

## Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach, and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. No shame, no blame, no judgements. If you would like my help sorting out your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com). I offer confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located. I can't wait to meet you.

Okay. Today's episode is a follow-up to Episode 60, which is called "Other People's Feelings," or something very close to that. I probably should have called that episode, "Dealing with other people's discomfort," because that's what I was primarily concerned with in that episode, and that's what I'm primarily concerned with today.

For a lot of us, seeing someone we care about feeling uncomfortable emotions feels incredibly uncomfortable for US. And believing we are the cause of other people's uncomfortable emotions usually feels even more uncomfortable. And because of this, a lot of us spend an incredible amount of time and energy trying not to make other people "feel bad," so to speak. Sometimes we do everything we can to do the things we think will make other people happy, and attempt to NOT do the things we think will make other people unhappy.

Some people do this kind of thing and recognize that they're doing it, and sometimes they call this kind of behavior "people-pleasing," or they identify as "people-pleasers." And sometimes people don't really recognize that they're organizing their lives around the goal of keeping other people happy, or at least, not upsetting other people.

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

I don't think it matters whether you have labeled yourself a "people-pleaser" or not. If identifying with this label is helpful to you, that's fine with me, but what I want to stress is that we all have the capacity to attempt to manage other people's feelings with our own behavior, whether we think of ourselves as a people-pleaser or not. And infidelity situations certainly have the potential to bring out the so-called "people-pleasing" tendencies in any of us, for so many reasons.

To launch into this discussion of dealing with other people's discomfort, I'm going to reiterate some things I've said on other episodes, but all of these points bear repeating.

The first point is this. Feelings, or emotions, are in essence, sensations in our body that arise from our thinking. If I think to myself, oh my god, that headache I keep having might mean I have a brain tumor, and if I really believe that might be true, I might feel fear, or worry, or panic. And those feelings will manifest as floods of sensations flowing through my body. My heart rate usually speeds up when I feel those kinds of feelings. My breathing may change. My body temperature may change, and maybe in very specific parts of my body.

The immediate, physical experience of an emotion can be really intense, and although we tend to find some feelings intensely pleasant, or pleasurable, we also tend to find some feelings very unpleasant, or uncomfortable. When we learn how to tolerate feeling our uncomfortable emotions in a deliberate way, they can become a lot easier to deal with, which is a very good thing, but even when we get better at allowing our uncomfortable emotions without resisting them, we may never especially

## Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)

ENJOY them. My best guess, at this stage of my life, is that I will never enjoy feeling the emotion of fear. I'm certainly more able to allow myself to feel the emotion of fear than I used to be, which is very liberating, but I can't say that I especially enjoy it, but that's okay.

Because uncomfortable feelings are part of the so-called normal human experience. I always use the word "normal" lightly, people. That's a word that is often misused and weaponized. What I want to stress is that even though we have collectively valorized a certain set of human emotions and pathologized a certain set of human emotions, ALL human emotions are naturally occurring things. And the so-called negative emotions do not have to be considered problematic!

And this is a really important idea to consider, because we have collectively bought into the idea that so-called negative emotions are a bad thing. Or that there's some sort of fundamental problem going on if we feel uncomfortable emotions. And when we buy into these ways of thinking, this really impacts the way we relate to our own uncomfortable feelings, and the way we relate to other people's uncomfortable feelings.

What if our uncomfortable emotions aren't a PROBLEM? What if feelings are kind of like weather, insofar as we consider it totally normal that there are a range of types of weather. Yes, we may like sunshine more than hail. Or we might like a nice rainy day, but detest wind. Whatever our preferences may be, we tend to recognize that all of the forms of weather just exist, and we have to learn how to deal with them. This is an imperfect analogy, of course, because we may be able to effectively avoid certain forms of weather by moving, but we certainly can't completely control the weather. That's for sure.

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

My sense is that most of us don't like uncomfortable emotions because we've never learned how to deal with feeling them, and that's fair enough! I certainly did not like my uncomfortable emotions AT ALL before I was introduced to the idea that they weren't necessarily bad in any way, and introduced to practices that helped me experience them willingly. But here's the great news: you too can learn how to relate to your uncomfortable emotions in a new way. And I can help you do that!

