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RAINing and ReGAINing

Interestingly, Buddhist mindfulness teachers have long discussed aspects of trigger management, although they generally speak of addressing reactivity. In fact, as described below, there is a mindfulness approach that closely parallels several of the interventions described in this book. Referred to as RAIN, this well-known technique was first developed by meditation teacher Michele McDonald (<https://learn.tricycle.org/courses/rain>), and later expanded and popularized by Buddhist psychologist Tara Brach (2013). The acronym refers to four suggested steps in responding to an upsetting experience: *Recognize*, *Allow*, *Investigate*, and *Nonidentify*.

The RAIN algorithm is widely taught in mindfulness classes as a way for people to decrease their reactivity to internal or external events. It is slightly adapted here for use with those who are prone to triggering, and who, in the absence of sufficient emotional regulation skills, tend to respond with distress reduction behaviors (DRBs). This modified RAIN approach is renamed ReGAIN, because it adds a grounding step between Recognize and Allow. It also emphasizes, much as Brach (2013) does for RAIN, the need for the client to do only what is possible in the moment, without being overwhelmed.

ReGAIN may be relatively easy to remember, in that it suggests regaining one's balance, equanimity, or functioning after being triggered into a challenging state. ReGAIN consists of the following steps, although it is common for someone to follow any given step with an earlier one, then perhaps skip to a later one; the process is not always linear:

- *Recognize* that you are triggered.
- *Ground* yourself.
- As best you can, *Allow* yourself to experience whatever is coming up, with self-compassion.
- *Investigate* how you are triggered, where the thoughts or feelings come from, and why they make you upset.
- *Nonidentify*: Remind yourself that these experiences aren't real; they are just triggered thoughts, feelings, or memories. They aren't you; they are just what you are experiencing.

Because this is a tool that the client can carry with her, it is provided in Appendix 7 and is available online to purchasers of this book (see the box at the end of the table of contents).

Before ReGAINing is discussed in detail, its paradoxical nature should be acknowledged. Although this technique is ultimately associated with less suffering over time, its primary action derives from nonavoidance, and exploration of challenging experiences. As a result, some clients who are early in the treatment process may experience an increase in distress when first practicing the recognizing and/or allowing components of this exercise. This can be mitigated by inviting the client to initially practice ReGAIN on a more superficial level—acknowledging emergent unwanted states, but not fully engaging them—until she has gained the emotional regulation capacity required for more “deep” versions of this exercise.

The original RAIN approach invites the individual to be aware of, open to, and interested in all ongoing experiences, albeit especially difficult ones. The ReGAIN version presented here is specific to triggered states, and proceeds as follows:

•• *Recognize that something has happened and that you are probably in a triggered state.*

Originally presented as Recognize what is happening (Brach, 2013), this step refers to being aware that something has changed internally, that one is having emotions, thoughts, sensations, or memories that were not present moments before. Unfortunately, people who engage in dissociation, thought suppression, denial, or excessive substance use may be relatively unaware of their ongoing experience, including whether it has changed. In the absence of such information, the client may not notice that he has been triggered, and will have fewer opportunities to intervene in impending DRBs.

Recognition therefore relies on some degree of mindfulness: the ability to be aware of moment-by-moment experiences without interference—to be able to know, and name, what is happening internally without self-judgment.

As noted, this capacity also benefits from reduced substance use or dissociation, to the extent that the client has control over those phenomena. Of course, such awareness also can have a downside, since it involves increased access to unwanted thoughts, feelings, and memories. This means that the client who is beleaguered by upsetting internal events, often in the presence of reduced emotional regulation skills, may need to approach the Recognition phase of ReGAIN with care and self-compassion.

Beyond increasing mindfulness, those who have difficulty recognizing changed states can use a self-observation approach, referred to as emotional detective work (Briere & Lanktree, 2012). In this activity, the client learns to notice bodily cues signaling emotional arousal or distress, such as increased heart rate, shortness of breath, flushing, coldness of extremities, scalp tightness, restlessness, or clenched muscles, along with emergent thoughts and microflashbacks, to infer the intrusion of emotions or memories. Since, for many, awareness of the body is more grounding and less distressing than awareness of thoughts or feelings, this approach may serve as a “work-around” for some clients, until more emotional regulation and mindfulness is available.

