OPPOSITE TO EMOTION (O2E)

CORE CONCEPT: Use Opposite to Emotion (also known as Opposite Action) to get unstuck from ineffective behaviors that arise from certain emotional states.

We get stuck in negative or ineffective emotional states partly because of mood-congruent behavior. Mood-congruent behavior occurs when, without awareness, we fall into behavior patterns that keep certain emotions around. For example, when we feel depressed, we may perform the following actions or inactions:

- Get isolated (e.g., be disconnected from relationships, not answer the phone, miss social engagements and appointments)
- Be inactive (e.g., stay in bed or on the couch, not participate in hobbies or potentially positive experiences, let the chores at home and other responsibilities pile up)
- Engage in stuck thinking (e.g., focus only on the negative, ruminate, want to die)
- Neglect self-care and hygiene
- Eat and sleep too much or too little
- Decide to stop therapy and medications
- Engage in other behaviors that perpetuate negative emotional states.

Unfortunately, these automatic reactions to depression keep us depressed and may even make it worse. This is where Opposite to Emotion is helpful. This dialectical skill directs us to act in ways that are the opposite of the behaviors toward which our difficult emotions pull us. For the depressive examples just given, we would use Opposite to Emotion to:

- Reach out to others with whom we have relationships for help and positive experience
- Get moving by doing activities, hobbies, and important tasks; use ROUTINE, the Activities, Build Positive Experience, or Build Mastery, or engage in distress tolerance skills
- Practice dialectics, take a Nonjudgmental Stance, or use Encouragement
- Use PLEASED
- Go to therapy appointments and discuss medication issues with your prescriber before making changes
- Use other skills to address additional behaviors that perpetuate negative emotional states.

See the following explanations and examples for ways to use Opposite to Emotion to address common difficult emotions.

Opposite to Emotion with anxiety or fear

We tend to avoid when we feel anxiety and fear. We also tend to ruminate on anxious thoughts. Avoidance gets reinforced because it protects us from distress. However, the more we avoid, the more our anxieties build over time and the more we end up feeling overwhelmed. In addition, avoidance results in our world getting smaller and smaller.

Using Opposite to Emotion means approaching our fears one step at a time and learning to tolerate the distress that comes with it. To do this effectively, we use mindfulness to desensitize ourselves and distress tolerance when we feel too overwhelmed. The more we approach rather than avoid, the more our nervous system learns to be "bored" and the less anxious we feel.

With some fears we might not go one step at a time, instead choosing to jump fully in. Going all in to approach a fear is like jumping into a cold swimming pool: At first it is shocking, but then your system acclimates. Whether you take on a fear one step at a time or go all in depends on the situation, so choose your strategy according to what will be most effective for you.

Last, we can also learn to accept our anxious thoughts rather than fight them or catastrophize about them. This approach takes the power out of the thoughts.

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Opposite to Emotion with anger
We often want to lash out with words or behavior when we feel anger, and we may replay the situation we are angry about over and over in our minds. Using Opposite to Emotion includes avoiding the person you are angry with until you calm down while also being kind and compassionate to others, choosing to spend quality time with our pets, friends, and/or family, and being careful to be gentle and not to displace our anger onto others.

Additionally, we might imagine compassion for the person we feel anger toward (which is difficult to do sometimes). Remember that most people (including ourselves) do not want to make mistakes and do not want others to be angry at them, no matter how unskillfully they act. Compassion can be dialectically balanced with accountability.

We can also distract ourselves from angry thoughts and from replaying situations that cause anger by using the Thoughts skill. Count to 100 or recite the alphabet or focus on thoughts that are the opposite of angry thoughts.

However, Opposite to Emotion with anger does not mean denying or stuffing anger, because this sets the stage for rage. After you have calmed your anger by using Opposite to Emotion, see whether the emotion fits Wise Mind and use interpersonal effectiveness skills to address the situation with others if needed.

