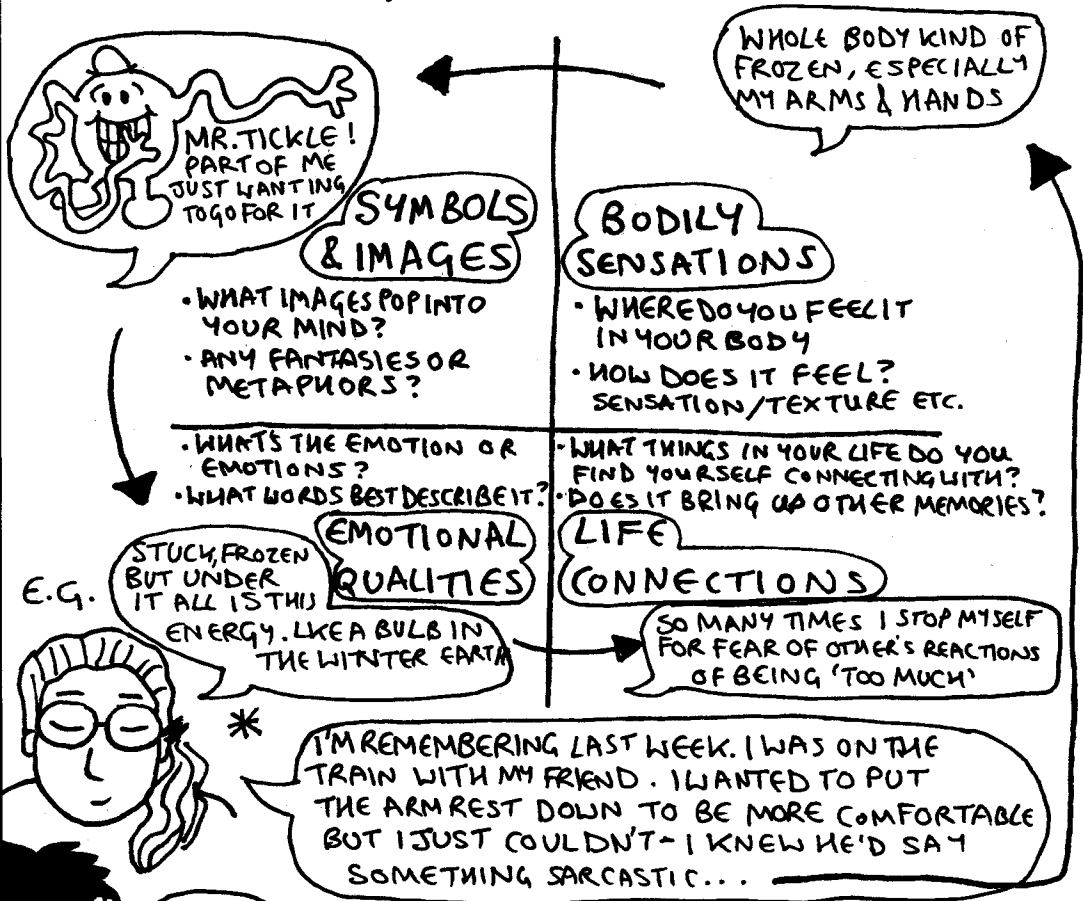


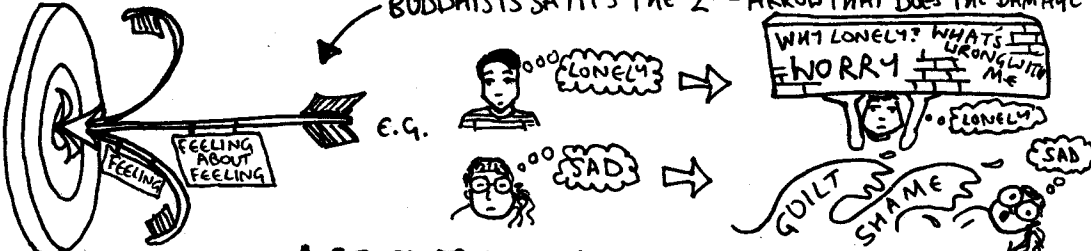
IMAGE	BODY
EMOTION	MEMORY

12

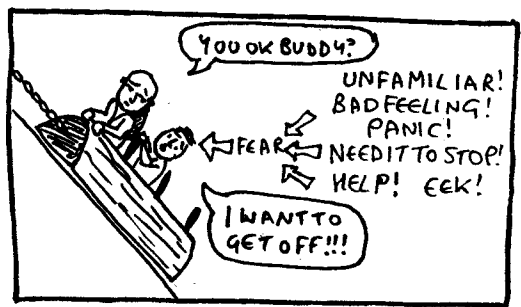
TRY IT YOURSELF... YOU CAN JOT DOWN WORDS, IMAGES OR ABSTRACT COLOURS OR SHAPES IN EACH OF THE 4 QUADRANTS AS YOU REMEMBER

