

Emotional regulation

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What is emotion regulation and how do we do it?



ALL OF US FEEL AND EXPERIENCE EMOTIONS – negative and positive – each and every day. Emotions are a normal part of our everyday lives. Everyone experiences them. For some though, feeling these emotions can seem overwhelming, like an out-of-control roller coaster. It is common for one or more strong emotions to occur before an individual engages in self-injury. These often include: guilt, sadness, feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, anger, self-blame, and low self-worth. This feeling of being overwhelmed emotionally can lead to a deep need to do something that will stop the intensity. Self-injury can serve as a short-term fix to stop the overwhelmingness of the feeling – at least for a little while. The role of emotions and how they contribute to self-injury is discussed in greater detail on an [an](#) The purpose of our conversation here is to discuss how to help ourselves – and others – with managing or regulating strong emotions when they feel overwhelming.





"Emotion regulation" is a term generally used to describe a person's ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience. People unconsciously use emotion regulation strategies to cope with difficult situations many times throughout each day. Most of us use a variety of emotion regulation strategies and are able to apply them to different situations in order to adapt to the demands of our environment. Some of these are healthy, some are not. Healthy coping strategies, such as managing stress with a walking program, do not cause harm. They can help to diffuse strong emotions, often allowing for a greater understanding of what led to the emotional experience. Self-injury is considered an unhealthy coping strategy. Unhealthy strategies are those that may leave lasting damage (such as lifetime scars, chronic injuries or wounds), result in unanticipated damage (such as wounding too deeply), or lead to avoiding dealing with situations that will inevitably require a head on solution (drugs or alcohol are common here but self-injury can be used as a "distraction" for this reason too).

Why Emotion Regulation Is Important?

Unlike small children, adults are expected to be able to manage their emotions—especially anxiety and anger—in a manner that is socially acceptable. When emotional control fails, people often say or do things they later regret and wish they had been able to keep their emotions in check. Emotion dysregulation is a component of certain forms of mental illness. Over time, it could have a negative impact on one's personal well-being and social relationships.

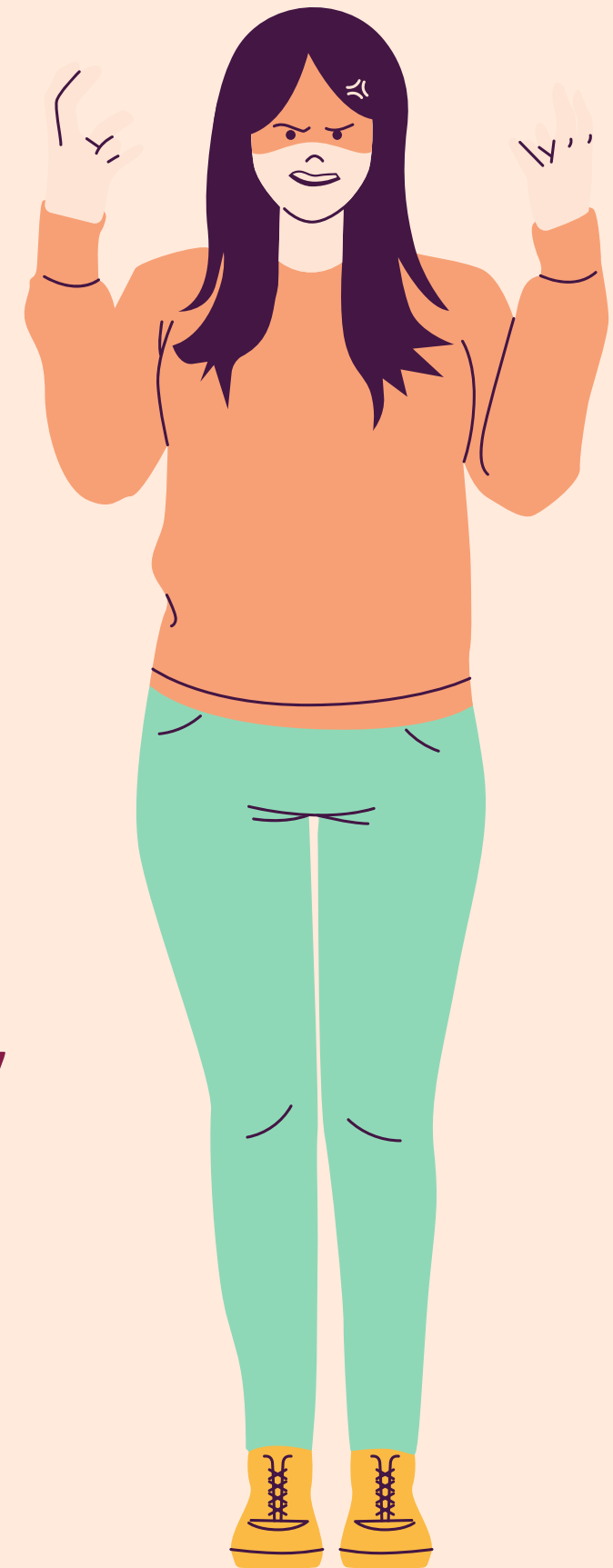
What is emotion dysregulation?