And what I have experienced myself and observed in others is that when we are more willing to accept our own uncomfortable emotions as an inevitable, unproblematic aspect of our experience of being alive, and actually allow the immediate experiences of feeling uncomfortable, we're a lot better able to trust that other people can handle their own discomfort, too. Which is SO incredibly freeing and empowering.

Now another important point that will be familiar to you if you've been listening to this podcast for a while is that other people do not directly cause us to feel the feelings that we feel. No one ever MAKES us feel anything. And similarly, we do not make anyone else feel anything. It is our thinking that creates our feelings – not other people, and whatever they do or don't do. And that's true for other people as well. Their thinking creates their feelings. Whatever we do or do not do may be the occasion of their feelings, but it's not the direct cause of their feelings. But when we don't recognize that this is the way it works, we tend to think that if we – for example – tell our spouse we want a divorce, they will be devastated, and it will be our fault that they feel devastated.

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

But that's not exactly how it works. It is possible that if you tell your spouse you want a divorce, they will feel devastated, but that's because of what they THINK about you asking for a divorce. If they think, "Oh my god, I don't know how I will survive if we aren't married anymore," they might feel devastated. Or hopeless, or helpless, or something along those lines. On the other hand, if they think, "Wow, this is really sad, I sure don't want to get divorced, but I also don't want to stay married if my spouse doesn't want to be with me anymore," they might feel sad, but they might not feel devastated. And, it's also worth pointing out that they might not be as upset about you asking for a divorce than you think they will be.

Often, when we are worried about making another person feel bad, we forget two very important things: one is that we can never be sure of what another person is going to think about anything before it happens. We may think we know someone so well that we can be sure how they'll react to anything, and I'll grant you that you could be right, but it's also important to remember that we cannot perfectly predict the future. The second is that even if we were to do everything we thought we could do to prevent another person from feeling bad, we cannot control their thinking. That's impossible.

So, it is entirely possible that if you divorce your spouse, they're going to be upset about that, and possibly upset with you, no matter how well you handle yourself and engage in the process of ending your relationship. They simply may not want to get divorced, at least not initially, and it's their prerogative to not want to do that! They are allowed to have different preferences than you have! And they are allowed to have thoughts and feelings about your actions!

## Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)

What some people take that to mean is that if there is any chance that their actions may OCCASION pain for someone they care about, they shouldn't take the actions that could occasion pain. Even when people are sort of on board with the idea that they don't directly cause anyone else's pain, they often still don't want to do anything that could possibly be even remotely associated with the pain of someone they care about.

And a lot of people tell me that's because they can't help but feel other people's pain. We have collectively bought into this idea that if someone we care about is hurting, we should be hurting too, if we truly care about them. Or that if someone we care about is in pain, it is by definition painful for us, because their soul is an extension of our soul, or we're so closely connected that we share a soul or a heart or a whatever. And I don't mean to sound overly snarky, because I know some people really treasure these kinds of ideas, and if you do, that's fine with me. BUT, I am still going to be ruthlessly unsentimental about a key point here, and that is this. We do NOT feel other people's pain. We feel our own feelings, and they feel theirs. What's really going on, when we think someone we care about is hurting, is we think, "Uh oh! There's a problem here! They're experiencing discomfort, and discomfort is bad, and they shouldn't have to feel that! And if I caused their discomfort, that means I'm bad, so I really need them to feel better so I can feel okay again."

This is a bottomless pit, people.

So often, we're so desperate for other people to feel okay that we end up compromising things that are very important to us, in an attempt to make other people feel good, or at least, not feel bad.



## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

And in the short term, this may SEEM like a win! Let's say we get ready to tell our spouse that we want a divorce, and then we actually do it, and our spouse says something to the effect of, "Oh my god, you can't leave me!" and we feel terrible, and we try to make everything better by walking back whatever we've just said, and staying in the relationship.

If we do this, it might seem like we've solved our problem for a while.

