

THREE

How to Manage Strong Emotions

Have you ever had any of these thoughts?

I feel like I'm being hit by a tidal wave of emotions.

Am I just going to break down?

Should I just try to ignore these painful feelings?

I better keep these intense emotions to myself.

I don't want anyone to think I'm weak and pity me.

Intense feelings can be difficult to handle at any time. The challenges can seem even harder when you're living with cancer. So many new and unpredictable things are happening in your body. If you also feel as if powerful emotions are threatening to overwhelm your mind, you may feel even more vulnerable.

When I had cancer, I actually worried about being out of control and had an intense dream.

I was driving an unreliable car in the pouring rain. I was in unfamiliar territory. The place on the dashboard where the GPS should be was an empty dark hole. I tried unsuccessfully to get to the maps on my phone. I couldn't get through when I tried to make a phone call for assistance. I thought I should just pull over but couldn't stop. The rain became blinding, and I was in a flooded area, engulfed by water. I was unable to control what was happening. The car was sinking with me inside!

I woke myself up yelling, “Help, help!” The powerful dread, pounding heart, sickness in my stomach, and tightness in my chest remained for some time after I was awake.

Whether you have cancer or not, no one likes to be worried, sad, or irritable. Yet these feelings can be common reactions to life with cancer. Even knowing that others may feel as we do, we can give ourselves a hard time about having intense emotions. Do you tell yourself you should be handling your feelings differently? Are you looking for ways to manage strong emotions? How can you do that?

DBT teaches that although you can’t change unpredictable and uncontrollable situations, **you can change *how* you respond**. You can regain a sense of control and emotional balance by learning how to regulate strong emotions. In this chapter we offer ways to constructively accept feelings without being consumed by them. We explain how emotions function and present concrete skills to manage powerful feelings, as well as strategies to calm yourself in the moment.

Understanding Emotions

Emotions have a bad reputation. We make judgments about strong feelings. We may decide some emotions are good ones *or* bad ones. We may believe we should avoid certain feelings *or* they may overwhelm us. The fact is that suppressing emotions can get in the way of effective coping. Blocking feelings intensifies them. Studies report that cancer patients who could understand, categorize, and label their emotions showed improved emotional coping and other health benefits such as lower levels of inflammation. We are going to show you how to do this.

To get a fuller understanding of emotions, let’s start by looking at their positive aspects. Surprisingly, they can be very helpful.

Emotions Can Be Constructive Guides to Action

They can **give you messages about the safety of a situation**, letting you know whether or not you need to be alert and aware of danger. They can also **motivate you to overcome obstacles and take productive action**.

- **Fear** can communicate the need to escape from danger, to run from a lion or immediately consult a doctor.
- **Anger** can mobilize you to protect yourself against a physical or emotional threat, to play harder on the football field, or speak up when you are not getting the help you need.
- **Anxiety** can be a sign that you need to respond to and act on your worry, to study for that test or call the doctor.
- **Sadness** tells you that it might be useful to reach out to others for support.

Emotions Provide Quick, Nonverbal Communication

Your facial expression, body language, and tone of voice can intentionally or unintentionally send messages to people around you. Expressions of empathy and compassion have been called the **language of connection**. Indeed, openly showing feeling has been found to communicate trustworthiness and increase social connection.

So how do feelings stir up an unhelpful reaction?

Negative Feedback Loop: An Unproductive Cycle of Emotions

Let's assume Sara is anxiously awaiting an overdue call from her doctor with information vital to her course of treatment. Many of us would feel agitated in this situation. Sara's initial response, frustration, is called the **primary emotion**. Physiologically this emotion, or any emotion for that matter, lasts only for approximately 90 seconds.

After that minute and a half, we have additional reactions, presumptions, and judgments about the situation. For example, Sara might now think:

This is outrageous!

Does my doctor know what it is like to be waiting?

I am so aggravated. She is unreliable.

How am I going to trust someone so insensitive?

The doctor must be waiting for more time to talk because the news is so bad.

Am I just a bitchy, demanding patient?

These opinions and doubts can stir up **secondary emotions** such as indignation, mistrust, anger, apprehension, anxiety, or shame. Sara's initial reaction of frustration is now maintained and/or intensified by these thoughts, body sensations, and emotional reactions that impact each other. Her subsequent feelings may be based on judgments about her frustration, as well as thoughts about the way her feelings can impact her and her relationships. These secondary emotions are also referred to as the second arrow because she is "hit" again!

