

What is distress intolerance?

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All humans experience a range of emotions. Some emotions may be comfortable to us, and others may be uncomfortable. There are varying types of emotions that people might find distressing, which include...

The Sad: This group includes emotions that reflect sadness at varying degrees of intensity. This includes emotions such as disappointment, hurt, despair, guilt, shame, sadness, depression, grief and misery.



The Mad: This group includes emotions that reflect anger at varying degrees of intensity. This includes feelings such as irritation, agitation, frustration, disgust, jealousy, anger, rage and hatred.



The Scared: This group includes emotions that reflect fear at varying degrees of intensity. This includes feelings such as nervousness, anxiety, dread, fear, panic and terror.



Most people dislike feeling uncomfortable, and so when we experience emotional discomfort, we may evaluate it negatively. Below are some of the common beliefs that people might have when they start to experience negative emotion...

- I can't stand this
- I hate this feeling
- Take it away
- I will lose control
- I'll go crazy
- It's bad to feel this way
- It's unbearable
- I must stop this feeling
- I can't cope with this feeling
- It's weak to feel this way
- This feeling will go on forever
- It is wrong to feel this way

The more strongly we hold these kinds of beliefs about our emotions, the more bothered we will be by our emotions, and the more we will want to get rid of them. Our level of tolerance towards emotions is based on how much we fear emotions, how unpleasant they feel to us, how unbearable they seem, and how much we want to get away from emotions, rather than the intensity of the emotions themselves.

Distress intolerance is when someone believes they are unable to cope with their uncomfortable emotions, and tries to escape or avoid them.

How does distress intolerance develop?

It is likely a combination of biological and environmental factors that lead some people to be more intolerant of emotional distress than others.

There is some suggestion that some people are biologically more sensitive to negative emotions, experiencing negative emotions more easily, at a higher level of intensity, and for a longer duration than other people. This means that some people experience negative emotions as more painful, and hence have greater difficulty coping with the experience.

It is likely that our experiences growing up through childhood, adolescence and through adult life, may shape how we deal with emotions. Some people may not have been shown ways to tolerate emotional discomfort appropriately, for example being punished for expressing normal emotions like crying when they were sad. Others may have only been shown unhelpful ways of dealing with their emotions, such as seeing a loved one use alcohol to deal with their own emotions.

The problem with distress intolerance

It makes a lot of sense to try to get away from things that feel unpleasant. This strategy seems to work for other things that make us uncomfortable (e.g., heat, cold, pain, hunger). Unfortunately, when we apply the same strategy to our emotions, it seems to backfire. The more we fear, struggle with, and try to avoid any form of distress, generally the worse that distress gets. Our fear and avoidance of the distress actually amplifies the distress.

What can be done to help?

Instead of fearing and fighting uncomfortable emotions and desperately trying to get rid of them, it is possible to learn how to sit with and tolerate emotional distress, such that we learn the emotion will pass and that we can cope.

This will involve identifying and challenging beliefs we hold about emotions, and learning to balance tolerating emotional discomfort when it does arise, with taking action to improve our emotional experiences.

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