



"Don't hide from your feelings. Accept them."

- Christian Chasmer, author of *Lose the Limits*

Watch and Wait When Difficult Emotions Arise

For some people, difficult emotions that may be simmering on the mental backburner tend to flare up and boil over during the winter holiday season.

Emotions like anger, jealousy, resentment, shame, fear or loneliness don't necessarily have to heighten anxiety or get the best of you. There are ways to reduce suffering associated with triggers such as criticism, awkward social situations, past mistakes or traumatic experiences that evoke an intense emotional response.

Let it RAIN

RAIN is an acronym for a healthy way to experience emotions. The RAIN process provides a thoughtful alternative to emotional pain or denial that can manifest as harmful behaviors.

[Tara Brach, Ph.D.](#), an internationally known meditation teacher, psychologist and the author of *Radical Acceptance* and other books, explains it this way:

Recognize strong emotions and related sensations in your body. What stands out? When you are aware of your "felt sense" as a whole, it's easier to identify root causes.

Allow yourself to be present in the moment. It's normal to resist confronting a painful emotion. At this stage, you are simply noticing what is true, not pushing away or controlling anything you feel.

Investigate difficult emotions with gentle attention and without judgment. You might ask yourself: "What do I believe about this emotion?" "What do I fear?" "What do I want? For example, you may be seeking acceptance, companionship or forgiveness.

Nurture yourself as you sense your vulnerability. What do you want to remember, experience or trust?

Brach says it's important to experiment with ways to "befriend your inner life" through words, touch, images or energy.

After completing the four steps, Brach recommends taking time to rest in a soft state of awareness, and if you cannot complete the process, try again another day.

[Toni Parker, PhD.](#), a therapist is affiliated with the [Gottman Institute](#), writes that practicing mindfulness – or creating space to reflect and thoughtfully respond rather than react – is the key to overcoming difficult emotions. The Gottman Institute offers a six-step process similar to RAIN:

1. Turn toward your emotions with acceptance. Identify where you sense them in your body.
2. Identify and label emotions, e.g., "I feel discouraged." "This is sadness."
3. Acknowledge and accept your emotions, don't deny them.
4. Realize that emotions are impermanent; even overwhelming ones will pass.
5. Inquire and investigate. Ask yourself, "What triggered me?" "Why do I feel this way?"
6. Let go of the need to control your emotions; be open to the outcome and what unfolds.

Emotional Paradox

There is evidence of a paradoxical response that helps explain how some people can get stuck in the allowing phase of RAIN. Research shows that the more people feel difficult emotions, the more they oppose them, and the more they oppose them, the stronger those emotions get. These findings suggest that there is value in allowing emotions to be felt, according to Anna Schaffner, Ph.D., a professor of cultural history.

In a [Psychology Today](#) blog post, Schaffner says suppression or repression of difficult emotions, such as sadness, can also inhibit positive emotions, such as joy. (Suppression is a conscious effort to try not to think about or feel painful or unwanted emotions. Repression involves unconsciously blocking unwanted thoughts or impulses.)

"By accepting our pain and discomfort, and that they are part of life, we can feel them cleanly. 'Clean pain' is the root pain, usually sadness. 'Dirty pain' emerges when we feel guilty about feeling it in the first place, or blame ourselves for it," she writes.

A study published in the journal [Emotion](#) found that people who judge their negative feelings as bad or inappropriate are more likely to experience mental health problems compared to those who judge their negative

feelings as good or neutral. Not surprisingly, people who feel good about the positive emotions they experience are more likely to have better mental health.

Labeling emotions as "bad" has compound effects. For instance, negative labeling leads to rumination, which prolongs suffering. When people have a neutral response, the negative feeling tends to pass more quickly, according to a [report by the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research](#). In addition, other studies on the way emotions are perceived show that positive emotional regulation strategies correlate with positive mental health in terms of life satisfaction, personal affect, and symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Becoming More Skillful

There are all kinds of experiences that elicit difficult emotions. Most of the time, these emotions pass quickly and are replaced by other emotions. However, there are some emotions that linger, such as grief for the loss of a loved one, the hurt of being abandoned as a child or pain caused by acts of violence. Being aware of the source of emotions is a critical first step in handling them more skillfully.

As you navigate in the workplace and in your personal life, you can help yourself and others by:

- Being a good listener, even when you disagree
- Waiting for your turn and not interrupting
- Providing validation by repeating what you heard
- Avoiding judgment and assigning blame
- Expressing empathy inwardly and outwardly

If you find the holiday season trying, allow yourself time to feel your emotions. Rest quietly in the knowledge that they are real and that you have valid reasons for experiencing them. Take some deep breaths or a time out, as needed. Then you may find it's easier to prepare for and respond mindfully to any triggers that might come up for you.