

Exercise: Is emotion control working?

Spend a few minutes thinking about an issue you've struggled with for a long time (it could be something that you struggle with all the time or something that just keeps coming back up again and again). It might be about your health, maybe your family / friends, or work. Also write down how long you have been struggling with this. Write about this situation on the lines provided below. If you need more space, use another piece of paper:

If you haven't already, write about the emotions that occur in this situation that you find are difficult or distressing (i.e., sadness, anger, hurt, anxiety, fear).

What are some common thoughts that show up when you think about this situation? What emotions do you experience when you think these thoughts? It may be one thought or several thoughts that reoccur (i.e., I can't handle / stand this? Why is this happening to me? I'm a failure. Nothing goes right for me? What if I don't get passed this? etc.)

The six step worksheet: Discovering the power of giving up emotion control

• **Step 1.** Please complete the worksheet below in the following steps. First, think about all the strategies that you have used to try control / get rid of / or fix the distress (difficult emotions and thoughts) that you experience as a result of this situation. In the column on the left below, identify all of these strategies. Make sure not to write anything in the right-hand columns yet. We'll be using that column for something else.

If you have trouble identifying some of the things that you have done to reduce, or get rid of, the thoughts and feelings you have, think about some of the things that you have seen / heard other people do, and write those in the columns above. For example, some people might drink or take drugs to make themselves feel better. Some people procrastinate or avoid doing something. Others try to reduce their interpersonal distress by avoiding people. They might even avoid a loved one.

Step 2. When you take a close look, you may notice that some of the things you do to try to get rid of your distress don't work at all. Go back and look at what you wrote down under "Strategies", above, and put a checkmark by those strategies you believe don't help at all under "Doesn't Help".

Step 3: One of the toughest things about being human is that we love getting benefits in the short term. That is, if we do something that pays off at least a little in the short term, we continue to do it—even if it doesn't help in the long run or even makes things worse over time. For each strategy you listed above, put a check-mark (under "Short-Term") by those you believe work at least a little over the short-term.

• **Step 4:** Next, put a check-mark by those strategies you believe have lessened or gotten rid of that distress over the long-term.

• **Step 5.** Some of the things we do to manage our distress are physically harmful to ourselves or others. Put a check mark by those strategies you believe to be physically harmful to you or others under "Harmful".

• **Step 6:** Finally, some of the things we do to manage our distress move us further away from things that are important to us, from things that we value. They cost us, because our lives become less vital, meaningful, and purposeful as a result. Put a check mark by those strategies you believe move you farther away from the relationships and things that are truly important to you.

If you are like most people, you probably noticed that most—if not all—of the strategies you've used to try and manage this problem aren't working, especially over the long run. Some of the strategies you've listed may work for smaller problems, for things that don't matter so much. But for big issues (like this one) that matter, you may be seeing that they just don't work. If you've discovered that some of your strategies are working over the

long term, ask yourself the following questions for each of them: **Has this distress gone once and for all?**

We are not trying to make you feel hopeless about your life, here. In fact, this whole program is about helping you get more of the things that really matter to you in your life—more meaning, more purpose, and more aliveness. All of us have wanted more of these things all our lives. For most of us, life often becomes more about trying to avoid distress rather than trying to live life according to what matters to us. That is why it is important to take a long, honest look at what you do when you are distressed. Maybe some things are working. Maybe some things are not working. The distress still lingers, or comes and goes—and meanwhile, your life is not getting any more meaningful or vital. It's like getting your car deeply stuck in the mud. You keep pressing on the accelerator, thinking that will get you out of the mess you're in. Meanwhile, the wheels keep spinning—and you're still in the mud.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the chart you've just made above. Does your experience tell you that trying to get rid of distress hasn't worked? If it hasn't worked after all this time, why would it start working now? There's an old saying: "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got". And again, we're not suggesting that you are hopeless or your life is hopeless—just that trying to banish tough feelings and thoughts when they show up is hopeless. We often think that things will "get better" when we are in CONTROL of our thoughts and feelings. We wait and wait. Years go by and we are still not in contro. What if we didn't have to wait? What if we could live well now – with our thoughts and feelings?

In the next section we look at how the struggle to CONTROL our thoughts and feelings can keep us so occupied that we get too busy struggling to live well.