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The Process of Emotional Regulation

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Abstract

Emotional regulation is a developmental skill that everyone must learn. It is the ability for you to tune into, make sense of and control your own strong feelings. It affectively influences how well you can adapt to situations and events in your life, as well as how you navigate and adapt to the world. A lack of healthy emotional regulation can lead one to become dysregulated. Two important phenomenon underpin our ability to regulate: emotional complexity and splitting. The more acknowledgment and understanding that we give to our emotions (not just the thoughts in our mind but the feelings in our better), the more control and problem solving skills we can harness to sustain a good standard of personal well-being.

Keywords: emotional, regulation, dysregulation, process, mind, body

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the process of emotional regulation:

- What is it?
- How does this impact us in different areas of our lives?
- How can we encourage the development of healthy emotional regulation?
- How do we know when we have gotten it right!?

We also want to encourage others to explore:

- What happens when difficulties with emotional regulation emerge?
- How do we re-regulate the body and mind?

Hopefully this chapter will answer these questions providing you with an overview of what is involved in the process of emotional regulation – so let us get started!

2. What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is a phrase that doctors, psychologists, and even teachers and parents are using more and more. However even though it is something that

everyone is talking about, lots of people are confused in regard to what emotional regulation actually is.

From our perspective, emotional regulation is all about recognising, understanding, influencing, controlling and experiencing and expressing emotions. Researchers such as Fresco, Mennin, Heimberg and Ritter [1] have carried out research to the same effect, defining emotional regulation in a similar way. Other researchers have explained that emotional regulation can at times be unconscious, or conscious. That means that sometimes we are aware of what we are feeling, and sometimes we are not. Oftentimes, we can influence which emotions we have, when we have them, to what degree they are felt and how they are expressed [2]. However, sometimes we lose control of our emotions and we become what scientists call “dysregulated”. When this happens, individuals are typically less able to understand, influence and control their emotions.

Emotions in themselves indicate how we feel about what is going on around us. They have a functional purpose; to notify us to the relevance of our concerns, to highlight to us what we consider to be important, what our needs and wants are in a given moment, and to help us navigate the world. Emotions exist on a spectrum for everyone; we all feel certain emotions to varying degrees, at different times. In other words, we can have a little or a lot of an emotion at any given time. The importance of developing an ability to internally regulate our emotional state has been well documented in scientific research. Emotional regulation is not just the process of acknowledging our feelings, but also understanding them to control them. This process of feeling, understanding and controlling our emotional state involves both the body and the mind, the physical state and our thought processes. Once an individual develops an understanding of what they are feelings, what thoughts they have and the possible triggers for these thoughts the feelings, then they can begin the process of self-regulation; the ability to regulate oneself and alter one's own responses [2]. There is a positive relationship between how competent a person is regulating their emotional state, and how well they can adapt to both minor and major events in life. Those who are able to successfully tune into how they are feeling have a better change in being able to calm themselves down. Similarly, when a person understands the triggers for a particular emotion, then they will be better able to respond in a helpful manner. Let us look at this in a real life example.

A woman walks down the road, let us call her Alice. Alice sees a large dog coming towards her and she begins to feel anxiety and panic setting in. She feels her heart rate increase and the blood rush to her face. She thinks “I’m feeling anxious because I was bitten by a dog last year on holidays, it is still affecting me”. Alice is able to rationalise her feelings in this moment. She successfully identifies how she is feeling and she links this feeling to a triggering experience. Alice then tells herself “That dog on holidays was an angry dog, and it was unusual that he bit a stranger. The dog in front of me now looks kind, and he is out walking on a lead with its owner. It’s unlikely that he is going to bite me”. Alice takes several deep breaths and says to herself over and over again “I’m going to be okay, just keep walking”. Alice uses deep breathing to control her feelings of anxiety, thus linking her body and her mind. Her heartbeat drops, and she responds in a way which is helpful – she passes the dog. This demonstrates the process of recognising, understanding, influencing, controlling, experiencing and expressing emotions. Alice successfully engaged in emotional regulation – going through each stage of the process.

