



Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions

- guide -

Prepared by Root Cuthbertson 2020

This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations, to increase understanding for those who may have a different relationship with these topics than you do. The approaches mentioned in this guide can be part of an Inner Transition toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

What Are Uncomfortable Emotions?

Below is a brief description of a few uncomfortable emotions, those often viewed as 'negative,' 'undesirable,' or 'inappropriate.' Uncomfortable emotions can arise for many reasons, like a growing awareness of the destruction of nature or the suffering of humans. During a Transition, many people may habitually carry uncomfortable emotions like:

Fear or anxiety – Related to survival and perception of danger. Courage is feeling fear and continuing to do what one can despite it.

Grief or sadness – Related to losses of any kind, individual, local, or global. Sharing grief honours connections, expresses deep care or love, and may be an important ingredient of joy.

Numbness or not knowing – Related to dissociation and coping strategies which may be helpful short-term and harmful long-term. Investigating numbness may reveal new insights or energy.

Disgust or contempt – Related to survival and rejecting something harmful to wellbeing; the opposite of acceptance or trust. Tolerance is feeling disgust and continuing to do what one can despite it.

Anger or frustration – Related to survival and perceived need to defend. Anger can be useful for motivation or taking action.

Ideally, an Inner Transition will involve a growing awareness of uncomfortable emotions, and how to express them in a healthy way. For individuals, this can be part of self-care practices like emotional hygiene (see [Inquiry: Emotions](#)). Groups can support uncomfortable emotions in several ways outlined below.

Benefits of Expressing Uncomfortable Emotions

Expressing or sharing uncomfortable emotions can be helpful for individual and group well-being, part of an Inner Transition allowing stuck energy to flow more freely. Expressing uncomfortable emotions in a good way may benefit individuals and groups by:

- bridging differences, building trust, and cultivating compassion
- freeing up the energy used to suppress emotions
- deepening connection and empathy
- increasing the courage to stay open to feeling uncomfortable emotions
- preventing uncomfortable emotions from becoming toxic
- reducing tensions, resentments, or obstacles to connection
- replenishing a sense of purpose and motivation
- reassuring individuals and groups that such emotions are normal
- providing a foundation for a supportive group culture and sense of community.

Avoiding Uncomfortable Emotions

Someone may avoid uncomfortable emotions for many reasons, typically because of a personal history where uncomfortable emotions were not encouraged. This can result in beliefs like:

- there will be bad consequences for expressing uncomfortable emotions.
- expressing uncomfortable emotions will lead to getting stuck in repeating a cycle.
- suppressing uncomfortable emotions is somehow valuable or praiseworthy.
- relationships based on uncomfortable emotions are somehow wrong or unimportant.
- uncomfortable emotions involve transactions that are too expensive.
- due to culture or context, expressing uncomfortable emotions would feel shameful or wrong.
- uncomfortable emotions are either wrong, best kept to a minimum or too overwhelming to experience.

History & Social Justice

Transition represents the possibility of addressing historic inequality, past harms, and fashioning a new society based on social justice for all. Historically entrenched systems of oppression will likely take some time to dismantle and transition from. Transitioners can benefit from making time and space for the uncomfortable emotions that are likely to arise. For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation process that South Africa implemented while dismantling the apartheid system involved the expression of many uncomfortable emotions.

Embracing Uncomfortable Emotions

Groups and individuals can benefit from learning to tolerate, understand, embrace, and make space for uncomfortable emotions.

For instance, an Inner Transition may involve getting curious about anger. Getting to know it better can reduce one's fear of anger, so it can be reframed as a source of empowerment. Anger is a common human emotion which can be helpful for motivating, galvanizing, and sustaining actions. Anger can arise as a defense, to protect those perceived as vulnerable, hurt, or disempowered -- perceptions which may be accurate or inaccurate.

Suppressing anger can diminish it as a source of power, and lead to it eventually expressing 'inappropriately' – leaking out slowly or exploding all at once. While it can feel like there is no choice but to express anger impulsively, learning to mindfully embrace anger allows for more choices. Emotional maturity involves learning to choose how to respond 'appropriately,' rather than react impulsively to emotions like anger (see [Inquiry: Emotions](#)).

An Inner Transition will ideally involve learning to embrace uncomfortable emotions and use them in a good way to benefit self, others, and the world.

Normalising & Culture Change

Since uncomfortable emotions are likely to arise, they can be reframed as a normal part of a group's dynamics that can benefit groups and individuals. In addition to providing dedicated times and spaces where uncomfortable emotions are welcome (see below), groups can begin to Transition their culture so that uncomfortable emotions are more welcome anytime. Ideally individuals can express their uncomfortable emotions, feel supported by the group, and continue contributing to the group.

