

Negative Capacity: Some Thoughts

Negative Capacity is

A willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that.

the capability to tolerate internal discomfort without suppressing or acting out. There are many ways to develop negative capacity. Mindfulness training is probably the most effective.

includes the capacity to tolerate the discomfort of things not moving, of seemingly not getting anywhere.

includes the discomfort of *not knowing*.

The capacity to focus “attention on moment-to-moment experience without being swept up by judgments or preconceived ideas and expectations.” Daniel Siegel, *The Mindful Therapist*, p.xiv.

“... a powerful spiritual practice because we are confronting the protective mechanisms of our ego in the moment. Much in the same way that we have learned to countenance difficult sensations while meditating, we find that we can remain present despite all sorts of impulses to do something else. We discover that an impulse is not an imperative.” Diane Musho Hamilton, *Everything is Workable: A Zen Approach to Conflict Resolution*, p. 30.

not a “grit your teeth and take it” kind of relating to your inner experience. We have to welcome our experience with genuine caring and curiosity; we need to want to become intimate with it. Part of what helps us to do this is to love the truth more than feeling good. Gabor Maté calls this *compassionate inquiry*; Prendergast calls it *affectionate attention*.

Some thoughts:

“[L]earning mindfulness techniques can strengthen the hub of the mind so that internal sensations, such as bodily signals or waves of emotion, can be experienced with more clarity and calmness.” Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, p. 133.

As Siegel explains, CBT therapists sometimes have patients develop a “safe space” inside themselves into which they can retreat whenever internal or external things become potentially overwhelming. See Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, at 135. *See also* Tara Brach, *True Refuge* (2016).

It’s important to remember that our automatic defenses are predicated on our childhood experience that correctly perceived that we could not handle the intensity of many of our scary feelings. Most adults continue to unknowing follow that childhood belief that they will be overwhelmed if they allow themselves to feel certain feelings, not realizing that as adults they have or can relatively easily develop the capacity to tolerate what had once been intolerable. Siegel calls this gradual increase in tolerance the widening of a “window of tolerance.” Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*, p. 137.

“Being fully present through mindful awareness training has been demonstrated to be a crucial factor in giving us resilience to face challenges in our daily lives.” Siegel, *The Mindful Therapist*, p. 1.

What’s needed to stay present to our difficult feelings?

- (1) The willingness to be curious about our experience and that of others.
- (2) The strength to tolerate the discomfort of fear.
- (3) The courage to challenge our thoughts and beliefs.
- (4) The willingness to surrender being perfect (i.e., who we’re *supposed* to be).
- (5) The willingness to surrender the need for love, approval, and esteem.
- (6) The compassion to love ourselves exactly as we are.
- (7) The willingness to recognize that we deserve our own love and compassion as much as any being in the Universe.
- (8) The faith to trust that no matter what happens, we will be all right.

Mediators need to develop what the German-American philosopher Eric Voegelin called “reflective distance” [Voegelin, *In Search of Order* (2000) at 47].