But the problem with this is, as I said a moment ago, other people's feelings are never within our control. Even if we do all the things that someone tells us they want us to do, or don't do the things they say they don't want us to do, that's no guarantee they'll feel good, or be happy with us all the time. That's up to THEM! Even if you stay married to them instead of leaving them, they may not be happy all the time, and they may not be happy with you all the time. And you may say, well sure, nobody's going to be happy all the time, but at least I can ensure that they won't feel devastated.

And again, I want to emphasize that that is up to them. Whether or not someone feels devastated is up to them. How someone deals with feeling devastated is up to them. There are some things that we simply cannot do for other people, and create and digest feelings are two of those things. We create our own feelings through our thinking. And we have to digest our own feelings, by allowing ourselves to really feel them, if we want to feel better.

I'm going to make an analogy that might strike some people as a little crude, so consider yourself warned. We NEVER think that we can eat and digest food, and eliminate waste for another person. We may talk about



## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

people needing their asses wiped for them, metaphorically, but here's the thing: it is actually physically possible to wipe someone else's ass for them, in very literal terms. But it ISN'T possible to go poop for another person. As far as I know anyway! It is not possible for you to eat food for someone else, and digest it for them, and eliminate it for them. And it's the same way with feelings. Just like only we can put food in our mouths and chew and swallow, only we can feel our feelings and figure out what to do with them. Figure out how to digest and assimilate them. Figure out how to let go of our shit, emotionally speaking. Nobody else can do this for us, and we can't do it for anyone else.

But that doesn't stop us from trying.

I want to suggest that instead of trying to relieve people of their uncomfortable feelings, or attempting to never do anything that might possibly occasion an uncomfortable feeling on anyone else's part, we can make far better use of our energy by doing the following three things:

Number one: Learning how to get clear on what is most true for us, and making choices about our lives that align with our truths – and that of course may include making changes in our relationships, and sometimes telling people we care about things they may not want to hear. When we know what is most important to us, we know what's at stake when we slip into people-pleasing behaviors, or are tempted to. And by that what I mean is attempting to manage other people's feeling through our actions.

Number two: Learning how to deal with our own discomfort, which includes the discomfort we may feel when we think other people are hurting – and perhaps, hurting because of us.

## Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)

Number three: Learning how to be present with people who are hurting, even if we feel uncomfortable doing so.

If the last two things I said sound contradictory, allow me to clarify. Learning how to tolerate our own discomfort is a process that usually doesn't have an end date. For most humans, getting better at allowing discomfort doesn't mean that we never feel uncomfortable, and doesn't mean that we are never uncomfortable with feeling uncomfortable! But I can tell you from my own experience, and from observing the experiences of clients and colleagues, that when it comes to tolerating discomfort, every little bit helps immensely. Every time we decide we're willing to allow ourselves to be uncomfortable without resisting or reacting, we gain a little more peace. Every time we practice feeling uncomfortable, without having to do anything about it, we become a little more free and empowered. And this is AMAZING.

That said, even if we get pretty practiced in allowing discomfort and tolerating it and even embracing it, it may still feel excruciatingly hard to sit someone you care about down, tell them something they don't want to hear, and be present with them as they react. Like, for instance, if you're telling your spouse you want a divorce, and you know that that is partially because of what you've discovered about yourself because of the infidelity you've been engaging in, but your spouse may not know that. And you may not want them to know that.

What I'm going to offer you now is a set of practices for being with someone you care about when they're experiencing discomfort, which can be especially useful when you are pretty obviously the occasion of their

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

discomfort. Let's say, for instance, that you've just told your spouse you want a divorce. Your spouse is upset. What can you actually do in that situation?

FIRST AND FOREMOST, orient yourself to your own experience of the moment. What are YOU thinking? What are YOU feeling? Remind yourself that your job is to deal with your own discomfort. So focus on what's going on with you. Can you name and claim your own emotions? Can you allow yourself to feel them, and ride them out, even if they are intense? Your job is not to try to eliminate your discomfort. It's to allow yourself to be with it. Maybe you can notice the thoughts that have inspired your emotions. For instance, you might recognize that you're feeling panicked because you think your partner is devastated, and it's your fault. Remember that that is a thought. It's not a fact.