Marsha uses the expression "**emotions love themselves**" to describe the way experiencing an emotion can leave you even more sensitive to other information that confirms or magnifies that feeling. You can feel flooded by these secondary feelings and unable to find the off switch, like when the gas pedal in a car is stuck to the floor.

Sara's initial frustration may have been useful if it rallied her to check with her doctor, yet now she may be **holding on to feelings past their usefulness**. If Sara focuses on ideas that confirm her feelings, the frustration and indignation may intensify. Now she is angry. Physical expressions of anger, such as a flushed face and feeling on the verge of tears, may now unwittingly reinforce her emotion. She may make judgments about her doctor that may or may not be accurate. Suppose she begins to worry that her care may not be reliable. She may then become critical and judgmental of herself for feeling so agitated, possibly stirring up shame. She is likely already anxious about the news. Now this flood of secondary ongoing emotions not clearly based on facts can get in the way of her effective coping.

So let's look at how can you reduce this unproductive cycling of emotions.

How to Regulate an Emotion

- Allow yourself to be aware of how you are feeling.
- Pause to observe your emotional experience.

- Pay attention to where and how the feeling is expressed in your body.
- Notice your thoughts.
- Describe the experience.
 - Name the emotion you wish to control.
 - Label the prompting event.
 - Identify physical reactions and judgments/assumptions about the event.
- Check the facts.
 - Are your ideas verified by facts?
 - Are you assuming a threat? If so, name it and assess the likelihood of its happening.
- Ask wise mind.
 - Does the emotion or its intensity fit the facts?
 - Consider other possible perspectives.
 - Decide whether it is in your interest to express or act on the emotion.

Facing Feelings

The first step of emotion regulation is to pause **to allow your feelings**. We can't control an emotion we don't acknowledge. We are trying to manage feelings, not block them! In fact, **complete emotional control is neither possible nor desirable**. Trying to avoid emotions can be like playing with one of those Chinese paper finger traps. The more you try to pull away, the more you get stuck. Recall that blocking feelings actually intensifies them. What's more, when we don't acknowledge our emotions, we can miss their useful message.

Why do we try to avoid feelings? At times we may believe the myth that accepting the emotion means approving of or consenting to feeling as we do. We may also worry that admitting a feeling will open the floodgates and overwhelm us with uncontrollable emotion.

When I was anticipating surgery, I imagined that if I allowed any

anxiety or sadness to surface I was giving in to those feelings. Like many people, I made judgments about my emotions. I was concerned that I would pay a price for showing “negative, unacceptable” emotions. I thought I *should* be more positive and was critical of myself for feeling apprehensive or gloomy. I worried that any fear or anguish might define me as weak or selfish. I covered my feelings to protect my self-image and avoid shame or pity. I wanted to ensure I didn’t appear vulnerable to myself or to anyone else.

The goal of emotion regulation is to find a balanced place between avoiding feelings and allowing them without being overwhelmed by them. The ideal is to accept emotions, not push them away, hold on to them, or amplify them. I love an image a wise Zen teacher shared with me. He told me to think about lightly holding my feelings in a flat open palm instead of using a tight fist to try to hold on to them or punch them away. With an open palm we try to **allow the feeling to come and then let it go**, like surfing rising and falling waves.

I saw firsthand that trying to block emotions does not work. As much as I tried to avoid any anxiety or sadness, my feelings showed up anyway. My sister had offered to be at the hospital, and I said it wasn’t necessary. On the morning of my surgery, I was surprised by my strong desire to connect to the family of my childhood and now wanted my sister with me. With the reality of the surgery staring me in the face, I then asked her to make the long trip to the hospital. At the time, I neither understood my emotional reaction nor was aware of what I was feeling. Yet luckily I respected their message to reach out for support. Blessedly, so did my sister. She came.

I nearly missed a valuable message from feelings I judged as destructive and did not want to accept. I was so busy trying to be strong that I was not able to ask people to support me or allow them in to do so. I later learned that my emotions did not have to be on or off. I could cope more effectively by allowing my feelings *and* learning to regulate their intensity. I could learn how to acknowledge a constructive message from my feelings *and* control emotions when they escalated and/or persisted unproductively.

Now let’s follow the way Sara might manage her anger about not hearing from her doctor in the expected time frame as an example of how to regulate emotion.

