

Allowing pain... a little bit at a time

Suppression is not very helpful in getting rid of painful thoughts and feelings. Actually, it may even make things worse.

Can you think of a time when you didn't want to deal with a really intense thought, memory, image or feeling? The idea of having it in your head might have felt like it would overwhelm you.

What did you do? Maybe you tried to block it out or push it away. Blocking out distressing memories, thoughts or feelings is often our automatic response – all humans are hard-wired to avoid pain.

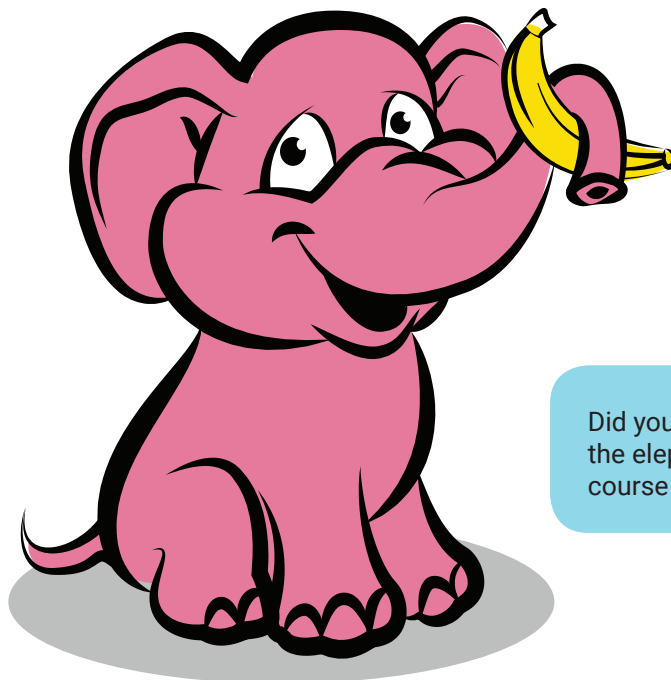
If you find yourself **repeatedly** blocking out thoughts or memories, it's likely you are using suppression to avoid emotional pain. Researchers have done lots of studies showing that suppression is not very helpful in getting rid of painful thoughts and feelings. Actually, it may even make things worse.

WHY IS SUPPRESSION UNHELPFUL?

Suppressing thoughts makes the thought bigger and louder! Likewise, when we try to suppress an emotion, it actually increases emotional arousal and distress. Why? Because our minds are weird. Here is a demonstration...

For the next 30 seconds, close your eyes and try your hardest NOT to think about a baby pink elephant holding a banana in its trunk.

Push all thoughts of a pink elephant away and clear your mind of banana holding elephants!



Did you think about the elephant? Of course you did!

