

Overview

Emotion Regulation is the module in which we learn to understand how our emotions work, and the skills we need to manage our emotions instead of being managed by them, to reduce how vulnerable we are to negative emotions, and to build positive emotional experiences.

Perhaps more than in the other three modules, the skills in Emotion Regulation build on each other. As we learn each little piece, and practice it, we are putting another building block in the structure of our own Emotion Regulation, learning little by little how to handle negative emotions and how to build positive ones.

As you learn each new skill or awareness in your life, congratulate yourself. You are doing probably the hardest work you will ever do, and the outcome of all the struggle and practice will be worth it. Things will get very much easier, and your emotional life will be more comfortable.

The first thing to realize is that no one is telling us that our negative emotions are bad, or not important, or to get rid of them. Everyone has negative emotions. It is part of life. Those of us who have been through painful or traumatizing experiences may have very intense negative emotions. We want to validate these emotions, have them recognized and

believed, accept them as real and meaningful.

What the module on Emotion Regulation intends to teach us is how to understand our emotions and how they get that way, how we are or become more vulnerable to those emotions and what we can do about it, and some techniques for building positive emotions into our lives.

What is Emotion Regulation?

I am going to talk a little about what we mean by Emotion Regulation and the goals of Emotion Regulation training in DBT, and then we will begin to talk about a model for understanding our emotions.

Our emotions can frequently be very intense and labile, which means they change often. Our emotions often drive our behavior. A lot of our behavior focuses around finding ways to get our emotions validated or to get rid of the pain in some way.

Because of this, learning to regulate emotions is a central part of DBT. This does not mean that the emotions are invalid, and it does not mean that we are trying to get rid of them. They are valid and important. But because our emotions cause us so much pain and often keep us feeling out of control, we are going to first learn some things about our emotions and where they come from, and then we will learn some techniques about managing our emotions, reducing our vulnerability to negative emotions, learning to experience some positive emotions, and learning to reduce our emotional suffering.

Primary and Secondary Emotions

There are primary and secondary emotions. The secondary emotion is the one that follows the primary or first emotion, for example, feeling shame because you got angry. Anger is the primary emotion, and shame is the secondary emotion. A person can get angry for being angry, or depressed for being depressed, or angry for feeling fear. In these three cases, anger, depression and anger are the secondary emotions.

It's really important to be able to tell which emotions are the primary emotions and which are the secondary emotions.

Neither the primary nor the secondary emotions are good or bad, but to get back to the original problem and work on solving it, it is necessary usually to deal with the primary emotions.

Try to think of a situation where you experienced a primary and then a secondary emotion. For example: A close relative died. I first feel grief. That is my primary emotion. Then I feel ashamed because I feel so sad. Shame is the secondary emotion.

This can be hard, because the switch often happens very fast. If you feel an emotion, look at your emotion and see if there is a primary emotion behind it. We will come back to this later.

Exercises

There are two Kinds of emotional experiences

- Reactions to events in one's environment
(being criticized, having a loved one call on the phone, losing a game, etc.)
- Inner reactions, primarily reactions to one's own thoughts
(guilt about feeling angry, shame about not doing well at something, fear about something anticipated or thought about)

How have emotions acted in your lives? Helpful? Hurtful?