

The meaning of self-control

Tips from Dr. Darek Dawda
of DAVDA Psychology*

BY MATHILDA WATERS



According to our expert on well-being, Dr. Darek Dawda of DAVDA Psychology, thinking can be both good and bad for you.

MW: What is the best way to be in control of how you feel?

Dr. DD: One doesn't have direct control over one's emotions. It is very common for people to attempt to directly change their difficult emotions by becoming upset with the way they feel or wishing they felt differently. This approach is not useful. Another very common coping strategy is to avoid difficult emotions through distractions or addictions. Avoidance of emotions might bring short-term relief, but won't produce lasting improvements.

MW: So are we at the mercy of our emotional whims?

Dr. DD: No. The important point is that you have complete control over your actions, and it's your behaviour that you need to exert control over. The way you feel does not have to dictate how you act. And changing what you do will definitely result in changes in how you feel.

MW: So is the key to changing the way one feels to do the right things?

Dr. DD: That's right. Self-control doesn't mean you should control your emotions but rather maintain control over your behaviour. It's best to accept your emotions as they are, and to focus your energy on doing the right things.

MW: What about people who are depressed? Isn't it hard to do anything when you are depressed?

Dr. DD: People who are depressed will frequently say 'I know I should do it, but I just can't.' This is a self-defeating way of thinking. True, it takes more effort, sometimes much more effort, for a depressed person to do what a healthy person can do effortlessly. But even a depressed person, with the application of some will power, can put one foot in front of the other and do what needs to be done.

MW: What if you are confused and overwhelmed with your emotions, and not sure what the right thing to do is?

Dr. DD: Feeling confused and overwhelmed is often a part of the path to clarity, so patience is required. However, if one is chronically overwhelmed and confused, one should seek professional help.

MW: You said earlier one should accept one's emotions as they are. How do you accept something that hurts you?

Dr. DD: It's a very useful skill to develop to be connected not only with what feels good, but also that which hurts or scares you. Emotions provide invaluable information about how well one is doing. Ignoring this information prevents learning and often perpetuates the trouble. Many people focus on trying to change their feelings, while continuing to do the same things that contribute to their unhappiness.

MW: Why is that?

Dr. DD: Unfortunately, in this culture, we are led to believe that well-being comes in a pill, and that the attainment of well-being requires no effort. This is furthest from the truth.

MW: So what is the prescription?

Dr. DD: Work towards radical acceptance of emotions and radical control of behaviour.

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