

‘Too little’ sadness

As with anger and anxiety, it’s easy at first glance to think that not experiencing sadness would be a good thing; after all, how would feeling *more* of an emotion that can often feel unpleasant, heavy and joyless be useful? Why would it be useful to have such an emotion as part of our lives? Well, to start with, it’s helpful to consider the evolutionary purpose of sadness, particularly given that it often brings a sense of heaviness and lethargy (blocking energy to run away or fight), and crying (which brings tears that get in the way of seeing clearly) that would seem to run counter to managing threats and danger? One idea here is that sadness evolved as a type of distress call, signalling the need for reconnection, particularly after becoming disconnected from an attachment figure. In this sense, common features of sadness – tears, facial expression and body posture – may serve to signal to other people that we need care. In fact, when we are sad, it can be the care and affection of others that can help us to feel better, and in this sense, sadness can be associated with the soothing system (Chapter 2).

So, what might happen to get in the way of this process, so that sadness becomes unfelt, blocked or unexpressed? Well, let's look at an example from the animal kingdom. Imagine a leopard cub separated from his or her mother, calling out in distress to signal to her to come back and reconnect. Unfortunately, mum isn’t able to come back – she’s been injured severely while hunting a wild beast. While the cub’s distress call is initially a helpful thing, letting mum know when to come back to reconnect, over time, rather than signalling her, it’s also likely to bring attention from less friendly animals – in fact, animals that might be quite dangerous. So, after a time, a shift happens in the cub – distress calling is turned off, and there is a downregulation of distress and physiology – like a type of ‘hunkering down’. A similar process can happen in humans, and John Bowlby, a British psychologist, spoke about this idea of protest and despair states (Bowlby, 1979). So, in relation to sadness, one idea here is that if

when growing up, we experienced sadness and distress but learned that no one responded to this with care and affection, it might be that we coped by shutting down on experiencing or expressing these types of feelings.

Sadness can also get blocked through other types of learning. There are various ways this works. For some people growing up in certain cultures, sadness – particularly its overt expression – may be frowned upon. For example, in Victorian Britain, it was imperative to keep a ‘stiff upper lip’ – that is, to keep one’s emotions controlled in the face of difficulties. Although this was over a hundred years ago, aspects of this still permeate British culture, and many other cultures around the world hold similar perspectives. Our personal learning histories may also prove problematic for the expression of sadness. Let's look at another example of this.

Andrew came to see me for therapy initially with his fiancée, Cass. Although Andrew found it difficult to put it into words, he said that he was coming to therapy as he recognised that his relationship was going through a difficult time, and that he was feeling quite shut down to her and various other aspects of his life (e.g. seeing friends and family). Andrew wondered whether he was depressed but, after discussion on this, we realised that it was different; Andrew didn't feel depressed, and in many areas of life (hobbies, his job) he experienced a lot of pleasure and drive. However, both him and Cass reported that, since they had been together, Andrew had always been a little distant with her, and also with his friends and family. He would talk about aspects of his life but rarely opened up about difficulties he had been having. In the past six months, a couple of life-changing things had happened. First, Andrew found out that Cass was pregnant; he was overjoyed at this news and had been very excited about becoming a Dad, and what his daughter (they had found out the gender) would be like, and all the things they'd do together. Tragically, at twenty-two weeks Cass had a miscarriage, and although Andrew had been very caring and thoughtful towards her since, he wouldn't share his feelings about the loss with her. He described having kept all of his feelings ‘in’, and that his

role was 'just to be there for Cass'. As we discussed this further, Andrew told me that, as a child, he would often get upset and tearful and didn't like to be left by his parents. Because of this, throughout his childhood, both his parents and his older brothers used to laugh at him and make fun of this, calling him names ('you're a little girl') and telling him he needed to 'man up' and to 'pull yourself together'. As we worked together, Andrew realised that it made sense why he learned to shut down to feelings of sadness, loss and distress, and that as a consequence, this created a sense of disconnect with other people, particularly during stressful life events.

Blocks to sadness can also turn up in other relational contexts. For example, when we've done something (intentionally or unintentionally) that has hurt someone, we can experience guilt, which often comes textured with feelings of sadness and remorse. Sometimes we can be blocked to this type of sadness, particularly if shame takes over, and we get caught more with concerns about what other people will think and feel (e.g. criticism and anger) towards us for our actions, or berating ourselves for what we did. This type of external and internal shame (see Chapter 16d of the main book) can be a significant block to experiencing remorse-based sadness.

