

10 TIPS for MANAGING Strong Emotions

On my Facebook page I was asked, “How can an emotion that is so strong and breathtaking like fear ultimately teach us?” As I started to answer, I found that this question warranted a much more in depth response than a single Facebook update. So, I decided to write to you all about how to manage your strong emotions. Here is some great information that has been tried and proven true by myself and my Spiritual Direction clients.

One way to interpret emotions is to look at them as the tools in your human being toolkit that translate your intuitive voice into the literal (AKA: your body’s voice). The experience of “breathtaking” is an emotional impulse that is so strong that it is impossible for your physical system to deny. When your “breath is taken,” the only nurturing option you have is to stop and pay attention to your breath. This experience is undeniably very uncomfortable, and it can happen with any strong emotion: be it with fear, anger, or even joy*.

A NOTE ABOUT JOY

If you have a belief that joy is not part of your emotional repertoire, you might not think to include it when you are thinking about managing your strong emotions. Know that the emotional impulse of joy is as valid as your fear, anger, or sadness. And, it can be so strong that it can also take your breath away or (as it does to me) sweep your feet out from under you. Being ‘blissed out’ can have the consequence of totally un-grounding you. Being ungrounded can result in being so unaware of your surroundings or circumstances that you can literally injure yourself and/or leave your rational self behind and make uninformed choices. You could find that you’ve totally lost the thread of a conversation and are not present when it is important to be so. It may be a ‘good problem’ to have, but strong joy can prove problematic nonetheless.

It can be very easy to react to this discomfort with the judgment of, “Something is very wrong here!” One of the reasons that a fix-it-NOW reaction is so common is that our culture appears to really support this reaction. But, another option is available to you—that is to really make your strong emotional impulses valid or “right.” Perhaps if our parents and culture supported this option with us at a young age, welcoming our strong emotions as help-mates would be second nature. But let’s assume that you are one of the norm: someone who has had the idea of normalizing strong emotions culturized out of you. Therefore, the option of gratefully welcoming your strong emotions is a skill set that you need to learn.

Here are 10 skills to cultivate and practice to help you manage your strong emotions.

1 Ask For Help

First and foremost, when an emotion is strong, you need to listen to it. Learning to do this is one of the most common reasons people come to my practice. Finding someone to help cultivate comfort with the discomfort of strong emotions can be invaluable in this process, and often necessary. This is because it is so darn uncomfortable to sit with the discomfort without your default reaction of ...well, like panic! Other default reactions can include beating yourself up or trying to numb yourself with unhealthy habits like eating sugar, playing computer games to the exclusion of everything else, imbibing in smoking cigarettes or pot, or drinking alcohol. Check out my blog post, “What Does an Intuitive Counselor Do?” for some great information on how to choose a support person for this process.

2 Gather Information

Gathering information is, for me, one of the most comforting, foundational ways of shoring up my ability to manage strong emotions. This process, done by studying, reading, watching webinars, going to workshops etc., invites the voice of the mind (or the rational) to help support your system when dealing with strong emotions. One of the steps (or stages) of deepening into living a balanced life is to explore which of your ‘voices’ you give more (or less) validity to when problem solving. Since our western culture still validates the rational voice more highly than the emotional, physical or intuitive voices, the mind’s voice is pretty darn strong, as a rule. When you are moving through the process of learning to manage strong emotions, it is important to not throw out the assistance and support of the mind’s voice. It can provide a safe structure for the more amorphous quality that the emotional system is. Here are a few amazing resources to get you started: *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker, and Karla McLaren’s *The Language of Emotions*.

3 “Thy Will, Not My Will” or “Let Go, Let God”

Whenever I hear someone declare, “It brought me to my knees!” (another form of “breathtaking”), I know that their intuitive system is telling them to let go of their grip on needing to understand, their expectation of an outcome or their idea of what’s supposed to happen. This is the skill set of surrender. In order to ply this skill set like a master, you have to embrace the idea that being humble is a state of grace rather than a state of penance for being inherently flawed. As long as you walk in life thinking that you are 100% responsible for everything without including the 100% participation of the divine, your experience of humility is going to be defined as humiliation. And that can stop your self-compassion practice in its tracks; not to mention lowering the accurate interpretation of what your emotional system is trying to tell you by a mile (or 10 :)). I think that culture, once again, plays a role in this. If you were raised with the sweet inclusion of the unseen divine as a partner in the walk of life, lucky you! But if you are resonating with what I am saying, then most likely that wasn’t included in your life management tool-kit growing up. Remember that these are skills to learn...it is never too late. Caroline Myss articulates information about this tool so beautifully when she talks about the anatomy of the 5th Chakra. So, add *Anatomy of the Spirit* and *Defy Gravity* to your “gather information” list.