On the other hand, unhealthy emotional regulation patterns also exist. Unfortunately, when unhealthy emotional regulation develops – sometimes called dysregulation, it can negatively impact a person. It can impact how people interact with others, how they connect with others on a deep or intimate level, and it can also impact performance at work or other areas in a person's life. In other words,

the ability to regulate your own emotions is crucial to having effective and flexible responses, which influences how you deal with challenging situations in life [3].

Another concept in the area of emotional regulation is the idea of emotional complexity i.e. the co-occurrence of both positive and negative emotions simultaneously in the one individual [4]. This makes the topic of emotional regulation even more interesting (and complicated!) because people can have conflicting emotional states at the same time. People often have an easy time separating the good from the bad to divide them up, when actually they can exist together. For example, you could have a long-term relationship with someone who cares about you greatly; you have a nice time together, you have great memories and you have come to live together in a comfortable and safe home. But, this person also drove your car to work one morning and left a dent on the side of it. Healthy emotional regulation would look like someone who realises: it was probably a mistake, it is easily fixed and I do not believe that they meant to do it. Unhealthy patterns of emotional regulation now see this person as an inconvenience, that they care less about you and your belongings and that they do not care about stressing you out. Unhealthy patterns of emotional regulation can lead us to put certain things on pedestals and not others – without every questioning it. The reality is, good people can sometimes do “bad” things, and bad people may also sometimes do “good” things.

Emotional intensity also plays a role in the evaluation of one’s ability to regulate themselves. The intensity of your emotions relates to how you perceive your own emotions. Do not forget – the consequence must match the crime. Poor emotional regulation will have you feeling overly stressed about minor things, viewing small blips as massive problems and internalising stressful situations as more tiresome and threatening than they actually are. That’s the thing about seeing things as they “actually are” – the lens which we look at life through is very much based on what we believe to be true, as conscious and independently thinking as human beings are, we do not always challenge these thoughts i.e. not all of your thoughts are true! Of course, at times, emotional intensity can be helpful to us; it gives us information about how we really feel about certain things. For example, if you felt more intense sadness at the passing of someone close to you, it is likely that you care deeply about this person and perhaps love them. Intense feelings give us a lot of information and it is our job to sieve through this information.

3. How does this impact us in different areas of our lives?

Having well developed or poorly developed emotional regulation skills can impact us in almost every area of our lives. As we all grow, to survive and function well in the world, we have to continue to progress with our own independence skills, otherwise referred to as our day-to-day adaptive skills. These skills include many different domains: communication skills, community use, leisure and social skills, healthy and safety, self-care and self-direction skills, and our work lives. As we list them, it can sound overwhelming, that we must continue to progress in all these areas of life all the time – but the thing is, it’s a gradual process, like taking things step by step. Healthy emotional regulation will allow us to continue to make progress where we need to.

Alongside the development of emotional regulation skills comes emotional literacy; the actual naming of the emotions that exist for us. Emotional literacy is like letter or word literacy – it is a way of reading and understanding emotions in one’s self and in others. Without it people struggle to understand what emotions they are having themselves and what other people are feeling. If difficulties in this area emerge, they will have a negative knock on effect on social interactions, which

in turn will negatively impact relationships. On the flip side, developing good emotional literacy will enable positive social interactions and healthy relationships.

Adults who generally describe their emotional states in clusters (e.g. feeling angry and frustrated) are said to have lower differentiation. Differentiation is the idea that we are precise and accurate when it comes to acknowledging, and describing, our own feelings. If we were to look at differentiation a different way: let's say our degrees of differentiation are not very broad i.e. we describe the majority of our lives events and situations using the words "happy", "sad" and "annoying" – the more vague the differentiation and the more general our labels, the less information it actually gives us, or anyone else for that matter. To make positive changes to your emotional state, you first have to know what you are dealing with. Individuals with high emotional differentiation may then describe their emotions in a more precise manner as a result (e.g. feeling rejection, disappointed and irritated) [4]. The level of differentiation that individuals have, reflects the degree to which they have the ability to distinguish different emotions from one another by being able to slot them into finer categories that is relevant to the experience at the time. As we know, knowledge is power, so the more precise we can be, the more ownership we can feel over controlling and altering how we feel. The more we understand our emotions, the better able we are to manage their manifestations, both mentally and physically. This understanding can then lead to better, more efficient communication when relaying how we feel to others.