Opposite to Emotion with guilt and shame
We feel guilt when we have done something to hurt ourselves or others or when we make mistakes. Often, we try to avoid or hide from others when we feel guilt, or we try to blame or otherwise avoid accepting responsibility for our actions.

Using Opposite to Emotion means addressing what we did or the mistake that we made with whoever was affected. We apologize and try to make the situation better if possible. If we cannot make the situation better, we try to do something better somewhere else; this is a symbolic way to right a wrong. Be committed to not repeating the same mistakes and develop a plan to act differently in the future.

Remember that a genuine apology is for the benefit of the other person and not a means of avoiding consequences. Other people may still be upset for a time after your apology. Be patient with the process. Accept consequences with grace unless they do not fit the situation as evaluated in Wise Mind. *Do not participate in guilt or consequences that are out of proportion with the situation.*

After you have completed the steps listed here, let go of the situation and the thoughts that caused the guilt. Use Radical Acceptance.

Sometimes guilt does *not* fit Wise Mind. For example, we have a right to say no and to have boundaries, and we do not need to feel guilty for exerting this right. At other times, we experience guilt in the absence of wrongdoing for a variety of reasons. Examples include feeling guilty for practicing Self- Soothe skills, for having a good time, or for taking time for ourselves. This type of guilt leads us to avoid behaviors such as saying no, setting boundaries, and participating in beneficial activities.

When we have guilt that does not fit Wise Mind, the Opposite to Emotion is to approach rather than avoid. Keep practicing saying no, setting boundaries, and participating in activities until you no longer feel guilty. Remember to use REASON and Encouragement to address your thoughts and judgments that prompt guilt. We need to coach ourselves in these situations!

We feel shame when guilt is not addressed, when we have done something serious, or when something serious has happened to us. Shame involves experiencing judgments about being damaged, unlovable, or unforgivable as a person.

We can also feel shame for how we look or who we are as people even when it does not fit Wise Mind. This type of shame frequently originates from others' judgments and from being mistreated. Shame causes us to hide, and hiding keeps the shame around.

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Using Opposite to Emotion with shame involves coming out of hiding and talking about what causes us shame with *someone safe, nonjudgmental, and accepting*. As we work through shame, we can often open ourselves up to more and more supportive people and begin to heal. The process of working through shame also requires a Nonjudgmental Stance and distress tolerance skills.

Opposite to Emotion with other emotions

We can use Opposite to Emotion with other emotions too. For example, you might feel attraction or love toward someone who is not worthy of it or who mistreats you, and those emotions keep you engaging in the ineffective relationship. In this case Opposite to Emotion would involve avoiding this person, blocking his or her advances to engage in the relationship, and reminding yourself why the person is not healthy for you. You might also approach other relationships.

As another example, we have times when we feel jealous and go on the offensive toward the person, we are jealous of or try to overcontrol the people involved in the event causing the jealously. In this situation the Opposite to Emotion would be avoiding going on the offensive and letting go of the tendency to control others.

A last example is feeling unmotivated or like you do not "feel like" doing a behavior that you know will be helpful. You consequently avoid doing what you know to be effective, whether that is doing the dishes, going for a walk, engaging in a conversation, or doing whatever is needed. We all have these moments, usually every day. Of course, you can use mindfulness to explore the reasons you don't feel like doing the thing you are avoiding, but the Opposite to Emotion is to follow the Nike slogan and 'just do it'. An oversimplification? Maybe, but there is a reason that this almost 30-year-old slogan resonates with so many people.

In your use of Opposite to Emotion, consider one final note. Whether or not your emotion or the intensity of it is justified depends on the situation, the facts, and other potential factors. Opposite to Emotion is not meant to invalidate the real emotions we experience. Instead, Opposite to Emotion is intended to get us unstuck from prolonged and overly intense emotional states by recognizing behaviors that do not work and instead choosing those opposite behaviors that are more effective. In other words: **Do less of what does not work and more of what does in order to change your emotions.**