4 Believe That Your Emotions Are Valid

Historically, it is a new idea that emotions are to be taken seriously. It was not until the 1970s that studying psychology began to be considered as valid as studying anatomy and physiology or math or chemistry. For hundreds of years before that, being emotional was relegated to the immature, the weak, or the female sex. I tell you this to put the work of valuing your emotions as much as your intellect, spirit, or physical strength into a contextual frame. As you start to bring emotions into an equal stance, your foundational cultural beliefs will fight your good intentions and actions. The founder of family systems theory, Murray Bowen, suggested that most of us would not be able to change these foundational beliefs in our lifetime; they are that strong! Hence me carrying the banner of self compassion with so much vigor! Your emotions, even if you respond to them with discomfort, are your help-mates. Those impulses are your allies, not your enemies. But... until you have built the soul stamina to maintain your boundaries with them, they truly can wreak havoc with your peace of mind and body. So, love yourself enough to seek appropriate help when you feel lost or unable to see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, ok?

5 Respond Rather Than React

Remember what I said above about how the only option you have when a strong emotion like fear takes your breath away is to pay attention to your breath? It is at that time that you can offer yourself options of response. Responding rather than reacting is an important skill set to learn. Reacting is that knee jerk action you do without taking the few moments needed for discernment. It is actually a life-saving tool that is hardwired into you. It belongs to the part of us that is called “survival intuition.” If the house is literally falling down around you or there is a literal tidal wave coming your way, it is really important to have this tool at your finger tips. You have heard this tool called “fight or flight,” and it is our instinctual action in response to danger. The challenge we all face, though, is that we are only supposed to react in this manner when there is some *literal* danger that is threatening us. In our super stressed world, we get to see tidal waves happening in real time, even though the disaster is happening thousands of miles away. Our “fight or flight” physiology kicks in like the literal disaster is happening in our own back yard. When you add years of this happening every day in your world, and then add the years of it happening everyday to your parents and loved ones, you end up with your physiology in a constant reactive mode; so much so that you don’t even know that you are in that reactive “soup” all the time.

It is important to understand that most of the time when a strong emotion (especially fear and its resulting anger action) hits, it is not of the “survival intuition” variety. It is more of the anxiety variety which, unfortunately, prompts the body to have the same physiological response as if the volcano hours away was actually erupting and you have to get the hell out of here NOW! So...when the intense emotion comes, you most likely have the time to stop and listen to yourself. You can give yourself the very valid option of retreating by saying to whoever you’re pissed at or to yourself in your rising panic, “I will take this all into consideration and get back to you.” I can’t tell you how helpful this tool is in the throes of powerful emotion.

6 Truth: You Are Precious

I remember well when, in a lecture, Norm Shealy gave us the adamant statement: “God doesn’t make junk!” In my intuition training with him and Caroline Myss, we spent a lot of time looking at our limiting beliefs. The limiting belief that you are less than perfect just the way you are is one that you need to give up if you are determined to master the skill set of managing strong emotions. The roots of believing you need to be better than you are have a deep, dark hold in the Anglo culture. It could come from the historical Judeo-Christian belief that we incarnate as a penance rather than as a choice. I am NOT suggesting that you let go of striving for excellence. But if you have any inkling of thinking, feeling or believing that you (or anyone else) is essentially flawed...that belief has to be authentically reframed if you are going to master being comfortable with the discomfort of strong emotions.

7

Welcome the Emotion When It Comes

If your truth is inclusive of “I am precious,” then the idea that strong emotions need to be fixed or gotten rid of becomes problematic. One of the reasons you have trouble allowing yourself to be precious is that, (if you follow that belief thread), you’ll notice that the requirement that you be congruent and self responsible becomes more weighty. If you are valuable, then all of you has to be valuable. That is inclusive of your “good, bad and the ugly;” your positive and negative; your easy successes and your most embarrassing failures; your everyday experiences; and your most wondrous “aha!” moments. If you are precious, then you need to cultivate the soul stamina to weather the perfect storms your emotional system can inflict upon you. Strong emotions test your spiritual strength. Your emotional system provides you a sort of flag that indicates there are instructions available (Caroline Myss calls them “marching orders”) that show you how to move forward in the name of your optimal growth as a soul in a human body.

Your human body is (has to be!) as valuable as your soul. One of the ways emotions flag us with vital information is through physical discomfort. And it can be so easy to deem that discomfort something to ignore, push through or anesthetize. If you consider yourself precious, you need to welcome and embrace both the emotion and the accompanying discomfort as valid responses.

8

Breathe!