"Emotion dysregulation" is the term used to describe an inability to regularly use healthy strategies to diffuse or moderate negative emotions. While all people occasionally use less than ideal emotion regulation strategies, individuals who regularly experience what feels like overwhelming, intense negative emotions are much more likely to rely on unhealthy strategies, like self-injury.



What causes emotions to feel so overwhelming?

It is really important to note that the experience of an emotion per se is not what leads to difficulties. It is the interpretation of this emotion that tends to ratchet up feelings and a sense of not being able to tolerate them. We call this a "vicious emotional cycle." Emotions, thoughts, and our behavior are all linked together.





For example:-



A friend walks right past you in the hallway without acknowledging you and you immediately have a rapid fire set of feelings, like confusion or disappointment or self-doubt or anger, that turns quickly into a series of thoughts about that event (e.g., "What did I do wrong?" "I'll bet that she is mad at me for that thing that happened a few weeks ago..." "I am sure it was nothing, I am being oversensitive, she was probably in a hurry somewhere. But still..."). This initial cascade can lead to intense or acute feelings (e.g., frustration, panic, insecurity) and you may have a strong desire to not be feeling the negative feelings coming up. This desire turns into action: you do something (e.g., go home and dwell on it; stop communicating with your friend; get a tasty treat to make you feel better or take your mind off it). Sounds familiar?

It becomes a pattern...

This cycle can become vicious and/or a typical go-to pattern over time. Unless something is done to change the cycle, continued avoidance of the feelings associated with that friend or event may lead to additional negative thoughts and feelings about that person. This further supports one's initial interpretation of the event and can then lead to even more negative thoughts and feelings (e.g. "Our friendship is ending; she never really liked me anyway. What will happen if she shares what she knows about me to others? Will I lose more friends?? Oh no, it is all happening again!"). It is easy to see how even a small event can cascade into something hugely triggering. This cycle can be even more intense when the events that occur are more serious or somehow tie into earlier negative experiences, like trauma or abuse.

The vicious cycle:-



Breaking the cycle:-

Changing any part of this cycle can interfere with the pattern

and lead to more positive thoughts and feelings down the road (though it can feel like work to get there!). Learning how to understand and work with the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviors is the heart of popular therapy techniques, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. There is no one-size-fits all strategy to managing difficult thoughts and emotions. What works for one person in a particular situation, may not work for someone else. The important point is that we all must learn what will work for each of us.

