
STRATEGIES for MINDFUL LIVING

Courtesy of UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center

The Emotional Filing Cabinet

Our ability to deal with emotions is similar to a filing cabinet. At times, we are able to respond to emotions quickly, thus eliminating the need for us to file it away — the emotional “document” is able to be recycled or discarded as appropriate. However, at times we are in a situation where it is not appropriate or emotionally safe for us to process difficult emotions, thus we put them in the “filing cabinet.” Some events are a single sheet, requiring us to come back, process, and then determine what needs to happen to the document — whether that be placing it into a folder or removing it from the cabinet so that we have more space. Other events, like trauma, the end of a relationship, or death of a loved one, require an entire file.

When an event requires an entire file, often times that file is very disorganized when we add it to the cabinet — maybe it’s out of order, maybe there are notes sticking out of the file, maybe the documents inside would be better served if they were condensed into more cohesive files. Processing these “file” events is like opening the folder and analyzing the documents within as opposed to trying to remove the file. In some instances, the file never completely goes away, but if we are able to make the file more organized and neater, it is an easier process for us to examine the file and not feel as overwhelmed by it. Some files never go away, nor should we expect them to do so. The passing of a loved one, for instance, is a file that will remain in the cabinet, but should be one that, at some point, is easy for us to open, examine, respond to, and then place back in the cabinet for when we need it.

How does this apply to our emotions during a pandemic? The starting place is by understanding that there is a “file” taking up space in our emotional capacity that wasn’t there previously — it adds a layer of stress and mild anxious energy to all activity, especially if you’re working in healthcare or are another type of essential worker. This may affect your ability to “file away” emotions the way that you did prior to the start of COVID-19, or you may find that you have less emotional energy to spare. During this time, it’s important to make sure that you’re engaging in an active self-care practice, taking time to process emotions with someone you trust, and giving yourself a little additional grace and kindness. If you need help with any of this, the EACC can help.



