

Ep #112: Being a Human Feels Terrible Sometimes



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With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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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. There are many benefits to working with me, including finding relief from all of the intense and exhausting emotions you may be feeling, learning to think about your situation in a way that helps you see where you have power and choices, and resolving your situation in a way that's truly right for you. There's a lot of prescriptive advice out there about how to deal with an infidelity situation, and a lot of it basically says that if you're the one cheating, you better stop it right now, but that is not my approach. My perspective is that there are many ways to resolve an infidelity situation, and our job is to find the resolution that's right for you. When you're ready to talk, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. And let me mention that as this episode airs in late October, 2022 will be on its way to its conclusion. And my availability between now and the end of the year is limited. So if you've been thinking about booking your first session with me, find yourself a time on my calendar before I'm all booked up for the rest of the year.

As the title of this episode might suggest, today we are going to talk about how being a human feels fucking terrible sometimes. And this applies to everyone, infidelity or no infidelity, but it certainly is an important thing to keep in mind if you're grappling with an infidelity situation and feeling rather challenged by it.

I think that we as a society don't acknowledge how awful it can feel to be human to the extent that we usefully could, and I don't think we acknowledge all of the various flavors of what feeling terrible can feel like to the extent that we usefully could. And we don't just fail to acknowledge that being a human feels terrible sometimes. Worse yet, we suggest, in many

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ways, that feeling terrible is a sign that something is very, very wrong. Maybe it's a sign that something is very wrong with US, or with someone else, or with our life circumstances, or with the whole entire universe. I think these kinds of messages do us all a tremendous disservice, and today I'm going to talk about that, and I'm going to talk about other ways we might conceptualize and approach the experience of being humans who are probably going feel terrible sometimes.

My observation is that in general, we collectively accept that we aren't going to feel amazing and great all of the time. Or at least we say we accept this. We may recognize that there are going to be times in life that are pretty tough, and that entail some emotions that we don't consider positive or pleasant. But we also have this collective sense that there's only a certain amount of discomfort that's acceptable. We might embrace the idea that a certain amount of "negative" emotion is normal, or at least unavoidable, and we might agree that particular types of "negative" emotions are pretty much unavoidable too. But we think that there's some sort of threshold, beyond which we shouldn't have to feel pain or discomfort of any kind. We might think that it's okay to feel terrible for five minutes, or maybe even an hour, and MAYBE for a day or two, but not for a week. And definitely not for a month. Or longer than a month. And there's also this idea floating around out there that even if it's okay – kind of! – to not feel great sometimes, it is far, far better to feel good than to not feel good.

Nod your head if any of this sounds familiar to you! And by the way, if this has been your way of thinking about so-called negative emotions, or uncomfortable emotions, there's nothing wrong with you. I thought about my own uncomfortable emotions in exactly this way for quite a long time. So please be assured that I'm not calling you out if you've been thinking about emotional discomfort like this.

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This way of thinking about emotional discomfort is very prevalent in our world today! I'm speaking primarily about the United States, because that's my frame of reference, but these ideas aren't exclusive to the United States.

One of the reasons these kinds of ideas about "negative" emotions have become dominant in the United States and beyond – not the only reason, but one that it's helpful to be aware of – has to do with the cultural authority of the medical profession. Medical knowledge has a particular degree of esteem in our society, and this came to be true through particular social and historical circumstances, which I will not get into the details of, because I am no longer a card-carrying sociologist, and this is not a sociology lecture, or even a sociology podcast. No deep dive into the sociology of medicine and medical knowledge today. Suffice it to say that medical knowledge has come to be seen as more legitimate than other forms of knowledge in our society – and this has been the case for so long that we pretty much take it for granted these days.

Now, one of the things the medical profession has done is medicalize conditions and behaviors or aspects of the human experience that weren't previously conceptualized in medical terms, or attended to with medical solutions. And we as a society have come to see aspects of the human experience as intelligible primarily – or even exclusively – through a medical lens, and have come to agree that medical solutions are the best or only ways of treating or responding to those aspects of the human experience.