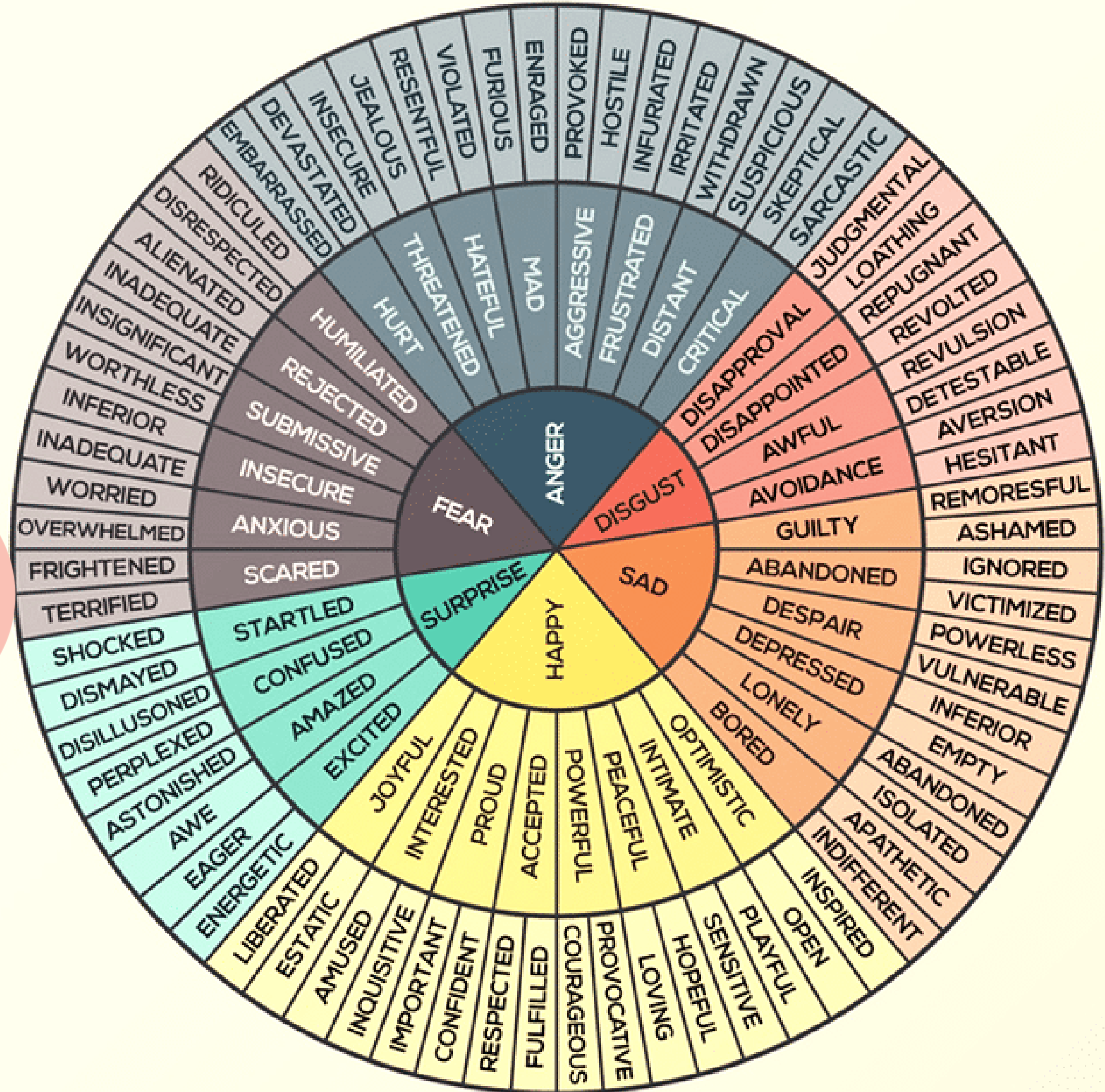
To do this, we need to learn to pay attention to the way the thought-emotion-behavior relationship works for each of us.

Try asking yourself these questions:

- What specific thoughts trigger the most negative emotions for me?
- Which emotions are hardest for me to tolerate?
- Which emotions are easiest for me to tolerate?
- What behaviors do I tend to use to calm down the feelings?
- How well do these work in the short and long term? Do I want to use these behaviors?
- What are the underlying beliefs about myself, others, or life in general that tend to most strongly perpetuate the negative cycles?
- Conversely, what thoughts and beliefs do I have that assist me most in generating positive feelings?



Emotion wheel



Examples of Common Emotion Regulation Strategies

HEALTHY

- Talking with friends
- Exercising
- Writing in a journal
- Meditation
- Therapy
- Taking care of self when physically ill
- Getting adequate sleep
- Paying attention to negative thoughts that occur before or after strong emotions
- Noticing when you need a break – and taking it!

UNHEALTHY

- Abusing alcohol or other substances
- Self-Injury
- Avoiding or withdrawing from difficult situations
- Physical or verbal aggression
- Excessive social media use, to the exclusion of other responsibilities

Tips for regulating emotions:-



I. Take Care of Your Physical Needs:

Getting a good night's rest, eating healthfully, and exercising your body are all essential to being able to feel satisfaction in life. We've all noticed how much better we can feel after having a good night of restful sleep or after eating a diet of healthy foods. It can be as though we have an entirely fresh perspective on life and it is much easier to overlook the little things that might have annoyed or upset us otherwise.

2. Engage in activities that build a sense of achievement:

Doing one positive thing every day can lead to a sense of achievement and contentment. We can each benefit from paying more attention to the positive events in our lives. The things that bring us joy have been shown to decrease negative moods and increase positive moods.