Again, recognition can be challenging, especially for those who don’t, in fact, want to recognize that they are upset. As a result, the client must be patient with herself as she slowly grows this capacity. Equally important, the therapist should be sure to praise and validate the client for the bravery entailed in paying attention when not doing so may be more comfortable and less challenging.

•• *Ground yourself.*

This step, not included in the traditional RAIN procedure, encourages the client to engage in activities that allow greater stability and self-support when experiencing the immediate effects of having been triggered. It is added in ReGAIN because, as noted throughout this book, it is not unusual for survivors of trauma or adverse attachment experiences to be overwhelmed by triggered states, and thus require some stabilization before actually addressing activated feelings, emotions, and memories.

Similar to “pausing the process” in trigger management, grounding includes activities such as slowing one’s breath, practicing mindfulness or a brief breath/relaxation exercise, engaging in metacognitive self-talk, using strategic distraction, and attending to the here and now (vs. the there and then of triggered states). Once the client is sufficiently grounded and deescalated, he can move onto the next step, *Allowing*.

•• *As best you can, Allow yourself to experience whatever is coming up, with self-compassion.*

Brach (2013) refers to this step as Allowing life to be just as it is. In RA-focused therapy, the goal is slightly more circumscribed, in that it calls for specific acceptance of triggered experiences. In this context, “allowing” refers to nonresistance—to the extent possible, not fighting, suppressing, or otherwise avoiding suddenly arising internal states, but instead allowing them to occur.

Because allowing such experiences can be difficult, this step also includes self-compassion: appreciation of how difficult it can be to sit with triggered emotions, thoughts, and memories, and the bravery associated with allowing these experiences to occur without pushing them away. As Kristin Neff (<http://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2>) notes,

“Instead of just ignoring your pain with a ‘stiff upper lip’ mentality, you stop to tell yourself ‘this is really difficult right now,’ how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?”

Self-compassion may involve the affirming self-statements described in Chapter 5, but more generally it invites the person to feel caring and appreciation for herself in the same way she would feel compassion for someone else who was “in her shoes” and going through the same thing. Importantly, self-compassion is not used in this step to alter or reduce newly allowed thoughts or feelings, but rather to provide a stabilizing base of self-acceptance and appreciation when triggered states arise in the mind or body. Since those involved in habitual DRBs, by definition, use avoidance as a primary survival strategy, allowing unwanted memories and associated feelings can be challenging. For this reason, RA clients are encouraged not only to practice self-compassion but also to experiment with titrating awareness: not only “letting in” thoughts or feelings, at whatever level is tolerable but also having the option to stop doing so if the experience become overwhelming. As well, the client may gain from returning to the ReGAIN Grounding step—for example, using self-soothing and breathing techniques to help her remain “present” during this step.

The benefits of allowing are several:

- The suppression effect, which occurs when internal phenomena are avoided or blocked, is no longer as active; thus, emotional distress is less likely to endure into the long-term.
- Learning to “sit with” unwanted experiences even briefly teaches nonresistance and distress tolerance (Linehan, 1993), and builds emotional regulation capacity, which reduces the need for avoidance responses such as DRBs and excessive substance use.
- Memories and emotions that are allowed to emerge unimpeded, and are associated with self-compassion, can be processed and counterconditioned over time. As trauma or attachment memories lose their ability to produce extreme distress, the client has less need for avoidance, including DRBs.
- Practicing self-compassion at times of triggered distress allows the client to more deeply learn self-acceptance, since it is evoked on a regular basis and often proves helpful in the context of invalidating, self-hating, or shaming thoughts and feelings.

