HANDLING EMOTIONS

The ability to experience and express emotions is more important than you might realize.

As the felt response to a given situation, emotions play a key part in your reactions. When you’re in tune with them, you have access to important knowledge that helps with:

* decision-making
* relationship success
* day-to-day interactions
* self-care

While emotions can have a helpful role in your daily life, they can take a toll on your emotional health and interpersonal relationships when they start to feel out of control.

**1. Take a look at the impact of your emotions**

Intense emotions aren’t all bad.

“Emotions make our lives exciting, unique, and vibrant,” Botnick says. “Strong feelings can signify that we embrace life fully, that we’re not repressing our natural reactions.” It’s perfectly normal to experience some emotional overwhelm on occasion— when something wonderful happens, when something terrible happens, when you feel like you’ve missed out.

So, how do you know when there’s a problem?

Emotions that regularly get out of hand might lead to:

* relationship or friendship conflict
* difficulty relating to others
* trouble at work or school
* an urge to use substances to help manage your emotions
* physical or emotional outbursts

Find some time to take stock of just how your uncontrolled emotions are affecting your day-to-day life. This will make it easier to identify problem areas (and track your success).

**2. Aim for regulation, not repression**

You can’t control your emotions with a dial (if only it were that easy!). But imagine, for a moment, that you could manage emotions this way.

You wouldn’t want to leave them running at maximum all the time. You also wouldn’t want to switch them off entirely, either. When you suppress or repress emotions, you’re preventing yourself from experiencing and expressing feelings. This can happen consciously (suppression) or unconsciously (repression).

Either can contribute to mental and physical health symptoms, including:

* anxiety
* depression
* sleep issues
* muscle tension and pain
* difficulty managing stress
* substance misuse

When learning to exercise control over emotions, make sure you aren’t just sweeping them under the rug. Healthy emotional expression involves finding some balance between overwhelming emotions and no emotions at all.

**3. Identify what you’re feeling**

Taking a moment to check in with yourself about your mood can help you begin gaining back control.

Say you’ve been seeing someone for a few months. You tried planning a date last week, but they said they didn’t have time. Yesterday, you texted again, saying, “I’d like to see you soon. Can you meet this week?”

They finally reply, more than a day later: “Can’t. Busy.”

You’re suddenly extremely upset. Without stopping to think, you hurl your phone across the room, knock over your wastebasket, and kick your desk, stubbing your toe.

Interrupt yourself by asking:

What am I feeling right now? (disappointed, confused, furious)

What happened to make me feel this way? (They brushed me off with no explanation.)

Does the situation have a different explanation that might make sense? (Maybe they’re stressed, sick, or dealing with something else they don’t feel comfortable explaining. They might plan to explain more when they can.)

What do I want to do about these feelings? (Scream, vent my frustration by throwing things, text back something rude.)

Is there a better way of coping with them? (Ask if everything’s OK. Ask when they’re free next. Go for a walk or run.)

By considering possible alternatives, you’re reframing your thoughts, which can help you modify your first extreme reaction.

It can take some time before this response becomes a habit. With practice, going through these steps in your head will become easier (and more effective).

**4. Accept your emotions — all of them**

If you’re trying to get better at managing emotions, you might try downplaying your feelings to yourself.

When you hyperventilate after receiving good news or collapse on the floor screaming and sobbing when you can’t find your keys, it might seem helpful to tell yourself, “Just calm down,” or “It’s not that big of a deal, so don’t freak out.”

But this invalidates your experience. It is a big deal to you.

Accepting emotions as they come helps you get more comfortable with them. Increasing your comfort around intense emotions allows you to fully feel them without reacting in extreme, unhelpful ways.

To practice accepting emotions, try thinking of them as messengers. They’re not “good” or “bad.” They’re neutral. Maybe they bring up unpleasant feelings sometimes, but they’re still giving you important information that you can use.

For example, try:

“I’m upset because I keep losing my keys, which makes me late. I should put a dish on the shelf by the door so I remember to leave them in the same place.”

Accepting emotions may lead toTrusted Source greater life satisfaction and fewer mental health symptoms. What’s more, people thinking of their emotions as helpful may lead toTrusted Source higher levels of happiness.