And there are two general things I want to say about medicalization. The first is that this process applies to MANY aspects of the human experience, such as childbirth, baldness, pre-menstrual syndrome, erectile dysfunction,

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and emotions. And that's what we're primarily concerned with today, of course, although I do love talking about Viagra and the medicalization of impotence. Another time, perhaps! The second general thing I want you to know about medicalization is that it isn't inherently a good or a bad thing. Medical sociologists argue that some people have found great relief from the medicalization of their conditions. Big examples of this are chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. Many folks who suffer from these conditions have found a lot of relief from having their experiences considered legitimate – or at least more legitimate - in the eyes of the medical profession. In a world where medical knowledge has such great cultural authority and legal power, having a medical diagnosis may be the difference between being taken seriously – and getting health care – and being dismissed, or worse, by health care providers and anyone and everyone else. That doesn't mean that it's necessarily BETTER for a condition to be medicalized, on the whole. But it may have some distinct benefits.

On the other hand, sociologists also argue that medicalization has led to disease-mongering, and the pathologizing of normal aspects of human experience. And many would argue that emotions – including the so-called negative emotions, and including intensely negative emotions – are a normal aspect of the human experience that has been pathologized within the medical profession. And of course, the pharmaceutical industry has made a killing off of this.

These days, we may take it for granted that if you're too sad, you're depressed, and possibly need medication. And if you experience more than a certain amount of anxiety, you have an anxiety disorder, and perhaps need medication. But it wasn't always this way!

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I want to be really clear that this is not a rant against medical knowledge writ large or pharmaceutical assistance for dealing with emotions. That's not what I'm getting at here. My opinion is that there are a lot of different tools out there to help us get through life, and if you find pharmaceutical tools helpful to you, fantastic. If you like the results you get from using medication to manage your emotions, that's wonderful. And moreover, it's none of my business.

But whether you find medication useful in managing your emotions or not, I want to suggest that we collectively may lose a lot when we think of emotions as experiences that need to be viewed as pathological, and need to be managed primarily or exclusively with medical tools. Whether or not you find benefit in medication, there is TREMENDOUS benefit to be found in a) normalizing the experience of feeling pretty fucking terrible at times, and b) learning how to deal with feeling terrible, with tools other than – or in addition to - medical tools, or pharmaceutical tools.

In contrast to medical perspectives on human emotion, which tend to valorize a certain set of emotions and pathologize another, perspectives from literature, religion, and philosophy emphasize that the breadth of the so-called “normal” human emotional experience includes some emotions that feel great, and some emotions that feel pretty fucking terrible. These other perspectives acknowledge the place of agony as well as ecstasy. The place of boredom and malaise as well as contentment. They recognize that anxiety may be just as “normal,” if you will, as excitement. Great thinkers have recognized that heartbreak and heartache and devastation are just as fundamental to the human experience as joy and elation. In other words, there are many perspectives on “negative” emotion that suggest that our so-called negative emotions aren't a problem.

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Here are a few comments on emotions we tend to consider negative.

In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran writes,

“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

Even as the stone of the fruit must break, so that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain.

And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy.

And you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields.

And you would watch with serenity through the winters of your grief.

Much of your pain is self-chosen.

It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self.

Therefore trust the physician, and drink his remedy in silence and tranquility.

For his hand, though heavy and hard, is guided by the tender hand of the unseen.

And the cup he brings, though it may burn your lips, has been fashioned of the clay which the potter has moistened with his own sacred tears.”

In *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger*, Lama Rod Owens writes, “My anger is like a living being that I am in partnership with. My anger has been precious to me ever since I realized that, like any other person or thing, it too deserved to be loved. Before this realization, my anger was sad and lonely. It felt forgotten and ignored. It acted out like

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anyone who has felt ignored or taken for granted acts out. I started practicing loving my anger because I wanted to be liberated from it. Loving my anger means that I allow it to be there without judgement and without shame. Moreover, loving anger disrupts its power over me and allows space for me to be in power over my anger.”

Quite succinctly, Henry Rollins tells us, “Believe me when I tell you, life will not break your heart, it will crush it.” That’s from the song Blues Jam, I think, which I think was on Rollins Band album that came out in the 90s but I cannot remember the name of the album to save my life, and I don’t want to look it up because it was a pretty bad album, if memory serves me well, even if that line stuck with me forever.

The Egyptian Book of the Dead tells us that to live is to die a thousand deaths. And we can interpret that in many ways, but one way is that we may feel excruciating emotional pain that feels like death over and over again. And we may then be reborn, over and over and over again.