Recognising & Acknowledging → Accurate Labelling → Understanding → Managing.

As the vocabulary surrounding one's emotions increases, the labelling process becomes clearer. This first step however is based on the idea that an individual is honest and frank about they feel. Throughout a lifetime, many will be aware (or not so aware) of the idea of suppressing emotions. Suppressing emotions often occurs when people cognitively suppress them i.e. "*I just won't think about it and it will go away*". What most often do not realise, is that feelings exist in our bodies just as much as they do in our brains. Suppressing an emotion is as helpful as pushing a light plastic ball underwater – it will continue to spring back up to the surface, usually where you do not expect it. By turning off our brain power to our emotions, we only scratch the surface, giving credit to the old saying "*feeling the feels*". Therefore, the fundamental key to emotional regulation is **getting out of the mind and into the body**.

4. How can one facilitate its growth?

All feelings live in our bodies and our minds – but everyone keeps them in different places though. Some people might keep strong feelings like sadness or disappointment in their heart, others might keep sadness in their throat or stomach. Some people keep anger in their heads or in their hands. It is different for everyone, and feelings can also move around in our body. If this sounds like a foreign concept, then it is best to first *tune in*. The purpose of tuning in is to first learn where your feelings manifest physically. By doing so, you can then pinpoint tailored strategies to help soothe them and relieve yourself from negative repercussions. The key to tuning in? Mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the act of being mindful; to be present in the here and now, to use our sense to attune to our surroundings, and to feel grounded to exactly where we are. This subtle practise can look differently to different people. For example, some might like to do grounding exercises like the 5-4-3-2-1, or a relaxing body scan, others might prefer to do mindful eating with sweet or sour foods. Mindfulness is not such an alien concept as those who have not tried it yet may think. Those who read

in silence, enjoy listening to rain on the window, take part in yoga or daily stretches all are enjoying a real-life example of mindfulness. One of the least complex strategies is deep breathing. This exercise is all about taking some time to breathe in slowly into your stomach, breathe in for 7 seconds, hold for 2 seconds and breathe out for 11 seconds. As the saying goes, “*in for 7 and out for 11*”. An example of a script to carry out a body scan exercise is below:

1. Take a seat or lie down on your back: let your legs relax and your arms fall to your sides. Settle yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to be still.
2. Let us begin by taking three large breaths, in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Notice how your chest expands and contracts with every breath.
3. Now we feel relax, we are going to start to pay attention to other parts of the body. Let us go right to the bottom and start with your feet. They might feel warm or cold, restless, or calm, wet, or dry. Try your best to relax your feet now. If you are finding it hard to do, that is okay too.
4. Allow yourself to be still. At this very moment, there is nothing to do. Try to pay attention as best you can. If you find that is hard to do, just keep coming back to how your breathing feels.
5. Move your attention to your lower legs. How are they feeling? Heavy, light, restless, or calm? Do your best to give yourself a few moments of rest.
6. Start to move your attention up to your upper legs. Whatever you feel there, or do not feel, is fine. Just try your best to let them relax. If you feel wriggly, that's okay, that happens.
7. Now move your attention to your stomach. It will always rise and fall as you breathe, like waves on the sea. You might feel something inside like hungry or full. You might even feel some emotion there too, like nervousness, sadness, excitement, or happiness.
8. Move your attention to your chest. Keep focusing on how it feels to take nice, deep breaths. Notice how your chest will rise and fall with every breath. If it is hard to maintain focus, that is okay. Just notice how your breath feels in this moment.
9. Now bring your attention to your hands. There is no need to move them anywhere else right now. They might be resting on the floor, chair, or on your lap, stomach, or chest. Try relaxing them. Let your fingers go.
10. Bring your attention to your arms. Are they feeling heavy? Let go of any tension that is being held by your arms and let them feel calm, loose, and light.
11. Next, move your attention around to your back. Let it relax and sink into the chair or floor as much as possible. If you are finding it hard to focus, that's okay. Just bring your attention back to your breath.
12. Move your attention to your neck and shoulders. Let your shoulders drop and release any tension that is being held in your neck.

