

Emotion Regulation

Our emotions are tools that can be used to navigate through life events, relationships with others, and personal experiences. Sometimes strong emotions can be overwhelming and may lead to unhealthy behaviors. This guide will introduce strategies for better understanding, manage, and expressing your emotions.

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The Basics

Our emotions are responses to the events happening in the world around us. They can often drive our actions and our impressions of people, things, or events. Some emotions are easy to recognize and are very strong, while others are more subtle and may even be unconscious. How we experience emotions, and how they are formed, is hugely dependent on our brain function. The ability to recognize, name, and regulate our emotions is dependent on the frontal lobes of the brain. The amygdala plays a role in associating emotions with memories and experiences. Though our emotions may feel like a part of our conscience, they are also synchronized with our bodies. For example, fear can be associated with increased heart rate and upset stomach.



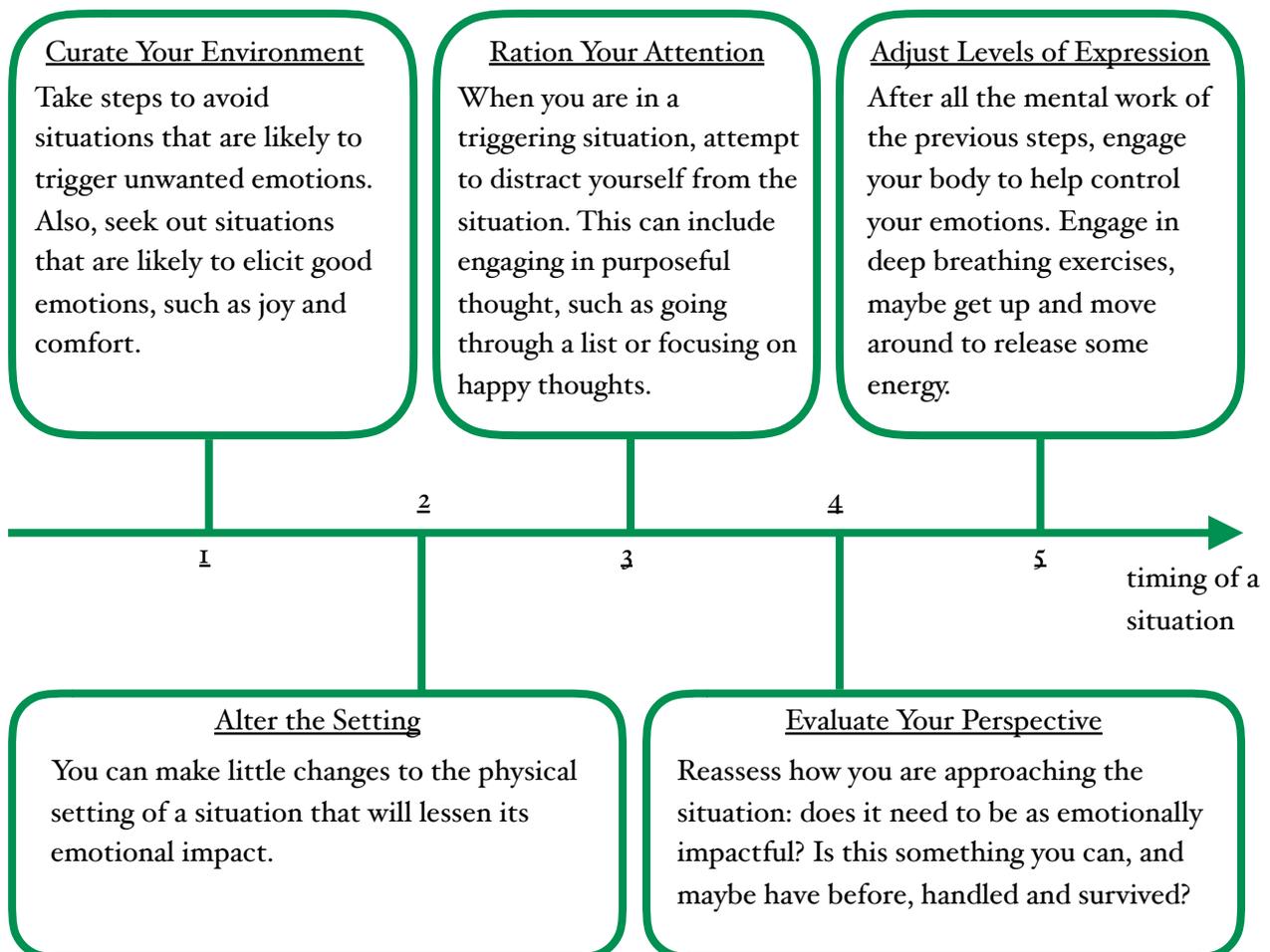
Our emotions can be great tools for us. When in tune with our emotions, we can recognize when certain situations are safe and bring us joy. In the same vein, uncomfortable emotions can indicate that we need to remove ourselves from certain situations. All emotions, including sadness, anger, and stress, are important to recognize and feel to certain extents. Emotions can present many problems, however, when we are unable to regulate them. Overwhelming emotions can have detrimental effects on our ability to function and survive. When our emotions impair our ability to think clearly and with reason, we may act in illogical or harmful ways. It is important to find a safe balance. The following sections will discuss evidence-based methods to improve emotion regulation and expression.