# FEELINGS ABOUT FEELINGS

BECAUSE OF THE LIMITING MESSAGES WE RECEIVE ABOUT EMOTIONS WE OFTEN NOTICE INFOCUSING THAT FEELINGS ABOUT FEELINGS COME UP  
 BUDDHISTS SAY IT'S THE 2<sup>ND</sup> ARROW THAT DOES THE DAMAGE



A STORY FROM KIRK SOUDER...



FOCUSING WHEN FEELINGS ABOUT FEELINGS COME UP

STAY WITH ALL OF THEM

BEHIND THEY'RE ALL TRYING TO HELP...

I NOTICE A HOT TIGHT RAGE

ANGER

I NOTICE SELF-DISGUST FOR FEELING ANGER

I NOTICE HEAVY SADNESS AT HOW QUICKLY I'M DISGUSTED WITH MYSELF

DISGUST

SADNESS



# F.E.A.R.

THIS IS BUDDHIST TEACHER  
PEMA CHÖDRÖN →



SHE TEACHES A MINDFUL  
PRACTICE FOR 'BEING  
PRESENT' TO OUR FEELINGS

**F**IND THE FEELING IN YOUR BODY

**E**MBRACE IT - INSTEAD OF OUR  
USUAL HABITS OF

WITHDRAWING FROM IT  
E.G. DISTRACTION /  
AVOIDANCE

OR  
REACTING TO IT  
E.G. TRYING TO GET RID OF IT  
ATTACKING  
WHATEVER  
TRIGGERED IT

**A**LLOW THOUGHTS ABOUT  
IT TO DISSOLVE &  
LIE BY THE SIDE WITH THE FEELING

Allowing the thoughts to dissolve is about letting go of these storylines and just remaining with the actual feeling: its texture, strength, colour, where you feel it in your body, sensation, etc.

OH NO I FEEL LOW. WHAT'S GOING ON?  
MAYBE I'M DEPRESSED. WHAT'S WRONG WITH  
ME. MY LIFE IS GREAT. I SHOULDN'T FEEL  
DEPRESSED. I'M BEING SO STUPID. OTHER  
PEOPLE HAVE IT SO MUCH WORSE THAN ME.  
I'M A BAD PERSON. I MUST...

↑  
THE STORYLINE



**R**EMEMBER ALL THE OTHERS  
WHO FEEL, OR HAVE FELT  
THIS WAY

It can also be really helpful to remember to use tough feelings as a way of connecting with all the other people who're feeling this way. This turns you outwards towards the world, develops compassion, and can leave you feel less alone.

# STAYING WITH VS. RUSHING TO ENGAGE

## WHAT WE USUALLY DO: WITHDRAW

I start my day with something bothering me from the previous day, or just a general sense of anxiety, unease or irritation. Instead of giving that any time I get straight into my work. Or perhaps I'm at the end of the day and something that's happened is troubling me but I just launch into watching TV or socialising. When I do that, often there is a sense of something under the surface which is getting bigger and more frightening the more I try to push it down under all the busy-ness and distractions. When I finally stop work or turn of the TV it can feel much more fearsome than it did at the start, and I often realise that I haven't really been present to whatever I was working on, or enjoying what I was watching, because it's nagging away in the background.

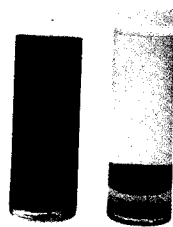
## OR REACT

I respond straight away to a difficult email, or I lash out at somebody who has upset me, or I make a snap decision about a tough situation. Often when that happens I'm aware that I haven't dealt with the situation as well as I might have: I've passed the difficult feeling on to someone else in a crappy kind of domino effect, or I've exacerbated a problem rather than helping with it.