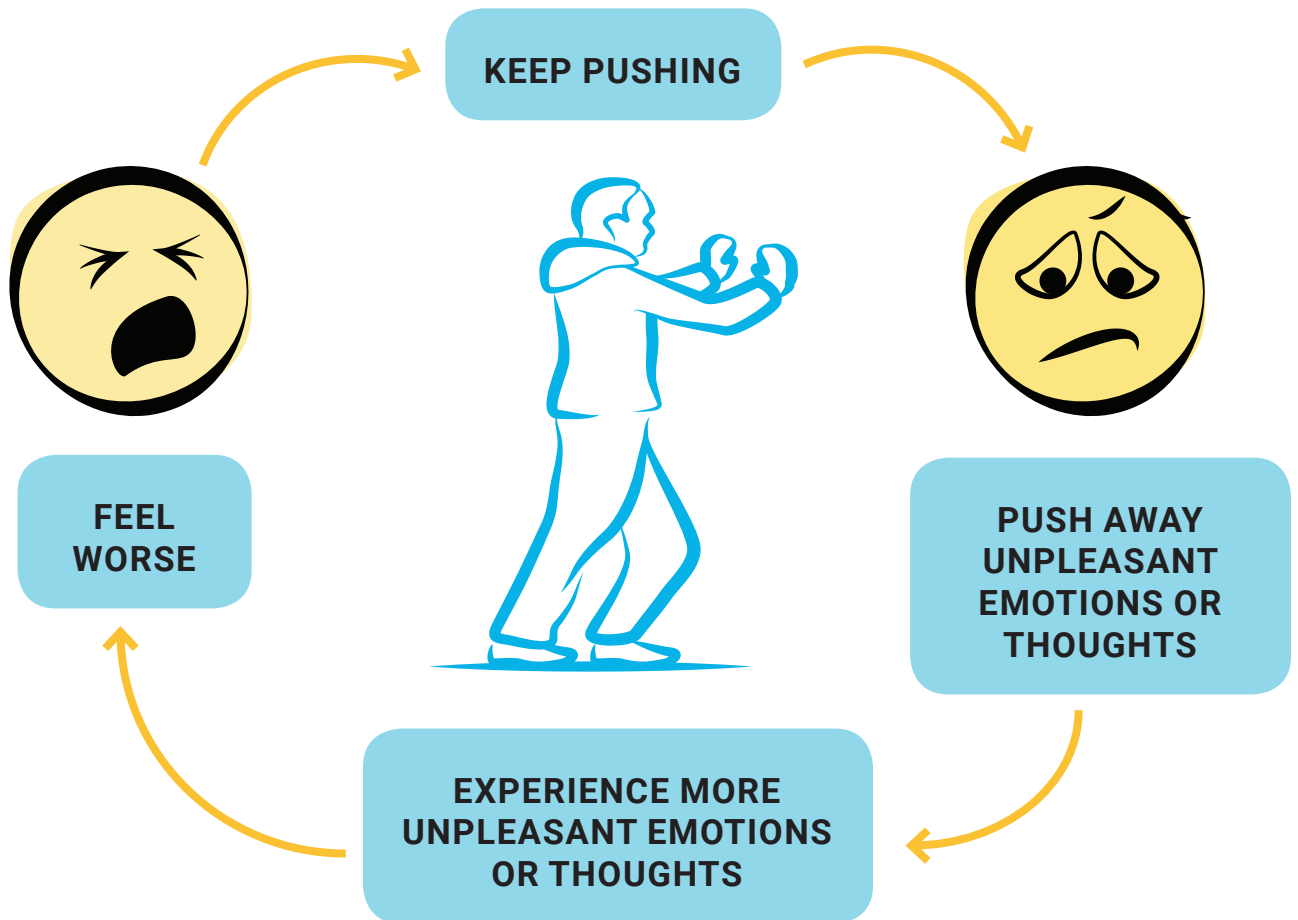


To be open to, and accepting of your emotions (even the painful ones), is a mindset where we allow our experiences to be as they are, without trying to change them. With this mindset, we can learn how to manage negative thoughts and emotions.



THE CYCLE OF SUPPRESSION

In order to NOT think about something, our mind has to pay attention to it, and also remember what we are trying to ignore. It is an impossible task for our minds! Putting effort into blocking out upsetting thoughts, memories, or situations doesn't work.



If the effort you are using to avoid upsetting thoughts, memories, or situations isn't working, what else could you do? Why don't you try allowing yourself to feel the pain – a little bit at a time. As soon as it feels too much, use one of your ERIC Skills to put the brakes on. 5-4-3-2-1 or mindful breathing will help so you don't get overwhelmed by your feelings.



PRACTICE & REFLECT

Practice allowing yourself to feel the pain – a little bit at a time. When it feels too much, use one of your ERIC skills to put the brakes on. Every few minutes, practice a mindful lean, mindful breathing, or use 5-4-3-2-1 to stay in control. Tick which skill you used when allowing an upsetting thought, feeling, or memory to hang around.

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What happened when you tried one of your core skills? What did you notice?

Were any of your strategies more helpful than others?

Can you think of any other strategies for managing emotions instead of suppressing them?