**5. Keep a mood journal**

Writing down (or typing up) your feelings and the responses they trigger can help you uncover any disruptive patterns.

Sometimes, it’s enough to mentally trace emotions back through your thoughts. Putting feelings onto paper can allow you to reflect on them more deeply.

It also helps you recognize when specific circumstances, like trouble at work or family conflict, contribute to harder-to-control emotions. Identifying specific triggers makes it possible to come up with ways to manage them more productively.

Journaling provides the most benefit when you do it daily. Keep your journal with you and jot down intense emotions or feelings as they happen. Try to note the triggers and your reaction. If your reaction didn’t help, use your journal to explore more helpful possibilities for the future.

**6. Take a deep breath**

There’s much to be said for the power of a deep breath, whether you’re ridiculously happy or so angry you can’t speak. Slowing down and paying attention to your breath won’t make the emotions go away (and remember, that’s not the goal).

Still, deep breathing exercises can help you ground yourself and take a step back from the first intense flash of emotion and any extreme reaction you want to avoid.

The next time you feel emotions starting to take control:

Breathe in slowly. Deep breaths come from the diaphragm, not the chest. It may help to visualize your breath rising from deep in your belly.

Hold it. Hold your breath for a count of three, then let it out slowly.

Consider a mantra. Some people find it helpful to repeat a mantra, like “I am calm” or “I am relaxed.”

**7. Know when to express yourself**

There’s a time and place for everything, including intense emotions. Sobbing uncontrollably is a pretty common response to losing a loved one, for example. Screaming into your pillow, even punching it, might help you relieve some anger and tension after being dumped.

Other situations, however, call for some restraint. No matter how frustrated you are, screaming at your boss over an unfair disciplinary action won’t help.

Being mindful of your surroundings and the situation can help you learn when it’s OK to let feelings out and when you might want to sit with them for the moment.

**8. Give yourself some space**

Getting some distance from intense feelings can help you make sure you’re reacting to them in reasonable ways, according to Botnick.

This distance might be physical, like leaving an upsetting situation, for example. But you can also create some mental distance by distracting yourself.

While you don’t want to block or avoid feelings entirely, it’s not harmful to distract yourself until you’re in a better place to deal with them. Just make sure you do come back to them. Healthy distractions are only temporary.

Try:

* taking a walk
* watching a funny video
* talking to a loved one
* spending a few minutes with your pet

9. Try meditation

If you practice meditation already, it might be one of your go-to methods for coping with extreme feelings.

Meditation can help you increase your awareness of all feelings and experiences. When you meditate, you’re teaching yourself to sit with those feelings, to notice them without judging yourself or attempting to change them or make them go away.

As mentioned above, learning to accept all of your emotions can make emotional regulation easier. Meditation helps you increase those acceptance skills. It also offers other benefits, like helping you relax and get better sleep.

Our guide to different kinds of meditation can help you get started.

**10. Stay on top of stress**

When you’re under a lot of stress, managing your emotions can become more difficult. Even people who generally can control their emotions well might find it harder in times of high tension and stress.

Reducing stress, or finding more helpful ways to manage it, can help your emotions become more manageable.

Mindfulness practices like meditation can help with stress, too. They won’t get rid of it, but they can make it easier to live with.

Other healthy ways to cope with stress include:

* getting enough sleep
* making time to talk (and laugh) with friends
* exercise
* spending time in nature
* making time for relaxation and hobbies

**11. Talk to a therapist**

If your emotions continue to feel overwhelming, it may be time to seek professional support.

Long-term or persistent emotional dysregulation and mood swings are linked to certain mental health conditions, including borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder. Trouble controlling emotions can also relate to trauma, family issues, or other underlying concerns, Botnick explains.

A therapist can offer compassionate, judgment-free support as you:

* explore factors contributing to dysregulated emotions
* address severe mood swings
* learn how down-regulate intense feelings or up-regulate limited emotional expression
* practice challenging and reframing feelings that cause distress

Mood swings and intense emotions can provoke negative or unwanted thoughts that eventually trigger feelings of hopelessness or despair.

This cycle can eventually lead to unhelpful coping methods like self-harm or even thoughts of suicide. If you begin thinking about suicide or have urges to self-harm, talk to a trusted loved one who can help you get support right away.