

RAIN of Self Compassion

by Tara Brach (adapted from Tara's upcoming book, True Refuge (Bantam, 2012))

R Recognize what is happening

A Allow life to be just as it is

I Investigate inner experience with an Intimate attention

N Non-Identification; rest in Natural awareness

Recognize what is happening

Recognition starts when you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations are arising in the present moment. Recognition is seeing what is true in your inner life. You can awaken recognition simply by asking yourself: "What is happening inside me right now?" Call on your natural curiosity as you focus inward. Try to let go of any preconceived ideas about what is happening and instead, listen in a kind, receptive way to your body and heart.

Allow life to be just as it is

Allowing means "letting be" the thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations you discover. It can be helpful when difficult experiences arise, to ask yourself, "Can I be with this?" or "Can I let this be, just as it is?" You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away and perhaps feeling shame that they are even arising, but as you become more willing to be present with "what is," a different quality of attention will emerge.

The realization that allowing is intrinsic to healing can give rise to a conscious intention to "let be." Many persons support their resolve to accept what is happening by mentally whispering an encouraging word or phrase. For instance, you might feel the grip of fear and whisper "let be," or experience the swelling of deep grief and whisper "yes." You might use the words, "this too," or "I consent." At first you might feel a sense of tentatively "putting up" with unpleasant emotions or sensations. Or you might say "yes" to fear and hope that saying "yes," will make fear magically disappear. In reality, we have to consent again and again, sometimes recognizing even the most subtle ways we are tensing against fear or pain. Yet even the first gesture of allowing, simply whispering a phrase like "yes," or "I consent," begins to create a space that softens the harsh edges of your pain. Your entire being is not so rallied in resistance. Offer the phrase gently and patiently, and in time your receptivity will deepen. Your defenses relax and you may feel a physical sense of yielding or opening to waves of experience.

Sometimes, however, just the notion of allowing brings up vehement resistance. "What do you mean!" someone might say. "Am I supposed to accept that he betrayed me? Am I supposed to say 'yes' to feeling self-loathing?" "To this awful anxiety?" In these situations it is important to point out that we are agreeing only the experience—in our body, heart, mind—in the present moment. We're not being asked to accept the situation itself or another person's behavior, just the felt experience, here and now. In fact, when resistance arises, or first step is to accept the experience of resisting. We are recognizing and allowing the disgust, the tension in the body, the blaming thoughts, the aversion. As I often teach it, "You are saying 'yes' to your 'no!'"

Investigate inner experience with an Intimate and kind attention

Investigation means calling on your natural interest—the desire to know truth—and directing a more focused attention to your present experience. Simply pausing to ask, "What is happening inside me?" might initiate recognition, but with investigation you engage in a more active and pointed kind of inquiry. You might ask yourself: "How am I experiencing this in my body?" or "What am I believing?" or "What does this feeling want from me?"

The investigation phase of RAIN can uncover experience that has been outside of your conscious awareness. We often don't ask ourselves the very questions that might most unhook us from an unconscious identification with our thoughts and feelings. For instance, if you are possessed by feelings of fear and hurt, asking yourself "What am I believing right now?" may uncover the stories of personal failure or mistrust that have been fueling the feelings. Consciously naming the belief can weaken its grip. On the other hand, if you are lost in obsessive thinking, you might not remember to ask "What am I feeling in my body?" This question can help you to step out of intellectualization, judgments and mental commentary, and to directly contact the felt sense of vulnerability or woundedness.

Exploring the felt sense in the body is a key element of mindfulness and insight. As you investigate, you might contact sensations of hollowness or shakiness, and then tap into a story you've told yourself for years about always being pushed away by those you most want to be close to. This might lead to a memory of rejection, and then to feelings of shame, hurt or loneliness. Buried in this you might feel a yearning for acceptance, for connection. Unless these parts of your psyche are consciously contacted, they will control your experience and perpetuate the identification with a threatened, deficient self.

However, such inquiry alone is not enough to facilitate transformation. In order for investigation to be healing and freeing, we need to approach our experience with an intimate quality of attention. This means contacting a sense of care and warmth and offering a kind welcome to whatever comes up. "I care for this suffering." Without this heart energy, investigation cannot penetrate; there is not enough safety and openness for real contact: Self-compassion is an inherent ingredient in a mindful presence.

Imagine that your child has been bullied at school and comes home in tears. What is needed is both understanding (investigation) and compassion (intimacy). In order to find out what happened and how your child is feeling, you have to offer a kind, receptive, gentle attention. In RAIN, this intimate attention is offered to our inner life. It softens the armoring of the heart and makes inquiry, and ultimately insight and healing, possible.

Non-Identification; rest in Natural awareness

The lucid, open and kind presence evoked in the R, A and I of RAIN leads to the N: the freedom of Non-identification, and the realization of what I call Natural awareness or natural presence. Non-identification means that your self-sense is not fused with, or defined by, any limited set of emotions, sensations or stories about who you are. Identification keeps us locked into what I call the "small self," the self of trance. When identification with the small self is loosened, we begin to intuit and live from the aliveness, openness and love that express our natural awareness. In a very immediate way, we find we have more choices about how to respond to life—new possibilities open up, fresh ways of relating with ourselves, with loved ones and colleagues—and we are filled with more gratitude, greater ease.

The first three steps of RAIN require intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result of mindfulness: a liberating realization of natural awareness. While for some people, this kind of awakening might uproot the suffering of trance once and for all, for most of us, freedom from emotional suffering unfolds more gradually. You might find yourself moving through many rounds of getting lost in the old stories of what is wrong with you, wrong with others, wrong with your life --and then remembering to arrive once again in mindful presence. Yet with each round, the understanding that you are not the isolated, deficient, endangered self depicted in your stories deepens; and with each round the realization of your true potential—awakened, loving presence—blossoms more fully. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, tell yourself "this is really difficult right now" - how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?