

Opposite Action to Change Emotions

Emotions come with specific ACTION URGES that push us to act in certain ways.

Often we escape the pain of the emotion in harmful ways.

These are common URGES associated with a sample of emotions:

FEAR → Escaping or avoiding

ANGER → Attacking

SADNESS → Withdrawing, becoming passive, isolating

SHAME → Hiding, avoiding, withdrawing, saving face by attacking others

GUILT → Overpromise that you will not commit the offense again, disclaim all responsibility, hiding, lowering head, begging forgiveness

JEALOUSY → Verbal accusations, attempt to control, acting suspicious

LOVE → Saying "I love you," making effort to spend time with the person, doing what the other person wants and needs, and giving affection

ACTING OPPOSITE = act opposite to the action urge when the emotion is doing more harm than good (see Emotion Regulation Handout 4, "What Good Are Emotions?").

EMOTION-----OPPOSITE ACTION

Fear/Anxiety-----APPROACH

- Approach events, places, tasks, activities, people you are afraid of, over and over; confront.
- Do things to increase a sense of control and mastery over fears.

Anger-----GENTLY AVOID

- Gently avoid the person you are angry with (rather than attacking).
- Take a time out and breathe in and out deeply and slowly.
- Be kind rather than mean or attacking. (Try to have sympathy or empathy for the other person.)

Sadness-----GET ACTIVE

- Approach, don't avoid.
- Build mastery and increase pleasant activities.

(continued)

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EMOTION-----OPPOSITE ACTION

Shame-----**FACE THE MUSIC** (when your behavior violates your moral values or something shameful has been revealed about you and the shame fits the facts):

- Apologize and repair the harm when possible.
- Try to avoid making same mistake in the future and accept consequences.
- Forgive yourself and let it go.

GO PUBLIC (when your behavior DOES NOT violate your moral values and the shame does NOT fit the facts):

- You continue to participate fully in social interactions, hold your head high, keep your voice steady, and make eye contact.
- Go public with your personal characteristics or your behavior (with people who won't reject you).
- Repeat the behavior that sets off shame over and over (without hiding it from those who won't reject you).

Guilt-----**FACE THE MUSIC** (when your behavior violates your moral values, hurts feelings of significant others, and the guilt fits the facts):

- Experience the guilt.
- You ask, but don't beg, for forgiveness and accept the consequences.
- You repair the transgression and work to prevent it from happening again.

DON'T APOLOGIZE OR TRY TO MAKE UP FOR IT (when your behavior DOES NOT violate your moral values and the guilt does NOT fit the facts):

- Change your body posture, look innocent and proud, head up, puff up your chest, maintain eye contact, keep voice steady and clear.

Jealousy-----**LET GO OF CONTROLLING OTHERS' ACTIONS** (when it does not fit the facts or is not effective):

- Stop spying or snooping.
- Relax your face and body.

Love-----**STOP EXPRESSING LOVE** (when it does not fit the facts or is not effective, e.g., the relationship is truly over, not accessible, or abusive):

- Avoid the person and distract yourself from thoughts of the person.
- Remind yourself of why love is not justified and rehearse the "cons" of loving this person.
- Avoid contact with things that remind you of the person (e.g., pictures).

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OPPOSITE ACTION WORKS BEST WHEN:

1. **The emotion does NOT FIT THE FACTS.**

- An emotion does *not fit the facts* when:
 - The emotion does *not fit the facts* of the actual situation (e.g., terror in response to speaking in public)

or

- The emotion, its intensity, or its duration are *not effective* for your goals in the situation (e.g., you feel angry at your math teacher, but three periods later you're still fuming and can't focus on science).

2. **The opposite action is done ALL THE WAY.**

- Opposite behavior
- Opposite words and thinking
- Opposite facial expression, voice tone, and posture

OPPOSITE ACTION REQUIRES THESE seven STEPS:

1. Figure out the emotion you are feeling.
2. What is the action URGE that goes with the emotion?
3. Ask yourself: Does the emotion fit the facts in the situation? If yes, will acting on the emotion's urge be effective?
4. Ask yourself: Do I want to change the emotion?
5. If yes, figure out the OPPOSITE ACTION.
6. Do the opposite action—ALL THE WAY!
7. Repeat acting in the opposite way until the emotion goes down enough for you to notice.