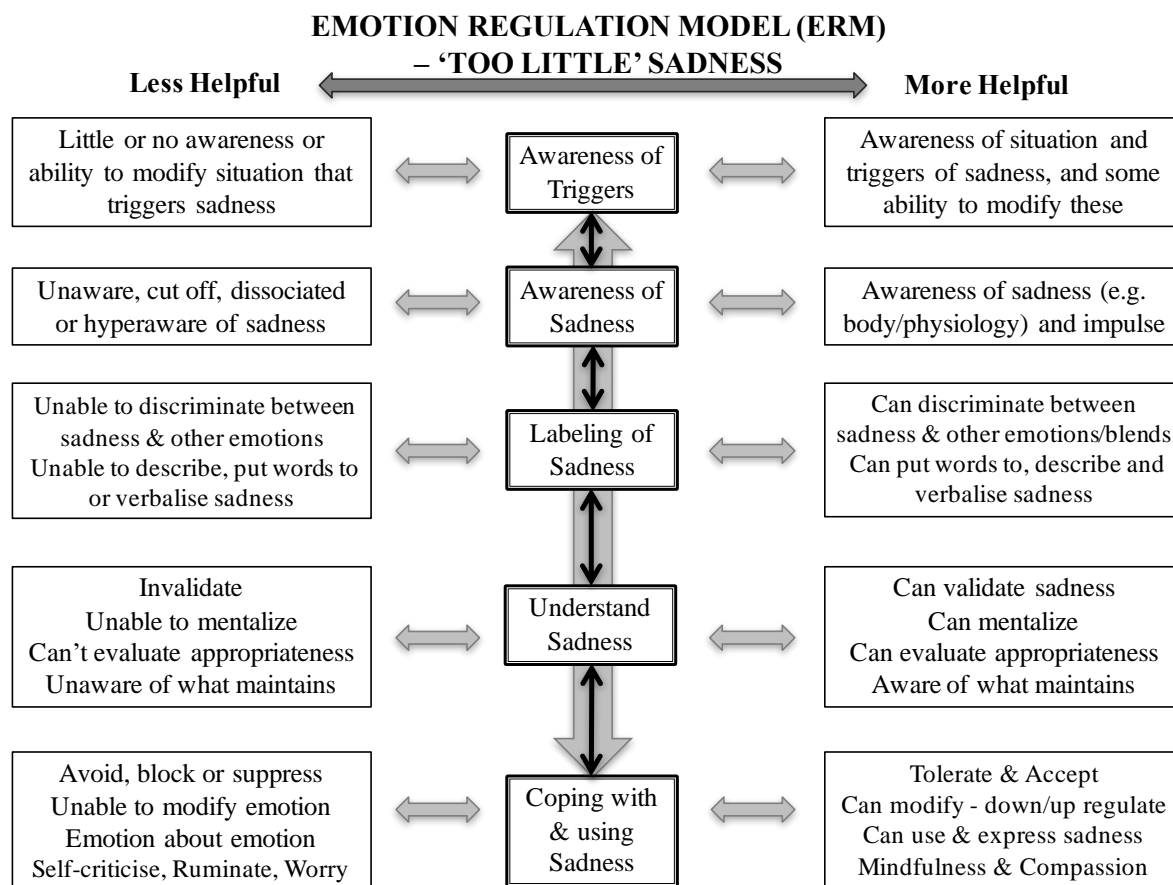
While it's understandable that people can be blocked to sadness, this is also problematic. It's an important emotion in making us pay attention to disruptions (e.g. losses) in our relationships and signal to ourselves and others that we are in distress and in need of care. If we're unable to do this, we are less likely to alleviate our distress, and as a consequence, remain in our threat systems for longer than we may need to otherwise.

Working with 'too little' sadness – what helps?

There are many ways to work with blocked, suppressed or unfelt sadness. As ever, it's helpful to check back in with the emotion regulation model first and use that as a guide to where some of the difficulties are.