Fritz Pearl said, “Fear is excitement without the breath.” This quote has been a tool for the strong fear impulse in me for years. So...use this tool! It’s a hard one, so write “Breathe!” (or the quote) on a post-it note and put it right in front of your face on the bathroom mirror. Even if you can’t do it right then and can only tell yourself that it is a possible response, you’ll be better off. As I mentioned in the beginning of this e-book, the experience of “breathtaking” is the emotional system showing itself with a physical imperative. I think that our breath is the main connection between all of our “voices” (physical, emotional, spiritual/intuitive, and mental/rational). It is the one thing that we as humans can use to participate in our relationship with the unseen. It is hard to articulate this in words; therefore, the breath could be our physical conduit to the divine. If you have ever had the luxury of sitting on the ocean shore for a long quiet moment, you will have had the experience of the essential relaxation that happens when you give yourself “over” to the ebb and flow of the waves. What if this is the literal divine, that is Mother Earth, showing you how to relax (surrender) and connect (include the divine in managing life)? Notice how your breath is the same as the waves coming in and out of shore. You don’t have to be at the seashore to access this clever resource for practicing being comfortable with discomfort. By the way, tools for cultivating divine connection with your breath abound. Any meditation or yoga practice worth its salt will fit the bill. If you want to include your rational voice in learning this skill, add any of Pema Chodron’s writings to your “gathering information” list: like *Places that Scare You* or *When Things Fall Apart*.

9 Cultivate Curiosity

Once you are able to have some semblance of a relaxed stance while listening to your breath, learn how to find your process (no matter how uncomfortable) interesting. What are you afraid of? Who are you angry at? If your sadness had a voice, what instructions does it have for you? These are some questions to start your inquiry. The cultivation of curiosity rather than judgment is a tool that will take you far along your path towards becoming clever at managing your strong emotions. If your answers to your curious questions start with the words “I should,” know that you are in judgment rather than curiosity. Start the practice of changing to “I could.” “Should-ing” on yourself slams the door to the more vulnerable aspects your psyche. Those aspects always have some valuable wisdom to impart but they will never be open to the parts of you that are demanding or punitive. If you carry the “should” burden as if it is hardwired into you, it can be very helpful to bring the tool of a journal in at this point. You can get into the habit of carrying around a little notebook (or as in my case, an iPad mini) and whenever a strong emotion tempts to you fall into reaction, give yourself permission to “take a breather,” and pull out your journal and write unedited. Use the word “should” without censor. Then go back and replace each “should” with a “could.” If you have the time, go back over what you have written and see how changing over to “could-ing” opens up options for you to choose which response you really want to make given the situation that is storming for you at that time. You can also make space for this inquiry in hindsight, if you haven’t yet mastered the art of *responding* rather than *reacting*.

10 Trust

Strong emotions are indicators that your personal work is in process. Truth: if this was easy, it wouldn’t be called work. The fact that you are reading this is no accident. Trust that you are not given anything you cannot handle. Trust, like courage, is only applicable in the face of a challenge that will stretch you. With your ration, intuition, and inner wisdom, you will discern the line between *stretch* and *break*. Because you believe you are precious, you are empowered to choose. Trust and faith are really helpful resources to carry with you when you roll up your sleeves and cultivate a friendly relationship with your strong emotions. Believing that trust and faith are real manifests in the patterns that get lived. It may not feel natural to allow trust to be your guide, so using the common adage of “fake it till you make it” will be appropriate here. As you courageously allow this to be your practice, you may notice that you begin to allow trust to easily be in the flow of your life. On a cellular level what’s happening here is that the neurons in your brain are creating new pathways that support nurturing and life generating beliefs. It could be helpful at this point to add *The Biology of Belief* by Bruce Lipton to your “gathering information” list.

What will you get out of mastering the skill set of managing your emotions?

Learning a different way of responding to the discomfort of those breathtaking experiences of powerful emotions is undeniably hard work. If you had been raised with welcoming your emotional system in its entirety, this skill set would have been second nature for you. But, because welcoming your intense emotions is not the norm, you need to unlearn knee jerk protective reactions. And then you get to do the vulnerable work of relearning responding and managing the whims and maelstroms of the emotional information package from a place of resourced self-confidence and soul stamina. If you are anything like me, when you are in the depths of realizing how much work acquiring this skill set is, having the motivation of knowing what you might get out of this work can be very helpful. :)

So here are a few results of embracing this work that I have seen in myself and others:

- the ability to frame the information from your emotions positively;
- the ability to respond rather than react;
- a greater array of response choices;
- the experience of being congruent; i.e. “Walking Your Talk;”
- the sweet experience of knowing you have value just because you are you;
- the deepening of your intimate relationship with your body;
- more experiences of synchronicity;
- a playful and curious attitude;
- a genuine experience of the validity that the unseen is real.

About Kim...

Kim Illig is an Intuitive Counselor, distinguished with certification from both Caroline Myss and Norman Shealy. With over 30 years experience in the healing arts working with individuals, groups and organizations, Kim brings extensive knowledge and skills to her practice. She invites all to be “integrating the intuitive everyday.” Please visit www.kimillig.com.

