

The 90-Second Rule—Letting Emotions Move Through

A reflection on emotional regulation and mind-body awareness

When a wave of emotion hits—anger, fear, sadness, or even joy—it can feel all-encompassing. Our heart races, our chest tightens, our thoughts spin. But neuroscience tells us something powerful: most emotions, when left unresisted, naturally move through the body in about 90 seconds.

This insight comes from Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a Harvard-trained neuroanatomist, who discovered that the physiological lifespan of an emotion—the chemical surge that occurs in the body—is roughly a minute and a half. After that, what keeps the emotion alive is our continued mental replay: the story we attach to it, the rumination, the “why” and “what if.”

Understanding this changes everything. It means we can pause, breathe, and ride the wave instead of being swept away by it. The emotion itself isn't the problem; it's our resistance or fixation that prolongs our suffering.

In coaching, I often invite clients to practice:

- **Notice:** When you feel a strong emotion, identify it by saying “I feel anger,” “I feel fear,” or “I feel sadness.”
- **Allow:** Give yourself permission to feel it fully for 90 seconds without judging or fixing it.
- **Breathe:** Slow your breath and stay curious about the sensations in your body.
- **Release:** As the wave begins to subside, reflect gently—what might this feeling be trying to tell you?

This brief window of awareness gives us back a sense of agency. Emotions stop being something to fear or suppress and become something to witness and learn from. When we honor the rhythm of our inner experience, we allow healing and clarity to emerge naturally, often in less than two minutes.

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