

## **‘Too much’ sadness**

In some ways, sadness is a strange emotion. Although sadness can feel painful and overwhelming – and therefore feel like an emotion of the threat system – it’s tricky to place it solely there. Think of the last time you saw a sad movie or TV show, maybe one where the protagonist just finds their long-lost daughter/son/mum/dad (you get the idea!), but then tragically dies shortly after being reunited. It’s likely that if the acting and script are half decent, you might feel quite sad and even tearful watching this. But it’s unlikely that you’ll describe this as an unpleasant, threat-like experience – in fact sometimes, people deliberately watch films like this as it temporarily connects them to sad feelings that can also leave them feeling uplifted and connected to others, appreciative of what is present in life, rather than depressed or unhappy.

There may be other times during which, when you’ve been sad, other people have noticed this and responded in very caring, supportive and connecting ways – so much so that afterwards you feel a slight uplift, a sense of feeling safe and connected, even if the situation that caused your sadness in the first place is ongoing. In this sense, sadness when met with care, support and connection, can actually stimulate the soothing system. From an evolutionary point of view, it’s thought that it evolved to signal loss and the need for reconnection – so it’s a type of distress call.

However, there are other versions of sadness that are far more distressing than this, and sometimes it can feel like an overwhelming and scary emotion to experience. This type of sadness can feel like an unanchored and rudderless boat at sea, caught in a constant cycle of rain, storms and crashing waves. Here, sadness can feel like we have been cut adrift, in the middle of an endless ocean of pain, never to meet the steady presence of land again. For

others, sadness feels like we can see land, but are continually being dashed upon the cliffs, unable to find a handhold on something that is steady and grounding.

Sangita walked into my therapy room already in tears. She told me, between breathless sobs, that she had been trying to hold everything together on her journey to our session, but couldn't manage any more. For the first 10 minutes or so, she did little other than cry, sob and blow her nose. As the session continued and she felt more settled, she went on to tell me about how life felt like a permanent storm of sadness and grief. Her girlfriend of ten years had recently passed away, six months after a short but painful battle with cervical cancer. Although there were still 'normal' moments in life, this was usually when Sangita was distracted by something at work, or when she managed to 'tune out' at night by eating, smoking weed, or drinking wine. Outside of this, she described how many things would 'tip' her into feelings of sadness and loss, and once this happened, like a dam breaking, she experienced an unstoppable surge of sadness, tears and heartache. As we explored further, it became clear that Sangita had always struggled to manage her emotions (like a light, she felt they were either on or had to be 'off' – there was no dimmer switch to them). Moreover, with sadness, in particular, she felt that she 'ought' to feel sad and that if she didn't, this would mean that she hadn't loved her partner enough. She was also concerned that if she started to enjoy life again, this would be a betrayal to her girlfriend's memory, and that other people would forget about her/how important she was to Sangita.

### **How do I know if I'm experiencing 'too much' sadness?**

As with any emotion, this is a difficult question to answer in isolation, as it depends on many factors. However, some of the following prompts are useful in reflecting on this:

- I feel too easily triggered to sadness

- I seem to get sad in many different situations, and more than others seem to
- I am often very sad
- When I get sad, it tends to last for a long time
- When I become sad, it tends to be at an intense level
- When I get sad, I don't feel that I'm in control of my feelings or actions
- What I get sad, this tends to have negative consequences on my life, or on other people
- When I get sad, it tends to take a long time to settle down again
- After settling from sadness, I often feel that my feelings or reactions may have been misplaced, or disproportionate to the situation
- Other people tell me I'm a sad person

It's worth taking some time to reflect on this yourself; make a few notes if that's helpful, as holding this in mind will help you as you work through this chapter.