3. Changing thoughts is easier than changing feelings:

Thoughts play a critical role in how we experience a situation. When you notice yourself first becoming upset, try to evaluate what you are thinking that is causing that emotion.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What is it that's really pushing my buttons here?
- Why am I reacting so strongly?
- What's the worst (or best) that could happen?
- How important will this be tomorrow? Next week? Next month?

4. Work on Relationships

Holiday gatherings are a great opportunity to repair and restart relationships with friends that you haven't seen in a while. Leave yourself open to the possibility of renewing old friendships, as well as to forging new friendships.

Perhaps most important of all, commit to maintaining and strengthening your current relationships with family, friends, and anyone else you are likely to see on your holiday travels.

5. Pull Back – Put in Some Perspective

- o What's the bigger picture?
- o Take the helicopter view;
- o What is another way of looking at this situation?
- o What would a trusted friend say to me right now?
- o Is this thought a fact or an opinion?
- o What is a more reasonable explanation?
- o How important is this? How important will it be in 6 months' time?
- o What is the best thing to do right now? For me? For others? For the situation?
- o What can I do that fits with my values?

Do what will be effective and appropriate

6. Practice Radical Acceptance

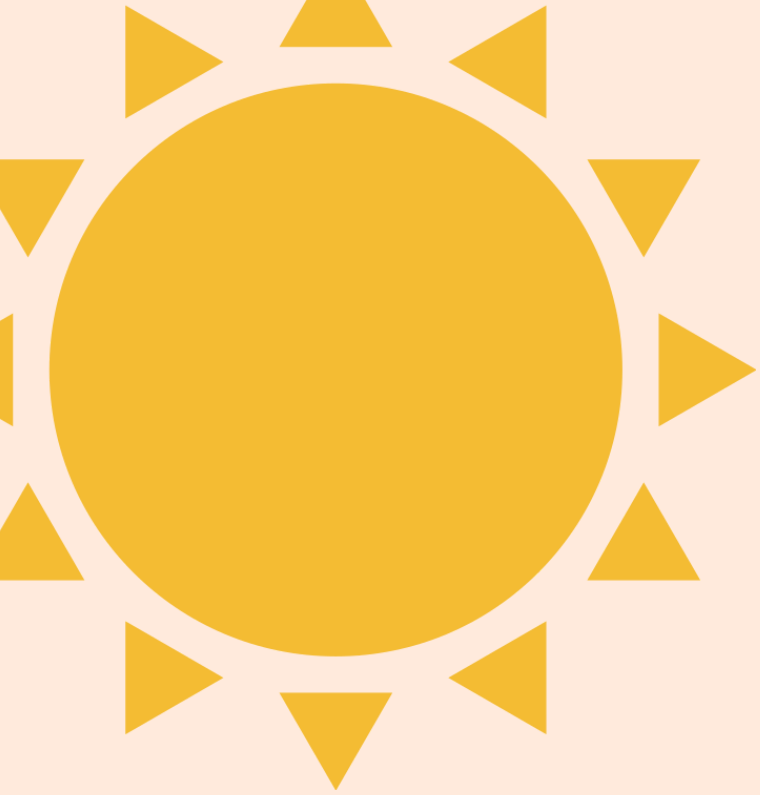
1. What is the problem or situation that you find problematic or painful?
2. What role did your behavior play in this situation? How about others' behavior?
 - a) Describe your actions and behaviors during this experience and consider how your actions influenced what occurred. Remember, you cannot control how others will act.
 - b) How did other people's behavior influence the situation? How did their actions contribute to what happened?
 - c) What were you able to control during this situation? What were you unable to control?
3. Consider and describe your reactions to the situation.
4. What was the impact of your reaction on others around you?
5. How might you behave next time so that you can minimize your reactive response?

8. Pay Attention to Positive Events

Humans are surprisingly good at filtering out the positive and focusing on the negative. It's natural, but it's not helpful! If you notice you are paying too much attention to the negative, pause and refocus onto the positive. You can practice by doing one small, positive activity every day, focusing on the good parts of the activity as you do it. Ignore minor issues and notice the enjoyment, pleasure, and fun!

9. Understanding and Labelling Emotions


- Primary emotions are often completely natural reactions to things around us, like being sad when a loved one dies, or angry when someone is rude to us. However, secondary emotions are more dangerous and more within our control; we generally have more of a choice about how to respond to the fact that we are sad when someone dies.
- Secondary emotions can push us towards behaviors that are destructive and maladaptive, making it essential to learn how to accept your primary emotion without judging yourself for feeling it.



