

Interrupt Emotional Shut Down

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

If you have struggled with the tragic strategy of shutting down to meet needs for peace and safety, you know how quickly it can show up in times of stress. When you hit a big stressor, your system miscues and imagines you are back in that old context in which shutting down was the only option you had.

Some part of you still holds the belief that you can't be present for the stressor and survive. Some part of you believes you have to go away.

If you are reading this, you have likely been working to cultivate skills in mindfulness and self-empathy. You probably have many more resources and skills than you had when the tragic strategy of shutting down first appeared in your life. Yet, you still find yourself shutting down. It seems to run on automatic and you wonder how to intervene.

There are, at least, three things you can consider when attempting to intervene with this reactive pattern:

1. How you relate to the shutting down
2. Access to self-confidence
3. Engagement

How You Relate to Shutting Down

As with any form of reactivity, pushing it away or distracting yourself from it, isn't helpful. Put mindful attention on the reaction. Notice exactly what's happening in your experience. For example, you might notice your mind is foggy, your body is lethargic, you have the impulse to go back to bed, and there is a numbness around your heart. Each time you name some aspect of shutting down with gentleness and acceptance you interrupt the pattern. With practice, this new way relating to your experience will become more prominent than the reactive pattern.

Access Self-Confidence

To stay engaged in times of stress rather than shut down, you also need a sense of self-confidence in your ability to stay with it and be okay. Cheerleading yourself by repeating "I can do this. I can be present to my feelings and be okay," is likely helpful and yet not quite enough. You can reinforce the new way of relating by mindfully replaying all the times you were present to challenging feelings and ended up safe and okay. As you replay these moments, really experience those previous times in your whole body, heart, and mind. Each time you do, you are integrating a sense of confidence.

Engagement

Shutting down is a process of disengagement. You can interrupt that process by engaging life in some tangible way, at the first sign that you are beginning to shut down. Engagement can take many forms. You might go for a walk, start a woodworking project, schedule a tea date with a friend; anything that helps you engage with something physical or with another person. The key here is to not follow the impulse to disengage. The more shut down has taken over, the more that isolation will seem attractive. Don't be fooled, this is not going to meet your needs. The moment you feel the impulse to disengage, do something, no matter how small, to engage with life.

Practice

Choose one of the three practices above to try out at least once today.