

Sadness	Grief	Depression
		
An emotion	A reaction, includes sadness	A condition, includes sadness
Often brief and situational	May come in waves No time limit	Lingers, a constant sadness
Specific events	A loss (death, ending of a relationship, job, major change in life style, physical change)	Hopelessness, worthlessness
May have no effect on daily function	Sadness, yearning, array of feelings such as frustration, anger, guilt	Feeling guilty for no reason
<i>“Sadness is a normal response to a wound that’s ultimately destined to heal...”</i>	Entwined with memory	Irritability
Lends balance to life, inspires empathy	Spiritual questioning	Loss of interest in activities, withdrawal from others
Often cathartic	Influenced by how a person perceives death/loss	Physical symptoms such as fatigue, low energy, changes in appetite, unable to sleep or sleeping too much, difficulty concentrating
Encourages resiliency	Age and emotional development influence the way a person grieves a death.	Thoughts of suicide

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The Benefit of Sadness: Why sadness isn't something we should always seek to avoid

The other day, my almost-four-year-old son said to me, "Daddy, I'm sad."

"Why?" I asked him.

He shrugged, unclear himself.

"Is it because it's a school day?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You'd rather stay home and play with me and mom?"

He nodded again, vigorously.

"Maybe it's not that you *don't* want to go to school," I said, "but that you want to stay home and play with us *more*."

He nodded a third time. "Yeah."

"But at school you get to play with all of your friends!" I reminded him enthusiastically. "And you're making smoothies today!"

His face brightened. "Oh, yeah!" And just like that, his sadness was gone.

Would that it were as easy to banish sadness in adults. Though the word "depression" has by and large replaced the word "sadness" for what we feel when things don't go our way or we lose something precious to us, the two are, in fact, quite distinct. Depression describes a specific set of symptoms that cluster together: depressed mood, inability to feel pleasure in pleasurable activities, sleep disturbance, decreased energy, difficulty concentrating, and possibly suicidal thinking. Sadness, on the other hand, may indicate a depressed mood, but may also be felt in a way that has little if any effect on daily function.

Sadness may, for example, be bittersweet—meaning brought on by a loss that makes us unhappy but at the same time that surfaces memories we enjoy. Sadness is a normal response to a wound that's ultimately destined to heal (which, of course, is person-dependent, meaning that what becomes a non-healing wound in me might heal within a few weeks in you). While depression has no upside of which I can think, sadness sometimes does.

Sadness can fill us with appreciation for the good we've lost. It can help us treasure the good we haven't. It can make us more tender. It can make us more empathetic and compassionate toward others who've gone through or are going through what we are. It can connect us to others by signaling we need their support. It can incline us to give support to others who've supported us. It can fill us with appreciation for the times we *don't* feel sad.

Most of us would avoid feeling sad if we could, but this would be a mistake. Suppressing unpleasant feelings because we're afraid of pain typically only leads to greater pain in the future, either as a result of the misguided steps we take to avoid feeling it initially (e.g., drug use), or as a result of it finally bursting forth when enough losses that haven't been properly grieved pile up one on top of the other and can no longer be contained. Most psychologists know of the cost of blocking out legitimate sadness rather than allowing it to be felt until it ends on its own.

Because, in my experience, it does end. The final benefit of experiencing sadness may be that it's cathartic. Why, after all, do we cry? To feel better. When we suffer a blow in life, sadness may represent the bridge we must take to return to our baseline level of happiness. Certainly grief and sadness can become prolonged and develop into full-blown depression, but data suggest that when most of us suffer a loss, we grieve for a while and then eventually move on. We are all, in fact, far more resilient than we think.

I'm writing about this now because I've been feeling sad myself lately. Someone I love isn't doing so well, and there's not much I can do about it. Unfortunately, some things in life aren't fixable in the way we want, and when that's the case, not being able to do it the way we want is...sad. So, not being able to do anything else, I tolerate my sadness. And I share it with others I love. And it draws us together—in a good way, I find—helping us to value and appreciate one another more, teaching me that, in one sense, sadness holds the power to bring out our best. And for that I'm thankful.

Coping Skills to Release Sadness

Laura Schenck, MA

Sadness is an emotional experience that is inherent to life itself. While sadness is often labeled as an unpleasant emotion, it is important to remember that there is no such thing as “good” or “bad” emotion.

As with all emotions, sadness is a temporary state of being that we all experience in some form at various points in life. Sadness may differ in the degree, intensity, or context within which sadness impacts our lives.

Take a moment to reflect on what the emotion of sadness feels like for you in particular contexts.

For example, notice the difference between sadness over feeling lonely versus sadness over the death of a loved one. All emotions can be experienced along a continuum of varying intensity and duration. By increasing mindful awareness of how you typically experience an emotion such as sadness, you will become more adept at noticing your personal warning signs or cues that indicate sadness.

Reflect on current coping strategies.