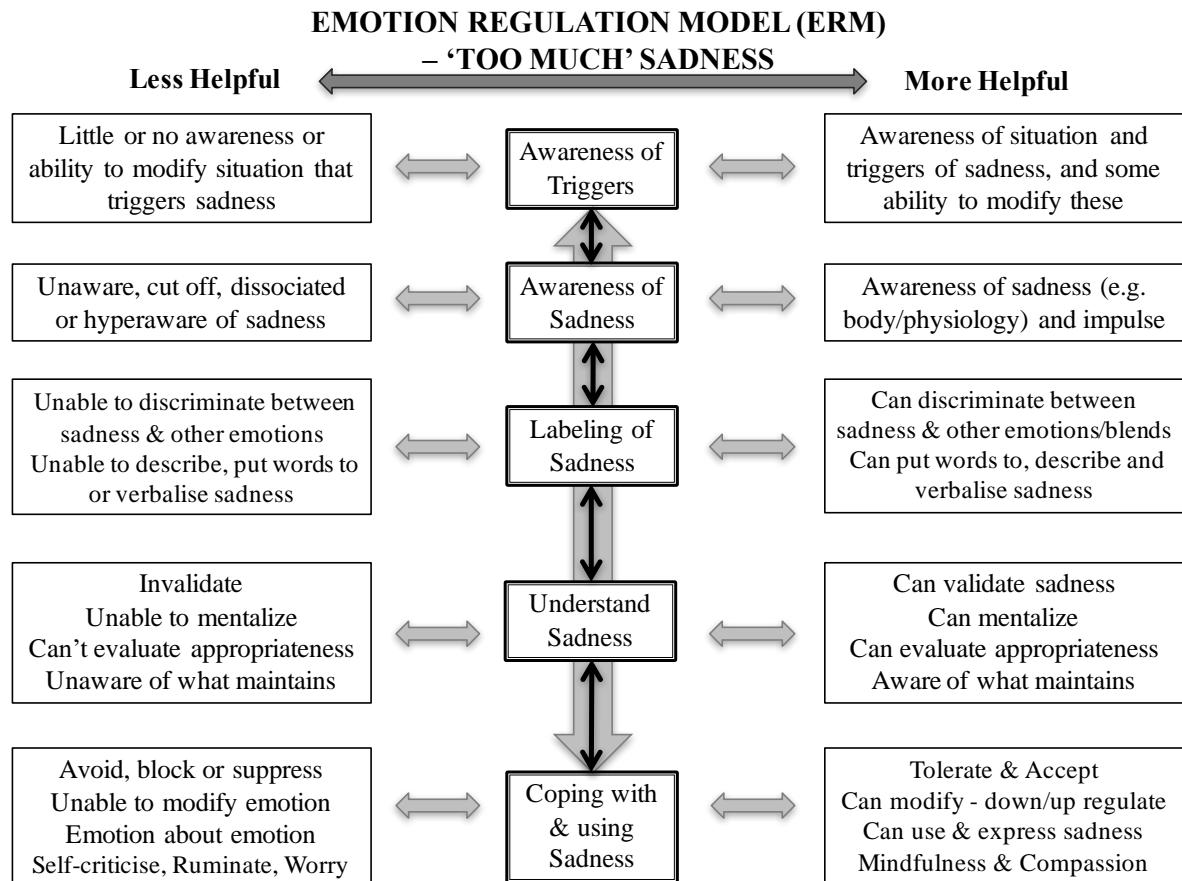
When we looked at these together, Sangita felt many were familiar to her. In particular, she described being regularly triggered to sadness, but at a level that was not only intense, but that took a long time to settle down. She also recognised that sadness was harming her, and other people.

### **How to help when you experience 'too much' sadness?**

There isn't one single way of working with difficulties with sadness, but we're going to explore how, using a number of steps, you might start to find a way of using your compassionate mind to do this.

#### *Step 1: Emotion regulation model*

Whichever emotion you're finding hard to work with, it's always useful to begin by turning back to the emotion regulation model we've been using through the book. Take a look again at the model (below), and with 'too much' sadness in mind, see if you can see which step of the emotion regulation model you're tracking more on the 'unhelpful' side (left-hand side) of the model.



When Sangita did this, she recognised that while she was aware of when it arose (Step 2), and could label and discriminate it from other feelings (Step 3), it was difficult to track which situations might trigger sadness (Step 1). In particular, it was at the 'coping with and using sadness' stage that she recognised having most difficulties. Sangita described having a lack of agency over sadness, and unhelpful thoughts and feelings about it (e.g. that it was necessary to feel sad, or else the relationship would be minimised, or for fear of anger emerging in its place).

Once you have a sense of which stage of the model you might be struggling with in regards to sadness, it can be helpful to start by returning to that chapter(s), and working through the exercises but with sadness as the key focus (Section IV in the main book). Take your time with this, as the skills in each chapter can take some time to develop and embed into life. After you've done that, it can then be useful to consider some specific ideas that might help in working with too much sadness.

*Step 2: Become familiar with sadness*

When we experience sadness frequently in life, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees and recognise what has triggered it, and why we're feeling like we're feeling. Although many people understand that sadness is linked to loss (for example, the end of a relationship or death of a family member), it can be harder to hold in mind that sadness is linked to the loss of something *valued* and *precious*. Generally, if we lose someone from our life (or something for that matter, such as a watch, piece of jewellery or other possession) that we don't value or cherish, we tend not to feel sad. So, it's useful to start by holding in mind that if you're feeling sad, this is likely because there is something important missing in your life. However, what sometimes makes sadness so tricky and overwhelming is when we struggle to acknowledge, tolerate and process that we are feeling this way because something deeply meaningful, precious and cherished has been taken from our life, often against our wishes. It is this part – that something has been taken from us against our wishes – which is why anger and a sense of 'unfairness' can embed in the experience of sadness and grief, keeping it fuelled and 'hot'.