Step 1: What is blocking sadness? Turning to the emotion regulation model

Take a look at the emotion regulation model (below) that we've been working on in the main book, and explored in detail in Section IV (Chapters 12 to 16). In regard to your difficulty with too little sadness, which step(s) do you find yourself tracking to the left-hand side of the model?



When Andrew looked at this, he recognised that he struggled with a number of the emotion regulation steps. He described finding it hard to identify the type of situations that might be associated with or trigger sadness, and how the feelings showed up inside of him. As discussed earlier in the chapter, for some people sadness is tricky because they struggle to notice or understand that sadness can arise when we lose something that is special, valued and cherished. So, in addressing sadness, Andrew found it difficult to acknowledge how excited and 'in love' he was with his unborn daughter, how he had already imagined what she would

look like, what she would be called, and what they would do together in the future. He was therefore shut down to the pain of loss that the miscarriage brought, even though on one level, he ‘knew’ that he was hurting. He was aware that some of this struggle was linked to early experiences he’d had growing up, particularly the shame associated with showing sadness and the need to ‘man up’. In this sense, he recognised his tendency to invalidate sadness (Step 4), and that he had become skilled at blocking out or suppressing it if it did arise (Step 5).

Based on the steps of the emotion regulation you tracked on the left-hand side of the model, it’s useful to return to the chapters that specifically refer to how to develop skills with that ‘step’ that we outlined in Section IV (Chapters 12 to 16) of the book. Take your time to go through this, building skills and confidence to ‘be with’ sadness.

Once you’ve spent some time working on this, it’s useful to continue reading and working through the remainder of this chapter. Remember that these exercises are designed to help you explore, understand and tolerate emotions, and not designed to overwhelm or cause you undue distress. Like going to a gym after a long time, it’s important to move into this slowly and gradually, developing your skills and strength as you do, rather than lifting the heaviest weights straight away. Remember that you’ve developed a variety of compassionate mind skills that will help you navigate this.

Step 2: Experiencing and expressing sadness

There are many ways that you can begin to connect with sadness deliberately, rather than waiting for a natural situation to arise that may trigger it. Sometimes people find it helpful to watch a ‘sad’ film – if you search on google for ‘saddest films’, you’ll find lots of examples. Once you find one, put some time aside to watch it. As you do, mindfully track your feelings. Now, remember, do this in a way that is helpful and not harmful, explorative not overwhelming. Notice as you watch the film, the changing landscape of your emotions, and in particular, if

and when sadness shows up. Notice how sadness plays itself inside you – where in your body you notice this feeling, what it feels like, what your body wants to do, and what happens to your thinking in the presence of it. If you can, make some notes about this after the film, documenting what you noticed and learned about your feelings. Spend time writing about sadness – what part of the film triggered it, how it felt, whether you experienced any other emotions alongside it (e.g. threat system anxiety or shame about feeling sad). Repeat this process with other films or TV shows that have the potential to elicit sadness. Continue to track your feelings, and if you can, allow yourself to notice and experience sadness whenever it rises.

After using a story about someone else’s life to connect you with sadness, it’s now useful to use your own story and experiences instead. To do this, start by writing down situations or experiences in your life that have been difficult, and that may potentially trigger sadness. For example, these could be times of loss (e.g. a relationship break-up; the death of a friend or grandparent), or of missing out on something (e.g. a job you really wanted), or falling out with someone (e.g. a friend or colleague). Go where it feels safe here. With this memory in mind, try out the following exercise. Remember, work with this memory in a way that feels helpful and manageable, not overwhelming, and if you do feel too heated into your threat system, you have a variety of skills (posture, breathing rhythm, imagery and so on) that can help you to regulate this.

Exercise: Connecting with sad memories

Bring to mind the memory of a time in your life which may – or could – be associated with sadness. Maybe a time you experienced the loss of something or someone that you valued or cherished in some way. If you notice yourself getting distracted, or alternatively, a bit overwhelmed when doing this, try to turn to your compassionate mind training skills to help here – mindfulness, soothing breathing, posture, compassionate self and so on. Remember,

compassion comes with wisdom, and so this exercise is not about overwhelming you, but courageously exploring sadness in a way that is manageable, not overwhelming.

