

Unified Protocol for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders: Workbook (2 edn)

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Countering Emotional Behaviors

Chapter: (p. 95) Countering Emotional Behaviors

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Goals



- To learn about the behaviors associated with strong emotions
- To understand how these behaviors influence emotional experiences
- To identify and counter different types of emotional behaviors

Homework Review



Did you complete your **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (and your **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotion Scales** if you've chosen to complete them) for the previous week? Have you plotted your scores on your **Progress Record**? Additionally, did you notice any negative automatic thoughts this past week? If so, were you able use the **Practicing Cognitive Flexibility Form** to generate alternative ways to interpret emotion-producing situations?

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Remember that we can get stuck in thinking ruts where we trust our (often negative) first impressions. The goal of evaluating our negative automatic thoughts is not to correct them. Instead, we want to be more flexible in allowing other, more balanced interpretations. If you have not done so, spend the next week closely monitoring and questioning your negative automatic thoughts. (p. 96)

Key Concepts



The next room on the third floor of our house provides skills to identify and evaluate emotional behaviors—the behaviors that you use to manage strong emotions (see Figure 9.1). Emotional behaviors can often be helpful (e.g., running away from a snarling stray dog when feeling fear, phrasing negative feedback carefully to prevent yourself from feeling guilty about how you handled things), but sometimes these behaviors are not consistent with the situation at hand (e.g., avoiding a meeting when you feel anxious about giving a presentation). As we discussed in Chapter 5, emotional behaviors serve to avoid uncomfortable emotions in the short term but can limit our lives in the long term. In this chapter, you will first learn to identify the behaviors you use in the context of a strong emotion. Then you will work to develop new ways to act that do not interfere with your life in the long term.

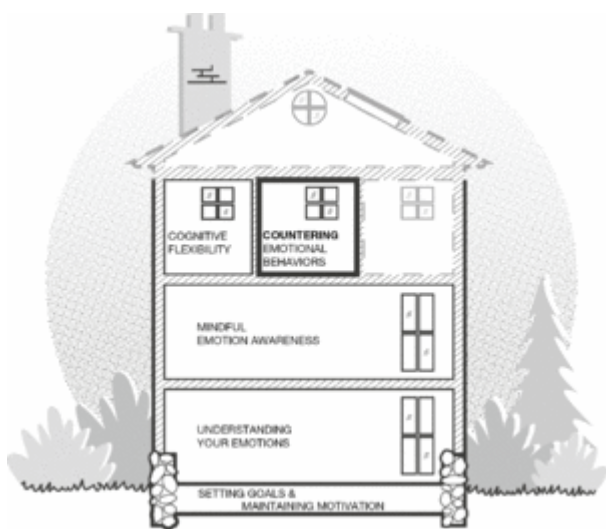


Figure 9.1

What Are Emotional Behaviors?



The term “emotional behaviors” refers to the things we *do* to manage our emotions. There are several ways our actions can be affected by our (p. 97) emotions. First, every emotion is naturally associated with specific actions that are called *emotion-driven behaviors*. In Chapter 5 we discussed how the natural behaviors linked with each emotion can be helpful. For example, sadness prompts us to withdraw to process a loss or setback. Anger motivates us to defend ourselves when we’ve been wronged. Take a moment here to remind yourself of the helpful behaviors associated with other common emotions by filling in Figure 9.2.

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Emotion	Associated Behaviors
Anxiety	
Guilt	
Happiness	
Other emotions:	

Figure 9.2
Emotion-Driven Action Tendencies

As you probably remember, anxiety helps us to prepare for important events in the future (e.g., studying for an upcoming test, saving for retirement). Guilt may prompt us to make amends after hurting another person. Happiness lets us know what we value so we can continue to pursue it. In all of these cases, emotions communicate important information about the world around us so that we can act in ways that benefit us.

However, sometimes the emotion-driven behaviors that we engage in when feeling a strong emotion are not so helpful. For example, imagine that you snap at your significant other because you had a bad day at work. We can all relate to lashing out at someone we love when we're stressed about something else, even though we know it won't solve the problem. So why do we do it? Often we act in ways that reduce distress in the short term. That is, snapping at a loved one might make you feel a little better while you're doing it—kind of like scratching an itch. This behavior might feel like a release from the tension you're feeling. But the relief is often short-lived as these behaviors can lead to long-term consequences that make you feel worse later on (e.g., more arguments with your partner, feeling guilty for lashing out).

