



# Sit With Negative Emotions, Don't Push Them Away

Arthur C. Brooks | June 18, 2020

**If we want a life full of deep meaning, true love, and emotional strength, it's going to involve the risk (and often the reality) of discomfort, conflict, and loss.**

I was 5 years old when Woodstock took place. The only thing I remember about it was a hippie on television saying, “If it feels good, do it.” Given the limits of my feel-good experiences at the time, I imagined not the sexual revolution and drug culture but hippies eating lots of candy and staying up past their bedtime watching television.

I think that a similarly radical life philosophy is brewing in our culture, and it started well before the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world inside out with fear of sickness and economic pain. It might be summarized as “If it feels bad, make it stop.” From schools to workplaces, we are told that ordinary negative emotions and experiences—fear of failure, or sadness over a breakup, maybe—should be treated or eliminated. Feeling bad is bad.

This is an error, as was the Woodstock motto. I don't believe that either radical hedonism or eradicating bad feelings is the path to a good life, or for that matter, very sensible. To be clear, I am not talking about medical issues such as clinical depression, anxiety, or trauma. I am talking about the sadness and misfortunes that are inherent to a normal life, and even the “negative affect” that some people have in relative abundance. (Including me, by the way: No one studies happiness unless they find it elusive.)

People are experiencing more than just everyday bad feelings right now. Many have lost jobs and loved ones and are feeling the devastation of this once-in-a-lifetime tragedy. Even for those of us who haven't, however, the pandemic is a particularly rough patch in our lives. But we have an opportunity here to assess the benefits of negative emotions and experiences—and how we can use them for personal improvement instead of trying to push them away.

Let's start with a fairly obvious point: Negative emotions exist to keep us safe. The primary negative emotions include sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. We experience them in an involuntary way in response to environmental stimuli. You never say to yourself, Hey, I think I'll feel afraid now—you just feel it and react with fight or flight, which can save your life. Disgust similarly alerts us involuntarily to potential pathogens. Of course, your system can be hyperactive—you can have an anger-management problem or be excessively fearful—but the broader point is: Although they aren't fun, bad feelings are supremely important.

Negative emotions can also make us more effective in our day-to-day activities. In an influential 2009 article in the journal *Psychological Review*, the evolutionary psychologists Paul W. Andrews and J. Anderson Thomson argue that sadness—and even depression—have persisted in the face of evolution because they bring cognitive benefits. There is evidence that sadness makes us better at assessing reality in social situations,

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because we are less likely to flatter ourselves or gloss over negative truths. Sadness can even make us more productive at work by enhancing focus and helping us learn from mistakes. This is how failure, via the resulting negative emotions, can help lead to later success.

Psychologists have found that many of the most meaningful experiences in life are quite painful. In one 2018 study, for example, two psychologists at Western Illinois University asked a large group of college students to report the positive and negative emotions—as well as the meaningfulness—they associated with their education and with their relationships. The students reported that these things gave them tremendous meaning, but that the cost was high. As the researchers summarized their findings, “Meaning involves negative affect and worry about loss.”

Finally, exposure to negative emotions makes us stronger for when there is a true crisis. Research shows that “stress inoculation training”—in which people learn to cope with anger, fear, and anxiety by being exposed to stimuli that cause these feelings—is effective in creating emotional resilience. It is easy to imagine that attempts to eliminate bad feelings from daily life could lead to a sort of “emotional allergy”—that when hard times come and someone feels grief or fear that is impossible to ignore, that person will not have the tools to face these feelings.

In sum, if we want a life full of deep meaning, true love, and emotional strength, it’s going to involve the risk (and often the reality) of discomfort, conflict, and loss. This means there will be sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. If we eliminate negative emotions and experiences from our lives, we will be poorer and weaker for having done so.

Even if we are lucky enough to avoid catastrophic loss, the current pandemic is a psychological stress test for most of us. Many people reading this are experiencing anxiety about the future, disappointment about missed opportunities, and other negative feelings. And there are fewer distractions from these feelings, meaning that some are sitting with negative emotions in a way to which they are unaccustomed. To help us turn these moments into an opportunity for growth, we can learn from and emulate those who are experienced in managing discomfort: athletes, monks, and the elderly.

## **1. BE AN ATHLETE.**

Some readers may remember the fitness legend Jack LaLanne, who lived to 96 and was both active and ripped to the very end. He must have loved working out, right? Wrong. In his immortal words, “I hate exercise.” This may be a bit extreme, but it betrays a truth about fitness so fundamental that it’s become a cliché: No pain, no gain. And so it can be with fear and disappointment. We can accept that avoiding them is the fast road to ill health, and that struggling through them can lead to progress. At first, it is painful. Little by little, however, we begin to lean in—to associate these negative feelings with the emotional strength that they can bring.

## **2. BE A MONK.**

In the ancient Buddhist text *The Dhammapada*, the Lord Buddha is quoted as saying, “He who has no attachment whatsoever for the mind and body, who does not grieve for what he has not—he is truly called

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a monk.” We can all gain insight from this. At present, almost all of us are separated from people, experiences, and things we ordinarily enjoy. Some of these losses—of lives and livelihoods— must be grieved. But through conscious detachment, we can lessen our suffering for the loss of worldly things that perhaps we don’t really need. Whether it is eating out, traveling, or going to the gym, this is an opportunity to examine each of our previous commitments. How much of our time and energy were they occupying? What is this separation teaching us about our priorities? By sitting with these uncomfortable feelings, we may be able to let go of some of the grief we feel for our old way of life, and become just a bit more monk-like in our approach to quarantine.

### 3. BE A SAGE.

The challenges we are facing during this period can give us a jump-start on a key element of wisdom that usually takes many years to develop. Psychologists have shown that one of the greatest consolations of old age is that while older people have negative emotions just like the rest of us, they suffer less from them. One reason for this is that they have learned that although negative events are inevitable, negative feelings are fleeting, unless we choose to hang on to them. They figure out that they get a head start on feeling well not by avoiding bad feelings, but by simply choosing to let these bad feelings pass through them. So to get a head start on this head start, imagine yourself in a few months, not feeling bad about this moment. You will be amazed at how well this works to give you perspective and relief in the present.

One last thought: In 2019, the comedian Stephen Colbert was asked in an interview by CNN’s Anderson Cooper about a plane crash that killed Colbert’s father and two of his brothers when he was 10 years old. Cooper quoted a previous statement by Colbert that he had learned to “love the thing that I most wish had not happened.” He asked Colbert to clarify this extraordinary remark. “It’s a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering,” Colbert replied. “I don’t want it to have happened ... but if you are grateful for your life ... then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can’t pick and choose what you’re grateful for.”

Colbert’s words resonated deeply with me, and perhaps they do with you, too. No normal person skips merrily into a tragic loss, nor usually seeks out even minor discomfort. But those things find us, over and over again in life. This is especially true today, in the era of COVID-19. The meaning from this pain, and the benefits it can bring to our lives and society, comes from how we choose to use it.

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