Jim Carrey, as in the actor, was interviewed in Details magazine back when Details magazine a) still existed, and b) was actually cool, back in 1994. I was a teenager then, and like any self-respecting slightly punk-rock teenager, I was very into magazines and zines, if you remember those. And for a while I had a magazine collection that was library-worthy. In the digital age, it’s amazing to look back on that, but at the time, having insane stacks of magazines was actually pretty cool. Anyway, I liked my magazines so much that I actually saved a handful of them, even after I purged most of them when I moved out of my parents’ house and moved from place to place. But then I became more ruthless about holding onto stuff just for nostalgia’s sake, and I got rid of what was left of my magazine collection. Except for this one issue of Details with Jim Carrey on the

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cover, which I still have to this day. The reason I kept it is because in this interview, Jim Carrey said something that stuck my teenage self as really important to pay attention to, and it's something that my forty-something self still thinks is pretty important to pay attention to. And I'll read that to you now.

“I have been through times when I'm literally squatting in the living room, having one of those open-throat cries, when you're crying all the way to your buttocks,” Carey said. “I always believed I would come out of it, though. I don't think anybody is interesting until they've had the shit kicked out of them. The pain is there for a reason. A lot of times when I was in those depressions, I've also had the thing going through my head that this is what I've asked for. I've prayed to god that I would have depth as an artist, and I would have things to say. I've said, no matter what, keep me sane but give me what I need.”

Okay. I could keep reading passages about the value of our intense and uncomfortable emotions, or our intensely uncomfortable emotions all day, but I'm going to switch gears and share a nugget of insight from each of the life coaching schools from which I received my training as a coach. My approach to coaching, by the way, is informed by a lot more than just my coach training per se, but I have actually been trained and certified as a life coach by the Life Coach School, and Martha Beck's program, which is now called the wayfinder coach training or something like that but back when I took her training I think it was just called the Martha Beck Institute. I think.

Anyway, Brooke Castillo, the head guru of the Life Coach School, teaches that life is 50-50. And what she means by that is, even if we are really dedicated to managing our minds and consistently cleaning up the thoughts that create unnecessary suffering for us, we're still going to experience

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“negative” emotions fifty percent of the time. Some of these “negative” emotions may be mildly intense, and some may be extremely intense. The important message here is that point of living our lives consciously and intentionally is not to eliminate all uncomfortable emotion. Even if we create lives we love, and set and accomplish goals, and have great relationships, and do whatever else we most want to do, we’re never going to get to a place where “negative” emotions aren’t a part of our experience.

I personally don’t love to say that life is fifty-fifty because I’m not a quantitative person, and putting it in those terms just doesn’t really appeal to me. I prefer to say things like, “It’s totally normal and okay to feel really awful sometimes.” But I share this phrasing of hers because so many people find it really powerful. The idea that it’s inevitable living our so-called best life entails feeling uncomfortable emotions half the time is a really mind-blowing insight for some people. So whether that phrasing appeals to you or not, it’s one way of normalizing the spectrum of emotions that humans experience.

Along similar lines, one of the mottos of Martha Beck and her coaching community is, “this is way harder than I thought it was going to be, and that’s okay.” The Martha Beck people apply this mantra specifically to the process of making change. Martha talks about how we may set off upon the journey of change-making, thinking that it won’t be hard, or maybe it will be hard, but only SO hard, and then once we actually get into it, we discover that making change is excruciatingly hard and uncomfortable. Far worse than we imagined it would be. And the point is, what if that’s okay? I think this motto, or this mantra, can actually be applied to life in general, not just moments in life when we’re making change. I like to rephrase this and say, “What if this – meaning life – is way more uncomfortable than I thought it was going to be, and what if that’s okay?”

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Now, just to be really clear, the point isn't feeling happiness and joy and all of the emotions that we really like to feel isn't wonderful. Of course it is. And nor is it the point that we want to create excruciatingly uncomfortable feelings on purpose, or not do anything proactive about an excess of discomfort. I'm all in favor of reducing unnecessary suffering. But in order to do that most effectively, we a) may have to intellectually be willing to contend with SOME discomfort, perhaps discomfort 50% of the time, and b) we have to be willing to actively feel our most unpleasant feelings, instead of trying to resist them. Ever heard the saying, "what you resist, persists"? I think that's attributed to good ole' Karl Jung, but I bet Buddha said it first.

