

Get Uncomfortable!

By Katie Rickel, PhD

Rehabilitation—whether from a physical or psychological trauma—usually requires that we endure some discomfort as we allow ourselves to heal. However, most of us have an intense fear of being uncomfortable. In fact, we are taught to fear discomfort from infancy. As babies, our expressions of discomfort are adaptive—they inform our caretakers when we need to eat, be changed, or sleep. The scream is designed to be heart-wrenching to surrounding adults so that needs are met quickly and discomfort is rapidly relieved.

It's no surprise, then, that we develop an aversion to discomfort as adults. Of course, high levels of pain need to be addressed seriously and promptly, as they are our body's way of communicating that something is awry. However, why do we often go to such lengths to avoid those lower levels of discomfort? Learning to tolerate discomfort—to sit with it and watch it pass organically—is a life-changing skill that warrants some practice. Consider the following types of discomfort that might improve your quality of life:

HUNGER DISCOMFORT

As a psychologist treating obesity, I work with patients daily who have developed such a fear of hunger that they eat when they feel the slightest twinge of emptiness in their bellies. They no longer remember what it's like to feel hunger because eating has become so automatic.

Use the pain: If you are trying to lose weight, then experiencing some moderate levels of hunger some of the time is a necessary part of the process. Physical hunger is usually a sign that your body is using more calories than you are providing it and therefore going into its "reserves" for energy. Guess what? That's exactly what needs to happen for weight loss



to occur. So, dieters should actually welcome moderate physical hunger—it means the process is working.

EXERCISE DISCOMFORT

Feeling your heart rate soar, countering the resistance of a heavy weight, and noticing the burn of lactic acid build-up the next day can be perceived as uncomfortable. For some people, the anticipation of this discomfort leads to avoidance of exercise altogether.

Use the pain: Whether you are exercising in an attempt to improve your physique or to increase your endurance, you will only achieve your goals if your body is challenged beyond its normal state of functioning. If you feel as comfortable during exercise as you do lying on your couch, then you likely will not see the changes that you desire. Thus, try to re-interpret discomfort during and after exercise as a sign that you are moving closer to your objective.

LOSS DISCOMFORT

Losing a loved one (either by death or the dissolution of a relationship) is likely one of the most painful aspects of the human experience. The emotions experienced after such a loss—depression, anger, loneliness—produce significant discomfort, and sometimes we turn toward unhealthy distractions to temporarily escape our negative state of mind.

Use the pain: The intensity of emotion following a loss is usually proportionate to the degree of love and connectedness that characterized the relationship. If you had not developed a meaningful bond with the person you have lost, your pain would not be so great. Thus, you can view the negative feelings as testament to the great gift that relationship provided you.

These are just some examples of discomfort that we can use to our advantage in the healing process as we work to improve our physical and psychological health. The next time that you are uncomfortable, strive to find the lessons and teachings hidden in the experience. **h&h**

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