

## Working Through an Episode of Overwhelming Depression or Anxiety

**IMPORTANT** – If you are suicidal, stop now and get help. You can go to the nearest emergency room. You can call: 9-1-1; or in Washington County, PA 1-877-225-3567 or 724-225-3584; or in Allegheny County 1-888-796-8226; or at California University of PA 724-938-4357. The National Crisis Text Line is 741741.

If you feel able to face your feelings and are not suicidal, please continue on. If you become suicidal at any point, stop and get help.

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how upset are you right now?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

2. Even though your emotional brain is probably too upset to fully acknowledge this fact, remind yourself that **you will not always feel like this.** This is the single most important thing I can tell you. You've probably gone through something like this before and come out of it, so hopefully a little part of you knows it's true. If this is your first episode, please trust that you will come out of it. After you do come out of this episode (and it won't be long now), **the thoughts and images that are going through your mind right now will not bother you as much.** I know it's hard to believe this, but it's true. Your brain on high negative emotion is like a brain having a bad drug trip. You're going to listen to what your emotional brain has to say, but then we're going to start to move you back into your rational mindset where you'll start to feel better.
3. **Remind yourself that you are not alone in your misery.** These "dark nights of the soul" are very common. There's nothing wrong with you for having them. Right this minute, many people are experiencing the same level of deep, gut-wrenching despair or terrifying anxiety that you are experiencing. Sometimes, it's just really hard to be a fallible human living with other fallible humans in an imperfect, sometimes unsafe world. We do things we deeply regret; people betray us; we get sick or hurt; others get sick or hurt; we make a fool of ourselves; we disappoint ourselves; we disappoint others; we lose what we have, etc. These sorts of things happen to ALL of us at various times - and it hurts and makes us scared when they do. Your emotional distress is a normal reaction to your situation.
4. **The first step to healing is to go right into the pain or fear,** allowing yourself to fully feel your feelings. Our natural inclination is to tighten up and resist our painful feelings because we are well aware that confronting them will hurt. But, though that may be true, the pain that we feel will likely burn itself out more quickly if we allow it expression. As they say, "What you resist persists." Relax your body and open to what you are experiencing in this very moment.
  - a. Write down where you feel the pain or fear in your body and what it feels like (burning, heavy, tight, pressure, etc).
  - b. **Next, write down the painful thoughts and images that are going through your head** because, believe it or not, very soon you may not even remember the details of

this episode very well. So, what are those thoughts? What are those pictures in your head? **Write them down now! Be specific. Number them as you go.**

5. Again, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how upset are you right now?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

(It's okay if you aren't feeling better yet)

6. Now we're going to have you switch course so you can begin to **employ your rational mind again**. You needed to let your emotional mind express itself, but you don't want to stay in that mindset. An overly emotional mind is an impaired mind, and, if left to its own devices, will suck you into endless, unproductive, negative thought loops. It's trying to solve your problem for you, *but you won't solve anything using your impaired emotional mind; you will only get more upset*. Thinking rationally will *not* come easily right now because your emotional mind is going to resist it. To start employing the more rational part of your brain, I want you to **think about the following**:

If there is a guilt/regret/shame component to your problem:

- If you feel you did something wrong that led to your situation, what do you think are the underlying reasons that you did what you did? People will tend to beat themselves up, feeling that they messed up because they are inadequate in some way. But people act in certain ways for a variety of reasons, and usually for multiple reasons. Think about all the factors that may have influenced your behavior (including experiences from the past).
- By the way, if you have hit upon a blind spot or a weakness in yourself, that's normal. We all have them. Though it's hard for any of us to admit our imperfections, you will be a better person for having discovered this.
- Of course we need to own up to our responsibility in what happens (if we are responsible to some degree), but consider if what happened is really *completely* your fault? Is there any chance that someone else is also partially responsible, even if he/she won't admit it? If so, explain.

If there is a fear/anxiety component to your problem:

- Specifically, what are you afraid will happen?
- How likely is it that the worst will happen?

If there is a loss component to your problem:

- Is your mind idealizing what you had, making it seem like it was perfect when it wasn't?
- As long as you are breathing, there is hope - no matter what you've done, what others have done, or what you've lost. If you just hang in there, you will come out the other side.

- Consider that sometimes we don't really know what will turn out to be good fortune or bad fortune until much later. We can be surprised down the road when what seemed like bad fortune actually leads to something positive. Poet Mary Oliver, wrote, "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift (from *Thirst*)." Is there any possibility that anything good will come of this, or already has come of this? (For example, you will learn something, you will get closer to someone, etc.) If so, write it down).

For all:

- Can you think of any ways you can make the best of your current situation?
- Often we can find some solace if we remember to attend to the present moment. Life is only lived in the present. If you ask yourself if you are okay in this present moment, you might say you are, but that you're worried about what's to come down the road. But down the road, you will most likely still be feeling like the present moment is okay. Try to just experience the present moment for a while. Notice your breathing, what you see, hear, and feel. Realize that you are safe right now - and it will always be "right now."
- Do you have any religious or philosophical viewpoints or practices that might be helpful to remember now? For instance, do you believe that things happen for a reason, or that everything will turn out all right in the end?

