

THE
EMOTION
REGULATION
HANDBOOK



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EMOTION REGULATION HANDBOOK

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Why Do You Need Emotion Regulation?





Emotions are powerful and can be disruptive.

Life is rich with emotional experiences. As you move through developmental stages and milestone events, you have a wide range of responses. Some situations stir deep feelings within you ranging from joy to sorrow, pleasure to pain and love to hate. When you experience powerful emotions at the extremes of these ranges, you can find it hard to function. Even with positive situations it can become hard to concentrate, to complete routine tasks and manage our interactions with other people.

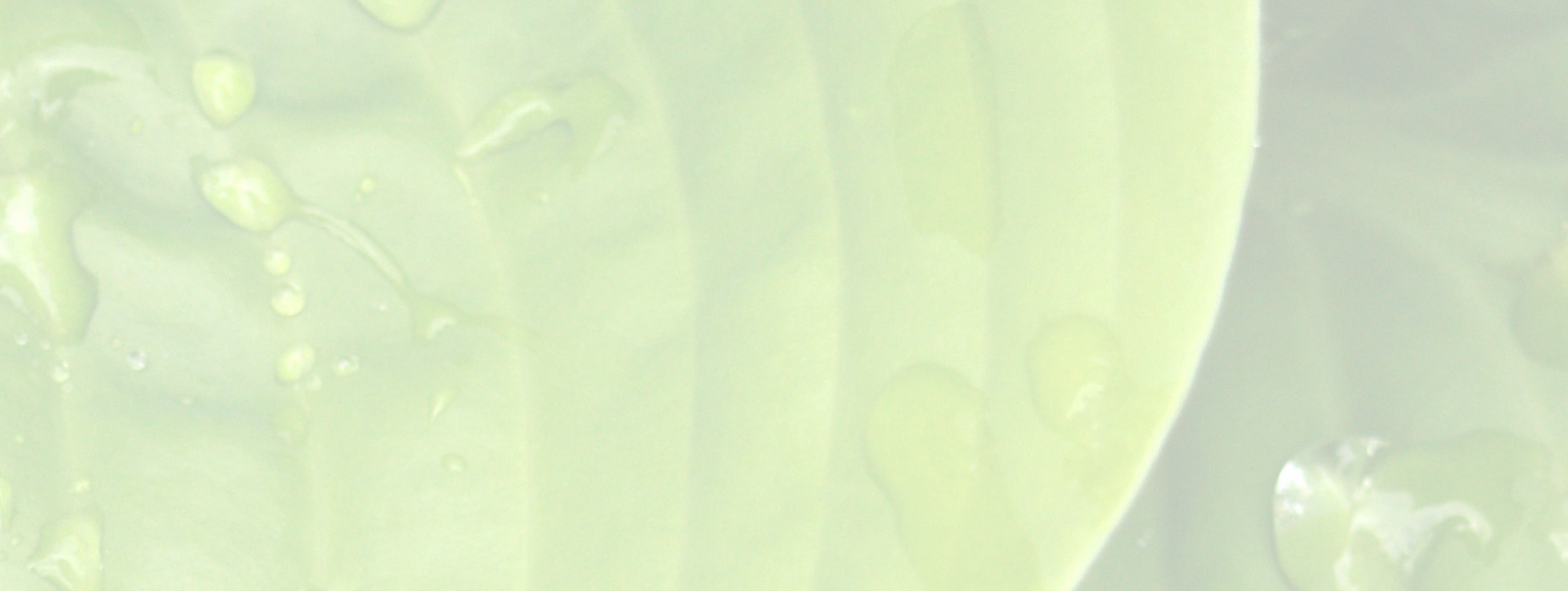
We all need a safe outlet for the free expression of our full range of emotions.

Since powerful emotions are bound to be part of your life, it makes sense to develop strategies that help you manage them. Being able to explore your feelings and express them in a safe manner is less disruptive to relationships and the rhythms of daily life. Physical health and mental health improve when you are able to identify and process feelings. This leads to understanding your experience, soothing your pain and healing your emotional wounds.

We are all capable of coping with powerful emotions.

Even if we have struggled with difficult and overwhelming emotions in the past, we can learn how to handle such situations and maintain a sense of calm control. Just as there is a wide range of feelings we experience, there are a variety of strategies that can help us notice our feelings, understand their purpose and move through them in a healthier manner, leading to improved health and better relationships.





What Can you Do to Manage Your Feelings?





Start by identifying your many, varied emotions.

It can be hard to know just what you are feeling. Often our feelings are layered or blended or jumbled up. If you can sit quietly with your experience, you may be able to sort your feelings. A list like this can help you get started:

- Happy
- Sad
- Overwhelmed
- Exhausted
- Frustrated
- Betrayed
- Afraid
- Disappointed
- Furious
- Weary
- Joyful
- Excited
- Intimidated
- Grateful
- Nervous
- Disgusted
- Weepy
- Encouraged
- Creative
- Giddy
- Wounded
- Brave
- Relaxed
- Sorrowful
- Pleased
- Amused
- Upset
- Enthusiastic
- Optimistic
- Tender
- Vibrant
- Secure
- Discouraged
- Energetic
- Strong

Accept Your Full Range of Emotions

It's common for humans to experience a variety of emotions, sometimes even at the same time. We can be sad and relieved, or we can be happy and nervous. Feelings flow through us all the time, so it's important to remember that there is really no such thing as a bad feeling. There are feelings that make us uncomfortable and feelings that can be difficult to cope with and move through, it's true. When we label these feelings as "bad" and try to avoid them, we're leaving out a significant part of the human experience.

Good things will happen and so will hard things. When the going gets tough, we can't always be positive, happy and optimistic. That's ok. Good times pass, and so do tough times. If you let the feelings flow through you, accepting whatever rises up then releasing it as the next experience happens, it will help you find your balance no matter what happens in your life.





Have Self-Compassion

Everyone experiences pain and suffering in life. Be gentle with yourself when you find yourself in difficult situations. You are doing the best you can, and it is enough for this moment. You are learning and growing, even as you make mistakes and even as bad things happen in your life. Rest. Reflect. Revitalize through self care. When this trying time passes, you will feel stronger and ready to take on the next challenge.

Select Strategies for Safe Expression

There are many ways to work through your feelings. As you develop more awareness of your feelings, you may also notice what helps you feel better when those difficult emotions hit. Think of it from the perspective of mind, body and spirit as you consider the strategies offered on page XX of this handbook. You will begin to explore what helps you cope when facing painful situations that may evoke a chaotic swirl of emotions.



A close-up photograph of several green leaves, likely from a plant like a basil or similar herb, covered in numerous clear water droplets. The droplets vary in size and are scattered across the surface of the leaves, which are a vibrant green color. The lighting is soft, creating a gentle glow and highlighting the texture of the leaves and the clarity of the water.

Why Develop Emotion Regulation Strategies?



You Want to Live Your Best Life

Everyone would like to feel safe, happy and well. We all hope to find acceptance and feel a sense of peace. When you develop emotion regulation strategies that help you handle the inevitable crises of life, you are more likely to be able to feel balanced, calm and content more of the time.

You Want to Have Better Relationships

Human beings are social and desire connection with others. It's true that some people are introverted and need less connection than their extroverted family members and friends. Still, we all want to have positive, strong relationships with people we care about who also care about us.

Pitfalls and Challenges on the Path

Habits Are Powerful

Habits help with establishing routines that move you easily through your days, weeks, months and years. You make it a habit to brush your teeth at certain times. You develop the habits of eating particular foods, going certain places and interacting with specific people. You have traditions you keep and customs you honour.

Change can be quite difficult. Often, you will move through your usual patterns without even considering any changes. At times, some of your habits may cause problems in your life which begins the process of thinking about change as a possibility to avoid those problems. It can take quite a while before you're ready to move from thinking about change to actually doing something different. Once you do something different, it's time to assess whether it solved the problem or not. If it doesn't solve the problem, it's time to decide whether to try something else, or go back to your old habits. If it does solve the problem, the next challenge lies in maintaining the change.

It can be quite a process to make even a small change. As a result, you've likely experienced this cycle many times over the course of your life. When you're thinking of making a change to incorporate something new, plan to practice the change for at least 30 days to help establish your new habit. Repetition over time forms new physical memories and new associations, which can mean the change is more likely to become a new habit, taking the place of whatever action was causing a problem.





Expectations Are Powerful

People in your life have gotten used to you behaving in certain ways. It's common for people who are trying to change habits to end up struggling in some of their closest relationships as well as with acquaintances who were happy with the way things were. Some people in your life may be uncomfortable with changes you are making for a variety of reasons, and sometimes they challenge your new ways. They give you the message to "Change back!" Often, even when your old behaviours cause problems for you and for them, they are also afraid of change and want things to stay as they have always been.

Your own expectations are often part of this equation, too. Many people hold themselves to a very high standard. This is often a strength. You want to do things well, and you work hard to make sure things get done. The challenge can come when you don't leave room for the mistakes and flaws that are simply part of human experience. You strive for perfection, and it's true that you can have a perfect score in a subject like math. However, it's also true that in many aspects of life, perfect performance is simply a social construct for humans who will sometimes get sick, sometimes struggle and sometimes make mistakes. It's important to strive for excellence, while at the same time accepting your inevitable limits.

Cues from our past are powerful.

We learn how to be in the world from our experiences. As we try behaviours or activities, we get feedback from the people around us, as well as from our own internal thoughts and responses. This feedback either encourages us to repeat the behaviour because it satisfied a need, or we may avoid repeating it because of the pain it caused. As a result, we can have powerful feelings related to new experiences based on our past.

Sometimes we call these triggers. Some sensory input – a sound, a smell, a feeling – something about a situation reminds us of an old memory and we react accordingly. We are often unaware that we are responding to something in our past when we have powerful feelings in the present until we have had some time, and sometimes some help, noticing and understanding these very personal connections between our past and our reaction in the present.





What Can You do Now?





One Breath at a Time

We breathe automatically, with the rhythm of our breath regulated by our central nervous system. This means that when our system is in an alarm state due to powerful emotions, we tend toward rapid, shallow breaths. This contributes to a heightened state of distress and can interfere with handling the situation well.

There are many types of breathing exercises that can help calm your central nervous system.

4-7-8 Breathing

- Find a comfortable position.
- Inhale as you count to 4.
- Hold the breath and count again, this time to 7.
- Exhale slowly and count to 8.

Belly Breathing

- Rest one hand over your heart and one hand over your belly.
- Breathe in, feeling your chest and belly rise.

Make sure to breathe deeply enough to expand your lungs fully, which contributes to the rise of your belly under your hand. These long, slow breaths will stimulate the vagus nerve, which then sends a calming message to your system, helping to relax your muscles. It also helps bring more oxygen to your system, which can help you think more clearly.

Box Breathing

- Inhale as you count to 4.
- Hold as you count to 4.
- Exhale as you count to 4.
- Hold as you count to 4.

Imagine that each step in this breathing process creates one side of a square, and when you have finished one full cycle you have constructed a box. This focused breathing can help you calm your mind and prepare to focus when you are about to handle something important.





Set SMART Goals

Specific

Break your bigger goal down into small steps. For example, if you want to improve your nutrition, a specific goal would be to add vegetables to lunch and dinner.

Measurable

Decide on your ideal numbers. For example, you want to add 1 serving of vegetables to lunch and 2 servings of vegetables to dinner.

Achievable

Choose something you believe you can do with the resources you have. For example, can you add 1 serving of vegetables to lunch and 2 servings of vegetables to dinner everyday, or would it be better to start with 5 days each week, or perhaps just on workdays or days off?

Relevant

Pick a goal that is related to your need or desire. For example, adding vegetables to lunch and dinner is more likely to improve your nutrition than cutting out chips or candy, which still leaves you plenty of non-nutritious choices to make.

Time-bound

Set time frames for your goal. For example, you will begin adding vegetables to lunch and dinner tomorrow after your weekly grocery shop, and you will continue to add vegetables to lunch and dinner for at least 30 days.





Dedicate Time

Strengthen

Give yourself one or more physical outlets to strengthen your body and release physical tension. Choose any physical activity you like to do. Add it your calendar, using the SMART goal concepts. Maybe you will do yoga before bed two days and walk around the block after work 5 days this week. Movement helps our body, mind and spirit. Try to do some of your activity outdoors for the added benefit of feeling connected to nature, which is also good for you.

Connect

Make a date with a family member or friend. Meet for a meal, plan a hike together or sign up for the same workshop. If you can't be together in person, schedule a virtual date. Make a coffee or pour a drink and sit down for a phone call or video chat. Choose a movie to watch and chat over a video or text platform as the movie plays in your respective homes. Send someone a handwritten thank you card, or a brief note to say hello. Most people enjoy receiving mail that isn't a bill or advertising.

Calm

Was there a creative activity you enjoyed doing as a child? Maybe you sang or painted or wrote stories. Expressive arts offer the opportunity for soothing sound or movement and allow you to explore and express feelings with more than words. The act of creating can offer playfulness, and a sense of connection to the senses that can be missing when you are struggling with thoughts and feelings about stress and trauma. Pick up some inexpensive supplies and plan a creative date with yourself.

