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DEER OAKS EAP PRESENTS:
June On-Demand Seminar

*Finding Yourself
Through Nature*

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Dealing with Difficult Emotions

Happiness and joy are wonderful emotions—but they aren't the only ones. It's human to feel sadness, anger, fear, guilt, envy, disgust, and other difficult emotions. It's normal to have those difficult feelings when life is not going as you'd like it to—when you face loss, failure, unfairness, abandonment, and other traumas and disappointments.

Psychologist Susan David presents a model that can help you deal with difficult emotions productively and move past them, rather than ignoring them, ruminating on them in an amplifying cycle, or trying to suppress them with false positivity. By recognizing and dealing with difficult emotions, you're building resilience for facing future difficulties. You're learning to live in the world as it is, not as you wish it to be.

Recognize the full range of your emotions.

With the modern emphasis on happiness and positivity (“Cheer up.” “Count your blessings.” “Look on the bright side.”) and cultural norms that discourage the expression of difficult emotions (“Don't cry.” “Be strong.”), many people have trouble even identifying difficult feelings and emotions. It's telling that they're labeled “negative” emotions, while happiness and joy are labeled “positive” emotions.

David proposes that all emotions have value—that recognizing the full range of your emotions is an important step toward mental health and the realization of your potential. Emotions in themselves aren't “good” or “bad,” she explains. They provide information about your values and what's important to you. It's how you act in response to those emotions that can either hold you back in life or propel you forward.

Don't deny or bottle up difficult emotions.

One common response to difficult emotions is to ignore or suppress them. Difficult emotions can certainly be uncomfortable. However, when you push them aside or try to bottle them up, they tend to spill out anyway, often at inconvenient times and in unproductive ways. By ignoring or dismissing difficult emotions, you're also distorting your view of the world. You're forcing yourself to see things as you want them to be, rather than looking honestly at things as they are. Emotions, even difficult ones, are important points of information.

Don't brew or ruminate on difficult emotions.

Another common response to difficult emotions is to ruminate on them. A little rumination can be productive if it helps you examine the emotion and consider what's triggering it. However, full-blown rumination—stewing



about what has made you angry or over-criticizing yourself for what has made you feel guilty—becomes a self-destructive cycle. You're stuck thinking the same painful thoughts and feeling the same uncomfortable emotions over and over again, amplifying the difficult emotions instead of dealing with them.

Label your emotions.

As you experience difficult emotions, notice and label them as specifically as possible. This can take practice if you're new to it. You might feel sad, but can you be more precise? Are you lonely? Grieving a loss? Feeling excluded or ignored? If you're feeling stressed, is it that you're overwhelmed by work demands, irritated by the way someone is behaving, tense from a fear of failure, or anxious about overdue bills? The more specifically you can name your emotions, the more effectively you'll be able to deal with them.

Examine your emotions with curiosity and compassion.

In the practice of mindfulness, you focus your thoughts on the present moment, clearing your mind of thoughts about the past and the future. An important part of the present moment is how you feel right now. In the practice of mindfulness, the goal is to notice and accept how you feel without judgment.

Whether it's using mindfulness or another method, your goal in dealing with difficult emotions is to examine them with curiosity and compassion. Recognize all of your emotions, even the difficult ones, and accept them as real. Don't dismiss them with false positivity. Don't wallow in them in a rumination cycle. Don't judge yourself for having “bad” emotions, but don't let them drive you, either. Accept difficult emotions for what they are: your feelings at the moment. They could be wild overreactions to a situation, or they could be appropriate responses to a hurt or injustice.

Use them to gain insight into your values, your needs, and what's important to you. As David puts it, "Emotions are data; they are not directives. We own our emotions; they don't own us."

Create space between your emotions and yourself.

You can't choose your emotions, but you can choose how you respond to them. Stephen Covey framed an important concept of Victor Frankl's in these words: "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Everyone has difficult emotions, but you don't need to let those emotions define you or drive your behavior. Create space between you as a person and the emotions you are feeling.

One way to do this is to notice a building emotion and take time to pause and examine it. Count to 10 (or to 100 or 1,000). Take deep breaths to calm yourself. Consider the emotion and what it is telling you. Then think about how to respond in a way that's aligned with your values and the person you want to be while recognizing the reality of the situation. That might be to speak up if you're feeling ignored or overlooked—but in a productive way that gets at the source of the problem you've observed. It might be to keep quiet for the moment and find a way to respond at another time—without losing sight of the problem your emotions have helped you identify. It might be to accept that you are grieving a loss and allow yourself to feel sad.

