Stress Reduction Module #8:

Tuning In To Stress & Our Emotions

### Stakeholder Sign Off

| **Name** | **Role\*** | **Initials** | **Date** |
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Learning Objectives:

* Understand concepts such as Emotional Regulation, Emotional Agility, and Emotional Rigidity
* Understand how each of these relate to stress for you
* Identify techniques for enhancing emotional regulation and emotional agility

Welcome to Module #8! This week, we’re diving into the powerful connection between our emotions and stress. We’ll learn how tuning into our emotions can help us manage stress more effectively and live with greater emotional balance.

#### **Introduction to Emotional Agility**

Emotional agility is the skill of being open and flexible with both positive and negative emotions rather than avoiding or getting stuck in them. This flexibility supports resilience. Harvard Medical School psychologist and author Susan David first introduced and explored this in her book *Emotional Agility*.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**

Emotional agility is about recognizing and accepting your emotions, whether positive or negative, and choosing to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively. Instead of pushing negative feelings away, it involves noticing them, acknowledging that they’re valid, and then deciding how to move forward intentionally.

**Example**: Imagine you’re anxious about an upcoming presentation. Instead of letting that anxiety overwhelm you, emotional agility allows you to acknowledge the feeling, recognize it as a sign that you care about doing well, and shift your focus toward preparation rather than becoming paralyzed by the emotion.

#### **A Closer Look at Emotional Regulation**

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage and respond to disruptive emotions and impulses without ignoring or bottling them up. It’s a key component of emotional agility.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**

Emotional regulation allows you to experience your emotions without being overwhelmed or reactive. Think of it like driving a car—your emotions are the passengers, but you control where you’re going and how fast you get there.

**Example**: After a stressful day, emotional regulation helps you recognize your frustration and choose a healthy response, like going for a walk during lunch, rather than taking out your stress on a colleague.

#### **Emotional Rigidity**

Emotional Rigidity is the inability to regulate emotions or adapt to change. You become stuck in a specific emotional state or reaction, which increases stress and undermines resilience.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**

When you’re stuck in a single emotional response and struggle to adapt, that’s emotional rigidity. Rather than adjusting to new information, perspectives, or changing circumstances, you’re locked in the same emotional reaction.

* **How It Feels**: Emotional rigidity can manifest as holding onto anger long after an argument is over, refusing to see another person’s perspective, or being completely consumed by stress, despite a shift in circumstances.
* **Why It’s Harmful**: Emotional rigidity can heighten and prolong the stress response, making it harder to cope. It can also cause impulsive reactions or getting stuck in negative thought patterns, leading to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

**Example**: Imagine you’ve had a disagreement with a friend and, even after apologies, you can’t stop feeling angry. Emotional rigidity keeps you fixated on the argument. In contrast, moving on might involve focusing on rebuilding the friendship, engaging in a shared activity, or reflecting on the positive aspects of the relationship.

#### **Finding the Connection**

Our emotions are directly tied to our body’s stress response. Emotions like anger, fear, and anxiety can trigger the fight-or-flight mechanism, as discussed in an earlier module. If these emotions aren’t managed, they can intensify the stress response, making us feel even more overwhelmed.

**Why It Matters**: Learning how to regulate emotions and become more emotionally agile can help prevent your body from overreacting to stressors, reducing risks from chronic stress.

**Example**: When stuck in traffic and feeling anxious, your body might enter a state of heightened stress. However, with emotional regulation, you can recognize the situation is beyond your control, take a deep breath, and prevent your stress from escalating. That is in your control.

*“Avoiding stress is impossible, but we can adjust our relationship to it. Stress doesn’t have to own us. We can own it.” –*Susan David

#### **Enhancing Emotional Agility**

Cultivating the ability to regulate emotions and be more agile is key to long-term stress management and resilience. A few ways to achieve this include building self-awareness, practicing self-compassion, and using positive self-talk.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**

* **Self-Awareness**: The first step in regulating your emotions is recognizing them. Try checking in with yourself each day and labeling your emotions—whether you’re happy, frustrated, or anxious.

**Example**: Simply acknowledging, *“I’m feeling anxious because I have a big presentation tomorrow,”* can make the anxiety easier to manage.

* **Mindfulness** is the practice of being fully present in the moment without judgment. It helps you observe your emotions rather than getting carried away by them. The next module will cover this in more detail.
* **Journaling**: Writing down your thoughts and emotions helps you process and release them. It also allows you to spot patterns in your response to stressors.
* **Self-Compassion:** Being kind to yourself during challenging times helps regulate emotions and supports resiliency. Treat yourself more like you would your best friend.
* **Positive Self-Talk:** Replacing negative, critical thoughts with positive affirmations or encouraging words can help shift you toward a more balanced emotional response.   
    
  For those who struggle with harsh internal dialogue, it can feel like a giant leap to go straight to positive affirmations. A more gradual approach might involve recognizing negative thoughts and then practicing neutral or balanced thinking. Instead of forcing overly positive statements, try shifting from critical self-talk to more compassionate, realistic thoughts.

Example: Instead of thinking, “I always mess things up,” you could reframe it to, “I’m doing my best, and it’s okay to make mistakes.”

#### **The Role of Culture in Emotional Responses**

Our unique cultural backgrounds can greatly influence how we express and respond to emotions, affecting how we handle stress.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**   
Cultural norms often shape how we handle our emotions. Some cultures might encourage open emotional expression, while others may emphasize emotional restraint. Recognizing how these norms impact your emotional responses can help you better manage stress.

