

How to control your emotions

It doesn't always make sense to give "free rein" to your emotions. Occasionally the situation will be wrong, sometimes your emotions will be too strong or inappropriate. The following scheme can help you (better) regulate your emotions.

There are three questions you can ask yourself to decide whether you should follow an emotional impulse.

1. Is the emotion appropriate?
2. Is it suitable to give expression to/live out the emotion?
3. Can you control the emotion?

If you answer all three questions with "yes", then you should act on your impulse. If you answer "no" to any of the three questions, it doesn't make sense to act on the impulse, and you should try to control the associated emotion.

Concerning 1: If the emotion isn't appropriate, you should generally actively modify the "wrong" emotion or at least moderate it significantly. It is important to bear in mind that your emotions do make sense from the perspective of your personal history, but might no longer be appropriate in the present. You can read about how to modify your automatic thoughts and corresponding core beliefs/belief systems on the website (see section 3).

Concerning 2 and 3: If the emotion is appropriate, but you currently have no opportunity to express it or cannot control it, you should temporarily reduce the intensity of the emotion, for instance by restraining your impulse to act. This would represent a temporary suppression of your emotion – a strategy that only makes sense in the short term. In the long term, you should express the emotion as soon as you can allow it to manifest itself and/or you can control it as the underlying need on which it is based is appropriate and thus it is prudent to satisfy this.

Strategies for controlling emotions

The preceding analysis of your personal emotions can help you to decide whether you need to employ strategies to control these. Emotional reactions are triggered by how you evaluate your situation and are associated with physical responses and particular impulses. Consequently, it is possible to control emotions on all these levels.

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You don't have to, or cannot always, tackle them on every level at the same time. However, it makes sense to get to know and practice a variety of strategies in order to find the ones that are most effective for you. These can be single strategies that you find particularly helpful or a set of strategies that you apply one after another or in parallel to each other.

Levels of control

1. Evaluating situations: mental/thought-based strategies

(see sections 5.3 and 5.4 of the chapter “Controlling thoughts and feelings”)

2. Physical responses: body-related strategies

Body-related strategies are aimed at reducing the physical arousal associated with strong feelings and emotions. In the case of anger, this is commonly referred to as “venting” or “working off” your emotion, but there are also measures which can help with all other emotions.

Physical responses are triggered by the autonomic nervous system, in particular by the increased release of adrenaline, and this is why reducing your adrenaline levels by exercising (jogging, rope skipping, knee bends/push-ups for example) and counteracting it by means of relaxation techniques (for instance breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation – see also the chapter “a more relaxed study experience”) are particularly suited to modulating physical responses. Any extreme build-up of tension can also be reduced by strong sensory stimuli (for instance biting a chili pepper, eating wasabi peanuts, chewing hot or sour gum, rolling a prickly massage ball over your skin or taking a cold shower).

3. Dealing with the resultant impulses: behavioral strategies

In this case, the aim is to generate a behavior that counteracts the original impulse. This behavior will inevitably feel incompatible with your emotion, but it will help to mitigate (overly) strong emotional reactions and may also have a direct impact on your environment.

As the effects they cause vary from emotion to emotion, it's important to identify the appropriate opposing behavior (see section 5.6 and exercise “All emotions at a glance”).

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An example will serve to illustrate this.

Imagine you've got a very high grade in an exam. A fellow student learns that he didn't pass the exam. You would of course feel happy about your success, but you wouldn't give in to the spontaneous impulse that makes you want to, for instance, smile and perhaps even celebrate. Instead you would feel you need to hold your tongue and commiserate with your fellow student about their failure. In the short term, your own joy decreases a bit, while at the same time the behavior leads to the fact that you do not hurt your fellow student.

In this case, your emotion would be appropriate, but you wouldn't be able to live it out without ignoring an important principle (that of not upsetting your fellow students).

Here's the proposed scheme once again in overview:

