



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

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Understanding Your Emotions—What Is an Emotion?

Chapter: (p. 41) Understanding Your Emotions—What Is an Emotion?

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Goals



- To learn how emotions are necessary and helpful
- To break emotions down into more manageable parts

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 last week? Did you plot your total scores on the **Progress Record**? If so, these records will help you track the gains you're making in treatment. If not, it might be helpful to reread Chapter 3 to remind you why

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record-keeping is so important. Perhaps you can brainstorm ways to make record-keeping a priority while you are going through this program.

Key Concepts



Given that the overall goal of this treatment is to better tolerate your emotions so you can respond to them more effectively when they come up, the ground floor of the house (covered in Chapters 5 and 6) involves gaining a better understanding of your emotions (see Figure 5.1). In this chapter, you will learn the important ways that emotions can be helpful in your day-to-day life and why you wouldn't actually want to get rid of all "bad" feelings. We will also begin to break emotions down into more manageable parts so that they feel less overwhelming. (p. 42)



Figure 5.1

Why Are We Focusing on Emotions?



As we discussed in Chapter 1, a person may have an emotional disorder when her emotions are so overwhelming that they interfere with her ability to live the life she wants to lead. People with emotional disorders tend to view their emotions negatively ("this is so uncomfortable," "it is bad to feel this way") and, as a result, try to avoid them. In fact, people often seek treatment to get rid of uncomfortable emotions like anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, or guilt. These emotions can occur in people with anxiety disorders (e.g., panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder), depressive disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, and others. Unfortunately, pushing away emotions doesn't work very well. The more energy you spend trying to suppress or avoid emotions, the less you can focus on things in your life that are important to you and the less you can move forward—making you feel worse in the long term.

Instead of getting rid of negative emotions, the goal of this treatment is to help you respond differently when they come up. In the next two chapters, we will teach you to listen to your emotions because their fundamental (p. 43) purpose is to communicate important information about the world around you. We will also help you understand how your emotions can go from providing this useful input to feeling totally overwhelming. We'll do this by breaking emotions down into more manageable parts—into thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. Then, in

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later chapters, we'll zero in on each of these three parts, providing you with specific ways to make changes to your emotional response.

Why Do We Have Emotions?



Imagine what it would be like if we had no emotions. How would we know if our lives were suddenly in danger without a sense of fear? How would we know to stand up for ourselves without a sense of anger? Even though these emotions may feel “bad” or “dangerous,” they actually tell us important information about our situation. They also motivate us to take action in ways that keep us safe or help us move forward with our goals. Let's take a closer look at how our emotions, even the uncomfortable ones, are necessary and helpful.

Fear

Fear is nature's alarm system. It lets us know that we might be in danger and that we need to take steps to protect ourselves. For example, imagine you are crossing the street when you notice that a car is coming straight at you. This situation would instantly prompt fear for pretty much everyone. The feeling would be associated with physical sensations that prepare the body to flee such an unsafe situation, like an increased heart rate to pump blood to the arms and legs and pupils dilating to scan for danger. Fear also provides a sense of urgency to act—often without thinking. In this situation, you would likely jump out of the way onto the sidewalk. If you felt nothing, you might continue to walk leisurely across the street, possibly being run over. So, as you can see here, the uncomfortable emotion of fear actually plays an important role in keeping us safe.

