A Neuroscientist Explains Exactly What To Do If You Get An Upsetting Text

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Picture this: You’re powering through a productive workday, when a text notification flashes across your phone or computer screen. It’s unsettling—maybe someone is criticizing you, delivering some bad news, or maybe an ex has reached out. No matter how you slice it, it’s troubling, and the feeling lingers long after the ping’s echo fades. The problem is, you can’t exactly turn your attention towards the anxiety-provoking situation—you’re having a productive workday, after all.

Here comes the real conflict, says neuroscientist Amishi Jha, Ph.D., author of Peak Mind, on the mindbodygreen podcast: “You need to devote your mind to the task at hand—meeting that deadline, getting the work done—but you have this pull toward that negative, probably self-related content.”

What’s the right move here? How do you manage your attention and mitigate your anxiety after receiving an upsetting text? Jha has the answer below.

What to do if you’ve received an upsetting text.

Essentially: Do the opposite of what feels natural. “Oftentimes, the typical response is to push it away, suppress it, ignore it, stomp it down, so you can get back to work,” says Jha. “That’s
pretty much a failed strategy.” As anyone who has tried this move will likely tell you: It never works. “You are going to have that content bubble up over and over and over again, and every time it appears, you’re going to have to squash it down,” notes Jha.

Rather, she recommends treating the experience with a mindfulness-based orientation—meaning, allow yourself to accept and feel any emotions that do bubble up. “A mindfulness-based approach is to first acknowledge and allow the emotional reaction that you had receiving the text message,” Jha explains. Embrace the emotions rather than squashing them down, and hold them in the space with you without particularly engaging with them.

“Sort of like if you have a friend or a child in the room with you when you're trying to get something done—they’re there with you, but you know that your attention needs to go towards what you’re doing right now,” says Jha. “You’re not ignoring it, but you’re also not engaging with it; you’re not denying it, but you’re also not trying to reframe it.”

It’s more difficult than it sounds, especially if you are a self-proclaimed problem solver. “Trying to solve the problem would probably not be the approach to take from a mindfulness based perspective, especially if there is a deadline,” counters Jha. It’s a lose-lose scenario: You won’t have the right frame of mind to engage with the text, and you won’t get any work done at the end of the day.

The takeaway.

Upsetting texts are, well, upsetting. So rather than attempting to bury the feeling (which never works, says Jha), acknowledge the emotional reaction without trying to solve the problem right away. This mindfulness-based approach can help honor those negative emotions, which ultimately takes away their power over you—which, in turn, helps you power through the day until you’re ready to face them head-on.

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