



JENNY TRYANSKY
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COACHING

go inward. move forward.

Managing Difficult Emotions in Times of Stress

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At a recent webinar gathering only two weeks into the Covid-19 crisis in North America, I reluctantly logged on to meet with a group of co-active coach colleagues, including mentors and teachers. I was nervous because I knew we'd be sharing and I had nothing positive to share. I had been struggling with challenging emotions for days and they weren't shifting.

I was quickly reminded why I love being part of the coaching community when a mentor I admire affirmed that one of the key attributes of true leadership is vulnerability.

There were almost thirty people on the screen and we began to share and sit together with our challenging emotions. Many people revealed the scope of their conflicting and confusing emotions; positive and negative feelings that they were holding at the same time like gratitude and fear, hopefulness and sadness. No one tried to 'fix' anything. We just allowed space for the emotions to be.

That is my biggest wish for all of us at this moment in history. **To allow ourselves the space to be with the difficult emotions that this crisis is stirring up within all of us, regardless of our individual circumstances.** It's not an invitation to be a pessimist or a buzz-kill with your family and friends; it's an invitation to be honest, to get clarity on what's happening within you, to understand and share the complexities of your humanness.

NAMING AND MEETING EMOTION

Many of us right now are still experiencing the shock, loss and yes, [even grief](#) over life as we knew it. Many of us went right into fight or flight mode when the gravity of the situation really sunk in and the unpredictability of the future swept over us. Some people haven't hit that place yet, but are maybe starting to feel anxiety creep in.

Those of us swimming in difficult emotions right now may need to get comfortable in the discomfort for just a little while. We may not be able to make the shift into strength and optimism as quickly as we'd like, as steadily as we want, or as expertly as we normally would with the usual ups and downs of regular life. That's OK. We need more vulnerable leadership and permission for it to be 'OK not to be OK'.

Everyone is experiencing our own version of this emotional rollercoaster. But there are ways to manage through it without trying to 'fix', push the emotions down or step over them - and most



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importantly, without letting the emotions dominate our actions and reactions 24/7 (though be gentle with yourself in those instances when they do). It starts with meeting the emotions.

The first step to managing anything is acknowledging what's true. Naming the difficult emotion and even what's really underneath helps us to not get swallowed up by it. The expression "Name it to tame it" is helpful here; as soon as we can name and acknowledge what we're feeling, the feeling loosens its grip, even just a little bit.

Bringing awareness to it with a simple acknowledgement like "this is fear, I'm feeling really scared," or "I'm frustrated and feel out of control," or even a simple "this is really hard" can be soothing amidst the stress and discomfort. It's a way to say "I see you, emotion. I know what's happening here." Creating that space to see it and be with it can be empowering, comforting and a way to intercept a potential downward spiral into a full-on stress response or a state of overwhelm.

SOOTHING OURSELVES

Finding a soothing gesture to layer into the practice of naming the emotion is where self-compassion comes into the equation. Bring your hand to your heart or chest, or onto your stomach or simply on top of your other hand as a soothing touch you can offer yourself in those moments of emotional turmoil. If you can feel into where you're specifically experiencing the emotion in your body and place your hand there, it can be even more effective and impactful.

This is an easy way for anyone to experience the comfort of soothing touch during this unprecedented time of physical distancing, whether you're isolating with family members or not. Take a moment to feel the warmth of your hand and experience the sensation of touch as you name the difficult emotions you're experiencing.

Next, offer yourself words of comfort just as you would to a friend who was in distress. For some it may feel good to say "everything is going to be ok." For others, it may be a more present-focused offering like "you're safe," or "you've gone through hard times before, you will get through this." Turning towards yourself with the same love and compassion you would offer a friend or loved one is a practice that most of us weren't raised or socialized with. When we can be our own source of comfort and care, we can manage our emotional state and our reactions to it in a much more skillful way.

SAFETY CHECK

I'm a student of mindful self-compassion practice, which has had a huge impact on my own personal growth. This meditation-based framework helps people turn towards their suffering



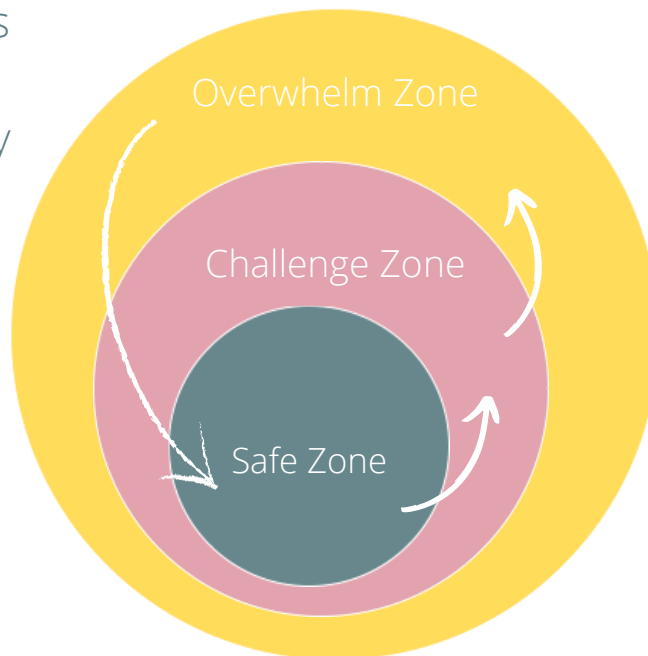
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and bring kindness and strength to their inner experience. There are many helpful free resources and meditations on the [Center for Mindful Self-Compassion website](#) that I encourage you to explore.