Getting a handle on your own experience of the situation may take you a moment. And in that moment, you may have to allow the urge to DO something about your feelings to come and go. You may desperately want to say something to your partner to make them feel better. See if you can ride out the intensity of your emotions without taking action. This may lead to an awkward moment or two. Or three. Or ten. It's entirely possible that your partner may be begging you to comfort them, and all you're doing is sitting there, trying to breathe, and trying to focus on digesting your own discomfort instead of doing what they want you to do.

That's okay. It's okay to have awkward moments. It's okay to not do the thing someone else wants us to do. Everyone will survive, even if the moment is awkward.

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

After you have gotten through the intensity of your own discomfort, you can then decide how you want to respond to your partner's discomfort. This is something you can certainly think about in advance, but no matter how much you think about this ahead of time, you will still have to engage with the moment at hand when it happens, as it happens.

Once your discomfort has dissipated to some extent, you can respond to your partner's discomfort intentionally.

One thing I want to make abundantly clear is that regarding other people's feelings as theirs to digest does not mean you have to take a cold or callous approach to anyone else's discomfort. Knowing that it isn't your job to fix someone else's feelings doesn't mean you can't be loving towards someone who is experiencing a lot of really intensely uncomfortable emotions. In fact, we can often respond to someone else's discomfort with even more love, if we want to, when we know their emotions are theirs, and that we can't resolve the other person's feelings for them.

It's kind of like how we might respond to a little kid or a baby animal having a total meltdown about something. For example, sometimes little kids have total, epic, existential freakouts because they decide that their ice cream is the wrong color, or they're wearing the wrong shoes, or something like that, and all of a sudden they're crying and screaming and utterly inconsolable. When I'm feeling reasonably calm myself, when I'm not feeling besieged by my own discomfort, I can take that little kid and hug them and say, "I know, pumpkin. I know you think you've got it bad right now, and I know it seems like everything is wrong, and I know you are totally distressed." I might not literally say those words, but that's what I'm thinking. And from that place, I can be this loving presence for this poor little person who is having a very human moment. I can CARE about their discomfort, without trying to

## Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)

relieve them of it, or talk them out of it. I know I can't explain to them that there's nothing wrong with their ice cream or their shoes. I know that's impossible. And I know I can't get them to stop being upset. I trust that the best thing that I can do in that moment, for them AND for myself, is to love them as much as I can. That doesn't mean I have to LIKE their behavior. That's a whole different thing. I can just have love for them because I care that they're hurting. It isn't about whether or not their thinking is reasonable, and therefore their pain is unnecessary. It's not about that at all. Their pain just IS. It's just happening, and I happen to be there as it's happening. And I can't fix it, but I can be willing to be loving and present with them as they go through it.

Having someone who is just present with you, who isn't trying to fix your feelings, who isn't totally consumed with their reaction to your feelings, is such a powerful thing. And it's a pretty rare thing in this world. It is such a powerful gift to give someone your fullest attention, without having an agenda, or expecting anything from them, or needing anything to be different. When you can be with someone who is suffering without needing their feelings to be different for you to be okay, you are giving someone a tremendous form of support. And in doing this, you may help them see that maybe they can bear their discomfort. When we are calm and full of love even in the face of distress, we show others that it's possible to tolerate their own experience of distress.

Just to be clear, as I'm talking about love here I'm not talking about romantic love, necessarily. If you're ending a relationship with someone, romantic love may NOT be what you want to feel for them. But you may want to feel immense love for them as person you've shared part of your life with, and may want to continue to have an important relationship with. And we can extend love, in the most general sense to anyone. Love doesn't have to be doled out in limited quantities, or for any particular

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

purposes. Sometimes we get into thinking that we can only love people that we have certain kinds of relationships with, and that it's weird or inappropriate to love anyone else. Depending on how you ACT on the feeling of love, it could get weird or inappropriate, and possibly get you put in prison, or at least get you an ankle bracelet. But jokes aside, feeling love for someone doesn't have to have any romantic or sexual implications. Feeling love for someone can simply mean we care deeply about them as a fellow human, just because they are a fellow human. And we can be a loving presence to anyone if we choose to be. You can be a loving presence for someone even if you never wish to see them again, after your current interaction with them.