Emotion Regulation

The goal of emotion regulation is to gain control of what kind of emotional response you have to a situation and how you express it. You can have an emotional response to an external situation (i.e. a conversation that happens in front of you) or to an internal situation (i.e. a fear of failure).

Dr. James Gross, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, is a leading figure in the study of emotion regulation. Dr. Gross describes all forms of emotion regulations to be composed of three main steps. First, you must set a goal to regulate your emotions. Your goal can be to decrease negative emotions or increase positive emotions (or both!). The second step is to control the conscious mental and physical aspects of emotional progression. This can include physically removing yourself from a situation or employing mental exercises to distract yourself, for example. Finally, the third step is the effect on our emotional experience. This includes a change in how you experience the emotion, how you behave following the emotion, and/or bodily changes that occur as a result of the emotion.

Emotion regulation theory has identified five methods of emotion regulation that you can employ. The five methods are summarized below:



Rumination

Rumination is the mental process of repeatedly going over, worrying about, or playing out a situation or difficulty in your head. These situations may be real events from your past or imagined events in your future. Either way, rumination is a very harmful process for your mental health. Even though the situation is not repeatedly playing out in the world, our minds react with the full emotional impact as if it were. This often leads to pent up negative emotions such as anger, resentment, fear, and sorrow. When these emotions have no outlet for release, the result is a negative persistent mood that sticks with us. In effect, our ability to regulate our negative emotions is severely weakened by the constant re-fueling of negative emotions.

There are ways to interrupt ruminating thoughts and to break the cycle. It is important to remember, however, that rumination is difficult to always recognize and stop. As such, progress will take time and patience with yourself. Because rumination is a repetitive cycle of obsessive worry, it becomes a type of habit that needs to be broken.

One way to break the habit of rumination is to recognize what external or internal triggers set off the rumination process. Is there a situation, place, or person that triggers the negative thoughts? Similarly, is there a thought process that often devolves into rumination? After you have identified these triggers, take the necessary steps to avoid them. When you recognize that you are falling into a thought process that usually leads to rumination, immediately catch yourself and attempt to reroute your thoughts. Again, this will take a lot of time and practice.



When beginning this journey, it is helpful to have a physical diary to track your rumination patterns. When you note a trigger, write it down. Describe what environment the trigger exists in. For example, describe where and what time of day it occurred, as well as if it coincided with a particular activity or routine. In addition, note what physical changes are associated with the onset of rumination- such as shallow breath, increased sweating, heart palpitations, etc. Overtime, this journal can help to illustrate any patterns that may exist.

When you have identified triggers, when they present, and what effect they can have, the next step is to remove the triggers and change your response to them. For example, if you notice a trigger always appears during a certain activity, then try to avoid or replace that activity. If you notice the beginning signs of rumination, do your best to interrupt your thoughts and change your physical response. Take deep breaths, move your body around, and distract your mind with a mentally engaging task. Once again, this will take time and practice to perfect so stay patient with yourself. You may not succeed every time, and that is okay.

Healthy Anger

As with many things in life, anger can be good in moderation but harmful in excess. Healthy anger is an emotion that prompts self-reflection. When you find yourself feeling angry, ask yourself why those feelings are arising. This inward reflection can be an essential step to not becoming overwhelmed by anger.

The amygdala is the part of the brain that is associated with behavior changes in response to strong emotions such as anger and fear. When the amygdala responds to stimuli from the environment our entire focus is external. The key to regulating anger levels is to engage the frontal lobes of the brain by practicing self-awareness and internal reflection. Ask yourself whether the threat that triggered the angry response is truly dangerous and urgent. Use the onset of anger as a cue to turn your attention to what kinds of thoughts and bodily sensation are activated. For example, anger is often associated with increased heart rate, sweating, and heavy breathing. This is due to the sympathetic nervous system, or “fight or flight” response, being activated.

Like all emotion regulation, managing anger is a skill that needs to be practiced over time. Some ways of acutely managing rising anger levels include physically removing yourself from a situation and taking a walk or a run. Practicing deep breaths and counting to 20 are also strategies that help to counter the “fight or flight” response and activate the parasympathetic nervous system (the “rest and digest” system that is the counterpart to “fight or flight”). Self-talk is a strategy that can be personalized to you: when you feel anger rising, recite a mantra to distract yourself from the anger. One example of a mantra can be, “I am safe. I am okay. This feeling will pass,”. Engaging these tactics will help when you are actively feeling angry. It is also helpful to engage in mindfulness activities on a regular basis, even when you are not angry. Like any skill, your ability to self-reflect and calm yourself down will get better with practice. If you are able to successfully use these techniques in a non-angry mood, you are more likely to be successful when you are angry.

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