

Ten Percent Weekly

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Opening Up Wisely

By Oren Jay Sofer

When I step back, I still find it hard to believe how intense the last year has been. It's difficult to even try to summarize the range of challenges that we as a society and individuals have face.

No wonder so many of us feel such a range of emotions: tired, anxious, numb; hopeful, grateful, eager to re-enter 'normal' life. Perhaps you even feel all of these things at once!

Of course, we have a long way to go to get the pandemic in a safe condition globally. But things are changing. Here in the US, spring has finally arrived and miraculously, everyone over 12 is now able to receive a vaccine. Life is beginning to open up—providing us with an invitation to do so skillfully.

It can be helpful to think about recovery from a traumatic event (and surviving a global pandemic could certainly approach that level) as being like healing a physical injury. If you try to do too much, too fast, you may just re-injure yourself. But if you err on the side of staying comfortable and don't do anything, you'll never heal.

A couple of summers ago, I tore the rotator cuff in my shoulder when I jumped into a pond at an odd angle. It affected everything: daily movements, hugging, even how I slept. I was given some physical therapy exercises, and told it would take about six to eight weeks to see improvements, longer until it was fully healed.

I didn't notice any difference initially, but after a few weeks the exercises became easier, with less pain and more mobility. I slowly increased the number of reps and the weights. Over time, with patience and steady attention, the tissues began to heal and my shoulder grew stronger. Sure enough, after a few months, I had recovered fully.

A good friend and colleague of mine, the Nonviolent Communication teacher Miki Kashtan, has a phrase that describes this area of stretching just enough to heal and grow: she calls it "the zone of strategic discomfort." Too much stretching and we shut down in overwhelm. Too little and we never shift.

This transition might be similar. But how do we know what's too much and too little? Two central principles in healing trauma can support our opening back up to life.

The first is called “pendulation,” which is a fancy way of saying ‘going back and forth.’ You start by establishing a sense of relative safety. With mindful attention, notice the areas in life where you feel even a little bit steady, strong, or at ease, and root yourself there. Allow the comfort of that to really register. Then, begin to explore an experience that may be challenging, mindfully noting what unfolds for you. Last, allow your attention to move back and forth between the two naturally and rhythmically.



The second principle, called “titration,” deals with how much difficulty we bite off at once. The word titrate comes from chemistry, where it refers to carefully and slowly adding one substance to another, a little bit at a time, to complete a reaction. In trauma healing, we titrate the amount of stimulation introduced to the nervous system in small, manageable doses as a way of staying regulated, while gradually increasing our capacity to integrate the intense feelings and energies that may have been triggered. Like physical therapy, we increase a little bit at a time, not too quickly, not too slowly. Stretch just a little bit beyond your comfort zone—enough that you’re uncomfortable, but not so much that you’re overwhelmed.

Pendulation and titration work in tandem. Establish the safe context, then titrate the amount of new things you do, then return to the safe context to integrate the experience. Go at your pace, taking it as slowly as you need. When you’re ready, experiment again, going back and forth (pendulating) between contexts that feel easier, and ones that are less comfortable or familiar.

How this plays out in practice will be up to you. For some of us, it may be a stretch to take a walk in the neighborhood or visit a park. Others of us may have been doing this for months, and stretching may mean hugging a vaccinated friend, or eating in a café, or walking in public without a mask. For all of us, of course, it means following the guidelines of medical experts to open up safely.

You can begin the process of opening back up by investigating a question. Where’s your home base? Where do you feel “safe enough” to relax and settle? Ground yourself there with mindfulness and compassion. Then ask: What’s the next step to move into your own zone of strategic discomfort? Notice what it feels like to take that step, notice what emotions are present, and see if you can let go of any self-judgment as you do so.

It’s okay to feel afraid and uncomfortable, but we don’t want these feelings to control our lives either. So, with mindfulness as your ally, dip your toe in and test the waters. We can each go at our own pace, and together, we’ll find our way.

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