

Using “Opposite Action” to Deal with Difficult Emotions

Objective

To help you learn to take action, in response to difficult emotions, that is contrary to what you might naturally do, using a technique called “opposite action.”

You Should Know

When we experience a strong emotion, such as fear, anger, or sadness, our tendency is to take action in response. It is a natural instinct to do something to make it go away. Sometimes that is a good strategy. For instance, if you see a snake slithering on the sidewalk and you experience fear, it is a good strategy to run in the other direction as a response to potential danger. But sometimes we experience fear when there is no actual danger, and running away from the situation doesn’t solve the problem.

Psychologist Marsha Linehan, who developed a therapeutic approach called Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), suggests a tool for identifying and regulating our emotions, which she calls “Opposite Action.” So, as the snake example makes sense, what about a person who has to give a speech and feels fear? That fear may be very real but dashing out of the room might not make sense—and, in reality, there is no actual danger, just a worry about something bad happening. That person might choose to face into it, take deep breaths, tell themselves that they are going to be all right. That is what Linehan means by “opposite action,” that is, taking charge of the emotion and, with repeated practice, mastering it.

The skill of opposite action is not the same as suppressing our emotions. We remain present and notice the emotion, then consciously use it to take a different action. With practice, this action can actually *change the emotion* over time. With sadness or depression, for example, the habitual action is to stay in bed, hide away. An opposite action would be to visit a friend, go to the gym, cook a nice meal. It’s not that you’re denying the emotion. You are working with it, challenging it by acting opposite to it, and, eventually, turning it around.

What to Do

In this worksheet, you will notice when and in what situations you experience difficult emotions, then keep track of what you typically do in response. Then you will have a chance to try out various ways of taking “opposite action” in response.

Typical responses to difficult emotions include:

- Fear—running away or avoiding the perceived danger
- Anger—fighting back or becoming defensive
- Sadness—isolate, withdraw, retreat

In the chart below, write down your experience of fear, anger, or sadness, and your typical response:

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Typical Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

To practice opposite action, try the following.

Fear—stay in the situation; take deep breaths; tell yourself “I can do this”; stand up straight; keep your eyes up

Anger—step away from the situation or person you feel anger toward; take deep breaths; count to ten; consider the other person’s side; practice compassion; write down your feelings

Sadness—don’t avoid the situation; let yourself cry if you feel sad; don’t choose “numbing” distractions such as substances or entertainment; choose an activity that is engaging and productive, with other people; don’t isolate or retreat

Opposite action is most effective when your emotions *do not fit* the actual reality of the situation, as in the public speaking example above where there is no actual danger. So your experience of “terror” ends up not being effective in helping you overcome your fear. Doing the

opposite, and doing it with all of your energy and commitment, is important to this skill. You can change your thoughts, your words, even your facial expressions and physical stance.

Start with emotions that aren't too intense so you can practice experiencing the change from "habitual/typical" to "effective." Repeat this as often as necessary before moving on to tackling, and mastering, stronger or more intense emotional situations. Think of the process as learning and practicing a new language—it might feel awkward at first, but it will get easier over time.

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Opposite Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What did you notice about your typical or habitual ways of dealing with difficult emotions?

2. Are your typical ways of handling emotions effective or ineffective? Explain.

3. Describe what happened when you tried to do “opposite action.” Was it easy? Challenging? What can you do to continue practicing this skill? Elaborate below or on a separate piece of paper.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