And that brings me to a very important point. Being willing to be present with someone when they're experiencing discomfort, and being willing to be a calm and loving presence for someone who is upset does NOT mean we have to tolerate any and all behavior. Let's say you tell your partner you want to end your romantic relationship with them, and they get very upset, and they start to cry and wail and tell you that they're never going to be okay without you. You don't have to be a calm and loving presence with them INDEFINITELY. You might want to stay with them for ten minutes or an hour or maybe even a week, and be with them as they experience their shock and grief. But remember, no matter what you do, your actions, in and of themselves, will not relieve them of their feelings. You cannot make them feel better, no matter what you do. And you get to set boundaries that are right for YOU in terms of how much of their sadness you want to be present for.

Similarly, let's say you've been cheating on your partner and your partner finds out and they get really mad. You may feel bad about cheating on them, and you may feel bad that they found out in the way that they did. And if they decide they want to yell at you for what you've done, and say

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

rather mean things to you, you might WANT to be present for some of that with as much equanimity as you can muster. You might believe that that's the right thing for you to do. And that's really important here. When someone you care about is hurting, and you think it's reasonable for them to be upset, and upset with you, you may WANT to be present with them in their state of discomfort, and deal with their behavior, no matter what that may be. Not because you think you CAUSED their pain, per se, but because you believe it's right for you to be present with your partner as they experience what they're going through. However, being willing to be present with someone is different from trying to fix someone else's feelings.

And this example also illustrates the importance of the boundaries you set. If your partner finds out you cheated on them, and they get mad and want to yell at you, you might want to sit there and take it for a little while. But it is not incumbent upon you to sit there and take it forever. I've talked about that in other episodes, but for today's purposes, the point I want to stress is that you being willing to be present with your partner while they feel their anger and express their anger to you is not necessarily going to make them feel better.

Here's the thing, people. It is inevitable that we are going to be the occasion of other people's discomfort at times, and other people are going to be the occasion of our discomfort at times. Unless you have literally achieved a state of enlightenment, this is just going to be part of your human experience. What if this isn't a problem? Yes, we may want to do our utmost to behave in ways that we believe are fair to others and kind to others and considerate of others. But we can't do that at the expense of what is most essential to us. Not for very long anyway. Not without suffering some major consequences for ourselves, which ultimately might have some pretty major consequences for other people, too. When we



## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

compromise what's most important to us, we tend to begin to suffer, and when we're suffering, we can be pretty insufferable to be around.

When we ourselves know, deep in our bones, from our own practice of tolerating discomfort, that discomfort might be uncomfortable, but it really isn't the end of the world, we can TRUST that our person will survive their discomfort. And trusting that they can tolerate their discomfort may be one of the most generous, loving things we can do for them, and for ourselves. When we believe that someone is capable of strength and courage and resilience, that usually has very different implications from thinking that someone is emotionally weak, or fragile, or lacks resilience. Part of being a loving presence for someone you care about may include assuming that they will rise to the occasion and learn how to meet the challenges they are facing. Why wouldn't we want to believe that about someone we care about?

And this is how we can begin to live out the lives that are truly right for us without making the possibility that other people may be upset by our choices a total roadblock.

Okay everyone, today's episode is a great example of how it's one thing to listen to me talk about the stuff I talk about on the podcast, and another thing entirely to have me as your coach who helps you put the concepts I talk about to use in your own life. I will tell you that one of the general things my clients struggle with the MOST is the stuff I've talked about today. I could build my whole coaching practice around the theory and practice of how to deal with other people's feelings, and other people's discomfort. So if you've been listening to this episode and thinking, "Sounds great, but I could never do that," I assure you that you CAN do it, but it may well take some practice, and some effort, and quite possibly,

## **Ep #124: Dealing with Other People's Discomfort (Part 2)**

some expert guidance. So if you want to get serious about learning how to care about other people without attempting to take responsibility for their feelings, let's work together. The first step is for you to schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com). On my services page you can learn more about the current coaching packages I offer, and my pricing.

All right people! Thank you all so much for listening. Bye for now.