Pause to Observe the Emotional Experience

Paying attention to where and how the emotion is expressed can help Sara recognize the factors in the feedback loop. She begins by stopping to recognize how she is feeling. Unlike me, Sara is in emotion mind and allows her feelings. She acknowledges her intense irritation. She attempts to pay attention to her thoughts without automatically accepting everything that comes to mind as fact. She makes an effort to notice where in her body she is reacting, discerning her flushed face, the tension in her jaw, and her clenched hands.

Describe the Experience

Sara tries to put words to a full picture of her inner experience. Labeling reactions is a crucial step in emotion regulation as it can help identify cues that may be intensifying the emotion by triggering a negative feedback loop. What's more, identifying a feeling literally helps to decrease its intensity.

Name the Emotion You Are Trying to Control

"Name it to tame it" reflects the research showing that **labeling an emotion calms the central nervous system**. Also recall that cancer patients who could categorize and label their emotions showed improved coping as well as other health benefits. Sara identifies her anger.

Naming your feelings is not always easy. I learned that it is even harder to label emotions that we are trying to avoid. At times we just don't know what we are feeling or how our emotions connect to our actions. Our secondary emotions can make it even harder to recognize a primary emotion. In the following chapters we offer additional ways to help you recognize the most common emotions that occur with cancer.

Label the Prompting Event

The next step for Sara in describing her experience is to try to recognize the source of her feeling. It is not always easy to identify what instigates an

emotion. We typically think of the prompting event as an external experience, such as her not hearing from the doctor as needed and expected. Yet Sara's anger may also be triggered by an internal experience such as a physical sensation like pain. It is also possible that ruminating thoughts such as fear about the news and/or her indignation refueling itself may be perpetuating her anger.

Identify Physical Reactions and Judgments/Assumptions

Now Sara tries to label her judgments or assumptions and put words to the way her body is responding. Identifying her reactions may help her be more aware of cues that may be intensifying her emotion.

She notices that her body expresses anger in her flushed face, the tension in her jaw, and her clenched hands. She recognizes that she is making black-or-white judgments about her doctor and herself. She labels her assumptions that either her doctor is insensitive, unreliable, and untrustworthy *or* she is just too demanding. Sara sees that she is also imagining that the news is bad.

Check the Facts

When the outcome is very important and/or the threat is likely to become reality, we are even more apt to have an intense and enduring reaction. Sara's anger makes sense if she has repeatedly had unresponsive medical care and feels her health or peace of mind is compromised.

Yet it's very valuable for Sara to be sure her assumptions are correct. Have her ideas been confirmed by facts? Although there may be a possibility her worst nightmares are true, her worries may not always be justified or give a complete picture of the situation. Believing inaccurate ideas can make her more emotional than may be warranted. She doesn't want to add unnecessary distress by incorrectly assuming bad news.

Her goal is to check out the accuracy of her assumptions, including why she hasn't heard from her doctor. She tries to name any threats she imagines. She recognizes that the threats are the possibility of getting unwelcome news, the risk of receiving insensitive, unreliable care, or the possibility that she is a difficult patient.

Wise Mind

The next step is for Sara to use wise mind to take a wider, more balanced perspective. Are there other ways to look at her situation to get a fuller picture about her doctor and herself? Does the intensity of her anger fit the facts of her circumstances? She considers:

Are there other reasons the doctor may not have called? Could there be an administrative problem at her office? Could I have missed the call?

Is it possible that getting back to me is one of many priorities and she is caught up with other patients? When I stop to think about it, is my doctor usually reliable?

Is my irritation stronger than the facts warrant? Could my agitation be stronger because I'm awaiting important news about my health?

I am indignant right now. Yet I am not usually an angry, demanding patient. Does my anger really define me?

Deciding Whether to Express Feelings

There is a difference between a natural urge to act on emotions and actually expressing them at this moment. You have a choice. Your wise mind can be a valuable guide to help you consider whether it is in your interest to act on your feelings right now.

When feelings are not confirmed by fact, the most constructive decision is often *not* to act right away. Sara's experience with her doctor is that she is normally reliable. She recognizes that her feelings are stronger than the facts warrant and decides it is not in her interest to express her feelings to the doctor at this time. She does not want to risk compromising a relationship with someone she needs to rely on. Instead Sara decides to pause, correct her assumptions, and try to regulate her emotions.