Another way to help create this space is to reframe "I am" statements like "I am sad," or "I am mad," into observations of your emotions. Statements like "I notice that I am feeling sad," or "I notice that I am feeling angry," separate you—your character, your personality, your values—from the emotions you are feeling and gives you space to choose a response. They help you step back and examine what might have triggered the emotion and explore why you are having the emotional reaction. Within that space, you'll be better able to choose your response.

Journaling and professional therapy are also helpful ways to recognize your emotions, label them with more specificity, and create space between your emotions and your responses.

Choose your response based on your values.

As you create space between your emotional reactions and your responses to those emotions, and between yourself as a person and your emotional reactions to the situations you face, choose your response based on your values. Your emotions can be clues to those values. David refers to them as signposts. If you feel angry about an injustice, either one



you observe or one you hear or read about, that can be a sign that you care about fairness and equality. If you are frustrated by being ignored, that could be a sign that you have something important to say and should find ways to express yourself in ways that you are heard.

Gradually change your habits of responding to difficult emotions.

It can take time to change lifelong habits of responding to difficult emotions. You may have been raised to hide or bottle "negative" emotions, to buck up and get over your sadness or never to express your anger. You may have settled so deeply into a rumination habit that it can be hard to break the self-fueling cycle. As with changing any habit, the key to dealing with difficult emotions is to start small and take it one step at a time.

As you improve your ability to notice your emotions and label them more precisely, take pride in that personal growth. It's important progress. Congratulate yourself when you are able to change an automatic and unhelpful reaction to a difficult emotion to a response based on your values. Observe how your ability to accept the full range of emotions and choose your response strengthens your relationships and frees you to be true to yourself. Each small step you take strengthens your new approach and gradually builds into a new habit of healthier emotional living.

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Source: Morgan, H. (2021, November). *Dealing with difficult emotions* (Z. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: *Workplace Options*.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Awareness Month June 2022

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

It's natural to be afraid when you're in danger. It's natural to be upset when something bad happens to you or someone you know. But if you feel afraid and upset weeks or months later, it's time to talk with your doctor. You might have post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD?

PTSD is a real illness. You can get PTSD after living through or seeing a dangerous event, such as war, a hurricane, or bad accident. PTSD makes you feel stressed and afraid after the danger is over. It affects your life and the people around you. If you have PTSD, you can get treatment and feel better.

Who gets PTSD?

PTSD can happen to anyone at any age. Children get PTSD too.

You don't have to be physically hurt to get PTSD. You can get it after you see other people, such as a friend or family member, get hurt.

What causes PTSD?

Living through or seeing something that's upsetting and dangerous can cause PTSD. This can include:

- Being a victim of or seeing violence
- The death or serious illness of a loved one
- War or combat
- Car accidents and plane crashes
- Hurricanes, tornadoes, and fires
- Violent crimes, like a robbery or shooting

There are many other things that can cause PTSD. Talk to your doctor or Employee Advisory Service (EAS) if you are troubled by something that happened to you or someone you care about.

How do I know if I have PTSD?

Your doctor can help you find out. Call your doctor if you have any of these problems:

- Bad dreams
- Flashbacks, or feeling like the scary event is happening again
- Scary thoughts you can't control
- Staying away from places and things that remind you of what happened
- Feeling worried, guilty, or sad
- Feeling alone
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling on edge
- Angry outbursts
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or others

Children who have PTSD may show other types of problems. These can include:

- Behaving like they did when they were younger.
- Being unable to talk.
- Complaining of stomach problems or headaches a lot.
- Refusing to go places or play with friends.

When does PTSD start?

PTSD starts at different times for different people. Signs of PTSD may start soon after a frightening event and then continue. Other people develop new or more severe signs months or even years later.

How can I get better?

PTSD can be treated. A doctor or mental health professional who has experience in treating people with PTSD can help you. Treatment may include "talk" therapy, medication, or both.

Treatment might take 6 to 12 weeks. For some people, it takes longer. Treatment is not the same for everyone. What works for you might not work for someone else.

Drinking alcohol or using other drugs will not help PTSD go away. It may even make it worse.

