

Emotional Regulation and Techniques

Information for patients

What are emotions?

- Emotions are feelings like sad, happy, angry or disgusted.
- Emotions also involve thoughts, physical sensations and behaviours.
- Emotions can change quickly, sometimes without an obvious reason.
- Emotions are normal and we all have them.
- We all feel overwhelmed by our emotions at times.



How do we learn to manage our emotions?

We start learning to manage our emotions from the moment we are born. When a baby is upset, it needs its caregivers to calm it. If our caregivers manage to do this most of the time, we gradually learn to do it for ourselves.

As we move into adulthood, we increasingly feel able to manage our own emotions (although we still need others to help with this at times).

When can emotions start to feel overwhelming?

It is normal for emotions to feel overwhelming at times.

Many people's caregivers did not respond to their emotions effectively. For example, they may have ignored, shouted, blamed or hurt us when we were emotional. In this situation, we struggle to learn how to manage emotions for ourselves. The emotions can start to feel overwhelming.

When emotions are overwhelming, we sometimes find other ways to try and manage them. For example: shutting our emotions away, hurting ourselves, searching for someone to make us feel better, or using alcohol or drugs.

The good news?

Because managing our emotions is something we learn, it is possible to learn how to do this at any age. However, it is harder if we have not learned it when we are young.

How do I start?

The first step is to notice and pay attention to our emotions.

If we have put a lot of energy into not feeling things, starting to feel can be scary.

What techniques can I use?

Once we have started to pay attention to our emotions, we can use techniques to help us cope with them.

None of these techniques will remove our emotions, but over time they can help us to feel that we have some control.

This takes time and practice, so don't expect too much of yourself. Be kind to yourself in the process, you are teaching yourself something very important and difficult.

Try to practice regularly. Start at times when you are not feeling too overwhelmed.

This is new and might feel unusual, useless or difficult. Give yourself time, build up gradually.

Some Techniques

Breathing Relaxation

You might have been told to take some deep breaths and found this unhelpful. Or you might feel that you have been breathing a long time, so you know how to do it!

However, breathing is key to managing our emotions. When we feel overwhelmed, we tend to over-breathe. Over-breathing will make us feel even worse - more anxious and jittery.

By learning to calm our breathing, we slow down our whole body.

- First, just notice your breathing.
- Put a hand on your abdomen, just below your rib cage at the top of your tummy.
- Breathe in slowly, try to pull the breath deep into your lungs.
- This is not a huge breath, but rather one that pulls the air further down.
- You should feel your hand on the top of your tummy rise and fall a little, but the top of your chest will not move much.
- Find a rhythm that feels comforting and calming, even if only a little.
- Do this for however long feels ok – it can be 10 minutes or 10 breaths.

Grounding

Grounding means connecting with the present moment, often by using your senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste). Grounding can be helpful if you find you are caught up in your thoughts and they are pulling you away to painful places. There are many ways to do this, and the steps below are one example:

- Notice the sensation of your feet on the ground, you might want to stamp your feet and notice how this feels.
- Or pay attention to how something feels to touch. This could be your clothes, a chair, a stone. Notice what the object feels like. You might like to find a small object that you can carry with you for this purpose.
- Move your attention out to what is around you. What can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell? Try to pay close attention to the details of your environment in that moment.
- Smell can have a particularly strong attachment to emotion, so finding something that you like to smell, and really noticing the smell, can help to bring you back to the present.

Making space

When our emotions are overwhelming, we sometimes try to shut them down and not feel them. This does not usually work and can make us feel worse. Imagine a dog that is upset and overwhelmed. If you put that dog in a very small space, it will probably get more worked up and overwhelmed. Now imagine the dog has a field to run around in. By having some space, it is likely to be more able to experience its emotions, and eventually calm down. However, we often do the first with our own emotions: we shut them away in a small box. The **NAME** technique can help with this:

- **Notice** – Just notice how you are feeling in this moment.
- **Acknowledge** – Try to acknowledge that this is how you are feeling right now. It is not right or wrong, but just how things are.
- **Make space** – Breathe into your body, and imagine you are making space for the emotions that are there.
- **Engage** – Once you have done this (it might take some time), see if you can re-engage with whatever you are doing in that moment (watching tv, walking, sitting etc). See if you can do it without having removed the emotions but having made some space for them.