Activity time!

Think about how you're
feeling right now and
what kind of weather it
relates to.

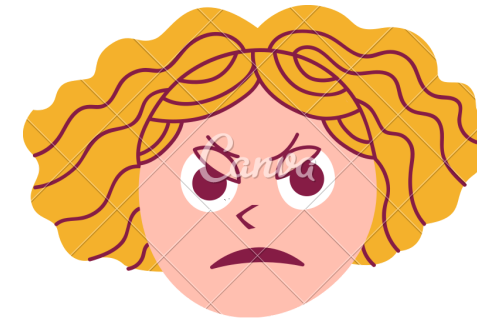




What type
of weather
can you
identify
with?



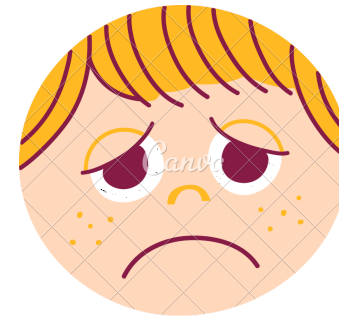
Calm



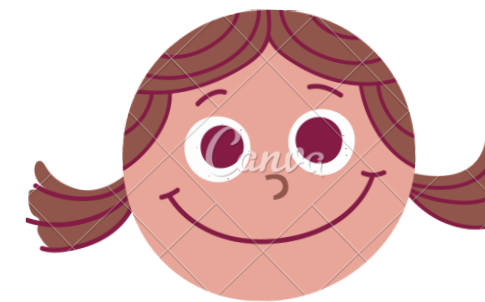
Angry



Sleepy



Sad



Happy



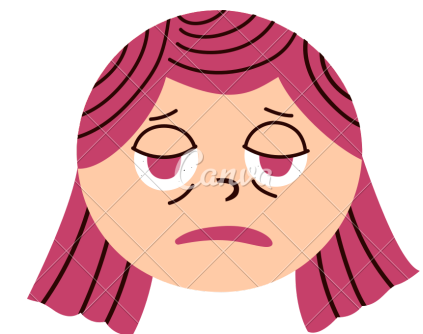
Worried



Shy



Proud



Tired

10. Letting Go of Painful Emotions

1. Observe your emotion. Acknowledge that it exists, stand back from it, and get yourself unstuck from it;
2. Try to experience your emotion as a wave, coming and going. You may find it helpful to concentrate on some part of the emotion, like how your body is feeling or some image about it.
3. Recognize that you are not your emotion. Your emotion is part of you, but it is not all of you. You are more than your emotion;
4. Do not necessarily act on the emotion; having the emotion does not mean that you have to act. You may just need to sit with the emotion. Often, acting can intensify and prolong the emotion;
5. Practice LOVING your emotions. This can be a difficult concept. Why would we want to love painful emotions?

II. Ask, "What are these feelings telling me?"

All that said, asking what an emotion is trying to tell you can lead you in so many helpful, illuminating directions. It could be telling you something as small as

