

Ten tips for tough times

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Feelings are often not the best guide for action. Feelings are obviously important, they deserve our attention. But whatever they tell us about our inner world they can't always be relied upon to accurately read objective reality. So when it comes to action it is best to refer to our values, to long term intentions and to common sense. Simply waiting a while and not acting on impulse can be very helpful. A Chinese proverb sums it up well: "It is best to slow down before turning a corner."

Seeking support isn't weakness, it's wisdom. Problems may have us retreat into ourselves. Although alone time can certainly be valuable, social or emotional isolation usually fuels problems - so stay connected, talk, perhaps see a therapist.

Watch out for all-or-nothing thinking. When problems are around the mind may catastrophise with black and white thinking about situations, e.g. "Everything is hopeless," and 'totalising' ideas about oneself such as, "I am hopeless/stupid/lazy/weak/etc." If you become aware of these thoughts, you can - at least to some degree - challenge or walk away from them.

Learn to sooth your nervous system. The fight, flight or freeze response that is there to protect us may not reset properly and thus be overactive (most severely seen in PTSD). This can be debilitating of health, relationships and general functioning. Breathing techniques, meditation, warm baths, massages, time in nature, walking, some music and certain exercises are among the many things we can do to help regulate our nervous system and manage reactivity. Perhaps something to research.

The liberation of acceptance. Acceptance is simply the recognition of what is without embellishment or resistance, it arises as we let go of protesting, dramatising, minimising or denying. Note, this doesn't mean we like what is happening nor is it a recommendation for inaction. Acceptance is also different from resignation, it has a sense of ease and opening whereas resignation has a closing, contracting character. Trying to fake, force or rush acceptance is not helpful, initially it will come and go, but if you are curious and explore the possibility, it will become deeper and more stable. Acceptance always plays a part in healing and, ultimately, can lead to an immense freedom.

Remember what has helped in the past. You haven't come this far without developing some useful self-knowledge and helpful living skills. However, because problems tend to obscure these resources you may need to remind yourself: What do you know about you that is going to help you through these difficult times? This refers to your values, beliefs, qualities,

attitudes, skills, and so on. What have you done previously that has helped you feel good about yourself and better able to handle difficulties? This refers to actions and practices. Also, it is wise to remember what you need to watch out for in yourself - the moods, attitudes, stories, ways of being, etc, that ultimately don't contribute to you or the situations you are facing. You might consider writing all these things down.

Come into the present. This is related to soothing the nervous system and acceptance. Often, if we stop and come into the present we can't find the problem. *Now* is actually okay. Suffering is hugely inflated by the mind speculating about the future, rehashing the past, creating stories and making judgements. Experiencing this very moment, noticing the nothingness or silence that is the background to all our experience is wisdom indeed. Consciously engaging with the physical environment such as feeling the connection of your feet with the floor or paying deliberate attention to simple, domestic tasks also helps.

The little things make a big difference. Notice and value small steps. Practicing some of the above may not resolve all your pain or struggles, but it will make some difference. And it is so very important to know that you are not powerless. We may have little or no control over some of the events and circumstances of our lives and even thoughts and feelings arise spontaneously. It all just happens, yet we still have choice over how we respond to all that just happens. When you have taken a step in a preferred direction, note the difference it makes and acknowledge yourself for taking that step.

The wisdom of not knowing. The background to our entire existence is not knowing. To whom or what does the thought 'I' appear? As Buddha concluded, that cannot be found; and the best science can say about the origin of the universe is that in the beginning there was nothing and it exploded. The first cause remains a complete mystery (and a God explanation does nothing to resolve that). Not knowing at a local level -

with our particular life circumstances - can connect us with this profound and mysterious not knowing, the mystery of being. Not knowing is only a problem if we think we should know... experiment with not knowing, it is very much related to acceptance, to being present, to humility, to the problem free background of nothingness, to ease, peace and wonder. Remember, nobody knows!

Your top tip. This refers to the section on self knowledge. If you were to write a list of things to remember in difficult times, what would you put at number one? Perhaps use to this space to note that down:

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