How PTSD Can Happen: Janet's Story

Janet was in a car crash last year. The crash was frightening, and a man in another car died. Janet thought she was lucky. She lived through it and she wasn't badly hurt.

Janet felt fine for a while, but things changed. She started to have nightmares every night. And when she was awake, she could see the crash happening over and over in her mind. She felt tense every time she rode in a car, and tried to avoid it as much as she could. Janet started yelling at her husband over little things. And sometimes she just felt numb inside.

Janet's husband asked her to see her doctor, who told her she might have PTSD. Janet's doctor put her in touch with a doctor trained to help people with PTSD. Soon Janet was being treated. It helped her to feel less tense and scared, and it helped her to sleep. It also helped her to share her feelings with the doctor. It wasn't easy, but after a couple of months, Janet began to feel better.

Spending Time in Nature Can Boost Your Health & Your Mood

Researchers continue to find more evidence that spending time in nature is good for both physical and mental health. Whether it's a walk in the woods, lying on the grass in your local park, listening to the sound of moving water, or noticing the smell of leaves and flowers, connecting with nature can reduce your stress, brighten your mood, sharpen your thinking, and even boost your immune system.

Here are some of the ways that bringing more nature into your life can improve your health and wellbeing, according to this growing body of research.

Facts About PTSD

- PTSD can affect anyone at any age.
- Millions of Americans get PTSD every year.
- Many war veterans have had PTSD.
- Women tend to get PTSD more often than men.
- PTSD can be treated. You can feel better.

Don't hurt yourself.

You are not alone. Get help if you are thinking about hurting yourself.

- Call your Employee Assistance Program.
- Call your doctor.
- Call 911 if you need help right away.
- Talk to a trained counselor at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). (n.d.). Post-traumatic stress disorder (NIH Publication No. TR-08-6388). Retrieved October 25, 2016, from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>



Reduced Stress

Whether you live with a view of trees out your window or spend time in parks, gardens, and other green spaces, exposure to plants, trees, and natural bodies of water has been found to reduce levels of stress and anxiety. Exposure to nature tends to lower your heart rate and blood pressure and reduce the level of cortisol (a stress hormone) in your system. Natural environments can also help to pull people out of tension-building cycles of rumination.^{1,2,3}

Brighter Moods

Spending time in nature can make you happier—not just while you’re out in it, but afterwards, too. Study participants reported more positive moods after spending time in nature when compared with people who had spent time in non-natural environments. Walks in nature can be an effective supplement to other treatments for depression. One study using brain imaging gives a clue why this might be: After a walk in nature, an area of the brain associated with depression and anxiety when inactive showed increased activity.¹

Improved Concentration and Creativity

Something about time in nature restores the brain’s ability to think clearly and creatively. People who spend time in nature score significantly higher on tests of concentration and creativity than people who don’t. One theory is that a natural environment draws out a relaxed and unforced attention to a person’s surroundings, giving the brain a chance to recharge for renewed focus and more open-minded thinking. In a related finding, children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are better able to concentrate after spending time in nature.^{4,5}

Better Connections with Other People

Exposure to nature, both in experimental situations and living environments, is associated with higher levels of kindness, generosity, and cooperation. People who live in buildings with trees and green space around them report having more and stronger social connections with neighbors than do people of similar demographics living in buildings without trees. In experiments, people exposed to beautiful plants or images of nature demonstrated more generous behavior than those who were not.^{6,7,8}

More Energy

Time outdoors in nature makes you feel more vital and energetic. It’s not clear why this is, but one plausible explanation is that time in nature has a restorative and reinvigorating effect. One study monitored the brain activity of subjects while they walked in nature and found that the effects were similar to those of people engaged in meditation.^{9,10,11}

Strengthened Immune System

Several studies in Japan have found that the body’s immune system is strengthened when people spend time in the woods or among trees. White blood cell counts go up, including the concentration of T-cells, which play an important role in fighting infection. The practice of “forest bathing”—spending time in the woods for health benefits—is common in Japan and is gaining acceptance around the world. The body’s production of vitamin D is also boosted when you spent time outdoors in sunlight. Vitamin D may play a role in reducing the risk of osteoporosis, heart attacks, and some forms of cancer.^{12–15}

For More Information

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The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative, By F. Williams (2017, W.W. Norton & Company).

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, November). Spending time in nature can boost your health and your mood (C. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



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