PEMA  
SAYS



LIKE ALLOWING  
CHURNED UP  
MUDDY WATER  
TO SETTLE  
SO WE CAN  
SEE MORE  
CLEARLY



## ALTERNATIVE

- REFRAIN FROM ACTING
- SLOW DOWN
- STAY WITH THE FEELING  
KINDLY & CURIOUSLY

## REMEMBER

- THIS STUFF IS HARD - INVOLVES FACING SCARY FEELINGS  
BEING VULNERABLE & CONFRONTING OLD STOCK HABITS
- BE KIND WITH YOURSELF & TAKE IT SLOW
- MAYBE PRACTISE FOR SHORT PERIODS AT FIRST, BUILD  
UP FROM EASIER FEELINGS, MIX UP 'POSITIVE' &  
'NEGATIVE' FEELINGS, DO IT WHEN YOU'RE FEELING CALM



# A RADICAL APPROACH

USUALLY WE SEE DIFFICULT FEELINGS AS FEARSOME & THREATENING WE TRY TO AVOID THEM, OR GET RID OF THEM IF THEY DO COME UP PEMA SUGGESTS SEEING THEM INSTEAD AS FRIENDLY & SUPPORTIVE WELCOMING THEM IN FOR ALL THAT THEY HAVE TO TEACH US

WE MIGHT NEVER GET TO...



HEY I'M FEELING A DEEP SEARING SENSE OF SHAME. BRING IT ON!

BUT WE COULD AIM TOWARDS...



WOAH THAT THING THAT HAPPENED TODAY REALLY PRESSED MY BUTTONS. NO WONDER I RESPONDED IN SUCH A HEAVY-HANDED WAY. HOW CAN I LOOK AFTER MYSELF TONIGHT & MAKE SOME TIME TO REFLECT ON IT TOMORROW?

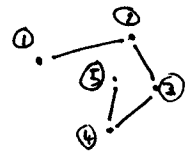
E.G. WRITING MY JOURNAL A FEW DAYS AFTER THIS



I tried to just be with the feelings and notice them, describing their texture, temperature and colour; really experiencing the sensations that arose in my body; widening out to notice how they unfold in time (What happens immediately beforehand? What is the overall situation I'm in when they happen? How do they tend to play out?) I tried to assume that the feelings were sensible, helpful things to have happened, it was just that I didn't know yet why they were sensible, and I needed to listen more carefully and kindly to them until they did make sense: however long that took.

HOT SHAME  
EMBARRASSMENT  
BUZZING  
IMPOTENT RAGE  
FIZZING  
NOT ALLOWED TO EXPRESS SELF  
MISUNDERSTOOD  
DANGER OF DISAPPROVAL

I found that after some time of staying with them, and curiously noticing them in this way, lots of things started to occur to me that hadn't before. It was like a process of joining the dots as all sorts of connections started to come to me. There was a feeling of weight lifting and being able to see things much more clearly and calmly for a while.



