

Filling Your Cup

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Cultivating sympathetic joy, practicing the concept of Muditā

There are words in other languages related to mindfulness concepts that do not exist in English. Muditā is one such word. Muditā is a Buddhist concept that refers to sympathetic joy.

If you have ever caught yourself watching videos on social media of strangers proposing to another, or having some incredible moment where suddenly you are swept up in their moment... You find yourself smiling and possibly noticing that you have moist eyes with happy tears. That is an example of Muditā - rejoicing in the positive experiences of others. You don't even know that person and suddenly you feel extremely happy for them.

Sometimes it can be hard to find that positive emotion for others due to jealousy or resentment. With the recent match, over 95% of medical students seeking pediatrics matched. It is easy to feel happy for them. However, that means a few percent did not match and hopefully they also ended up getting a good spot outside the match. One can sense the sadness thinking of those students and the complex emotions of not being happy with the match outcome, but also trying to be happy for their classmates and friends. It is possible to be happy for others and not happy at the same time. It may not have happened right away, but the ability to create that sympathetic joy, that Muditā, those happy thoughts or positive energy is very helpful to our wellness practice. There are many other scenarios one could use as examples to illustrate this concept.

Think back to when you got into college or medical school. You may have been happy, proud or both. Now think of what your parent(s) were thinking of that same moment. They were so happy for you. Overwhelmed with pride, they probably told lots of others about your accomplishments. Some of those people would be happy for you too, and others, maybe not. Or think of those emotions with you as the parent regarding the accomplishments of your child.

The bottom line, catching oneself in negative emotions is an important skill. A mindfulness practice allows one to notice and recognize or name what they are feeling. It is possible to turn negative thoughts around to be happy for others. At times, it may take a while to find that positive emotion or sympathetic joy for others. This is a skill that may require practice.

Emotions are complex. It is possible to have opposite and conflicting emotions. Recognizing this, one can take a moment to step back and focus on flipping the narrative. Negative thoughts can be very draining, especially when things don't go your way but do for others. Contemplate being happy for them. Practicing Muditā is one way to improve your well-being and create a sense of happiness. As part of your mindfulness practice, focus on the joy of others and try to imagine how that happiness feels. Think of how nice it was to have others to share that joy or that special moment. Be that person for someone else. Celebrate their joy. Make their joy also yours.