When you have a memory in mind, replay it slowly, starting with what led up to this situation, and then slowly taking a tour through the actual memory itself. What had happened (e.g. a loss)? See if you can recall or just imagine where you are, what's around you, and then move more specifically to what else is happening. Are there other people present in this memory? What are they doing or what is happening to them? If something was said then just try and bring that to mind.

As you're playing through the memory, notice your feelings again. Notice where in the body these show up, what your body wants to do, and notice any urges to do what you would usually do in the presence of this emoting (e.g. avoid, shut down or cut off from it). As best as you can, stay open to the feeling of sadness, noticing how it feels, how it affects the way you think, and what your body wants to do in the presence of sadness.

As is typical with these types of exercises, it's useful to spend some time afterwards making a few notes, or writing your reflections about what you learnt and noticed. Try to return to the same memory a number of times, so that you can take time to explore and (re)experience the feelings that arise fully. It can also be useful to then select another memory that may be linked to feelings of sadness and to repeat the process.

Sometimes people find it helpful to use old photos as a way of facilitating this exercise. Key here is to go where it feels safe, but to see if you can find a picture of an experience or person that was meaningful or important to you, which for whatever reason, you no longer have in your life. On looking at this type of photo, try to focus your feelings on the sense of loss and sadness at the absence of something that you valued or cherished. Notice where these feelings emerge in your body, what you feel like doing, and what thoughts start to arise in your

mind. If you feel like you're getting pulled too much into your emotions, use the skills you developed in Section III in the main book (e.g. body posture, breathing rhythm, sense of strength and groundedness of your compassionate self) to help you remain anchored. The skill here is finding memories and experiences in which we can begin to experience emotion, but also knowing that if we start to feel that the heat is going up too much, we can take a step back and support ourselves with what we're experiencing.

Step 3: Fear of sadness

As sadness can be a difficult emotion for people to experience (Gilbert et al., 2014), it's important that we try and create space for this process, but also look into any threat system activation that doing this brings. As ever, it's useful to try and do this from your compassionate self – the part of you that is wise, strong and committed. So, take a few minutes to find your way back into this part of you (and see Chapter 10 for a script to this), before reflecting on the following questions about the exercise you tried in Step 2 (above):

- Did your threat system come online alongside the presence of sadness?
- What was the threat emotion that you felt in reaction to experiencing sadness?
- Why might the threat system have come online around sadness?
- What would your threat reaction (e.g. anxiety, shame, invalidation) need from your compassionate self? What would it need to feel supported and held, so that sadness is also able to be online?
- How might the compassionate self turn up to help you tolerate experiencing sadness, even in the presence of threat system activation?

It's also helpful to hold on to the wisdom of your compassion self; that is, to know that although painful or scary at times, sadness will ebb and flow, and at some stage, it will reduce

and ease. A concern for some is that to experience sadness is to stay *stuck* with or in sadness – and sometimes people can get confused with sadness (as an emotion) and depression (as a persistent mood state), and be fearful that to connect with sadness would be to sink into a depression. So, it is your compassionate self that can help you to understand the difference here, and tolerate some of these fears. If it helps, return to Chapter 16a (on tolerating and accepting emotions) to develop your skills in this area further.

For other people, it's a concern about what shows up with sadness that is most troubling. For example, when we get sad, we can experience a loss of muscle tone, have changes in breathing (e.g. if we start sobbing), and from an evolutionary point of view, crying doesn't help that much when it comes to spotting threats approaching. All of these experiences can be quite threatening, particularly if we've learnt to deal with the world through more mobilising, activating threat-system related emotions (e.g. anger or anxiety), which bring alertness, tension and access to rapid responses to the environment, such as fight or flight.

For some people, it is the crying aspect of sadness that is particularly tricky, and they describe this as 'silly', 'embarrassing' and 'weak', and sometimes may make frequent apologies for being tearful. Part of this self-consciousness about crying can be linked to a fear of judgement and an internal fear of vulnerability. It can be useful here to consider whether this is something you struggle with:

- Do you find it OK to cry in front of people, on your own, or for that matter, neither?
- What are the threats or fears that you associate with crying?
- Do you have concerns about being judged, or feeling vulnerable when you cry?