It's also worth emphasizing that some people say that without contrast in emotions, we would never get to fully experience the emotions we love to feel. If we couldn't experience sadness, we wouldn't get to experience joy. If we couldn't experience despair, we wouldn't get to know hope. I have definitely observed, in myself and in my clients, that when we try to avoid intensely uncomfortable emotions, we often end up cutting ourselves off from experiencing intensely pleasurable ones too. If we want the fullest extent of the awesomeness of the human experience, we have to be open to the fullest extent of the unpleasantness of the human experience.

The way that we think about our feelings sets the tone for how we are able to actually deal with our feelings. If we think that uncomfortable emotions are a problem, we're going to deal with them very differently than if we think of them as normal part of life, or part of the richness of the human experience. So although our intellectual framing of our emotions is but one part of the process of learning how to deal with being a human who may feel terrible at times, it's an important part of the process. From there, the specific practices we can engage in to tolerate and embrace our emotions become a lot more possible.

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So with the importance of how we think about emotions in mind, I'll share one last way of thinking about emotions that may be helpful.

I have been talking about emotions as being similar to weather for a while now, so I was particularly delighted, upon listening to Jamie Raskin's memoir, *Unthinkable: Trauma, Truth, and the Trials of American Democracy*, that a friend of his counseled him to do the same in the aftermath of his son's suicide. The way I think about weather and emotions is this: weather just HAPPENS. It's part of the experience of life on earth. It's a force of nature. And although we may like some varieties or forms of weather better than others, it all happens, whether we like it or not. We can make the experience of our least favorite forms of weather less bad by being will to tolerate them with neutrality. We may never love rain, but we don't have to cultivate hatred for it.

And weather, like emotions, creates a particular physical experience in our bodies as it occurs. Heat feels different from cold. Being in the snow feels different from being in rain. Anger feels different from sadness. Elation feels different from contentment. But feelings, like weather, are just things that happen. And what Jamie Raskin's friend told him is that we don't have to take our feelings personally. We don't have to take our emotions personally. And I thought that was so brilliant. Weather just happens, and we don't take it personally. Yes, we are experiencing it, but so is everyone else on the planet in one form or another. And although we are experiencing our own emotions, emotions are also being experienced by everyone else on the planet. It may be helpful to think of them as happening THROUGH us, rather than TO us.

Sometimes we think that this kind of framing of our emotions is only available to people who aren't feeling as bad as we are. But I want to

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suggest that if this framing is helpful for someone whose beloved son recently committed suicide, it's available for your use, too. Sometimes we think that certain events or even possibilities are by definition harder to bear than others. But number one, I don't agree with this. Whether something is a big deal to us or not is a matter of our individual thinking. Some things that others might not care much about can matter tremendously to us, and vice versa. However, number two, if you do think that some events are objectively worse or harder to bear than others, I'd say that the death of a child by suicide might rank pretty high on that list.

No matter how intensely we feel our sorrow, or despair, or fear, or anger, or shame, or panic, or all of the above or whatever, we have the opportunity to decide what we make these feelings mean, and how we relate to them. We can choose to turn them into problems or roadblocks, or we can choose to view them as a part of the human experience we can tolerate, and even learn to make friends with. And I can teach you HOW to practice doing this. But being willing to try is the first step.

One of the most common things that I see with my clients is that they allow intense, uncomfortable emotions to be an indication that they shouldn't do something. And don't worry, this is not unique to the people who happen to work with me. I do this too! I certainly do it less than I used to, and I'm a lot more aware of when I'm doing this than I used to be, and I'm a lot more willing to gently guide myself from avoiding my emotions to allowing them than I used to be. And I didn't get to this point because there's anything special about me. I got to this point because I was willing to think about my emotions in a new way, and willing to practice allowing them, and then I actually practiced allowing them. And STILL practice allowing them. Over, and over, and over again. All day every day!

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So if you're feeling totally overwhelmed by uncomfortable emotions associated with your infidelity situation, I want to encourage you to see those emotions as part of the richness of being alive. I want to encourage you to see them as something other than problems, or indications that something is wrong, or indications that you should or shouldn't do something. Yes, you may also want to clean up the thinking that may be creating unnecessary suffering, and you may want to learn how to relate to your emotions differently, so that they don't give you so much trouble. And I can help you do those things. But the point for right now is that we don't have to make our discomfort any worse by thinking there is something wrong with experiencing it.

All right people. Thank you so much for listening. If you're ready to address your infidelity situation in a more intentional way, let's work together. You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I offer confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, so we can work together no matter where you're located.

Have a great week everyone. Bye for now.