

Using Self-Validation to Accept Your Thoughts and Emotions

What to Know

Self-validation, a Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) technique, refers to acknowledging, allowing, and accepting your thoughts and emotions. If you have a hard time regulating your emotions, you probably also have a hard time accepting them. For example, if you're angry or sad, you might say, "I shouldn't feel like this, I should know better!" On top of the anger or sadness, you add secondary feelings like shame or self-judgment.

Self-validation doesn't mean you believe your thoughts and emotions are accurate. There are times you'll have thoughts that don't reflect your values or feelings you know aren't justified. But if you fight them, or judge yourself for having them, your emotional upset increases.

Validating yourself can help calm you down and allow you to effectively manage upsetting thoughts and intense emotions. Learn to self-validate by following these four steps.

1. Observe. How does your body feel? What thoughts are running through your head? Be still and notice what's happening in your body and mind.

2. Acknowledge. Name the emotion you're experiencing right now, without judging it. If you feel sad, say, "I'm feeling sad right now." Avoid statements like, "I always feel sad! What is wrong with me? I'm so weak because I can't ever snap out of it!" Focus on the emotion and any thoughts you're having about it.

3. Allow. Remind yourself it's okay to experience *any* emotion. You're allowed to feel whatever you feel right now – or in any upsetting situation where you feel intense emotions. You're allowed to think your thoughts. Here are some statements you can say to yourself:

- It's okay to feel the way I do right now.
- I'm allowed to experience intense emotions.
- Just because I'm thinking these thoughts doesn't make them true.
- Allowing myself to feel this way doesn't mean I'm going to hurt myself.
- This will pass, but for now this is how I feel.
- I'm uncomfortable, but I'm safe.

4. Understand. Maybe you don't always stop to understand why you feel the way you feel. Think about what created the situation you're in now. Think about times in the past when you felt this way. Here are examples of someone trying to understand why they feel the way they do, and why they might be having the thoughts they're having:

"It's no surprise I feel sad. I believe I'm being ignored and that no one cares about me."

"I was so angry the last time she canceled our meeting! I can't believe she did it again. I'm upset that she doesn't seem to care about my schedule."

Here is an example of the four-step process.

1. Observe – My shoulders feel tense, my stomach is churning, and my thoughts are racing.
2. Acknowledge – Right now I'm so disappointed.
3. Allow – I'm uncomfortable but right now it is what it is. My thoughts about myself are really mean, but they're not true.
4. Understand – I'm angry because I started smoking again. I'm not going to judge myself for this, because I've been feeling very lonely and anxious. I don't need to make it harder on myself, so I'm not going to beat myself up. Instead, I'm going to do one thing to reduce my anxiety.

This worksheet will help you practice this technique by thinking about a past event where you experienced upsetting thoughts and emotions, and then practicing the four steps on a current situation.

What to Do

Describe a situation from the past when you experienced overwhelming thoughts and emotions. What happened? Who was involved? What was the outcome? Be very specific.

Describe how you could have applied the four steps to this situation.

Now, the next time you experience an upsetting situation, practice the four steps of self-validation. Fill in the boxes on the next page after you describe the current situation below.

Observe – How does your body feel? What are you thinking?

Acknowledge – Name your emotions, and how you feel about the thoughts you have right now.

Allow – Write down 3 positive statements you can say to yourself. Read the sentences out loud.

Understand – What contributed to the situation you're in right now? When did you feel this way in the past? What happened?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this activity help you effectively practice self-validation? Why or why not?

Was this exercise hard for you? Easy? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