On the other hand, what can Sara do if her assumptions are accurate? Suppose Sara's doctor is not as responsive as she wants and needs. She may still wisely decide to try to reduce the intensity of her anger. Yet now it may be in her interest to address the problem by expressing her feelings and taking action.

Problem Solving to Take Action

Let's look at problem-solving strategies to use when assumptions do not fit the facts.

- Describe the problem.
- Check the facts.
- Identify the goal.
- Brainstorm lots of solutions.
- Choose a solution that fits the goal and is likely to work.
- Act.

The problem is Sara's worry that her doctor is not as responsive as she wants or needs. In this case, when she checks her facts, her assumptions are correct, and her indignation is understandable. Her goal is to have a good working relationship with a medical provider who is responsive and provides good medical care.

At this point she thinks through possible actions. For example, she can acknowledge her disappointment to herself. She can share her feelings with a loved one. She can talk to someone in her doctor's office. She can speak directly to her doctor. Or she can change doctors.

If Sara decides to talk directly to her doctor, she will want to know how to express herself while protecting a relationship with someone she needs to rely on. Chapter 8 covers strategies for communication with medical providers and offers interpersonal skills Sara can use to talk effectively with her doctor.

Short-Term Ways to Tolerate Intense Distress

At times pain may be extreme. What can you do if your feelings seem too intense (over 80 on a scale of 1–100) to face at this moment? Your immediate priority may be to get enough relief to hold it together. Perhaps you feel too overwhelmed to think through all the steps of emotion regulation. These strategies to tolerate distress do not solve the problem, yet

they do offer ways to get through a difficult time by changing the physical input to the feedback loop.

Paced Breathing

Paced breathing is an effective way to promote calm feelings by slowing your heart rate. Even better, the skill can be used in public without others knowing. For example, Sara can use this skill if her anger remains too intense or persistent, yet she has to sit in her doctor's office and wait for test results.

Calm is promoted by taking a longer exhale than inhale. When you change your body chemistry by altering your breathing pattern, you cut off the physical input to a negative loop of danger. Slowing down the heart rate activates the parasympathetic nervous system. **If you have any breathing issues, consult your doctor before using this skill.**

To use paced breathing:

- Slow down your pace of breathing to an average of five or six breaths per minute.
- Try to breathe deeply from your abdomen.
- Inhale to a slow count of 4.
- Pause.
- Try to exhale to a count of 6 or if possible to 8. Repeat.

Paired Muscle Relaxation

This strategy ties muscle relaxation to exhalation to reduce physical tension and promote calm. As with every suggestion in this book, use your wise mind to be sure the following practice is helpful to you.

The steps to take are:

- Inhale as you stiffen and tighten your muscles, but not so much as to cause a cramp.
- Pay attention to the tension in your body for 4–5 seconds.

- Exhale for 6–7 seconds while softening the tension. Say the word *relax* in your mind as you slump like a rag doll.
- Bring your attention to your **facial muscles**.
 - Wrinkle your forehead and then let go.
 - Squeeze your eyes tightly and then relax them.
 - Furrow your brows and then soften.
 - Scrunch your cheeks and nose tightly and then release.
 - Grind your teeth and then let your whole mouth and jaw be slack with tongue relaxed and your teeth slightly apart.
 - Tightly pucker your lips and then let the corners of your lips relax and turn up slightly with a half smile and calm facial expression.
- Notice your **shoulders, arms, and hands**.
 - As you take a deep breath, bring your tightened fists up to your ears and shrug your shoulders.
 - As you let out the breath, drop your arms down and turn your unclenched hands outward with your palms up and your fingers relaxed.
- Focus on your **torso, legs, and feet**.
 - Hold your stomach in tightly and squeeze your buttocks together. Then soften.
 - Tense your thighs and calves and then release.
 - Flex your ankles, curl your toes, and then let them slacken.

Some find that even briefly bringing their attention to any area of physical discomfort is too agitating. If sensations are too overwhelming, shift to another part of the body, avoid that area, or do not use this practice.

The more often you do this technique, the more effective it becomes at helping to promote calm. The first time you try it you want to be in a quiet place and have plenty of time. As you improve, attempt to use it in

many different settings so it becomes possible to use this strategy wherever you are and whenever you need it.

The next three chapters demonstrate how to apply this emotion regulation framework to the most common emotions in dealing with cancer. As it is sometimes difficult to know and identify feelings, we include specific ways to help you recognize and label fear, sadness, and anger. We also offer more short-term ways to tolerate distress.

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