Sadness

Sadness is the emotion that naturally occurs after a loss or setback related to something or someone that is important to us, such as a death of a loved one, a break-up, or losing a job we enjoyed. This emotion is also really common when we notice significant differences between the way (p. 44) our life is and how we want it to be. For instance, we might feel sad about a job because we find ourselves not progressing like we had hoped, or we feel sad because we are experiencing struggles in a relationship that we really care about. Sadness is associated with physical sensations like heaviness in the body and feeling tired. Sadness signals the need to pull back so that the loss or setback can be processed. For example, feeling sad after a break-up lets you know that the relationship (or aspects of that relationship) was important to you. Withdrawing to process what went wrong and what characteristics you want to look for in a new relationship may help you find greater success with a future partner. This information would be lost if you jumped immediately into a new relationship because you wanted to avoid feeling any sadness. This emotion also signals to others that we may need support and comfort. Humans are social animals, which means we sometimes need help to get back on our feet. Expressing sadness naturally draws others toward us. So, here again, a seemingly “bad” emotion of sadness serves an important function in our lives.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the emotion that helps us prepare for the future. Anxiety alerts us to important or potentially dangerous situations that might occur. This emotion also prompts us to focus our attention on whatever is causing the anxiety so that we can prevent or decrease a negative outcome (or “threat”). For example, feeling anxiety before a big presentation at work or school lets you know that this task is important. It also prompts you to begin preparing so that you're not caught off guard. Imagine if you didn't feel anything as the day of this presentation approached. You probably wouldn't feel motivated to practice and might not be prepared for

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difficult questions from the audience. Yet again, we see an uncomfortable emotion that serves a very clear purpose in our lives.

Anger

Anger is the natural response when we feel we (or people we care about) have been wronged in some way. Anger (and the similar emotion of frustration) also occurs when we feel like we are being blocked from achieving important goals. This emotion alerts us that our boundaries have been crossed and motivates us to do something about it. For example, imagine you discover that your phone company has been charging you hidden fees for months and expects you to pay them right away or they'll shut off your service. Feeling anger in this situation lets you know that something (p. 45) unfair has happened—you shouldn't be expected to pay for services you didn't use. This anger would also probably prompt you to speak to a customer service manager to demand that the charges be reversed. Here the emotion of anger also signals to the other person that they have frustrated or wronged you. Anger has a bad reputation because it can be associated with destructive behavior like yelling and breaking things. It is important to separate this possible response to anger from the experience of the emotion itself. It is very important to pay attention to anger when it occurs because it signals to you that you may need to defend yourself.

Guilt/Shame

Guilt and shame occur when we fall short of some standard. Specifically, guilt is the natural response when we go against society's expectations in some way. For example, you might feel guilty if you forget to pay your friend back after borrowing money. Guilt in this situation would likely prompt you to make amends by apologizing and getting your friend the cash. Shame occurs when we fail to achieve a personal standard and feel "lesser in value." For instance, being *unable* to pay a friend back because you don't have any money may trigger feelings of shame. Shame, similar to sadness, prompts withdrawal from others. This withdrawal may give a person room to think about how they might achieve their goals going forward to feel better about themselves in the future. In both cases, these emotions motivate helpful behavior. Guilt helps people maintain important relationships by apologizing, and shame helps people achieve their goals by prompting hard work.

Note

*A note about shame and abuse: Very often, people who have experienced abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) feel ongoing shame long after the abuse has ended. Even though abuse is **never** the fault of the victim, people often report feeling shame while the abuse is happening. This is because shame can communicate submission to the abuser through body language (tears, head down). Submission in the moment of abuse may serve a protective role as it might prevent the abuser from hurting the person more. For example, if a person refrains from fighting back while being beaten, the abuse may stop sooner. Unfortunately, the feelings of shame can last much longer than is helpful. As we work through this treatment, we will identify ways that shame (and other emotions) are maintained in situations where they are not warranted and work to change these responses.*

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(p. 46) Positive Emotions

Positive emotions, like happiness, excitement, and pride, also communicate important information. Positive emotions help us identify what we value in life and how we want to be spending our time. For example, if you pick up a new hobby that brings you a lot of joy, what are you likely to do? Keep doing it! Sometimes people try to avoid positive emotions because they're afraid that once the emotion ends they'll feel even worse than they did before. Or they'll prevent themselves from getting excited because they worry that if things don't work out, they'll feel more disappointed than if they hadn't gotten excited in the first place. Sometimes people with depression avoid positive experiences like socializing because they find it distressing that they don't enjoy these experiences as much as they used to. Without positive emotions, though, we wouldn't know what direction to go in our lives. It is important to allow ourselves to feel the full range of emotions, negative and positive.