•• *Investigate how you have been triggered, the source of the trigger, and the source of the suffering.*

This step, which is an adaptation of what Brach (2013) calls *Investigate inner experience with kindness*, varies to some extent from the original Buddhist meaning. In Buddhist psychology, investigation usually means the process of uncovering what one is preoccupied with, or “attached” to, so that one can let go of these desires and suffer less from unmet needs.

Although this meaning is not overlooked from an RA perspective, the ReGAIN version of RAIN is more directly concerned with the triggering process. Among the questions that can be investigated are those discussed in this chapter, including:

- “What is triggering me?”
- “Why is it happening right now?”
- “Where do these triggers come from?”

At the same time, inquiry may include another, more existential question:

- “Why does this triggered experience hurt so much?”

Among the answers that investigation might point to include:

- The effects of trauma and attachment disturbance: “I was really hurt by what happened (or in the case of attachment issues, often by what didn’t happen), perhaps more than I realized, and the pain is still alive and well, even though I wish that it wasn’t.”
- The effects of harsh social messages: “These memories come with beliefs that I am bad, unlovable, and unworthy, which sometimes hurt as much or more than what happened to me.”
- The effects of culturally supported unrealistic expectations: “I have been trained to want to be perfect, intelligent, likable, successful, and conventionally attractive, so when memories of trauma or abuse suggest I’m not those things, I suffer even more.”
- The effects of resistance: “Trying to not feel or think about the past doesn’t work; it makes it worse, unpredictable, and more likely to come back.”

As Brach (2013) notes more generally, it is important that the client know that the Investigation step does not involve evaluation of her weaknesses, problems, or symptoms, but rather is a self-compassionate examination of triggers and their effects. The underlying message remains that triggering is due to previous negative experiences beyond the client’s control; it does not signal personal failings or psychological disorder.

In fact, investigation may to some extent be a prerequisite for self-compassion: the client can rarely “just” access self-acceptance or self-forgiveness solely because it someone has suggested that she do so. Rather, self-acceptance generally arises from insight, especially the realization that one is not inherently unacceptable or unworthy, but, instead, has been attempting to survive the effects of a painful childhood, current adverse events, and/or chronically devaluing social messages (Brach, 2003; Briere, 2014). It also includes the notion that everyone, even the client, deserves to be happy and not be maltreated (as one client put it, “why not? Why don’t I deserve what everyone should get?”). In this regard, investigation of the basis for one’s triggered responses, whether through ReGAIN or more broadly in therapy, works to debunk the myth of intrinsic badness (Briere, 1989) by uncovering other, more accurate and self-compassionate,

reasons for upsetting thoughts, intrusive phenomena, and problematic behavior, and by exploring one's basic entitlement to wellbeing.

•• *Nonidentify with triggered thoughts, feelings, and memories.*

This final step often arises in response to previous steps (Brach, 2013), especially the metacognitive aspects of Investigation. From a Western, self-oriented perspective, nonidentification refers to one of the fruits of mindfulness and metacognitive awareness: the realization that who we are is not defined by our emotions, thoughts, or memories; we receive our internal experiences, but to some extent we exist separately from them. As one Buddhist teacher notes, summarizing from other Buddhist and Hindu writers, "You are not your thoughts; you are the observer of your thoughts" (Ray, 2015).

Nonidentification is inherent in the metacognitive self-talk described in Chapter 5. For example:

- "Just because I think/feel it doesn't mean it's true."
- "These are just thoughts, not facts."
- "I am not defined by my history or how people judge me."
- "I feel but these are just feelings, they aren't who I am."
- "I am not my thoughts."
- "Although I feel angry/bad/unlovable right now, that doesn't mean that I am an angry/bad/unlovable person."

In the context of ReGAIN for triggered states, this skill involves metacognitively not identifying with activated internal experiences, especially those that suggest intrinsic badness or undeservingness. For example, a client might be able to say, "Just because I was raped as a kid doesn't mean that I am a lifelong victim, or that I deserve for people to treat me badly. I am not my history. Even though I sometimes blame myself, rape was what was done to me; it doesn't have anything to do with who I really am."