

Building Your Emotional Muscles

Learning to tolerate powerful emotion without acting on it is a skill that can be learned. It almost always requires work and regular practice, but the effort is necessary for gaining true wisdom and deep joy. I liken it to exercise, particularly good strength training.

More and more we're hearing about the importance of having strong core muscles. These muscles in the torso: back, abdominals, chest, etc. support the rest of our physical frame as we engage in all manner of activities. They turn out to be highly significant in helping us keep our balance, maintain good posture, regulate our weight and keep our bones healthy, among other benefits.

Learning to tolerate uncomfortable emotion, without reactivity, is a way of building core emotional strength. It is necessary for us, so that we can then learn emotional balance. If we can attend to what we feel, we then have the opportunity to be informed by our experience. Awareness of our emotions allows the possibility of choosing how to proceed, increasing the chances of our own satisfaction.

Here's an example. Let's say we come to recognize that we feel angry about a situation, but our anger frightens us because we're afraid of the conflict it may produce. If we simply shut down because the thought of a conflict is too overwhelming, the chances are good that we will regret this later. Decisions may get made which don't take into account our preferences or needs. How do we get out of this dilemma? If we can recognize both the anger and the fear, without reacting to them prematurely, we have an opportunity to try a new way. We can either directly address the issue with the pertinent people, or perhaps even decide that this is not a fight worth fighting.

The difference between shutting off the emotions and making a mindful decision to refrain from action is significant. In one case, resentment and bitterness are likely. Repeated experiences of resentment and bitterness are often at the root of depression, disconnection from loved ones and sometimes physical ailments. In the other case, there may be disappointment, but there is also recognition that the best choice was made, allowing for a much greater chance of finding acceptance even for an unwanted outcome.