13. Now, move your attention to your face and head. Unclench your jaw if it feels tense. Relax your eyebrows. Allow your eyes to feel light. Whenever you feel yourself thinking about something else, just return to your body and breath.
14. Finally, spend the next few moments paying attention to your entire bod. How does it feel? If it's easier, continue to pay attention to your breath. If it is time to wake up, gently open your eyes and sit for a few moments before deciding its time to move again.

It is important to remember that no matter what comes out from any of the above exercises, it is crucial to accept whatever that may be. The aim is to reach a stage in which you can understand your own emotions in order to control them, not to eliminate difficult feelings altogether. All feelings are normal, and not all feelings need to be acted on. If you find yourself saying you *should* or *should not* feel a certain way – then it might be important to rephrase your narrative to *this is how I feel, how can I help?* Being honest about how you feel will allow you to tune into your own thought patterns; where does your mind drift off to when you allow it? Gently ask yourself, are these negative thoughts helpful? Do I give enough airtime to my positive thoughts? And **are all these thoughts true?**

5. What does healthy emotional regulation look like?

On the ladder of emotional regulation, acceptance of the emotional experience is step one. Acknowledge the feelings that are occurring. Less acceptance in the present moment can lead to less clarity about the nature of their current well-being, the situation that is occurring around them and the degree to which the individual can cope with it. By not fully understanding what is occurring emotionally, individuals will therefore feel less empowered to have any perceived control over the situation at all, let alone feel as though they can alter how the emotional experience plays out. There is motivational information to be found among our emotions. Our emotions often show us what is important to us, how we feel about ourselves and others and what we care about. For example, if we go to a new place that we have never been, and our gut feeling leaves us unsure if we would like to stay or not, what we could actually be feeling is fear, lack of security and discomfort. Our inner emotions guide us to that realisation.

There are two strategies that can help us emotionally regulate: preventative, and responsive strategies. A preventative strategy is when we try to modify what type of emotion we will experience and how much of it will occur **before** the onset of the emotion. We implement this by deciding who and what we give our energy to. Lending energy to situations that are not helpful to our well-being is literally handing over our brain power to that very thing. It is often helpful to take a step back and observe all facts in a situation before we react, without absorbing.

6. Observe, not absorb

Responsive strategies are used when a trigger has occurred and the emotion has already kicked in. They are used after the fact – to help tone down the intensity of the emotion, curtail its manifestations or to eliminate it entirely [2]. The healthiest type of emotional regulation is the honest kind. As a society, we often feel we need to conform to how emotions should look i.e. “display rules”. This is the idea that we feel one thing internally, and display something entirely different externally; either

a different emotion entirely that does not match, or an impaired version of how we feel as to behave and appear at a “socially acceptable” level of that emotion. For example, it may be socially accepted and welcomed that we are visibly very happy while out in public, in fact, this can be contagious for others, but it may not be viewed as positively to be upset in public. For us all, we feel that there is a time and place for specific emotions. However, when the line is crossed from not expressing an emotion, to not acknowledging it at all, that’s when the process of dysregulation can begin.