(p. 98) Additionally, in Chapter 6, we discussed how humans' ability to think about the future can also prompt unhelpful emotional behaviors. We can imagine whether certain situations could *possibly* bring up strong emotions and change our behavior to prevent *potential* uncomfortable feelings. For example, avoiding parties might prevent you from experiencing feelings of anxiety in the short term. But, in the long term, there might be negative consequences for your relationships if you're never able to hang out with your friends. More importantly, avoiding parties sends the message that social situations *are indeed* dangerous (why else would you be avoiding them?), making it even harder to approach them in the future. Totally avoiding certain situations, events, or activities is called *overt avoidance*.

In addition to completely avoiding certain situations to prevent feeling an uncomfortable emotion altogether, we can also engage in less obvious forms of avoidance. *Subtle behavioral avoidance* refers to behaviors that prevent you from experiencing the full effect of an emotion. For example, you might go to a party but play games on your phone or have several drinks before talking to someone you don't know very well. Additionally, *cognitive avoidance* involves keeping your mind occupied to keep your attention off your emotions; this might look like surfing the Internet to distract yourself when feeling irritated in a meeting. Finally, *safety signals* are items that people carry to help them feel more comfortable in emotional situations. They can be superstitious objects like good luck charms, practical items like cell phones or water bottles, and even people we bring with us to uncomfortable places. At first glance safety signals probably don't seem like a big deal. But the problem with relying on them is that they can

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prevent you from learning that you can cope with a situation on your own. Using subtle behavioral avoidance, cognitive avoidance, or safety signals is problematic because it sends the message that you couldn't possibly cope with the full brunt of an emotional experience—keeping you stuck in the cycle of avoidance and maintaining negative beliefs about emotions.

In general, all of these categories of *unhelpful* emotional behaviors make you feel better (at least a little bit) in the short term but lead to more negative emotions in the long term. Each person may engage in unique, idiosyncratic emotional behaviors that relate to their lives. See Table 9.1 for some examples, and notice how each serves to avoid negative emotions in the short term but can increase them in the long term. (p. 99) (p. 100)

Table 9.1. Short-and Long-Term Consequences of Emotional Behaviors

Emotion-Driven Behaviors Behaviors driven by strong emotions that are designed to reduce the intensity of that emotion	
Behavior	Consequences
Leaving a situation when feeling anxious	<u>Short-term:</u> Reduction in anxiety <u>Long-term:</u> Begin avoiding more situations because they seem too anxiety-provoking, confirm to yourself that the situation is “dangerous” and continue to experience anxiety when approaching it
Lashing out at someone who made you angry	<u>Short-term:</u> Release of tension, like you “taught them a lesson” <u>Long-term:</u> Damage relationships, feeling guilty
Apologizing excessively	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel better, might get reassurance from the other person that they are not upset <u>Long-term:</u> People get frustrated with having to provide so much reassurance, confirms that you did something “bad”
Calling a relative repeatedly to check on their safety	<u>Short-term:</u> Feeling relief when you hear their voice <u>Long-term:</u> Relatives become annoyed by constant calls, you continue to feel anxious anytime you have a thought that loved ones might not be safe
Self-injurious behaviors (e.g., cutting yourself on purpose)	<u>Short-term:</u> Takes your mind off emotional pain, feel relief <u>Long-term:</u> Scars, social stigma, reinforce the belief that emotions are more dangerous than physical pain
Drinking alcohol or using substances	<u>Short-term:</u> Takes your mind off emotional pain, feel relief

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	<u>Long-term:</u> May engage in behaviors you later regret, reinforces the belief that you can't cope with emotions without taking the edge off with substances
Overt Avoidance Outright avoidance of situations, people, etc. that bring up strong emotions	
Behavior	Consequences
Not attending a party to avoid anxiety in social situations	<u>Short-term:</u> Steer clear of anxious feelings at party <u>Long-term:</u> Friends become frustrated and they invite you to fewer events, confirms to yourself that the party is "dangerous" and you continue to feel anxious and avoid parties in the future
Not taking public transportation due to fears of having a panic attack	<u>Short-term:</u> Possibly avoid having a panic attack <u>Long-term:</u> Spend money on cabs, might take a long time to get places, confirms the belief that you are unable to cope with panic attacks
Avoiding situation or places that remind you of better times	<u>Short-term:</u> Don't have to think about how you're feeling depressed now <u>Long-term:</u> Confirms the belief that thinking about the past will keep you down for a long period of time
Subtle Behavioral Avoidance Behaviors that prevent fully experiencing an emotion when outright avoidance isn't an option	
Behavior	Consequences
Texting at a party to avoid small talk	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel less awkward and anxious <u>Long-term:</u> Do not meet new people or make new friends, confirms the belief that others would judge you if you didn't "look busy"
Not drinking caffeine	<u>Short-term:</u> Prevents uncomfortable physical sensations such as racing heart <u>Long-term:</u> Limits your food and beverage options

