

Let Go of Destructive, Unwholesome Beliefs and Emotions



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Submission: October 02, 2017; **Published:** October 13, 2017

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Short Communication

(Excerpt from *Wise Mind Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss and Pain* by Ronald Alexander, PhD)

In Buddhist psychology, we recognize three categories of emotions, feelings, and thoughts: positive (wholesome), neutral, or negative (unwholesome). Anything with an unwholesome quality causes suffering, so we try to remedy or replace these destructive, afflictive thoughts and feelings with their wholesome counterparts.

Acceptance of what's happening in the moment, and of the current situation, is a cornerstone of Buddhism. The paradox is that this wholehearted acceptance of the present, regardless of how unpleasant or even painful circumstances might be, is absolutely necessary if you're to change the situation for the better. From acceptance, you move into action. When you're resisting what is, you blind yourself to the possibilities of what might be. When you accept what is, you experience spaciousness and expansiveness, and ideas and creativity rush in. Opportunities present themselves. You can embrace them and move forward with wholesome, productive actions that are in harmony with what you hope to achieve. You'll feel energized and vitalized instead of being dragged downward by fear and pessimism. However, this turn toward wholesome thought, feeling, and action can only occur after you've shed your resistance and accepted the present circumstances.

Destructive attitudes about confidence, sensuality, ambition, and other wholesome qualities, along with unwholesome beliefs, may be hidden in your unconscious mind. If so, they can only be discarded if they're brought into conscious awareness and examined. For example, I've worked with clients who found it difficult to generate a feeling of confidence or ambition, because they were taught that only arrogant, self-centered, or shallow people experience those feelings. Those who were abused in the past often have difficulty allowing them to feel confidence

and trust because of painful memories of betrayal and deeply embedded fear and distrust. These areas of hidden resistance to particular wholesome qualities will remain deep within until they're consciously deconstructed and reformulated.

In Buddhist psychology, the thought is said to be the seed that creates emotion, which in turn creates a feeling or sensation. The ever-active mind will add to this sequence, layering on new thoughts and emotions that are equally unwholesome. To stop this buildup of negativity that causes increased suffering, we can apply a wholesome remedy to the afflictive quality at any place in that sequence. Then, later, we can take the time to fully explore our unconscious, unwholesome beliefs.

Addressing Afflictive Thoughts

Cognitive behavioral therapy, also known as *cognitive therapy*, is a very effective approach to dealing with painful, afflictive thoughts, which are often based in habits of the mind and, upon examination, reveal themselves to be quite distorted and unwholesome. When these thoughts arise, you don't have to continue your narrative of suffering. Instead, you can stop, observe what you're thinking, and ask yourself, "Is this true?" You can consider the evidence that it is and weigh that against the evidence that it isn't, keeping in mind that extreme statements such as "I'll never..." or "It always happens that..." are almost certainly distortions. Using logic and reason, you can analyze a situation and determine whether you were assuming a worst-case scenario, and consider what the best-case scenario and even the most likely scenario are. This type of unemotional analysis provides perspective that allows for retraining the mind. You set aside the instantaneous, distorted, unwholesome thoughts and embrace more positive, wholesome ones, laying new neural pathways and building mind strength. If you don't know whether a particular negative thought is likely to be true, you can explore the possibilities instead of being pessimistic and assuming the worst.

The next step in examining an unwholesome thought is to replace it with one that's wholesome. Working with a mindfulness trainer or a therapist can be very helpful for figuring out specific wholesome, remedying thoughts. You may choose to write out these replacement thoughts, which can be very effective. However, when you first begin using this remedy of a positive thought, feeling, or sensation, you're likely to feel resistance, as the old neural pathways in the brain protest, "But this isn't true!" One way to get around this obstacle is to design remedying thoughts that feel true in the moment. Instead of trying to replace an unwholesome feeling of longing and emptiness with the belief, "I'm going to meet the love of my life very soon," you can remedy that afflictive feeling with a thought such as "I'm doing all the right things to attract and create a healthy, loving partnership," which is less likely to arouse feelings of dishonesty, discomfort, or embarrassment.

The emotional response to this wholesome, remedying thought needs to be positive for it to take hold in the mind and body, and begin to lay a new neural pathway in the left-prefrontal cortex. Otherwise, you can achieve the opposite effect, creating even more negative thoughts and feelings instead of remedying the ones your mind has already churned up. In mindfulness

training, the key is for the mediator to notice the direction of the mind flow in every moment and redirect it when it's moving toward unwholesomeness. You actually teach the mind to create wholesome thoughts, and in so doing, you reprogram your brain, replacing old neural networks with new ones that foster creativity and optimism.

Once you've generated this positive and healing thought, you can make a point of saying the words silently or aloud every time you witness yourself thinking negatively.

Creative individuals have learned the habit of rejecting limiting, constrictive thinking. They allow the witnessing mind to arise, look at an obstacle, and say, "Perhaps that's true, but let's sit with that idea for a while." With mindfulness training, you'll find it natural to entertain the impossible and even the absurd. You can let go of the constricting belief that it's a waste of time to consider new ideas that seem unworkable or that have "already been done" and, instead, open up to new possibilities that reveal themselves. In Buddhism, we say that a constrictive quality of mind keeps mind flow within a narrow range of awareness, while mindfulness allows us to drop our limitations and ultimately enter the creative space of open mind.



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DOI: [10.19080/PBSIJ.2017.07.555706](https://doi.org/10.19080/PBSIJ.2017.07.555706)

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