Given how overwhelming certain types of sadness are, we may need an anchor so as not to get submerged or lost in our distress. In the compassionate mind approach, this anchor comes in the form of your compassionate self, as it's this part of you that has the qualities that

can help you to be with sadness but not overwhelmed by it. To do this, try the following exercise:

*Exercise: Tuning in to sadness*

Sit in an upright and comfortable position. Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing and friendly facial expression. Allow your breathing to slow a little, and gently rest your attention in the flow of breathing in, and breathing out. Stay with this for 60 seconds, or so.

Now, as you've done before, take some time to step into your compassionate self. So, for a moment, bring to mind the qualities of that self – wisdom, strength and a caring-commitment. Remember it doesn't matter if you feel you actually are a deeply compassionate person, or not. The most important thing is *to imagine* that you have the qualities of a deeply compassionate person. Let's spend 30 seconds imagining these qualities.

From your compassionate self, imagine looking in at the part of you that gets overwhelmed with sadness. Consider the following questions:

- What do you (as the compassionate self) see as the triggers of sadness?
- What is keeping it going or maintaining it?
- When did sadness start for you? What started it?
- Where do you notice it in the body? Where does it show itself?
- What does sadness want to do, if it could?
- What would it need to settle? What would help it to feel less overwhelmed?

Make some notes from the above exercise, taking time to explore and become more familiar with what sadness is like for you. Once you feel familiar with its shape and texture, it can be useful to explore how to bring compassion to this.

*Step 3: Sadness: Expressed or not?*

It's also helpful at this stage to hold in mind whether your experience of sadness is as an internal one, or whether you share this or express it with others (e.g. through physical signs such as tears, body posture or facial expression, or through words to describe your feelings). For example, some people struggle to express sadness, and if this is the case for you, it's worth considering why that might be. Is there something that gets in the way, or fear about what would happen if you did express or 'show' your sadness to someone else? Whilst expressing sadness can be helpful, this isn't always the case. For example, if the people closest to you struggle to hear or tolerate sadness, it's understandable that you have learnt to keep this to yourself. If this is the case, there are a few choices here. You could approach the person who struggles with hearing and tolerating sadness, and share with them why it might be important for you that they try to listen to you. Or instead, you might decide that it's worth opening your mind to other people in life who are more able to do this for you. However, if it is more of an internal concern (threat system) about expressing sadness to others – for example, 'I'll come across as weak' or 'I'll get tearful and embarrass myself' – then it's useful to try and turn to these judgements and concerns and see if you can try to support yourself with this. In particular, it may be useful reading through one (or more) of the following chapters to help you with this:

- Chapter 16c: Coping with emotions – expressing emotions and assertiveness
- Chapter 16e: Managing shame and self-criticism
- Chapter 20: Using compassionate thinking to manage your emotions

If you are expressing sadness to other people already, it can also be worthwhile to consider if any difficulties arise out of doing this? Sometimes, other people initially respond with care and sensitivity, but over time, can pull away from us if we are openly showing sadness to them over a number of weeks or months. In turn, this can trigger more sadness (disconnection), shame and sometimes, anger and resentment at others for not being there when needed. Other times, when sadness is expressed, others respond insensitively, for example: ‘you should just get on with things’ or ‘stop feeling sorry for yourself, loads of people have it worse’. This can also trigger further sadness (or feeling misunderstood and alone), a sense of shame (‘I shouldn’t be feeling this sad’) or anger at the person for not understanding. Again, if this is the case for you, take some time to read through some of the following chapters in the main book, that will help you to manage some of these difficulties:

- Chapter 16a: Coping with emotions – tolerating and accepting
- Chapter 16c: Coping with emotions – expressing emotions and assertiveness
- Chapter 16e: Managing shame and self-criticism

We can also see what it’s like to have sadness ‘met’ by our compassionate mind – a part of us that can validate, empathise and engage compassionately in our distress in a supportive way. To do this, turn to Chapter 10 of the main book, in which we developed an image of our ‘compassionate other’. With this in mind, consider how it (the image of your compassionate other) would speak to your sadness, how it would offer you support and understanding.

