

Opening our eyes
Feeling uncomfortable? Hang out with it
by Nan Dickie

We all experience periods of mental and/or emotional discomfort in our lives.

Our natural inclination - indeed, instinct - when we experience a difficult feeling such as sadness, envy, fear or rejection for LSN, is to run away from it, to somehow make it go away, to try to escape it. You may think, "I'll ignore it, and it will disappear." Or, you may have a painful thought such as "I can't do anything about how they treat me, so I'll just give up." This instinct is called flight.

With some other emotions, such as anger, frustration or annoyance, we may choose to confront it - or the person whom we think has caused our troublesome feeling - by lashing out with our anger, or swearing at our frustration. Similarly, if we have an unpleasant thought such as, "I'm not as smart as everyone else," we may attack ourselves with negative self-judgment. This instinct is called fight.

Although the reactions of fleeing or fighting may work temporarily in some instances, they often do not resolve or deal constructively with the underlying feeling or thought we are experiencing. This is true whether you live with a mood disorder or not.

For those of us who live with mental illness, our discomfort most often takes the form of emotional pain, feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness, and many self-effacing and unkind thoughts towards and about ourselves. We tend to flee from distressing feelings and thoughts. It's no wonder that we do.

What can any of us do other than fleeing or fighting? It may seem counter-intuitive - and even feel like a scary or bad idea - to approach it with another "f" term: face it. (And I don't mean stare it down!) This is often the best choice.

Nobody chooses what their feelings will be. Feelings just "are." If we face our painful feelings, and are able to identify what they are, we have an opportunity to discover why we are having them. The next step is challenging but essential: we must accept that we are having the feeling, as hard as that may be. When we accept having a specific, tough feeling, it often loses its intensity or makes a shift. When it does so, we can live with the feeling with some degree of equanimity.

With our thinking, we do have a choice: we can change our thoughts. If I think, "I hate this cold weather!" I'm probably quite annoyed. However, if I change this thought to, "It's winter. It's cold outside. How can I best live with it?" I can work with it - the cold weather - in a constructive way.

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It is only by hanging out with uncomfortable feelings and thoughts that we are able to do our best with them. It's a big challenge, but it works. Give it a try, if only once.
