

Why we need to connect with discomfort

 Andrew May  Art And Culture  January 29, 2021



People tend to shy away from hard feelings. And why wouldn't we? After all it's part of our survival instinct to avoid pain and suffering.

But the reality is that we all experience pain at some point in our personal or professional lives and learning to meet and manage our discomfort in these times can be the difference between flourishing or floundering.

For small business owners, who require resilience at the best of times, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating. [Two-thirds](#) of Australian businesses have reported taking a financial hit since the pandemic began, and small businesses have been twice as likely as large businesses to [report](#) that they are struggling to meet financial commitments.

Unsurprisingly, financial stress levels among Australian small business owners have risen sharply and [about half](#) of all small-business owners say the pandemic has directly impacted their stress and anxiety levels.

The instinct for many at a time like this is to do whatever they can to distract from the discomfort. Common distractions include alcohol, drugs, sex, technology, gambling, entertainment.

This is understandable, however, appreciating that discomfort can be the key to unlocking our potential both personally and professionally can help us stay the course when the going gets tough.

I was recently listening to a podcast with Oscar-winning actor, Matthew McConaughey who captured the spirit of this idea. "We need to take time to check in and it can be a scary, scary time because the answers don't come quickly sometimes," [he said](#) while discussing human's urge to escape during times of discomfort on the Lewis Howes School of Greatness Podcast.

"And when they don't come and you're shaking monkeys off your back and you're not enjoying your own company and none of it makes sense, it's all confusing and you're looking over there and want to go to entertainment or communications or your phone or you want to drink earlier. All those things come up to mask that and you've got to try and hold back and sit in that discomfort and go 'this is prudent, this is a penance I am taking to get to know and listen to myself' and there is prudence in it."

He continued: "We all like pleasure over pain but I think what we forget sometimes is that there is a greater pleasure that can come with going through a pain. You can have little pleasures... and glide through life... but you're not really ambitious and not really chasing down a better self. If you go through resistance and you choose resistance at the right times... you have greater, more evolved pleasures on the other side of it."

So how do we do this?

One way is learning to turn towards, not away from, our feelings and use them to our advantage.

The evolutionary response to stress is designed to get us out of danger fast and the hormones released make us feel uncomfortable, essentially to agitate us into action. Our body puts us into a hypervigilant, aroused state so that we will get the hell away from the threat we are facing. Makes sense, and this knowledge can help us through a crisis like we have just been through.

Understanding the relationship between distress/discomfort and action can be helpful in a time when many small business owners feel stressed and have the legitimate sense that their livelihoods are in danger. It can be helpful because it is only through awareness that we can utilise discomfort and stress to our advantage, using the energy it creates as a means to problem solve and propel us forward.

Connecting with our discomfort is important for a variety of reasons:

1. Shifting our perspective on stress – seeing the cause of it as a challenge and something that can be useful can help us stay calm and leverage the strong emotions, instead of being disabled by them.
2. A practice of checking in and noticing how we are feeling allows time to pause and reflect. This in itself can help manage stress better and maintain health and wellbeing during periods of prolonged or intense pressure.
3. Avoidance coping, where we avoid negative feelings by attempting to escape them, is a maladaptive coping strategy that is a powerful predictor of social withdrawal, substance abuse and quitting when the going gets tough.
4. Acknowledging our own discomfort and associated challenging emotions validates them as natural and allows us to release them in ways that are healthy so we can move forward. Psychotherapist and author of *It's Not Always Depression*, Hilary Jacobs Hendel explains: "When we are taught about the automatic nature of emotions and learn to identify and work with the core emotions beneath our anxiety, we feel and function better."
5. It is only through acknowledgement of what we are experiencing that we can learn the skills we need to better mitigate the pressures and demands inherent in running a small business.

A recent [McKinsey report](#) on leadership in a crisis noted that uncomfortable feelings, like stress, can be helpful: "Stress can be good if you harness and frame it constructively; it keeps energy levels high and positive even in a crisis environment."

Of course, if we spend too long in our discomfort or don't create a healthy outlet for it, the reverse can happen and we end up more overwhelmed and struggle to take any action.

Pausing to connect and reflect is a pivotal piece of the stress puzzle.

The McKinsey report continued: "In a crisis, some leaders react to complex problems with polarising opinions, quick fixes, false promises, or overly simplistic answers, often combined with a command-and-control leadership style. They lose their ability to be in dialogue, to continuously adapt, and to look for novel solutions. In a situation where their experience falls short... they may be guided by their fear and resort to habitual responses, often unconsciously biased, to unfamiliar problems. Another risk of not being aware of our internal world is found in "sacrifice syndrome": leaders who face constant pressure do not find time to take care of themselves, leading to reduced effectiveness and exhaustion."

If we want to be energised and effective in our work, it is not just stress that we have to address but other uncomfortable emotions, be it anger, fear, frustration or anxiety. These feelings are not only natural, they are [just as important](#) as positive feelings for helping us process life's ups and downs. When we learn to connect with these feelings, pausing to acknowledge them and accept them as valid, we gain clarity and can start to see what action is needed so we can adapt and navigate our way to a better business and more resilient self.

Managing Negative Emotions

Taking time to pause and acknowledge our feelings is the first step in processing them in a healthier way. It allows us to think about what we can do to make ourselves feel better and take thoughtful action. There are other ways to manage uncomfortable feelings when they arise. These include:

- Making sure our basic needs are met during stressful times helps us to cope. This means making sure we are making time to get enough sleep, eating well and drinking water
- Finding a healthy outlet also helps us to better manage uncomfortable feelings. These include putting pen to paper and journaling; exercise; letting yourself cry or even scream; gardening; practicing mindfulness or meditation; listening to or playing music; getting creative and making, drawing or cooking
- Problem solving is a constructive way to navigate tricky times. You can do this by brainstorming and writing a list of possible solutions to a problem. It can help to do this with someone whose opinion you trust and respect. Writing a list of your strengths can also provide perspective and help power our problem-solving
- Asking for help is important in times of stress. This may mean talking to someone you trust or seeking support from a professional

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