

How To Use Psychological Flexibility To ‘Bend’ Negative Emotions Rather Than Deny Them

Emily Laurence • June 14, 2021

Even if you're a glass-half-full type of person, *no one* can be positive all the time. But it's also just as true that how we respond to negative emotions when they surface can have a direct effect on our overall mental health. Often, there's a desire to completely push negative thoughts away or become consumed by them completely. But a mental-health expert is offering up a meet-in-the-middle alternative that she, personally, swears by for improving her own mental health: "bending" with negative emotions via a technique called psychological flexibility.

"Psychological flexibility is the ability to bend with life," says Poppy Jamie, mental-health expert, founder of mental health app, Happy Not Perfect, and Well+Good Changemaker. She outlines in her new book, aptly named *Happy Not Perfect*, that rather than denying negative emotions when they surface, this technique asks you to "bend" with them. Think about it this way: If you think of a negative thought or emotion as a wave, practicing psychological flexibility can mean the difference between crashing against it in resistance or simply floating over it.

Learning how to actually implement psychological flexibility can be challenging at first, Jamie says, but once you consciously start making the effort, it gets easier to do. Below, learn more about the benefits it stands to offer and how you can practice it in your own life.

How psychological flexibility can ease feelings of anxiety

Psychological flexibility is a concept rooted in psychology that therapists often use to help someone overcome anxiety and depression. Research defines it as "the ability to stay in contact with the present moment, regardless of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, while choosing one's behaviors based on the situation and personal values." And, according to Jamie, it can be a helpful tool to turn to when there's a gap between what you expect to happen and how things actually go. "Life is a big, messy adventure, and being a flexible thinker is really about going with the flow," she says.

If the component of being a flexible thinker that asks you to stay in contact with the present moment and thought sounds a lot like mindfulness to you, you'd be correct in thinking so. With psychological flexibility, rather than trying to push negative thoughts away, you're acknowledging them—which is, indeed, a pillar of mindfulness.

"[Psychological flexibility] allows us to accept everything that comes our way and realize that every emotion contains a wealth of wisdom." —Poppy Jamie, mental health expert

"Ignoring pain doesn't make it go away; it makes it worse," Jamie says. "[Psychological flexibility] allows us to accept everything that comes our way and realize that every emotion contains a wealth of wisdom." Here's an example of what this looks like: Being psychologically *inflexible* can lead to numbing or distracting yourself as a way to push away what's happening and essentially just check out. But bending *with* your negative emotions means taking a beat, acknowledging the difficult emotions you're experiencing, and using that information to inform how you can move forward.

Bending with your negative thoughts instead of pushing them away can also lead to decreased anxiety. "What flexibility does is bring curiosity to meet our anxiety and disarm it," Jamie says, adding that anxiety can lead us to jump to conclusions that aren't necessarily truthful, such as overgeneralizing (a [negative thought pattern that takes a situation to the extreme](#)). What "bending" does is allow the opportunity to acknowledge our emotions and think more clearly about what's actually happening instead of jumping to false conclusions, and then figuring out a way forward.

For an example of how psychological flexibility can look in practice, when Jamie's book came out, she planned to send it to VIPs, but a problem with the packages caused a massive delay. She says her previous, inflexible self would have started spiraling, jumping to the conclusion that her entire book launch would be a failure. But with the help of the psychological flexibility technique, she was able to temper those emotions.

"I thought to myself, 'what is my fear here? Is that fear—that my book will be a complete failure if this mailer isn't perfect—actually true? How am I going to be kind to myself today? What would I tell a friend in this situation?'" she says. In the end, she embraced the issue as a cosmic joke of sorts: The packages were delayed and everyone got her book late, but she didn't start spiraling, and her launch wasn't a failure.

How to put the technique into practice

Now you know what psychological flexibility and "bending" with negative thoughts means, but there's still a difference between having that intel and being able to actually put it to use. Jamie says there are two instances when it can be especially helpful to put into practice. The first is every morning and involves taking a few minutes to connect with yourself before the demands of the day start taking over.

This, Jamie says, can look different for different people. Maybe it means going for a walk, playing with your dog, spending time in prayer, or, meditating. Whatever is going to put you in a positive mindset and bring good energy to your day, do it.

The second instance is generally more difficult to implement: That is, applying it when something unexpected happens. In this case, "bending" with negative thoughts requires consciously pausing, acknowledge what you're feeling, and then using those thoughts to inform

your next move without jumping to conclusions or assuming the worst. Here are some examples Jamie gives:

The inflexible thought: "I can't."

"Bending" to be more flexible: "I'm frustrated, which happens in life. Before I jump to conclusions, I'm going to gather more information and change my energy."

The inflexible thought: "Everyone hates me"

"Bending" to be more flexible: "I'm feeling a bit insecure right now, which seems to happen at parties. What about this situation is making me doubt myself? Has anyone done anything to prove my doubts are real?"

The inflexible thought: "It's always going to be like this."

"Bending" to be more flexible: "I'm feeling defeated about the future, which is normal and okay. What can I do in this moment that will make me feel more optimistic about the outcome?"

While the more you practice psychological flexibility, the easier it will become, Jamie says it's important to not be hard on yourself if you struggle with it, especially in the beginning. "[If you've never done it before], you're unlearning years of conditioning to think another way," she says. "That's why psychological flexibility *is* a practice."

Ultimately, she says, psychological flexibility is about developing an inner trust that you have the tools to handle whatever comes your way. It certainly doesn't mean you'll *like* everything you're faced with, but in knowing that you're capable of dealing, you'll find inner strength.

<https://www.wellandgood.com/psychological-flexibility/>