

10 PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF OPPOSITE ACTION, PARTS 1 & 2

By Laura K. Schenck, Ph.D., LPC

10 Practical Examples of Opposite Action Part 1

“The walls we build around us to keep sadness out also keeps out the joy.” – *Jim Rohn*

When you find yourself experiencing an emotion that is somehow getting in the way of harmonious relationships with others, pursuit of your goals, or living in accordance with your true values, opposite action can be an incredibly useful tool to have in your emotion regulation toolkit. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) encourages the use of opposite action when emotions are maladaptive, harmful, or overwhelming in some way. The idea is not to invalidate the reality of that emotional experience, but merely to transform that emotional experience into one that is more likely to bring about a desirable outcome.

If the idea of applying opposite action to painful or overwhelming emotions seems confusing or difficult to imagine putting into practice, it may be helpful to explore some practical examples of opposite action. As you read through the following emotional experiences and how to apply opposite action to them, try to reflect on your own typical emotional responses. We are all capable of a wide variety of complex emotions, but most of us have patterns or habits regarding our emotional responses to events. Becoming mindful of your personal tendencies can help you become more adept at recognizing your emotions more clearly and feeling confident in how to most effectively regulate the emotion.

What follows are the first five of ten examples of emotions and action tendencies, followed by a practical way to take opposite action. When we experience emotions, there are usually urges to take action (or inaction) that follow. For example, the emotional experience of anger may be followed by the action tendency of yelling. Or, the emotional experience of sadness may be followed by the action tendency to cry or socially withdraw. Again, be mindful of any emotions and action tendencies that you identify with and consider how you can apply practical opposite action to them in the future.

(1) Lethargy

The experience of lethargy is often accompanied by a lack of mental, physical, and emotional energy. There may be urges to avoid doing much of anything. Lethargy may be accompanied by the sense that just about anything would take a colossal amount of effort. There is often a strong desire to sit and do nothing at all. Notice the way that the action (or “inaction”) urges associated with the experience of lethargy are unproductive in the sense that they only serve to intensify and prolong the lethargy, rather than move you through it. This is a prime example of when it may be in your best interest to apply opposite action.

Taking Opposite Action:

Try making a list of things that you can *do*. Ideally, these should be things that can be realistically attained in the short-term. For example, despite a feeling of lethargy, you are capable of doing small things like washing the dishes, doing laundry, or tidying up. These are all behaviors that directly go against the feeling of lethargy, which can create an opposite

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emotional experience. Effective opposite action requires willingness to throw yourself into the task at hand, even if you don't "feel like it." The idea is to focus on how you *will* feel as a result of acting opposite to the current emotional experience.

(2) Social Withdrawal

Social withdrawal is often experienced as a desire to avoid contact with other people and isolate oneself from contact with the world. There may be an accompanying emotional experience of sadness or depression. When you feel yourself withdrawing from others, there is often a feeling that it would take monumental effort to make contact with people and a sense of not wanting others to see you in a state of sadness.

Taking Opposite Action:

Make the choice to actively reach out to a friend or loved one, even if it feels difficult. Try making a list of things you would like to talk about with them and remind yourself of how contact with this person often results in positive feelings. Another way to take opposite action would be to give support or express interest in others. Often times, when you give the very thing that you feel yourself needing, the result can be quite positive. Continue to reach out to others until you actively notice the feeling of withdrawal decreasing.

(3) Fear of Failure

A fear of failure may be related to a fear of being "exposed" as inadequate in some way. This fear may result in being limited as far as being willing to take on risks or challenges in life. Many people feel a sense that deep down they are incompetent in some way, and fear that if others "find them out" that something disastrous might happen. If you identify with a deep rooted fear of failure, it may be worthwhile to examine some of your core beliefs about yourself and sense of worth.

Taking Opposite Action:

Try making a list of all the reasons that you truly *are* competent and capable of success. Actively challenge any cognitive distortions that are serving to maintain your fear of failure. Remind yourself that perfection is not the goal; right now, it is willingness to perform and engage. Try separating your behavior (e.g., working on a challenging project) from your emotion of fear. Remind yourself that you are capable of working *and* tolerating the emotional experience of fear. Like all emotions, it will pass and has no more power over you than you are willing to give it. Engage in your work and when you mindfully notice your fear, take slow deep breaths and allow it to pass. Rather than fighting against it, simply acknowledge it with mindfulness, breathe into it, and let it go.

(4) Fear of Rejection

The fear of rejection is somewhat similar to the fear of failure in the sense that it is often rooted in maladaptive core beliefs and rife with cognitive distortions. This emotional experience may result in a consequence such as avoiding asking other people to spend time

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with you out of a fear of rejection. You may even tell yourself that they have “something better” to do or that you don’t want to “look needy.” The fear of rejection serves a temporarily useful purpose of keeping you safe from potential rejection and allowing you to avoid emotional vulnerability, but the long-term cost can be unfulfilling relationships with others.