I want to share my own take on a tool called the Three Circles of Safety, which is offered in Mindful Self-Compassion practice to help the experiencer check in with their level of difficulty and safety during a meditation that calls up challenging emotions. It's been so helpful for me that I now use it in everyday life and with my coaching clients.

Three Circles of Safety



When you find yourself in overwhelm, STOP what you're doing, and get yourself back to safety. Ground yourself, soothe yourself, tend to your needs to get back into the safe zone FIRST. You can't go backwards from overwhelm into healthy challenge.

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The smallest inner circle is the safe zone. We all know what that feels like: safe, comforting, familiar, peaceful. In this place, we're safe and feel good, but we're not necessarily challenged.

The circle surrounding the safe zone is the challenge zone. This is where growth happens. It's where we stretch ourselves and experience a little bit of discomfort - the kind of discomfort that's challenging in a good and healthy way, in a 'testing boundaries for the sake of learning' way. This is a great place to explore and play to see what the discomfort can offer us and how it can help us expand and grow.



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The largest outer circle is the overwhelm zone. This is where challenge turns to stress, and the discomfort becomes extreme and paralyzing. Many people go into 'shut down' here. It's the danger zone and it feels terrible and uncomfortable in an unmanageable way. When we're in overwhelm, we cannot be creative, resourceful, productive, thoughtful or make good decisions.

Here's the piece that is so key: **When you're in overwhelm you need to stop and take care of yourself in whatever way will work for you to get you back into that safe zone.** You need to get back to safety *before* you can ever be back in the challenge zone.

When you're in overwhelm, it's not the time to 'push through,' 'soldier on' and just 'get something done,' have that difficult conversation or take a next step. It's a time to acknowledge the difficult emotions, self-soothe and ask yourself what it is you need right now to feel safe again. You might be able to do this just by taking a few deep breaths, stopping whatever you're doing to get a drink of water, calling a family member or friend, meditating or going for a walk, disengaging and watching a show that makes you feel good or getting away for a few moments of silence and space.

We can use this tool right now as we navigate physical distancing, isolation and quarantine, remote work, essential services work and whatever our current 'new normal' looks like. When you start to notice emotion popping up, ask yourself which circle you're in. If you're in safety, can you stretch yourself a bit into that challenge zone for the sake of growth? Or maybe you just want to notice and feel into the positive emotions that you experience in the safe zone, and savour the present moment.

If you're in the challenge zone, ask yourself what you need to manage or pay attention to, and what boundaries need to be put in place so you don't tip into overwhelm.

And if you are in overwhelm, stop what you're doing, walk away and take care of your needs to get back to safety. If you don't have time to truly take care of your needs, take a moment to mindfully breathe and self-soothe. Just a moment.

Enroll your family members, your partner or any support that you have, and let them know which zone you're in so they can help if possible. My husband and I have gotten pretty good at telling each other or even simply sensing when each of us are in overwhelm and we try to trade off childcare duties or give each other the space needed to self-soothe and get back to safety before carrying on.

If you start to notice that you're in overwhelm too often or you can't get yourself back to the safe zone and regulate, that may be your signal to seek help from a mental health professional. You don't have to weather it alone.



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We're living in a time of extreme difficulty and stress. It hit us hard and fast, like a tornado sweeping through. We're still in the eye of the storm. While many of us have faith and belief that we will come out the other side, likely even with new awareness of how we want to change for the better, **we're not there yet**. We're here now, and we need to meet ourselves wherever we are.

My hope is for all of us to make space for ourselves and the people in our lives to experience all of this fully, honestly and wholeheartedly.

ABOUT JENNY



Jenny Tryansky is an ICF-credentialed Certified Professional Co-Active Coach with a **whole life/whole person approach**.

In her private practice, she works virtually with clients around the world, specializing in working one-on-one with people who are driven yet highly self-critical.

She coaches clients to build meaningful, authentic lives, tackling personal and professional challenges with self-compassion and resilience, as they move forward toward their goals fuelled with confidence instead of self-criticism.

In addition to coaching private clients, Jenny is a writer, speaker, workshop & group leader and mindful self-compassion advocate.



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She juggles life in Toronto with her husband and young daughter, and her work with clients around the world.

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[Sign up to her newsletter](#) for occasional emails with helpful insights, resources and news about new programs and workshops!

For a **complimentary exploration call** with Jenny to determine if there's a great connection and fit, send her an email at jennytryansky@gmail.com or connect through her website.