

Emotional Regulation

Step 1: Notice What Is Wrong

Identify initial distressing thought: For example: “I am irritated and overwhelmed because I had an argument with my boss.”

Notice where you feel distress in your body, i.e. “When I am irritated, my stomach tightens” or, ... “when I am overwhelmed, my lower back hurts.”

Step 2: Getting Safe and Comfortable (this is to avoid the fight/ flight/, freeze response from taking hold, and is key to emotional regulation)

Breathe...do a series of 5 big belly breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth, releasing tension in your muscles where you feel tightness.

Remove yourself physically from the stressor or person you are stressed around. (For example, you could say to a person you are in a dispute with), “I am overwhelmed, and it probably has nothing to do with you. I need a time out. Can we talk about this in a few hours, once I have had a chance to think about this?”

Engage in healthy distractions while you commit to yourself that you will return to reflect on your feelings later. For example, you could: read a magazine, watch sports, go for a walk, call a friend to discuss something other than the issue, organize your calendar.

Step 3: Label Feelings (once you are calm)

There are two basic levels or types of feeling you need to identify for the purpose of this exercise: Defensive and Vulnerable.

Defensive Feelings: These are feelings you are **most aware you are experiencing**: “I am feeling mad, sad, anxious, withdrawn,” etc. You may or may not know why you are feeling these things, or you may think you know, but could be distorting information. Give yourself a chance to complete this exercise before telling yourself you are sure of the nature of your feelings.

Vulnerable Feelings: These are feelings you are **less likely to reveal to yourself or others**. They sometimes hurt more and are often not disclosed openly, due to social norms, or cultural/societal expectations that discourage this. Examples are jealousy, fear and shame.

Put together a sentence about your experience that includes both sets of feelings. Here is a sample client feelings statement:

“I was angry when I found out my son was bullied at school. I was also frightened that he may be unpopular and felt a familiar pain because I remembered how ashamed I was when my older sister used to pick on me.” The defensive feeling here is anger, the vulnerable feelings are fear and shame.

Step 4: Make a Choice

For the purpose of this exercise, there are two types of choices one can make to effectively emotionally regulate: Passive or Active.

Passive Choices: Choices you can make by **thinking and reflecting**

Examples include: forgiveness, acceptance of what cannot be changed, letting go, focus on the positive aspects of the situation, or focus on positive possibilities for the future

Active Choices: Choices that **require a conversation with someone else or action** on your part

Examples include: making a request, or setting a boundary

Step 5: Self Comfort Using Choices

Write a self-comfort statement indicating your choice or combination of choices. For example:

“I am going to ask my son’s teacher to increase her awareness of classroom interactions between my son and the bully (make a request). I am going to prepare my son with options for what he can do or say when bullied (focus on positive possibilities for the future). I will ask him to come to me if he doesn’t know what to do (make a request) and trust him to take care of himself. If this continues, I will give him the option to change schools (setting a boundary). When I see all the personal feelings involved in my son’s bullying, I realize I may have complicated his pain with mine...I am going to choose to accept my past for what it is, something that cannot be changed. I recognize that my sister and I have a great relationship today (focusing on the positive).”

Step 6: Notice Relief

THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART. Many people skip this part, but you must notice what you have accomplished. Do this by:

- a) Saying to yourself “I did it, I processed this...I know where I stand and have made healthy choices. While I don’t expect these feelings to instantly go away my INTENTION is to release them.”
- b) Notice the body part that was tight, loosen it with intention (don’t force it).
- c) Give it a day or two, but if the negative defensive feelings are still bothering you after some time has passed, you may need to revise your choices, so that they provide you with relief.
- d) Breathe out the negative energy your defensive and vulnerable feelings have created in you. Let something else hold these feelings (i.e. a higher power, God, the universe, nature; whatever works for you).

EMOTIONAL REGULATION WORKSHEET

Step 1: Notice What Is Wrong

Write initial distressing thought below:

When I have this thought, my _____ (body part) tightens or is in pain.

Step 2: Getting Safe and Comfortable

Circle what you can do when faced with the thoughts and physical sensations listed in Step 1:

Belly Breathing Time Out/Walk Away Healthy Distraction

List personal options for healthy distractions below:

Step 3: Label Feelings

List the defensive feeling(s) you experience when you have the negative thought listed in Step 1 below. Examples of common defensive feelings are anger, anxiety, numbness, the need to withdraw from loved ones, and sadness.

Vulnerable feelings are the hardest to label. If you are stuck, think about the answers to these questions to help you get started: *What might someone else having similar thoughts be feeling that they may not want to talk about? When else in my life did I feel this way? What do I really NOT want to have happen and why?* Examples of common vulnerable feelings are hurt, fear, shame, embarrassment, loneliness, jealousy, abandonment and weakness. List vulnerable feelings:

Write feelings statement incorporating both kinds of feelings below:

Step 4: Make a Choice

Check the passive choice(s) you can make

Forgiveness

Acceptance of what cannot be changed

Letting go

Focus on the positive aspects of the situation

Focus on positive possibilities for the future

Check active choices you will make.

Making a request of someone else

Setting a boundary

Other _____

Step 5: Self Comfort Using Choices

Write a self-comfort statement indicating your choice or combination of choices:

Step 6: Notice Relief (Check the items below after you do them)

Saying to yourself "I did it, I processed this...I know where I stand and have made healthy choices. While I don't expect these feelings to instantly go away my INTENTION is to release them."

Notice the body part that was tight, loosen it with intention (don't force it).

Breathe out the negative energy your defensive and vulnerable feelings have created in you. Let something else hold these feelings.

On a scale of 1-5, 5 being significant relief, 1 being no change, how do you feel?

Immediately after the exercise

1 2 3 4 5

Two days after doing this exercise

1 2 3 4 5