Summarizing the Importance of Emotions

As you can see from these examples, emotions serve a necessary role in our lives. All of these emotions communicate very important information about the world around us and motivate us to act. Without them, we'd be unable to move successfully through life. In fact, we evolved to have emotions because they're so important for the survival of our species. Emotions are hardwired into us—even if we wanted to, we'd be unable to push them away completely. That's why this treatment focuses on accepting emotions and responding in more helpful ways when they come up.

You may be saying to yourself: "I can see how fear can be adaptive, but what about the fear I seem to feel for no reason when I have a panic attack?" Or maybe you're thinking: "Anxiety might be useful to some people, but I can't turn it off—I feel it all the time!" You might also be wondering: "How does normal sadness in response to a loss turn into feeling so depressed you can't get out of bed?" Even though we know that all of these emotions are important in the normal course of everyone's life, sometimes they can come up in the wrong situations and they can feel too intense to be productive.

So how do our emotions go from something useful to something overwhelming? The short answer is in the way that we respond to them. In order to begin to explore how this process unfolds, let's first break down what happens when we feel a strong emotion.

(p. 47) What Is an Emotion?



What exactly *is* an emotional experience? You may feel like your emotions are a big "cloud" of intense feelings. This may make it difficult to identify what useful information your emotions are trying to tell you. One way to make something feel less overwhelming is to break it down into its main parts. Every emotional experience can actually be broken down into three components—what we think, how we physically feel, and what we do. By paying attention to each of these parts, your emotions may begin to feel a bit less overwhelming.

The three components of emotional experiences are:

- 1. Cognitive (What You Think):** Your thinking in any given situation can really color how you feel about it. For example, if you tell yourself that you're going to lose your job, you'll probably begin to feel anxious. Or if you tell yourself that you don't deserve to be in a loving relationship, you might feel ashamed or sad. The relationship between thoughts and emotions goes the other way, too. For example, when you feel sad, you're more likely to have thoughts about the situation being hopeless, or being inadequate ("I always mess

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everything up”). In contrast, if you’re feeling pride, you may have thoughts about how capable you are (“I know I can do this!”). To begin to see how thoughts are important in any emotional experience, try to remember what you were thinking the last time you felt the emotions listed in the following spaces:

What were some of the thoughts going through your head the last time you felt anxious?

What about the last time you felt angry?

What about the last time you felt guilty?

2. Physiological (How You Feel): Every emotion is associated with a physiological response. In other words, your body goes through physical changes every time you experience an emotion. For example, fear is often accompanied by a faster heart rate, a tensing of the muscles, (p. 48) and maybe even shortness of breath. Remember, fear’s job is to protect you from danger, and these physiological changes are the body’s way of getting ready to take action. Anxiety may be accompanied by sweaty palms, muscle tension, or perhaps a knot in the stomach. These changes alert us that something important is looming and that we should prepare. Sadness may be accompanied by a sensation of extreme tiredness and heaviness in the limbs, prompting us to withdraw to process. See if you can identify the physiological sensations that might accompany the following states:

What physical sensations come with feeling excited?

What about when experiencing panic?

What sensations come with anger?

What about when you are feeling embarrassed?

3. Behavioral (What You Do): Whenever you feel an emotion, it is accompanied by the urge to act. We discussed some of the ways these behavioral urges can be helpful (e.g., jumping out of the way of an oncoming car in response to fear, standing up for yourself in response to anger). Sometimes, however, the things we do in response to strong emotions may not seem very useful. For example, someone who is extremely sad may watch television because the thought of getting out and “confronting” the day is too overwhelming. Or someone who is anxious in social settings may quickly leave a crowded party where they are expected to interact. Someone who is feeling guilty may completely avoid a loved one rather than face the interaction. Next, begin thinking about what you do (or feel like doing) in response to the following emotions:

What do you do (or feel like doing) when you’re sad?

(p. 49) What do you do (or feel like doing) when you’re angry?