Taking Opposite Action:

Recognize that no one “wants” to feel rejected. Ask yourself if you are *willing* to tolerate the temporary fear of rejection if it meant having close and meaningful relationships with others. What is more important to you? The moment that something shifts inside and you decide that fulfilling relationships with others are more important than the temporary fear of being rejected, you will be willing to take the risk of reaching out to others. Take some time to examine the cost that “protecting” yourself has had throughout your life. Remind yourself that the longer you avoid taking the risk to reach out to others, the more the fear will grow. The sooner and more frequently you take those risks, the more quickly the fears will dissipate.

(5) Guilt

Guilt can be an incredibly useful emotion when it is providing you with important information about a transgression that you have made. It is useful in the sense that the uncomfortable emotional experience of guilt is nagging at you to take action to make amends. When you take the time to apologize to people you have hurt or to make up for your mistakes, the emotion of guilt subsides. Many people experience guilt when they have acted in a way that is not in line with their true values or with the type of person they wish to be. There may be intense fear of apologizing to those you have hurt, which can result in the guilt lingering on.

Taking Opposite Action:

It is important to first take the time to mindfully assess whether or not your guilt is justified, or if you are experiencing unjustified guilt. Really examine what it is that you did and ask yourself if that behavior was truly hurtful to another person or if that behavior was out of line with your true values or morals. If you really have done something that you regret, recognize that you have the power to alleviate your feeling of guilt if you take *action*. This means reminding yourself of how much better you are going to feel when you make amends for any wrongdoings. Perhaps that means apologizing to someone you have hurt or otherwise righting a wrong. Even if it feels scary, opposite action for guilt means taking the leap and being willing to tolerate temporary discomfort in the pursuit of long-term emotional well-being.

In my next post, I look forward to exploring five more practical examples of opposite action. As you begin to get more comfortable with the concept of applying opposite action, begin to mindfully notice times throughout your typical day when you find yourself experiencing emotions that are somehow holding you back or keeping you stuck. Perhaps it is a particularly unpleasant, intense, or persistent emotion. Honestly examine your thoughts and behaviors and ask yourself if you are choosing thoughts and behaviors that are only serving to intensify the unpleasant emotion. Ask yourself if you are willing to tolerate temporary discomfort in order to move through the unpleasant emotion.

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10 Practical Examples of Opposite Action Part 2

“Almost all of us long for peace and freedom; but very few of us have much enthusiasm for the thoughts, feelings, and actions that make for peace and freedom.” – *Aldous Huxley*

In my last post, “[10 Practical Examples of Opposite Action – Part One](#),” we explored a variety of distressing, intense, or difficult emotional experiences and how they can be moved through with the application of opposite action. When emotional experiences are unpleasant or serve to keep us stuck in some way, there is often a tendency to think and act in ways that only serve to intensify or prolong the unpleasant emotional experience. For example, if you find yourself stuck in a repetitive cycle of feeling socially isolated and depressed, you may notice yourself engaging in a variety of thoughts and behaviors that essentially keep you feeling socially isolated and depressed. Thoughts such as “no one wants to be around me anyway” and behaviors such as avoiding people or staying in bed all day tend to *support* the unpleasant emotional experience.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy ([DBT](#)) encourages the use of opposite action to counteract emotional experiences when they are maladaptive or otherwise unproductive. Sometimes an emotional experience such as sadness and social isolation can provide a temporary respite from the world that enables you to collect your thoughts and heal. It is not the experience of sadness, per se, that is “bad.” The idea is that emotional experiences – whatever they may be – have the potential to be both constructive and destructive, depending upon how they are used.

As you read through [five more practical examples of opposite action to emotional experiences](#), continue to reflect on your own personal tendencies. Consider your habitual patterns of emotional responses to people and events. Mindfully notice the responses that your emotional expressions elicit in others. Honestly ask yourself how your sense of happiness and well-being may be positively impacted by applying opposite action to maladaptive or unhealthy expressions of emotion.

(6) Shame

The emotional experience of shame may be experienced when you feel as though something about you or your behaviors is frowned upon or unacceptable in some way. Many people learn to feel ashamed as children for engaging in completely normal and healthy behaviors. These early experiences of shame can carry over in adulthood and lead to maladaptive experiences of shame. The emotional expression of shame may be experienced as wanting to hide from the world, run away, or otherwise avoid having to face the supposed ridicule or judgment from others.