How do you usually respond to sadness? Try to pause and remember times in your life when you have felt sadness and notice what thoughts and behaviors you have chosen to practice. Perhaps you notice a tendency to socially isolate yourself during times of sadness or engage in some form of self-sabotaging behaviors. Or maybe you have a proclivity to reach out to friends and loved ones for social support. The idea is to allow yourself to observe your current coping strategies without any judgment. Notice patterns and themes as you piece together how you typically cope with sadness.

Crying is a natural bodily expression and release of emotions.

Notice your own tendencies and patterns when it comes to expressing sadness through tears. Do you notice a proclivity to hold back your tears, to express them only in solitude, or to allow them to flow freely? Try not to judge your own experiences when it comes to crying; simply notice your patterns and ask yourself if you are willing to allow yourself to release sadness in a healthy way through your tears.

Investigate What Sadness Means to You.

It is not uncommon to become so out of touch with our internal emotional experience that we no longer even know what we are feeling. Perhaps you've learned to become numb to intense emotions or to simply go through the motions without allowing yourself to feel. Try writing in your journal about what sadness means to you and what the experience feels like. For example, consider completing sentences such as, “I usually feel sad when...” or “I can tell I am feeling sad when...” The idea is to get in touch with a deeper understanding of what sadness feels like for you, so that you can become more skillful in identifying and responding to sadness in healthy ways in the future.

Delve into your creativity.

Through any creative pursuit, you can practice creating an image of what sadness would look like if it were personified into its own entity.

View the sadness as separate from your true self.

In other words, externalize the sadness. Rather than remaining stuck in a pattern of thinking, “I *am* sad,” make the choice to notice that, “I am *experiencing* sadness.” It is not a part of your identity, but merely a transitory aspect of your experience. It does not define you any more than you will allow.

If you find yourself in the midst of a period of sadness that is causing you unnecessary suffering, step back and recognize this.

If you are *tired* of that unnecessary suffering, ask yourself if you are willing to take proactive steps toward releasing the sadness. Once sadness has provided you with useful emotional information and has been experienced and expressed in healthy ways, it is time to actively release the sadness.

Give yourself support.

It is common during times of emotional distress to have powerful desires to feel comforted and supported. When it seems as though other people in our lives aren't there to provide that support or reassurance, sadness can easily intensify and become debilitating. It is precisely during these moments when it is most important to remember that we have all of the resources and gifts that we yearn for from others within ourselves. Take a moment to pause and give yourself the very compassion, comfort, and support that you need.

Reach out.

When you make the choice to actively reach out to a partner, friends, or family, there is great potential to release a pent up or stagnant emotion such as sadness. While it is important to remember that ultimately the true release of sadness is something that only *you* can do, sharing your feelings with others can provide new perspectives or ideas that you may not have seen or considered from within the place of sadness. Even if it feels as though others don't or can't truly understand how you are feeling, allow yourself to feel gratitude for their presence in your life. Remember the importance of authentic emotional connections with others as you begin to actively release the sadness and step back into a rich and vibrant life.

Remember that engaging with an animal/pet is also very therapeutic.

Spend time outdoors.

The choice to get your body moving, become active, and experience sunlight and fresh air is a way of applying opposite action to the emotion of sadness. The benefits of regular physical activity positively impact not only your physical health, but also your mental and emotional well-being. Depending upon your current physical health, any physical limitations, and your daily schedule, consider what physical activities you can realistically integrate into your day. Choose an activity in which you are *most likely* to participate. Notice any positive changes in your mood and release of sadness as a result of increasing your time outdoors and physical activity.

Take a hot shower or bath.

Research has shown that warm water eases the pain of loneliness. Even if your personal experience with sadness does not include a palpable sense of loneliness or isolation, a hot bath or shower is a form of self-care that can ease muscular tension and promote well-being. Don't rush through it or bathe mindlessly, but to take your time and be fully present. Allow yourself to truly enjoy and savor the warmth of the water, notice your muscles relaxing, and make the choice to give yourself the gift of

pampering yourself a bit. Visualize the warm water washing away the feelings of sadness as you envision yourself becoming cleansed, renewed, and rejuvenated as a result.

List ways of self soothing.

Reflect back on what healthy activities you have found helpful in the past during times of sadness or distress. Many people find it useful to create a list of self-soothing or distress tolerance strategies on hand for use during times of unpleasant emotions. When you find yourself stuck in a cycle of sadness, one way of actively releasing that sadness and moving through it is to reengage yourself with activities that you find pleasurable, enjoyable, or joyful. Examples of self-soothing activities include: watching a funny movie, curling up on the couch in a soft blanket, spending time with a pet, listening to uplifting music, or reading a positive/engaging book. Consider what works for you. Use these self-soothing activities as methods of releasing sadness and reminding yourself that it is possible to feel happy/pleasant emotions, thoughts, and sensations.

Ask yourself if it's time to release the sadness.

If you find yourself stuck in a repetitive or stagnant emotional state of sadness, consider what life *might* look like and feel like if you were to actually release that sadness. You may have reached a point of realization that your sadness is no longer serving your best interests... it is time for it to be released.