

Using Opposite Action to Deal with Difficult Emotions

Objective

The goal of this exercise is to employ a technique called "Opposite Action" to respond differently to powerful emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness.

Background

When we encounter potent emotions, our instinct often drives us towards certain actions. Sometimes, these responses are beneficial - for instance, when confronted with actual danger. However, there are situations where these feelings arise without any real threat, and acting on them may not be the best solution.

"Opposite Action" is a tool designed to help you identify and regulate your emotions. It's not about suppressing your feelings but taking control of them and choosing a different course of action. With practice, this can lead to a change in the emotional response over time.

Procedure

In this worksheet, you'll start by recording instances where you experience distressing emotions and what actions you typically take in response. Then, you'll experiment with different ways of using "Opposite Action."

Typical reactions to difficult emotions include:

- Fear – running away or avoiding the perceived danger.
- Anger – fighting back or becoming defensive.
- Sadness – isolate, withdraw, or retreat.

Step 1: Record Your Experiences

Use the table below to note down your experiences of fear, anger, or sadness, and your usual response.

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Typical Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

Step 2: Practice Opposite Action

Try the following opposite actions:

- Fear – stay in the situation; take deep breaths; reassure yourself that you can handle it.
- Anger – step away from the situation; take deep breaths; consider the other person's perspective; practice compassion.
- Sadness – face the situation; allow yourself to cry if needed; choose an activity that involves others.

Remember, Opposite Action is most effective when your emotions do not align with the reality of the situation. Start with less intense emotions and gradually move onto more challenging ones.

Step 3: Record Your Opposite Actions

Use the table below to note down your experiences of practicing Opposite Action.

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Opposite Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

Reflections

Reflect on the following questions after completing the exercise:

1. What did you notice about your typical ways of dealing with difficult emotions?
2. Are your typical ways of handling emotions effective or ineffective? Why?

3. Describe your experience of trying "Opposite Action." Was it easy or challenging?

4. How helpful was this exercise on a scale of 1 (not very helpful) to 10 (extremely helpful)?

5. What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

Reference: DBT Assignment Workbook by Elyse Pipitone, LCSW, and Angela M. Doel, MS