Taking Opposite Action:

When shame serves to keep you stuck, try applying opposite action by acknowledging your experience of shame while also reminding yourself that you are having an understandable emotional response to an event. Take the time to examine what specific event or chain of events has led to your experience of shame. Take the risk of applying opposite action by

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choosing to approach and engage in the behavior that caused you to feel the shame. If your shame is “unjustified” (i.e., not factually supported), then the choice to approach the situation or behavior that elicited the shame response can decrease your emotional experience of shame.

(7) Depression

Depression is often experienced as feeling sad a great deal of the time, perhaps even for no apparent reason. There may be accompanying thoughts to the experience of depression such as “nothing is going to work out” or “everyone else has it better than me.” Notice how these thoughts intensify and prolong the emotional experience of depression. Actions associated with depression may include sleeping or eating more or less than usual, feeling a lack of enjoyment in previously pleasurable activities, and avoiding contact with people.

Taking Opposite Action:

Try making concrete choices to counteract the emotional experience of depression by changing the ways that you choose to think and behave. While your emotions are not subject to your direct control, your thoughts and behaviors can be freely chosen by you. Your emotions are then indirectly affected by changes in your ways of thinking and behaving. Try taking opposite action to depression by challenging cognitive distortions that feed the depression. Actively cultivate and express gratitude by mindfully noticing small things in your daily life for which you feel grateful. Choose to pay attention to others and actively engage in your life. Try “showing up” to the present moment and notice the way this mindful connection to your present moment experience changes your emotions associated with depression.

(8) Anger

The emotion of anger can create physical sensations such as feeling hot, breathing rapidly, or noticing your heart racing. There are often accompanying thoughts to anger such as “I hate this” or “this has to stop.” Notice that anger fueling thoughts often carry a common theme of denying experiences or insisting that things must be different than they truly are. Anger can be constructive when it serves as a motivating force to take action to right a wrong or protect yourself from real threats. Anger can easily become maladaptive when it results in feeling out of control, lashing out at others inappropriately, or turns into self-hatred.

Taking Opposite Action:

If you find yourself consumed by persistent or overwhelming anger, make the choice to apply opposite action to snuff out the burning flames of anger. You can make the choice to cultivate an attitude of calm and acceptance. Take a few slow deep breaths and allow yourself to settle into acceptance of what is. You can actively reduce your state of hyper-arousal by taking slow breaths, self-soothing, and thinking positive thoughts about others. Rather than protecting yourself in the barbed wire of denial, choose to open yourself up to the reality of your experience. Treat others as you wish to be treated, *even if* you feel anger toward them. Notice how your experiences and interactions change as you consciously and deliberately apply an attitude of love and acceptance.

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(9) Feeling Inadequate

The experience of feeling inadequate can be connected to core beliefs about your sense of self-worth or self-efficacy. When you repeatedly or persistently feel inadequate, it is possible that you may be engaging in a form of self-invalidation or passive aggression against the self. As an emotional experience, feeling inadequate may result in sadness, feelings of failure, or beliefs that other people are “better.”

Taking Opposite Action:

The opposite of invalidating your self-worth and abilities is directing compassion and love toward yourself. Even if you “don’t feel like it,” make the choice to remind yourself of your accomplishments, abilities, and positive qualities. Reflect on the positive feedback that you have gotten from others in the past as you consider your talents and strengths. Make the choice to focus on the things that you do well, rather than excessively focus on your perceived weaknesses or faults. The outward expression of confidence can result in the genuine internal experience of confidence with consistent practice.

(10) Disappointment

The emotional experience of disappointment may be experienced as a deep painful feeling of being let down by yourself or others. Disappointment can be especially painful when you enter situations with high expectations. When you have unreasonable expectations of yourself or others, it is common to feel a crushing sense of disappointment when you or others don’t live up to those expectations. There may be accompanying thoughts such as “I knew this would happen” or “he always does this.” You may find yourself engaging in behaviors that only serve to intensify the disappointment, such as withdrawing from others, expressing anger, or giving up.

Taking Opposite Action:

Mindfully observe which thoughts and behaviors that you are engaging in are intensifying and prolonging the emotional experience of disappointment. When you become a mindful observer of your internal experience in this way, you free yourself to choose different thoughts and behaviors. Become aware of how your mental expectations may be fueling the experience of disappointment and actively adjust your expectations to more reasonably reflect the capabilities of yourself and others. Notice if you are withdrawing from others, and actively choose to reengage with the world, even if you “don’t feel like it.”

Opposite action is all about deliberately choosing alternative ways of thinking and behaving when emotional experiences are causing unnecessary suffering, keeping you stuck, or are persistent in nature. When you mindfully think and behave in ways that are opposite to the undesired emotional experience, you are indirectly influencing how you feel. Thoughts and behaviors are subject to your direct control. Try to apply new ways of thinking and behaving and notice the effect you are capable of exerting on your emotional experience.