For instance, if your group culture prioritises task-accomplishment (doing) over relationship building (being), you may view uncomfortable emotions as a 'waste of time' (see [Task-Process-Relationship Guide](#)). Your group could Transition its culture toward allowing individuals to more regularly express uncomfortable emotions. A good setting for uncomfortable emotions can channel their transformative power into beneficial Inner Transitions -- and result in accomplishing tasks with even greater efficiency.

When making space for uncomfortable emotions, try to be aware of cultural backgrounds in your group - individual members may have different views on how to 'appropriately' respond to uncomfortable emotions. This can be complex, so a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is generally unhelpful. Someone's cultural background, perception, and present-day context are all important factors in how they 'respond appropriately' to any situation. This is part of a larger topic of Culture Change.

Scheduling Times for Different Meetings

The 8 Shields framework recognises two basic kinds of meetings, operational and personal, which Transition Network refers to as Doing and Being meetings.

	Focus	Outcomes
Doing Meetings (aka Operational or Business)	Operations, Tasks, Planning, or Strategy	Progressing projects. Making decisions that affect a number of people in the group.
Being Meetings (aka Personal or Relational)	Social Connection, Heart-Sharing, Grief-Tending, or Clearing	Deepening relationships, building trust, or removing obstacles.

Some groups prefer to schedule operational/doing and personal/being meetings separately. Other groups may combine them in one meeting, while clarifying distinct times for personal and operational topics. Either way can be beneficial. If individuals can expect some time for personal topics where uncomfortable emotions are welcome, they can contribute more meaningfully during time for operational topics. They are less likely to 'interrupt' operational/doing meetings with personal emotions.

Before Meeting: Clean & Clear

For operational/doing meetings, the 8 Shields movement recommends a practice called 'Clean and Clear', which is inspired by the indigenous Hawaiian practice of ho'oponopono. This is for seeing whether there are any uncomfortable emotions – anger, resentment, disappointment, sadness, upset -- simmering between two people which may affect the business meeting. These emotions may be considered 'obstacles' to connection or decision-making, and the idea is to remove such obstacles so that the meeting can progress smoothly.

Before the meeting, let everyone know that early in the meeting everyone will be asked if they are 'Clean and Clear': if there are no uncomfortable emotions leftover from previous interactions that will affect the meeting. If everyone is 'Clean and Clear', the meeting can progress smoothly. If not, there will be a short time to determine how everyone can become 'Clean and Clear' with each other. This may involve two people scheduling a separate meeting for a Clearing process i.e. a deeper discussion / exploration of a tension or emotional charge. The idea is not to spend that time processing uncomfortable emotions! The incentive is that people get Clean and Clear with each other before the meeting, ideally resolving their issues ahead of time so that when they are asked the question, they can say yes, they are Clean and Clear.

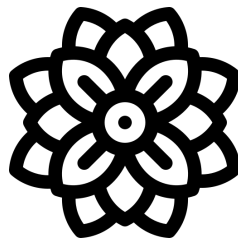
The 8 Shields movement has a 9-step process for Clearings, aimed at restoring connection, cultivating compassion, and deepening relationships.

Uncomfortable Emotions During Meetings

Some being/personal meetings are intended as a dedicated time and space where uncomfortable emotions are welcome. For instance, a Clearing often includes describing a person's behaviour, expressing uncomfortable emotions, and requesting a change in that behaviour. A Heart-Sharing (e.g. [Joanna Macy's Truth Mandala](#)) may create a strong container and invite a number of uncomfortable emotions like anger, fear, sadness, or emptiness.

Operational/doing meetings may benefit from setting uncomfortable emotions aside for a separate personal meeting. In some cultures, uncomfortable emotions arising at a business meeting will prompt the suspension of decision-making, to resume only after personal meetings where those emotions can express. Such cultures try to insulate decision-making from emotions like grief, fear, or anger; preferring to make decisions that affect the group 'in a good way,' or in the absence of uncomfortable emotions. This can reduce tensions, allow greater harmony within the group, and result in greater support for decisions.

And, uncomfortable emotions may arise at any time! If they do arise during a business meeting, ideally they can be viewed as a gift rather than an obstacle. In sociocracy, objections are viewed as gifts for the group, illuminating something that may have been obscured. Some groups similarly see uncomfortable emotions as indicators pointing to an unseen aspect. Depending on how appropriately or maturely they are expressed, uncomfortable emotions can help a group pause to consider a topic before making a decision. And, some decisions need to be made regardless of how many personal uncomfortable emotions arise.



Related Inner Transition Resources

- Inquiry: Emotions
- Task-Process-Relationship
- Knowing What I Feel
- Supporting Emotions to Flow

References

- 8 Shields Institute Meeting Protocol in the "Designing for Peace" online course
<http://8shields.org/offers/peace/>
- Macy, Joanna. Truth Mandala
<https://workthatreconnects.org/resource/truth-mandala/>
- Truth and Reconciliation
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_reconciliation_commission

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