Alternately, select a guided meditation on-line or on an app, settle yourself in and give it a try. If you are new to meditation, choose two or three different sources of audio or video meditations to sample. Set aside some time when you will be able to be still and uninterrupted. Start small with a 2 to 3 minute guided meditation if you are concerned you won't be able to do this. As you listen to these introductory exercises, consider whether you like the voice and if the words are resonating with you. There are a wide variety of recorded meditations available, many at no charge, so search around until you find one that feels right for you. Once you find one you like, try to listen to it several days a week for a few weeks. Challenge yourself to sit for 3 minutes in the beginning, and as you get used to it, add a minute or more every week for four weeks. See if you can get to 15 minutes.



A close-up photograph of several green leaves covered in numerous water droplets of various sizes. The leaves are vibrant green, and the droplets are clear and glistening, reflecting light. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, creating a sense of depth and freshness.

How Can Counselling Help?



Counselling offers you a personalized opportunity to talk about your thoughts and feelings about your experiences. Typically, a session is 50-60 minutes dedicated specifically to you. With an effective counsellor, you can untangle the complex threads of your experiences to better understand yourself and find the best way forward in your life.

Good counselling offers:

A neutral perspective and safe zone for exploration. Your counsellor should be accepting and non-judgmental. They should focus on you, learning your story and your perceptions without imposing their experience or world view on you. Your counsellor should be curious and ask questions to discover details without making assumptions about you or your situation.

Education, validation, reassurance. Your counsellor should offer general information about the situation you face based on research and learning. They can provide you with evidence that confirms what you are experiencing, which helps to validate your thoughts and feelings. They may share data and examples that reassure you as you move through difficult situations toward healing.

Ideas and tools for coping strategies. Your counsellor should offer you a variety of suggestions to try. Ideally, the counsellor will invite you to try different exercises that may help you, and if you don't want to try them, or if you try them and they don't work, your counsellor will work with you to explore this and adapt the strategy. The process of healing is a trial and collaborative adventure where your counsellor is a knowledgeable and skilled guide, but you are highly involved in planning the course and itinerary of your work.





What to look for in counselling:

A person you feel is interested in you and your story. Take the time to call before scheduling an appointment if you can. Even in a short telephone conversation with a counsellor you can find out a lot about how talking with them feels for you. The working relationship is a very important part of effective counselling. That first conversation may give you a strong positive or negative feeling about the counsellor, and it's good to trust your instincts. It may be that you feel neutral, and in that case, it doesn't hurt to schedule an appointment and get to know the counsellor a bit more before making your decision to go ahead or to look for someone else.

Someone who has knowledge and experience with the type of challenges you're facing. You can often find out if a counsellor has a particular area of expertise when you receive a referral by someone you trust, such as your family doctor. You can also research the counsellor on their website or through an internet search, which may tell you the focus of their work. A good relationship is very important, but you also want someone who has information and skills that will apply to your situation.

A space where you feel comfortable talking. Ideally the counsellor's office will be welcoming, soothing and convenient for you to travel to. Accessibility may be an important concern to investigate as well, particularly if you have any mobility issues. If counselling will be virtual, the counsellor should be experienced with telephone, email or video counselling strategies. They should be able to explain the challenges of virtual counselling compared to in-person counselling as well as the plan to maintain privacy and overcome technical glitches when they occur.





Some Next Practical Steps





Create a personalized self-care menu.

Print the PDF template and add menu items, including a variety of your favourite self-care activities. Post it somewhere you will see it frequently as a helpful reminder of possibilities when you need them.

Connect with family and friends.

Make that date with someone you love for an in-person or virtual hang out. Consider making it a regular, recurring event that you can look forward to without having to go to a lot of trouble organizing.

Find peer support by joining a group.

Look at community resources for information and support groups dealing with the challenges you face. These are often free and may be supported by professionals with knowledge and skills in the topic area. If you can't find a group that meets your needs, consider getting help to start one.

Get professional support.

Schedule a therapy session as a mental health check-up, even if you're not in distress now. Make it a semi-annual or annual event and you'll build a relationship with someone who has the ability to help you when you do find yourself struggling.





About the author:

Maureen Pollard is a Registered Social Worker with a private practice in Cobourg, ON, Canada. She has worked with individuals, families and groups since 1991 and takes a strengths-based, person-centred, collaborative approach using an eclectic range of therapeutic strategies and tools.





SELF CARE MENU

APPETIZERS

5-10 Minutes

ENTREES

30-60 Minutes

DESSERTS

15-20 Minutes

BEVERAGES

1-2 Minutes

CHEF'S SPECIAL

1-2 days

Give Your Self



A Hand!