

# Dealing with *Conflicting* Emotions: Tips from a psychologist: Dr. Darek Dawda

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*Having conflicting emotions is not only a normal but also valuable part of life, according to our expert psychologist, Dr. Dawda of DAVDA Psychology.\**

**MW:** Last time, we promised our readers that we would continue on the topic of difficult emotions. How does one deal with conflicting emotions? For example, my friend is unhappy in her relationship, but is terrified to even consider an alternative.

**DD:** The following are some general tips one can use when dealing with an issue that triggers complex emotional response.

## **Accept the complexity of your emotional response**

Your friend's reaction is a normal complex emotional response to a difficult situation, and the first thing your friend might want to do is accept the complexity of her emotions. It is cliché advice, but too often we deny ourselves the right to simply feel what we feel. Be it a result of our belief about how we should be feeling, or the fear of what would happen if we let ourselves be honest with ourselves, we often feel anxious when faced with conflicting emotions, and we strive to resolve the ambivalence as quickly as possible. This might be a good way to lower anxiety short term, but we will typically arrive at a better long-term solution if we properly consider all aspects of our emotional response.

## **Explore the complexity of the issue and your response to it**

It is best to put the issue and all your emotional responses to it on the table. For example, your friend might feel excited about the prospect of a new life, meeting new people, doing things she's always wanted to do, not having to argue or be accountable to anyone, and so on, all of which pulls her towards separation. On the other hand, she might feel protective of her partner, guilty about hurting him, worried about people casting judgment on her, or overwhelmed by a sense of loss of a companion or a dream, and so on, all of which makes her want to forget the whole thing and continue on with the relationship. Each of these emotions can give your friend valuable insight into her situation. It would be a good idea to take advantage of the richness of her emotional response.

## **Get it out of your head**

Rather than ruminating about the issue, it might be more useful to put it all on paper. Your friend might write all her responses down on a list, or in a diary, or a bubble diagram. If she likes being more playful with her internal life, she might imagine herself as consisting of several characters, each having different desires or fears. For example, your friend might imagine one part of her as an adventurous young traveller who is fearless and thirsty for exploration and new experiences. She might imagine another part as more fearful, stability and safety-oriented. Another part of her might be a highly caring and compassionate creature who has no difficulties sacrificing her own needs for the well being of others. And so on. She can generate as many characters as there are facets of her emotional response - imagination is the limit. Then the question becomes, how can these characters get along? Which one is most important for her? If this was a theatre show, and your friend was a director, what would she need to do to make this show happen?

## **Consider alternative courses of action**

Naturally, your friend will consider her possible courses of action. There are essentially three possibilities here: 1) continue the status quo, 2) work on improving her relationship, or 3) separate. Your friend might want to write down the pros and cons for each of her options.

## **Shelve the issue and wait for clarity**

If your friend feels emotionally overwhelmed, she likely does not have sufficient clarity to decide on what to do next. In which case (if there is no urgency to act) it is usually better to shelve it all to provide time for clarity to mature. Clarity is a sublime experience, but it can't be forced. Emotional processing is organic, it involves both conscious and subconscious processing, and it takes time. So your friend might revisit the issue from time to time, clarify what she can, and let other parts of her brain do the thinking for her. Sometimes all that is needed to know what one needs to do is a good night of sleep.

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