**Here’s an example from Mollie at Everlast:** In some cultures, people are encouraged to remain stoic and focus on problem-solving during stressful situations, which might lead you to suppress emotions like fear or worry. Understanding this cultural influence can help you explore ways to process these emotions without feeling guilty, such as discussing them in a safe space or practicing mindfulness to acknowledge and release them privately.

#### **Barriers to Being More Agile**

Chronic stress, trauma, and ingrained habits can make it harder to regulate emotions, but there are tools to overcome these barriers.

**[EXPANDED OPTION]**   
Several common barriers can make emotional regulation and agility difficult:

* **Chronic Stress** keeps your body in a constant state of high alert, making it difficult to regulate emotions effectively.
* **Depression and Trauma** A history of trauma or living with depression can lead to heightened emotional reactivity and difficulty in processing and adapting to change. These factors may inhibit emotional agility until they are addressed.
* **Ingrained Habits**: Long-standing patterns of emotional reactions, especially if they’ve become automatic over the years, can be challenging to change, even when they're not helpful.

**Overcoming Barriers**:

We’ll explore each of these in more depth in an upcoming module, but here are some initial tools to help:

* **Therapeutic Tools**: For example, cognitive reappraisal involves changing how you think about a situation to help you manage your emotions more effectively.
* **Mindfulness Practices**: Regular mindfulness exercises can reduce stress and increase emotional awareness, making it easier to regulate your responses.
* **Social Support**: Talking to a trusted friend or therapist can provide the support you need to work through emotional challenges.

#### **Moving Forward**

This week’s module has laid the groundwork for tuning into your emotions and understanding how they relate to stress. Over the next few weeks, we’ll explore specific tools like mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR), cognitive reappraisal, and other techniques to help you build greater emotional agility and regulation.

## Module #8: Activities and Exercises

### **Activity: Recognizing Rigidity vs Agility**

**Objective:** Practice recognizing emotionally rigid vs agile responses to real-life scenarios.

**Instructions:**

* Consider each scenario described below. Review and label each response as either emotionally rigid or emotionally agile. Then, reflect on how you might respond in a similar situation. Would your response be more rigid or agile?

**Scenario #1: You’re running late for an important meeting.**

* **Response A**: "This is going to ruin everything. I always mess up like this!"
* **Response B**: "Being late is not ideal, but I can still do well in the meeting. [Deep breath.]"

**Scenario #2: A close friend cancels plans at the last minute.**

* **Response A**: "It’s okay that I feel let down, but maybe something urgent came up. I’ll check in with them and reschedule."
* **Response B:** "They always do this to me. What did I do to make them not want to spend time with me?”

**Scenario #3: You receive negative feedback on a work project.**

* **Response A**: "This is an opportunity for me to improve."
* **Response B**: "I’m clearly not good enough for this job."

**Scenario #4: Your partner expresses frustration with your behavior during an argument.**

* **Response A**: "I don’t do that—you’re overreacting!"
* **Response B**: "I’m feeling defensive right now, but I want to understand your frustration."

**Scenario #5: You get stuck in heavy traffic, making you late for an event.**

* **Response A**: "I can’t control the traffic, but I can control how I respond."
* **Response B**: "This is ridiculous! Why does this always happen to me?”

### **Activity: Emotional Agility Quiz**

**Objective:** To assess your current level of emotional agility and identify areas for improvement.

**Instructions:** Complete this series of questions or reflections designed to help you evaluate how flexible and adaptive you are in managing your emotions. (Details to be filled in later.)

### **Activity: What Are Your Emotions Trying to Tell You?**

**Objective:** Develop a deeper understanding of emotional curiosity and learn to accurately label emotions to create space between yourself and your emotions.

**Instructions:**

**Scenario:** Alex is a hard-working professional who has been feeling overwhelmed with work. After back-to-back meetings and constant emails, Alex notices they aren’t performing as well as usual. When Alex tries to focus on a big project, their mind keeps wandering. By the end of the week, Alex feels exhausted and frustrated. On Friday evening, they sit down and think, “I’m completely burned out.”

**Step 1: Notice and Name the Emotion**

* Imagine you’re Alex. Pause and ask yourself: “What is the underlying emotion here?” Instead of just saying "burned out," explore the specific emotions Alex might be feeling. Are they frustrated, drained, or apathetic?

**Step 2: Label the emotions you think Alex may be experiencing**

Experiment with different ways Alex might label these emotions using these three different phrasing techniques.

1. **"I am [emotion]."**
2. **"I feel [emotion]."**
3. **"I’m having the thought that I’m feeling [emotion]."**

**Example:**

* “I am drained and unfocused.”
* “I feel drained and unfocused.”
* “I’m having the thought that I’m feeling drained and unfocused.”
* **Reflection**:  
  Notice how each phrasing shifts your relationship to the emotion. When Alex says, “I am drained and unfocused,” the emotion feels fused with their identity. By saying “I feel drained and unfocused,” Alex acknowledges the emotion as something they are experiencing but not defined by. Finally, “I’m having the thought that I’m feeling drained and unfocused” creates even more separation, allowing Alex to see the emotion as a temporary experience.

**Step 3: Try It Yourself**

The next time you feel a strong emotion, follow these steps:

1. Notice and Name the underlying emotions with curiosity and without judgment.
2. Accurately Label the emotion using the different phrasing techniques.
3. Reflect on how this changes your relationship to the emotion and whether it creates more clarity or calm.