# STAYING WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S FEELINGS

www.rewriting-the-rules.com/2013/07/16/other-peoples-feelings

## WHEN OTHERS IN OUR LIVES EXPRESS DIFFICULT FEELINGS WE TEND TO...

**EITHER**

- IT'S NOT MY FAULT
- OWN YOUR FEELINGS
- YOU SHOULDN'T FEEL THAT WAY
- TONE POLICING
- DENIAL
- MINIMISING



I'M FEELING REALLY PISSED OFF

**OR**

- OH NO I MADE YOU FEEL THAT WAY
- I'M SO SORRY
- I FEEL TERRIBLE
- I MUST FIX IT
- LOOK AFTER ME I FEEL SO BAD NOW



PUT ALL RESPONSIBILITY ON THEM

PUT ALL RESPONSIBILITY ON US

## ALTERNATIVE

- RECOGNISE WE'RE ALL INTER-CONNECTED
- STAY WITH THEIR FEELINGS & OUR FEELINGS
- REMEMBER NO-ONE IS ALL GOOD OR ALL BAD

**KIND**

WE COULD TRY TO

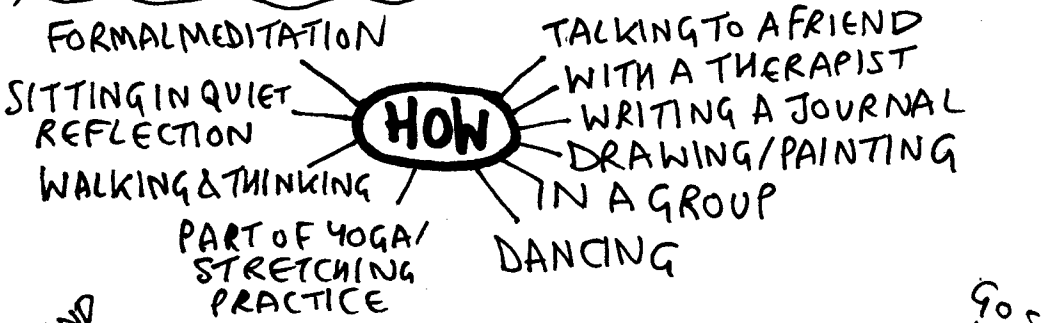
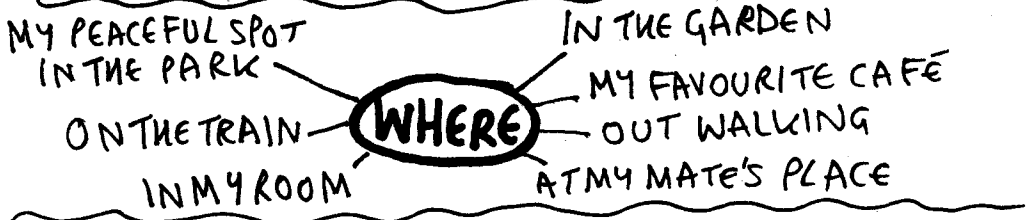
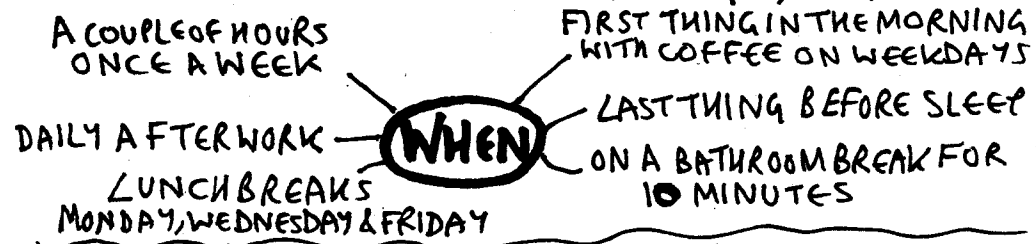
APPLY THE 'STAYING WITH FEELINGS' APPROACHES

**SLOW**

- BE PRESENT TO THEM & THEIR FEELINGS
- REALLY HEAR THEM & HOW IT IS FOR THEM
- NOTICE WHAT IT TRIGGERS IN US (ASK FOR TIME IF WE NEED TO PROCESS THAT)
- CHECK OUR UNDERSTANDING
- ONCE THEY'RE FINISHED FIND OUT WHAT THEY NEED
- BE CLEAR WHAT WE CAN OFFER & WHAT THE LIMITATIONS ARE ON THAT
- STAY OPEN INSTEAD OF CRAVING A 'PERFECT' OUTCOME

# BUILDING PRACTICES INTO OUR LIVES

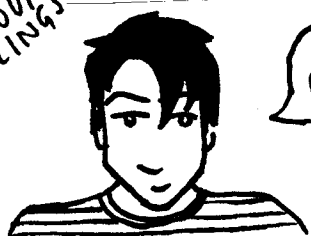
WE PRACTISE STAYING WITH OUR FEELINGS REGULARLY SO IT BECOMES EASIER TO DO 'ON THE SPOT' WHEN THEY COME UP, & WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S FEELINGS IT'S IMPORTANT TO FIND WHAT WORKS BEST FOR YOU YOU CAN TRY DIFFERENT THINGS, E.G.



BEHIND TO ALL YOUR FEELINGS

Sometimes when you stay with your feelings you find that they just shift and change by themselves; other times it leads to more of a sense of the water settling and seeing things more clearly; sometimes all you notice is just how hard staying with the feeling is, and how you spend the whole time drifting off, or trying to analyse it, or wanting it to stop. And if those things happen then they, in themselves, become something to stay with.

GO SLOW. IT TAKES TIME



I HOPE YOU FIND IT HELPFUL

# READ MORE

(IF YOU WANT TO)

[www.megjohnbarker.com](http://www.megjohnbarker.com)

(other zines and posts on emotions, happiness and mental health)

Pixar's Inside Out (2015)

Van Deurzen, E. (2008). *Psychotherapy and the quest for happiness*. Sage.  
([www.emmyvandeurzen.com](http://www.emmyvandeurzen.com))

Fredman, G. (2004). *Transforming emotion: Conversations in counselling and psychotherapy*. Whurr. (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/glenda-fredman-phd>)

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press. ([feministkilljoys.com](http://feministkilljoys.com)) \*

Cornell, A. W. (2000). *The power of focusing*. Thinking Allowed Productions.  
([www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org), [www.focusing.org.uk](http://www.focusing.org.uk))

Fear example:

<http://medium.com/@kirksouder/how-to-relate-to-fear-in-a-way-that-makes-it-ok-715a0e1bff89>

Chödrön, P. (2010). *The wisdom of no escape: And the path of loving-kindness*. Shambhala Publications. ([pemachodronfoundation.org](http://pemachodronfoundation.org))

\*THIS ONE IS  
MORE ACADEMIC



QUEERSQUARE  
ZINES