

Mindfulness in the Red Zone

A member of my DBT Family Skills Training recently asked me, "So, how exactly do you do mindfulness when you are emotionally dysregulated and in the 'Red Zone'?"

Great question! I think of times when I have been angered by my children's behavior when they were teens, distraught about the loss of a relationship, or nearly frozen with anxiety before a public performance. Then my honest answer is "Ugh, I didn't do it well." My more specific answer is that my responses, while avoiding a worst case scenario, often made my emotional reactivity worse.

It is extremely difficult to practice mindful awareness when one is emotionally flooded. By definition, when we are emotionally dysregulated, we are more likely to act on urges of mood dependent behaviors, to find it difficult to soothe or establish a balanced, effective level of physiological arousal, to redirect or reorient our attention toward valued actions which move us closer to our goals. This makes mindlessness a lot more likely than mindfulness. And we may humbly admit to have seen the unpleasant consequences that followed.

And yet at other times, we were able to become more mindful.

So what can we do--how can we apply mindfulness when in the red zone? I posed this question to a panel of experts, that is, members of our DBT Grad Group. Their names have been changed for purpose of confidentiality. They have been through the DBT Skills Group at least a year and

most have been in Grad Group for several years. Their responses (without their actual names) show what is truly possible to learn when practicing these DBT skills to take hold of the mind using observe, describe or participate in nonjudgmental, one-mindful, and effective ways.

Cathy: As one who's been in the red zone of late, I can say what works for me is changing my body chemistry in some way. Vigorous exercise, even if it means dropping to the floor and doing abs, seems to shake me up enough to cause a change in my mood. Also, getting outside gives more space for the many racing thoughts. It also helps to get the sunlight. And the biggest opposite action is for me to tell someone how I feel; instead of staying in isolation.

Beth: I agree with Cathy about talking with someone when you feel terrible, instead of isolating, which is the default, for me. Getting outside sometimes helps me, too, noticing the little things that can take you out of yourself. Conscious breathing. Self-soothing. Restorative yoga with props and sometimes with a guided tape. The senses 5-4-3-2-1 game (noticing 5 shapes/colors, 4 sounds, 3 sensations, 2 smells and 1 taste). When in the red zone during an interaction with someone: connect to your body, even if it is your pinky finger only; think and do "soft belly"; breathe consciously; focus on what they are really saying rather than your own reaction. Sometimes the only solution for me is pushing away, even though that is kind of the opposite of mindfulness. Probably the most important is: connection with someone else.



Earl: For me it starts with acknowledging that I am in the red zone, and doing the best I can to be gentle with myself, and saying it out loud (naming it) – “I am in the red zone.” This has the effect of grounding me just enough to break away somehow with a mindfulness exercise (counting my breaths, a pattern on a shirt, counting foot taps).

Virginia: This is what I do when I get to the red zone: First recognize the red zone, then take 3 deep breaths slowly no matter what. Then there are several options: walk away from the object of dysregulation by saying something like, "This is not a good time for me to talk. I'll be back." Then keep walking (or riding my bike) until some of the emotional energy dissipates. Then observe and describe your emotions as if you were talking to a friend about the issue. Start each sentence with "I feel..." and do not let yourself descend into blaming the other person(s) or thing(s). So something like, "I feel offended and hurt by..." and not "I feel that you are an idiot..." Even the practice of writing down what you feel will dissipate some of the emotional energy. The key is to center on what I feel and not the perceived faults of the other person(s) or thing(s). Then I tell myself that everyone is doing the best they can whether I believe that at the time or not.

Lastly, I return to the scene of emotional dysregulation and discuss what I feel and what the other person feels. It is important to listen without attaching myself to the other's emotions and not letting their emotions dysregulate me. If anything

happens to start the red zone climb I start the process all over again.

Jane: First, I have to know that I'm IN the red zone...and to say a mantra involving my Higher Power. It helps me to keep a "neutral" mind, at least for a while! Also, exercise is fantastic for changing my mood. I have time for plays in the future to look forward to and doing some creative activity is a big help.

I find these creative responses from our DBT grads to be so helpful. We can see practical and specific ways to one-mindfully observe and nonjudgmentally describe which can lead to more ways to effectively participate. And it's possible even in the most challenging of emotion mind moments!

Here's a summary of our experts' recommendations for navigating through the red zone.

- **Recognizing that we are in the red zone.**
- **Change body experience or awareness.**
- **Re-direct attention to an ally or valued actions.**
- **Take a break from the situation.**
- **Mindfully observe and describe emotion.**
- **Recall “we are doing the best we can.”**
- **Talk with someone you are close to who can really listen.**
- **Validate and be validated.**