What do you do (or feel like doing) when you’re ashamed or embarrassed?

These three components—thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors—can be found any time we experience an emotion. Sometimes one component may be easier to identify. For example, you may be very aware of physical sensations in a given situation but less aware of your behaviors or thoughts. In contrast, you might notice your thoughts more easily but be less aware

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of physical sensations and behaviors. It is important to take note of all three parts of an emotion because they can feed off each other.

We use the **Three-Component Model of Emotions Form** to break down any given emotional experience into each of these three parts. See Appendix B (pp. 168–169) for two examples of how to use this form. In the first example, a man is hurrying to catch the bus. As he reaches the bus stop, he first notices that his breathing is heavy, his heart rate has increased, and he’s feeling a bit dizzy. Next he notices thoughts about these physical sensations: “This is so uncomfortable! I’m going to have a panic attack if I get on this crowded bus.” These thoughts lead to even more intense physical sensations because when we tell ourselves something scary is going to happen (like having a panic attack), our bodies prepare for action. His increased anxiety leads to even more thoughts: “See, I *am* going to have a panic attack.” Then this man decides to walk to work instead of taking the bus—his behavior in this situation is to avoid the bus. As soon as he starts walking, he notices that his heart rate and breathing are starting to slow down and his worry thoughts are fading away. This strategy may have worked for him in the short term, but the next time he approaches the bus, he is likely to have similar worries about having a panic attack and may be more reluctant to ride the bus as a result.

In the second example, a woman received a text from a friend cancelling their upcoming dinner plans. In this case, thoughts are initially the most noticeable part of the emotion. The woman thinks to herself: “Of course she doesn’t want to hang out with me, I’m so lame.” Next, she begins to notice a lump in her throat and then observes she is starting to feel really tired. This leads to another thought: “I might as well go to bed early, since (p. 50) I have nothing better to do.” Similar to avoiding the bus in the first example, going to sleep leads to an immediate decrease in negative thoughts and uncomfortable physical sensations. This relief is short-lived, though, as sleeping too much has been linked to increased levels of depression.

Paying attention to this process is the first step in understanding how the experience of an emotion can go from informative to overwhelming. We would like you to use the **Three-Component Model of Emotions Form** at the end of this chapter any time you are feeling a strong emotion over the next week (at least once a day, if possible), taking note of what you’re thinking, feeling in your body, and doing (or feel like doing).

Sometimes the emotions you want to work on with this program do not come up very often for you. This may occur because you’re actively avoiding activities that provoke these feelings. Or you simply might not come across situations that bring on these emotions regularly (e.g., flying in an airplane). It may be helpful to think about the activities you can do this week to get some experience with the emotion(s) you’re working on; this will allow you to practice the skill discussed in this chapter. You might look to the steps you wrote down (refer back to Chapter 4 if needed) that were associated with your goals for some ideas.

Summary



In this chapter, we have discussed how all emotions, even the ones we traditionally think of as “bad,” play an important role in our lives. They prompt us to pay attention to a given situation and can motivate us to take action in helpful ways. We also saw how emotional experiences can be broken down into three main parts—thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. By breaking emotions down into these parts, they may feel less overwhelming. In the next chapter, we continue to discuss how emotional experiences unfold and also discuss the consequences to our responses.



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Homework

- Complete the **Three-Component Model Form** once a day over the course of this week. Select at least one emotional experience that occurs each day and break it down into thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. You may want to make photocopies of the (p. 51) form so that you have a fresh copy to write on each day, or you may download additional copies from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets. This form will help you understand what exactly is happening each time you have an emotion, making it feel less overwhelming.
- 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. The goal of this treatment is to eliminate uncomfortable emotions like fear, anxiety, and sadness.
T F
2. All emotions, even ones we consider “negative,” serve an important role in our lives.
T F
3. Anxiety is never helpful or useful.
T F
4. Emotional experiences are made up of three main parts: what you think, what you feel, and what you do.
T F

(p. 52)