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Wrapping yourself in a towel at the pool so no one can see your body	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel relieved that no one can see you <u>Long-term:</u> Confirms the belief that your body is something to be ashamed of
Perfectionism	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel stressed but prevents uncomfortable uncertainty about whether you're doing a good job <u>Long-term:</u> Continue to feel pressure for things to be "perfect," maintains worry that people will think less of you if you make a mistake
Restricting food intake	<u>Short-term:</u> Prevent yourself from worrying about gaining weight <u>Long-term:</u> Reinforces the belief that you have to be a certain weight, increased anxiety if you eat something "bad"
Cognitive Avoidance Anything you might do to keep your mind off something that is distressing	
Behavior	Consequences
Distraction (e.g., reading, listening to music, watching television)	<u>Short-term:</u> Keeps your mind off a difficult situation <u>Long-term:</u> Maintains the belief that you can't cope with the situation
Dissociation	<u>Short-term:</u> Avoid feelings associated with a difficult situation <u>Long-term:</u> Miss important elements of situation (e.g., questions directed at you, instructions)
Worry/Rumination	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel like you're working to solve the problem <u>Long-term:</u> Doesn't solve the problem, takes up a lot of time, actually increases negative emotions over time
Trying to push away "bad" thoughts that bring up emotions (thought suppression)	<u>Short-term:</u> Relief from not having to think about these thoughts <u>Long-term:</u> Thoughts rebound, are more intense than before, thoughts feel more dangerous than before
Safety Signals Items people carry with them that help them feel more comfortable and/or keep an emotion from becoming overwhelming	

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Behavior	Consequences
Carrying good luck charms to feel comfortable in an airplane	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel less anxious during the flight <u>Long-term:</u> Believe you can only fly with these items, refuse to get on a plane if you forget them
Carrying items like water bottles, medication, or cell phones “just in case”	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel prepared for anything <u>Long-term:</u> Your bag is really heavy, you believe you can’t function without it
Bringing a “safety person” to an uncomfortable situation	<u>Short-term:</u> Never feel bored <u>Long-term:</u> Disengage from situations that makes you appear unfriendly, don’t meet new people
Carrying self-defense items	<u>Short-term:</u> Feel prepared <u>Long-term:</u> Reinforces the idea that the world is a dangerous place and you cannot cope with it on your own

(p. 101) If Unhelpful Emotional Behaviors Have Negative Consequences, Why Do We Keep Doing Them?

As previously mentioned, unhelpful emotional behaviors provide short-term relief from distress. When a behavior makes you feel better, even just for a little while, it is reinforced. In other words, the relief you feel is a very powerful motivator to engage in that behavior again. Think of it like this: if you were in a great deal of pain and pushing a button administered pain medication that made you feel better, you’d probably keep pushing it. Reinforcement that is immediate, like feeling relief as soon as you perform an emotional behavior, is really difficult to break—even when we know that it will backfire in the long term.

When you enter a situation that brings up a strong emotion, the pull to do something that “worked” (reduced the negative emotions quickly) can be very strong. For example, if you usually leave crowded spaces when you begin to feel panicky, you’ll probably have the urge to engage in this behavior the next time this situation occurs. Although leaving makes you feel better immediately, you’re also confirming to yourself that crowds are **(p. 102)** indeed dangerous and the only reason you didn’t panic is because you left. Chances are that next time you are in a crowd you’ll feel even more anxious than before and, of course, the urge to leave. Further, continuing to avoid strong emotions keeps you stuck in a cycle where you continue to tell yourself (through your actions) that emotions are “bad,” making them more and more overwhelming each time they occur.

Let’s do an exercise that further highlights the short-term and long-term effects of avoiding our emotions.

Think about a time you were really embarrassed. Write down the situation on the following lines. What happened? What were you doing? thinking? feeling? Try to be very descriptive.

