A Life Without Suffering?

This month I am going to continue with the theme of expectations. More and more I find that people have become very intolerant of any kind of negative emotion. It’s as if somehow we expect to get through life without pain, sadness, grief or heartache, even though these emotions are all part of life’s journey. But television advertisements and pharmaceutical companies would have us believe that we can lead a life free of physical and emotional pain, so we seek ways to immediately dispel these feelings. However, because life without pain is not possible, what we should be doing instead is learning to tolerate our emotions, even the more uncomfortable ones. With our loved ones, we need to bear witness to the normal vicissitudes of pain and suffering in their lives without rushing to solve their problems, make their emotions go away, or humor them out of it. As parents, we need to teach our children to tolerate their emotions, rather than overreacting with our own strong emotions. Often our own distress over our loved one’s strong emotions cause us to overreact. This reinforces the message that it’s not okay to feel a certain way. It also sends the message that you do not believe that your child is capable of handling these emotions. Instead, we should be normalizing their feelings and teaching them that strong emotions are often like passing weather squalls. They will subside with time. In this way, we are helping them build a tolerance for difficult emotions so that they will not feel the need to quickly dispel them with impulsive actions or by self-medicating with drug/alcohol use. The capacity to sit with difficult emotions and to tolerate them without acting out is a key factor of psychological health. This does not mean stuffing emotions down or minimizing serious problems like depression. It means understanding and accepting the range of emotions that life’s journey will bring. “Feelings are much like waves. You cannot stop them from coming, but you can decide which ones to surf.” Jonatan Martensson