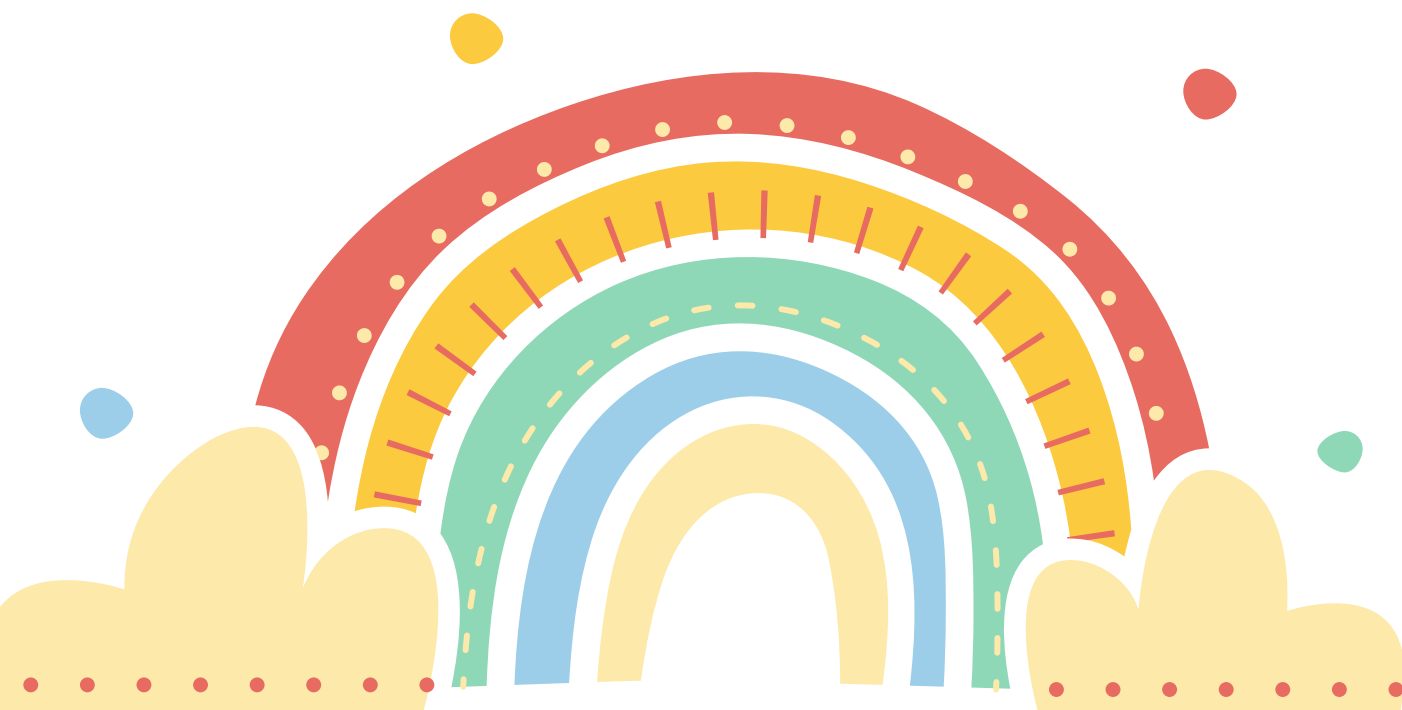
"You need to step away from social media for a bit,"

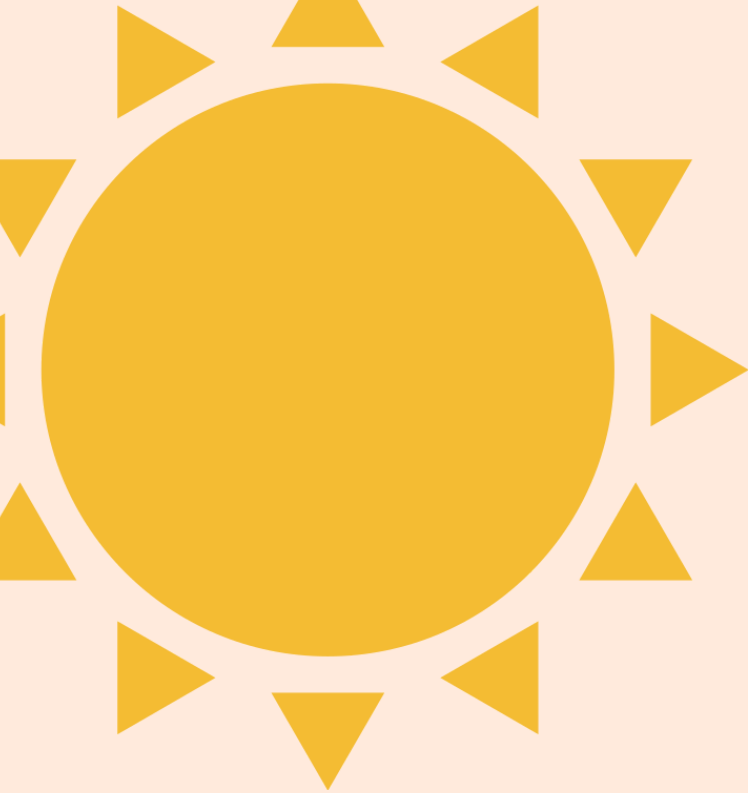
or something bigger or more nebulous, like

"You need to investigate further why everything is irritating you lately. Maybe that's something to talk about in therapy this week."

Honestly, maybe all this feeling is telling you is that you need to grab a snack because you're hangry.

You are the sky,
everything else-it's
just the weather!





Thank You!

Have a great day ahead

