

UNCONDITIONAL PRESENCE:

LETTING YOURSELF HAVE YOUR EXPERIENCE

Since we can never gain assurance that we are lovable through trying to prove our worth or cover up our flaws, what we need instead is a way to discover our core nature as intrinsically beautiful, already, just as it is. This is what can free us from the whole bad self/bad other runaround.

The journey from self-hatred to self-love involves learning to meet, accept, and open to the being that you are. This begins with *letting yourself have your experience*. Genuine self-acceptance is not possible as long as you are resisting, avoiding, judging, or trying to manipulate and control what you experience. Whenever you judge the experience you're having, you're not letting yourself be as you are. And this puts you at odds with yourself, creating inner division and conflict. The way to free yourself from shame and self-blame is through making friends with your experience, no matter what experience you're having.

Letting ourselves have our experience can be quite challenging, since nobody ever taught us how to relate honestly and directly to what we are feeling. Instead, the conventional wisdom in our culture is: If you're depressed or anxious, take a pill, go work out at the gym, or turn on the television — because the only solution to bad feelings is to get away from them.

Often when I try to help people open to their experience, they say something like: "I've felt this

sadness all my life. What good is it to sit here and keep feeling it? I've already had enough of this!" While this is understandable, there is a hidden story contained in our resistance to feeling. The storyline is: "If I feel my sadness, it will just pull me down into a bottomless black hole." This underlying belief comes from the helpless child within us who has never learned to handle his or her experience. For the child, it was true: Our sadness was bigger than we were because we didn't have the knowledge or capacity to process intense feelings. So our only option was to shut down our nervous system in the face of our pain. The problem is that we still try to run away from our feelings, even though as an adult we now have the capacity to do something different.

Yes, we have carried our pain within us all our lives. Yes, we have felt weighed down by it, felt at its mercy. Since the pain was bigger than we were as children, and we were helpless in the face of it, shutting down was the only way we could deal with it. So it's understandable that we see no benefit in opening ourselves to such feelings. And it's true: Passively becoming submerged or carried away by feelings *is* useless and futile. This is *unconscious suffering*.

This is not what I mean by "letting yourself have your experience." I mean the very opposite: Actively meeting, engaging, and opening to what you're feeling is how you let yourself have your experience. Consciously touching a feeling— "yes, this is the feeling that's here right now" — starts to free you from its grip. If you can open to your fear or pain and keep your attention on feeling the openness along with the feeling itself, eventually you may discover something marvelous: Your openness is more powerful than the

feelings you're opening to. Openness to fear is much bigger and stronger than the fear itself. This discovery puts you in touch with your capacity for strength, kindness, stability, and understanding in the face of whatever you are going through. This is *conscious suffering*.

If there is one thing I have learned in thirty-five years as a psychotherapist, it is this: If you can let your experience happen, it will release its knots and unfold, leading to a deeper, more grounded experience of yourself. No matter how painful or scary your feelings appear to be, your willingness to engage with them draws forth your essential strength, leading you in a more life-positive direction. My work, both with other people and with myself, has thoroughly convinced me of this truth, which has become the bedrock of my therapeutic practice, Just as the depth and stillness of the ocean lie hidden beneath the stormy waves on its surface, so the power of your essential nature lies concealed beneath all your turbulent feelings. Struggling with these feelings only keeps you tossing around on the stormy surface of yourself, disconnected from your larger being. Tossing in the waves keeps you from going beneath them and accessing the power, warmth, and openness of the heart.

Letting yourself have your experience, by contrast, allows you to ride or surf the waves instead of being carried away by them. In moments of allowing and opening to your experience, *you are* — you are there for yourself. You are saying yes to yourself as you are, as you are feeling right now. This is a profound act of self-love.

How then to start letting yourself have your experience? How to make friends with your feelings, just as they are in this moment, no matter how difficult they may be? The key is always to start right here where you are, wherever that is. I call this "acknowledging."

ACKNOWLEDGING

For instance, if you're confused or disturbed right now by what I'm suggesting, you could start by simply acknowledging the confusion or disturbance, without judging it as something bad or trying to get rid of it. Or, if you would be willing to tune into the place of unlove within you, you could see how this lack of love feels in your body. Simply *acknowledge* the sensations in your body, and meet them with awareness: "Yes, this is what's here." When you give up struggling to avoid your experience, you are no longer caught in a struggle, and you start to relax.

ALLOWING

Next, *allow* the feeling to be there, giving it plenty of space. Allowing doesn't mean wallowing in the feeling or acting it out, but rather opening up space around feeling the sensations in your body. This is like giving the feeling some breathing room, so it is not confined or constricted. Experience the space around the feeling and notice how the space lets the feeling be there, just as it is, without tension or resistance. Let yourself rest in that space. As you do this, you will find that you are holding the feeling in a much softer way. You have become the larger awareness in which your woundedness is held. Then there is nothing to fight against, and the body starts to settle down.

OPENING

As you begin to settle, you could also go a little further and see if you can *open* yourself to feeling the unlove directly, not maintaining any barrier against it.

Opening to a feeling means letting down your defensive walls. Or you could see it as opening to yourself in the place where you feel this way. Basically, you are now opening your heart to yourself, which unlocks a stream of kind understanding toward your experience, just as you might empathize with your child or your dearest friend if he or she were hurting.

ENTERING

A further, more advanced step is to *enter* right into the center of the feeling with your awareness so that you are at-one with the feeling, not separate from it in the least. When your awareness enters into a feeling in your body, it no longer remains something *other* that can torment or overwhelm you. When you can be present in the very center of a feeling, you discover its nature as fluid energy. There is a kind of surrender or letting go that can happen here, as all sense of struggle drops away. This is a more advanced phase of unconditional presence.

If the old wound of not feeling loved or lovable is undigested pain from childhood, then letting yourself experience it with unconditional presence is a way of digesting that old pain. As you digest it, it no longer remains something solid and frozen that clogs your system. This is a simple and direct way of starting to heal your woundedness, the fearful shutdown you became stuck in as a child.

Being present with yourself like this is an act of love that unlocks the door to your deeper resources. There is a simple principle operating here: When you show up for your experience, your being shows up for you. And when the larger being that you truly are reveals itself, you have an experience of coming home to yourself. Settling into yourself gives you access to native resources — strength, acceptance, peace, compassion— that help you meet and relate to whatever you're going through.

Coming home to yourself and your resources, you discover what is more true than any self-judgment: that you are just fine as you are, in your basic nature. You savor the basic goodness inherent within you, which has a clear, refreshing taste like pure water. Discovering this helps you appreciate your life, even with all its difficulties. In this way, letting yourself have your experience is the gateway to self-acceptance and self-love.