If you do have difficulties with the physicality of sadness (low muscle tone, sobbing, tears and so on), it's back to thinking about how your compassionate mind training skills can help you. What would help you to expose yourself to some of these experiences, so that they may not be

as threatening in the future? Use some of the questions earlier in this step to guide you on this, and also the exercises earlier in this chapter (e.g. watching something sad on TV, or using a memory) to see if, with the help of your compassionate self, you can begin to tolerate some of the fears that arise with these aspects of sadness.

Remember, just like a feature of a sprained ankle is pain, so too can crying be a common, natural response to sadness. While it might feel uncomfortable, it is entirely normal, and it may be that in tolerating, accepting and leaning into sadness and crying, we can listen to what it wants or needs. A useful question to help with reflection on crying is: ‘If your tears could speak, what would they say?’ or similarly ‘If your tears could speak, what would they be asking for?’ It is through this type of exploration that we may learn that our sadness *needs* something from us, or others. Let’s look at this in the next step.

Step 4: Caring for sadness – self-compassion

Once we’ve had some time practising tolerating and understanding any threat reactions to sadness, it’s then useful to see if we can be explicitly compassionate and caring towards it. To do this, take some time to explore the following exercise.

Exercise: Bringing compassion to sadness

Sit in an upright but 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, like an actor getting into a role, bring to mind your compassionate self. Spend some time connecting with its qualities – commitment, wisdom and in particular, your strength and courage. Notice your body posture, voice tone and facial expression. When you feel ready,

bring to mind the part of you that has been sad, but not able to experience or express this. If it helps, see if you could put an image to this – so if you could see it in front of you, what would it look like? Take 60 seconds or so with this.

Now, from this position, consider the following questions:

- How would your compassionate self – this strong, wise and committed part of you – understand about why sadness has been challenging to experience?
- What would it want to do to help with this block?
- What is sadness trying to tell you? What is causing it to be? What does it need from you to feel supported and cared for?
- What would it do to help sadness be part of your emotional range, without it feeling scary or overwhelming?

If you find imagery difficult, you could write a compassionate letter to your sadness, or to the things that block sadness (Chapter 19), expressing the care, wisdom and support of your compassionate self to sadness. Often here it's imagining the flow (even though it is from one part of you to another) from your compassionate, wise and caring part, to the part of you that is sad, but also that has been blocked from experiencing this emotion.

Step 5: Showing sadness to others – seeking care and connection

We are an exceptionally social species, and as we've discussed at various times throughout the book, our brains and bodies are highly sensitive to the kindness, care and affection of others. Moreover, sadness is likely to have evolved as an emotion that was closely tied to the signalling to others of our need to be cared for and connected. Given this, the final step we'll look at here is how to help you experience sadness while also being open to receiving the care and support of others.

In engaging in this step, it's important that you first feel comfortable enough in the previous four steps. If not, then take more time to work through these until you do feel more confident. When you're ready, it's useful to consider who you might begin to express sadness too, and whether they have the qualities that would help you to feel supported, understood and cared for.

Once you have someone in mind, it's useful to plan a time to meet which may be conducive to you sharing your feelings with them – for example, going to the football with them, or even the pub or a restaurant, might not feel like the most helpful place to discuss this. Think about how you could organise a time to meet in which you'll feel confident that there is enough time and opportunity to share with them about your sadness. Before you meet them, consider what you'd like to say to them, how you might get in contact with your sadness, and what you'd want from them. Sometimes people find it helpful to write a few things down beforehand, to guide them in what they'd like to express.

There can be a number of other things that can also help here. For example, it can be useful to return to the section in which we discussed expressing emotions (Chapter 16b), as this might help to shape how to say what you would like from the other person as you start to express sadness. If you have difficulties sharing your feelings or feel that the other person did not respond as you would have liked them to, it can be useful to spend some time afterwards 'turning up for yourself', and managing this setback. To help with this, because there is a clear pre, during and after phase to expressing sadness to someone else, it's also helpful to turn to the section in which we discussed the compassion PDA as a way of approaching difficult situations in life (Chapter 17).

Key reflections

- Sadness can be a painful and scary emotion to experience, and for many reasons, we can shut down or block this emotion from showing up in our lives
- Although distressing, sadness has a powerful role to play in signalling to ourselves and to others about our needs
- Learning to tolerate sadness, work with the things that block it (e.g. threat system), and finding ways to care for it, can help us to find a healthier way of connecting with this emotion