7. What happens when difficulties emerge?

Emotional dysregulation occurs when an individual is unable to control their emotional responses to specific events or environments. A prolonged period of emotional dysregulation can present as excessive sadness, fear, or irritability, to give some examples. A presence of dysregulation has two main indicators: heightened emotional reactivity and psychological splitting [3]. Emotional reactivity is how responsive we are to an event, how intense our response is and how quickly we can return back to regulation once we have reached our peak. Splitting then, is the phenomenon that describes how emotionally dysregulated people fail to see the good in the bad, and the bad in the good. It is a defence mechanism that allows individuals to categorise themselves and others as either “good” or “bad”. By sorting and labelling in this way, individuals are unable to see themselves and others in their entirety; as their whole being. The process of splitting can result in some high and taxing emotional costs such as major mood swings and erratic and volatile emotional states [3].

Emotional dysregulation can cause psychological discomfort. When we investigate our emotions i.e. when we feel upset, anger, disappointment or emotional hurt, we tend to act impulsively. This act of impulsivity is commonly known as the ‘fight-or-flight’ response. Pairing this response with a heightened emotional state can cause us to overreact. This overreaction is emotional reactivity. The difficulty emerges when we go beyond the point of easy and minimal-effort emotional regulation, and we may say or do things that we eventually come to regret. This regret usually makes its way to the surface once our emotions have come back down the reactivity scale i.e. when we no longer feel such heightened emotions, or our perception of certain situations change. When our views and feelings on a situation in the present moment do not match how we reacted previously, this can in turn be very uncomfortable for ourselves and those around us. Those who have not learned how to regulate their emotions can be characterised as being highly emotionally sensitive. This causes difficulty for the individual to understand their emotional experience and possess and utilise skills that can minimise and retrieve emotions back to their baseline.

8. Re-regulating the body

Gratz and Roemer [5] acknowledge that one set of beliefs or attitudes in relation to emotions – the willingness to accept emotional experience – is an important aspect of emotional dysregulation [6]. Our mind and our bodies are connected, so we need to feel better in our minds and our bodies in order to be happier. In our bodies, we use our senses to take in information. There have been four different types of emotional regulation strategies outlined by Ochsner and Gross [7]:

1. Situation selection/ modification to modify appraisal inputs or cues regarding emotional situations
2. Attentional deployment to focus on some cues more than others
3. Cognitive change to change the meaning of cues
4. Response modulation to control the manner in which an emotion is expressed [3].

Re-regulating the body begins with breaking old habits. It is important to talk about your own feelings throughout the day to a trusting other, or if kept personal, write them down in a journal as a mindfulness practice. Explicitly label your own emotions; this can be done in very simple statements to others or into yourself. Allow yourself to accept your own emotions, and the mental and physiological response to these emotions. Try to be gentle, and show yourself compassion during this time. This also goes for when you respond to your own emotions – do so with kindness. Positive affirmations can help with the thought process of the emotion, and physical experiences can help ground the body. Once you have been honest about how you are feeling, the journey of problem-solving can begin. Encourage yourself to think of several different ways of responding to a problem and then brainstorm through each of the possible outcomes as consequences of the various courses of action.

9. Summary

Generally speaking, a child with typically developing social and emotional (regulation) skills is able to relate to and interact with peers and adults, and express themselves in an age appropriate manner. For a young child, this involves actively seeking out family and friends, initiating interactions with them, and responding appropriately to social advances. Actively engaging in peer relationships is also a key component of social-emotional development for young children, which involves an ability to play with other children and siblings. At this age, children learn how to express their emotions using facial expressions, their voice and their body, and they begin to understand and respond to the emotions of others [8]. Continuing into adolescents, teenagers with positive emotional regulation habits can bounce back quicker and more efficiently from stressors, form positive friendships and romantic relationships and reach goals that require more of their own independence skills. These individuals grow up to be independent, stable and achieving adults. They trust their own abilities and problem solving competencies, they have a good standard of self-worth and adapt functionally to various situations and contexts.

To recap, the steps of the process of emotional regulation are as follows:

1. Recognise and acknowledge the thoughts in the mind and feelings in the body
2. Label them – as accurately and descriptively as possible
3. Take some time to feel through what you are experiencing, by using your grounding and mindfulness techniques at this point
4. Begin to think about problem solving – be careful to not act irrationally or too quickly. Take time to think about the various courses of action that can be taken, and the consequences of each.

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