7. **Take a deep breath and relax your body, relax your shoulders, relax your throat, relax your heart.**

8. Now it's time to **go back to your responses in item 4 and re-consider each of them.** Is there anything you could do to change their impact or prevent the worst from happening? Next to each one, write down any new, positive ideas you now have about those statements. Be specific and take your time. This task is an integral part of this healing exercise.

9. **Take a deep breath and relax your face, throat, shoulders, chest, and body.**

10. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how upset are you right now?

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(It's still okay if the number hasn't budged).

11. **For the rest of today, take extreme care of yourself.** You, my friend, have done a great job, but you are not out of the woods yet. Because you have just gone through (or perhaps are still going through) a highly emotional episode, your mind is in a vulnerable state. Remind yourself that you have already felt the pain at its maximum and you don't need to re-live it right now. For the next few hours, when the painful or fearful thoughts and images come up again, you need to say to yourself, "**Let it go.**" **There's no need to go back to the painful thoughts right now.** You need to protect yourself. You are likely to have some mood swings for a while, something akin to aftershocks. The bad feelings may return, though they probably won't last as long as the first time. The return of these feelings is not

a setback. Consider these emotional aftershocks as your chance to practice saying, "Let it go." You will allow your mind to go back to thinking about your problem when you need to, but for now, give your mind a chance to heal.

- 12. Do something pleasurable.** First, write down all the things you can think of that normally give you some degree of pleasure. Even write down things you can't do right now. Here are some ideas: go for a walk; go to the gym; talk to a family member or friend you think you can trust; paint or color just for fun; read a book; play a video game; read for pleasure; listen to an inspirational podcast.

Pick an activity that you can do right now and circle it. Now get up (or at least sit up) and go do it, putting your full attention on it. Remember, if the bad feelings arise, say, "Let it go." Also, keep in mind that you are doing the activity to heal your brain. Drop all concerns about painting the perfect picture or getting in a grueling work-out.

- 13. Now, write down small tasks you would like to perform,** like reading for 10 minutes, doing 10 minutes of homework, making one phone call, or unloading the dishwasher. Ideally, these will be tasks you can tolerate easily. Pick one now and circle it.

Once you get the task done, pat yourself on the back. Even a small sense of accomplishment goes a long way toward easing depression. **You may want to continue to alternate between pleasant and work-related activities for a while.** Keep your attention on what you're doing to the extent you can.

14. Now think about what are you happy about or grateful for?

15. What are your strengths?

16. Is there anything you're looking forward to in the future? If not, is there something you could plan?

17. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest, how upset are you right now?

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- 18. There are things you should avoid right now.** You are developing skills to get through the bad times. You don't need to use drugs or alcohol. In fact, substances could potentially make things worse. I would also recommend the following for today, if possible: Don't over-stress yourself with too much work or exercise; don't over-do the caffeine, especially if you are fearful; don't decide you're going to crack down on yourself today in some way; don't watch, read, or listen to anything sad; and don't stay up too late tonight. Also, it might be best if you don't make any major decisions today. Just take good care of yourself.

- 19. Continued self-care is important.** When the bad feelings or thoughts return, you can go back through this exercise if you'd like, making any modifications that seem right to you. You need to try to stay open to the pain, but you don't want to allow the pain to set up shop

in your brain. You allow the pain in, but always with the goal of ultimately releasing it. First thing in the morning, though, you may want to avoid the painful thoughts. Instead, **every day when you wake up**, give some thought to what you are grateful for and happy about in your life. Maybe you can only think of little things, but that's okay. You will be starting the day on a positive note, which will go a long way toward staying emotionally healthy. You may find it helpful to **plan for future episodes**. You can make a list of: beliefs to remember in hard times; things you find pleasurable; things you look forward to; things you are grateful for or happy about; and your strengths. When you get emotional, it's easy to forget the positive aspects of your life, so having reminders may be helpful. Also you can list emergency numbers in case you need them.

20. **If you need something more, help is available.** Please do not seriously consider suicide because you will get through this and you will actually be happy in the future, *no matter what* is happening to you in your current life. See today as a launching point to a better life and start making small changes to create that life. Don't attend to those negative movies that might be playing in your head about your future. Imagine a positive movie and attend to that. If you are considering suicide, you need to tell someone who can help, call 9-1-1, or go to the ER. Suicidal thoughts are the result of a brain in need of healing. Check out Andrew Solomon's TED talks on depression.

That's it! I applaud you for doing what you can to feel better. I wish you the very best. If you have any suggestions for this exercise, I'd appreciate your input: [moeller@calu.edu](mailto:moeller@calu.edu). Note that email is not a completely confidential form of communication.

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