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For the next minute, hold this memory in your mind. Really focus on it.

How successful were you thinking about that memory (circle one)?

Very Somewhat A little Not at all

Now for the next minute, absolutely *do not* think about the embarrassing memory. You can think about anything else, apart from that memory.

Again, how successful were you at *not* thinking about the memory (circle one)?

Very Somewhat A little Not at all

Did you find it difficult to avoid thinking about the memory? A lot of people find that it is an almost impossible task! You may have been able to hold thoughts about the memory off for a little while, but it probably took a lot of effort trying to distract yourself (e.g., singing a song to (p. 103) yourself). Generally, when we let our guard down, the thoughts come rushing back. By telling yourself to push away a particular thought, you're basically confirming to yourself that the thought is bad and worthy of avoiding. In other words, avoiding these thoughts makes it seem like they are so terrible that there is no other way to manage them than to forcefully push them away. When something is really dangerous, it tends to draw our attention to it so we can cope—that's why suppressing thoughts makes them come up even more.

How Do You Break the Cycle of Unhelpful Emotional Behaviors?

One of the best ways to break the cycle of experiencing overwhelming strong emotions is to replace a current emotional *behavior* with a new, alternative *behavior*. For example, when you're feeling sad, you could exercise or text your friends instead of taking a nap. We refer to this skill as choosing an *Alternative Action*—that is, engaging in an action that is different to what you've done in the past when you experience strong emotions. See Table 9.2 for examples of Alternative Actions.

Table 9.2. Alternative Actions for Emotional Behaviors

Emotion	Emotional Behavior(s)	Alternative Action(s)
Fear	Escape/avoid people or places Pick fights Make threats	Stay in the situation, approach Speak calmly Give compliments

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Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Withdraw from friends Nap Avoid enjoyable activities Listen to sad music Move slowly Do not make eye contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call friends, make plans to go out Schedule activities Make plans to do something fun Listen to upbeat music Be active: walk quickly, do pushups, stretch Make direct eye contact
Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over prepare Avoid Seek reassurance Worry/ruminate Pay extra attention to physical sensations Tap feet or hands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set a time limit on how long to prepare, engage in a pleasant activity Face the situation Resist reassurance seeking by talking about something else Practice mindfulness or problem-solving (i.e., make a step-by-step list of how to solve the problem) Maintain full contact with both feet and the floor, hold your hands together in your lap
Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fight Yell Break things Clench your fists Clench your jaw Make snarky comments Vent Pace Get too close to people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take a break before responding, go for a walk Talk in an even tone Move slowly, put items down gently Relax your hands, spread out your fingers to make it impossible to hold a fist Pay a compliment Tell a funny story, consider the other person's perspective Stretch gently Take a big step backwards
Guilt/ Shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Withdraw Avoid eye contact Speak softly Ruminate Maintain hunched posture Apologize excessively Deny yourself something to make up for what you did 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact others Make eye contact Use a full voice Anchor in the present Sit/stand up straight Apologize only once (if warranted), talk about something else Engage in an enjoyable activity (text friends, eat a favorite food, listen to music, etc.)

Approaching your emotions instead of avoiding them is an important form of *Alternative Action*. By “approaching,” we mean engaging in activities that bring up the emotions you are currently avoiding. Doing so will help you gather more information about your ability to cope in a given situation. Using a previous example, if you always avoid crowds out of fear that you will have a

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panic attack, you will assume you cannot handle being in a crowd. But if you were to approach this situation, you could learn more about how well you can manage.

Over time changing how you behave can also change how you feel. As we discussed in Chapter 5, thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors interact to produce emotional experiences. Thus changing how we respond to one of those components can change the whole experience. You might have noticed this in Chapter 8 when you learned strategies for *Cognitive Flexibility*. In those examples, changing how you responded to an automatic thought might have affected your subsequent thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Let's look at an example of how changing behavior might affect an emotional experience.

If you get angry in traffic, you might yell at other drivers. As you yell, your heart rate goes up, you start to spend time thinking about how the other drivers wronged you, and you likely continue to feel angry and perhaps risk picking a fight with another driver. Further, after yelling, you might (p. 104) (p. 105) feel bad about yourself. On the other hand, if you refrain from yelling and instead sing along with the radio (an *Alternative Action*), your behavior is less likely to fuel feelings of anger. If you engage in the *Alternative Action*, you avoid the potential of an altercation with another driver and might even feel proud of yourself for how you responded to the situation.