#### *Step 4: Compassion for sadness*

Given the ‘shape’ of how you experience sadness, let’s see what your compassionate self can do to help and support it. It’s useful to remember here the two psychologies of compassion



here that we discussed in Chapter 6 – courageous engagement with the distress of sadness, and wise actions that help to manage, tolerate and even alleviate it.

*Exercise: Supporting sadness with your compassionate mind*

Sit in an upright and comfortable position. Engage in your soothing rhythm breathing and friendly facial expression. Allow your breathing to slow a little, and gently rest your attention on the flow of breathing in, and breathing out. Stay with this for 60 seconds, or so. Now as you've done before, take some time to step into your compassionate self. Remember it doesn't matter if you feel you actually are a compassionate person, or not. The most important thing is *to imagine* that you have the qualities of a deeply compassionate person. Let's spend 30 seconds imagining these qualities.

We'll now focus specifically on the qualities of wisdom, strength and commitment, and how these may help with sadness.

- Wisdom – given the wisdom of your compassionate self, its understanding of why we experience sadness, how this gets shaped by experiences in life, and how our struggles with it are not our fault, how might this help when relating to it?
- Strength – given your compassionate self is strong, grounded and courageous, how might this help it to support sadness? Could you imagine this strength providing a type of anchor or grounding for sadness?
- Commitment – given the caring motivation of your compassionate self – its desire to be supportive and helpful – how will it try to support the part of you that gets overwhelmed with sadness? What is its desire towards it?

To finish off, it can be useful to consider what your compassionate self understands about what sadness ‘needs’ to help it settle. What would help it to feel that its needs have been met?

Bringing these qualities together now, what does your compassionate mind recognise sadness needs to settle? What would it need from you (as your compassionate self) that would help here?

*Step 5: Does anything sit behind sadness and grief*

Similar to other emotions, it can sometimes be useful to look behind sadness, and see if anything is keeping it locked in place in a way that might be causing you a lot of pain and distress. For example, Sangita recognised that while sadness and grief were the feelings knocking at her door, behind that was a huge, boiling pot of anger and rage; anger at the unfairness of losing her partner, anger that other people still had their partners, anger that good people die young, anger at God for not protecting her. But it turned out that anger was a tricky emotion for Sangita, particularly as she had grown up in a family in which this emotion was seen as ‘bad’ and ‘destructive’, and should be suppressed and blocked at all costs. As Sangita began to work on tolerating and de-shaming her experience of anger, she also began to realise that other feelings sat behind her sadness – in particular, anxiety and shame. She realised that if she was no longer sad, there was a fear that this would mean that the memory of her partner would fade and that other people would think she had forgotten about her. Moreover, she also had a sense that if she moved on with her own life – if she started healing and crucially, living and having fun – this would be the act of a selfish and self-centred person and clearly one who did not *really* care or love her partner. This was quite a shocking realisation for her but eventually proved to be central in her finding a way to have a more balanced relationship with sadness.

Given these examples, take some time to think about this for yourself. Does anything sit behind your sadness? What might your fear be if this emotion began to settle, and you didn't experience it so intensely? Here are some common ones:

- Anger at the unfairness of loss – this might be at the person who is no longer present, other people for still having something you now don't have, or at the world/God/universe for being unfair
- Shame regarding the type of person you'd be if you weren't experiencing sadness or grieving (e.g. selfish, uncaring)
- Anxiety at what might turn up if sadness reduced – so this is a sense that although you don't like being with sadness/grief, it is familiar; whereas letting go of this brings fears of the unknown or concerns about how you'd go about reclaiming life/living life again
- Anxiety or fear that if you allow yourself to experience sadness now, this might unlock all the pain and sadness you've experienced throughout your life . . . and that this would be overwhelming
- Aloneness or loneliness, particularly linked to a sense of how loss can never be remade, and a sense that you could remain utterly disconnected, separate and on your own for many years (or even the rest of your life)

If any of these (or others of course) emerge, it's useful to use the emotion regulation model (Section IV of the book) to turn towards and become more familiar with those aspects of this emotion that are tricky. You might also find it helpful to use some of the exercises that we practised in Chapter 19 (letter writing), Chapter 20 (compassionate thinking) and in particular, the multiple selves exercise in Chapter 16d which focuses on this more explicitly.

### **Key reflections**

- Sadness is a central emotion to our survival – it is linked to the experience of loss, and signals out need for reconnection and care to others
- Sometimes sadness can stay online when it would usually switch off or calm down over time
- Compassion for sadness can involve how to feel this emotion, but not become overwhelmed by it
- Sometimes there are other things maintaining sadness – for example, anger or shame