As this example illustrates, *Alternative Actions* have different short-term and long-term consequences than emotional behaviors. In the short term, it can be difficult to perform these actions, especially if they are different from what you're used to doing. But in the long term, engaging in *Alternative Actions* can help reduce the intensity of your emotional experience and might also make you feel proud of your ability to handle difficult situations.

Now that we have discussed the rationale for engaging in *Alternative Actions*, let's review some ways you can come up with actions that work for you. *Alternative Action* doesn't always mean that you have to do something big like approaching a feared situation. It can be something as simple as sitting up straight instead of slouching.

Another important point is that *Alternative Action* requires you to *do* something. It can be tempting to decide that the opposite of a behavior is to do nothing. For example, someone might be tempted to say that instead of reassurance seeking, they just won't say anything at all. But we find is that it's really hard to go from doing *something* to doing *nothing*. It is easier to go from doing *something* to doing *something different*. So instead of trying to eliminate a behavior, we try to focus on replacing it.

Sometimes it can be really tough to think of an *Alternative Action*. If you find yourself getting stuck, it can be helpful to start by thinking of the most extreme opposite action that you can. For example, if someone's emotional behavior when feeling sad is to spend time alone—the most extreme opposite might be going to a huge concert or talking to every stranger they see. Those behaviors might not be feasible. But then the individual can start scaling back to get to an *Alternative Action* that works for them. Perhaps they talk to two strangers, or call a friend and suggest that they do something together. Thinking of the most extreme opposite can help you start the brainstorming process.

At this point, it might be helpful to identify some of your typical emotional behaviors and work on developing alternative behaviors. You can use the **List of Emotional Behaviors Form** at the end of this chapter to note emotional behaviors that you use in your life. It's okay if you have trouble (p. 106) identifying all of them at this point—this form is for brainstorming. Next use the **Countering Emotional Behaviors Form** at the end of the chapter to come up with *Alternative Actions* for the emotional behaviors that you identified. You can keep working on this

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throughout the week. But, for right now, just note some of the behaviors you would like to change as part of your treatment, and then develop some clear *Alternative Actions* that you believe will be more helpful to you in the long term. Examples of completed versions of both of these forms can be seen in Appendix B (on pp. 175–178).

Treatment Goal Check-In

Use the space to below to reflect on how using *Countering Emotional Behaviors* can bring you closer to the goals you set in Chapter 4. Also note any progress you've made toward your goals.

Summary



In this chapter, we discussed emotional behaviors—actions that we take to manage strong emotions. Emotional behaviors can be used to quickly reduce the intensity of an emotional experience (emotion-driven behaviors) or to prevent feelings of distress (overt avoidance, subtle behavioral avoidance, cognitive avoidance, and safety signals). These strategies often lessen distress in the short term but tend to make things worse in the long term (e.g., avoiding a meeting where you have to give a presentation might make you feel relieved in the moment but get you in trouble with your boss later). However, because they bring down distress (even if just for a moment), we are likely to keep engaging in these behaviors the next time we encounter an uncomfortable emotion. Further, using emotional behaviors perpetuates the idea that we cannot handle a given situation, making us likely to rely on them again in the future. We also discussed changing unhelpful emotional behaviors by engaging in *Alternative Actions* such as engaging with (p. 107) and experiencing an emotion you usually avoid, which can help break this cycle by changing the intensity of your emotion. It can also increase your confidence that you can handle experiencing the situation/emotion.

Homework



- Begin identifying the emotional behaviors that apply to you using the **List of Emotional Behaviors Form**.
- Use the **Countering Emotional Behaviors Form** to start considering new behavioral responses to your strong emotions. If you would like more space to practice this skill, consider making photocopies of this form or downloading it from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets.
- Continue monitoring your weekly experiences using the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as the **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**, if you're using them).
- Remember to use the **Progress Record** to record the total scores from the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**).

Self-Assessment Quiz



Answer each of the following by circling true (T) or false (F). Answers can be found in Appendix A.

1. Every emotion has emotional behaviors associated with it.
T F

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2. All emotional behaviors are bad.

T F

3. Examples of emotional behaviors include outright avoidance, subtle behavioral avoidance, cognitive avoidance, and emotion-driven behaviors.

T F

4. One way to counter emotional behaviors is to approach situations you usually avoid.

T F

(p. 108)

(p. 109)

(p. 110)