

Module 3 / Emotion Regulation Skills

Teaching Notes

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Published by The Guilford Press
A Division of Guilford Publications, Inc.
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www.guilford.com

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Emotion Regulation Skills

Difficulties in regulating painful emotions are central to the behavioral difficulties of many individuals. From these individuals' perspective, painful feelings are most often the "problems to be solved." Dysfunctional behaviors, including suicidal behaviors, substance use disorders, overeating, emotion suppression, overcontrol, and interpersonal mayhem, are often behavioral solutions to intolerably painful emotions.

Individuals with high emotional sensitivity and/or intensity, or frequent emotional distress, can benefit from help in learning to regulate their emotions. Emotion regulation skills, however, can be extremely difficult to teach, because many individuals have been overdosed with remarks to the effect that "If you would just change your attitude, you could change your feelings." Some individuals come from environments where everyone else exhibits almost perfect cognitive control of their emotions. Moreover, these very same others have often exhibited both intolerance and strong disapproval of the individuals' inability to exhibit similar control. Some people will at times resist any attempt to control their emotions, because such control would imply that other people are right and they are wrong for feeling the way they do. Thus emotion regulation skills can be taught only in a context of emotional self-validation.

Like interpersonal effectiveness and distress tolerance, emotion regulation requires application of mindfulness skills—in this case, the nonjudgmental observation and description of one's current emotional responses. The theoretical idea is that much emotional distress is a result of secondary responses (e.g., intense shame, anxiety, or rage) to primary emotions. Often the primary emotions are adaptive and appropriate to the context. The reduction

of this secondary distress requires exposure to the primary emotion in a nonjudgmental atmosphere. In this context, mindfulness to one's own emotional responses can be thought of as an exposure technique. (See Chapter 11 of the main DBT text for a fuller description of exposure-based procedures.)

As noted in Chapter 1, the DBT model of emotion regulation is transdiagnostic, with data suggesting efficacy of DBT across a range of emotional disorders. As such, it is highly compatible with the similar transdiagnostic model underlying the Unified Protocol,^{1, 2} developed by David Barlow and his colleagues. Similar to DBT, the Unified Protocol addresses deficits in emotion regulation that underlie emotional disorders by (1) increasing present-focused emotion awareness, (2) increasing cognitive flexibility, (3) identifying and preventing patterns of emotion avoidance and maladaptive emotion-driven behaviors, (4) increasing awareness and tolerance of emotion-related physical sensations, and (5) utilizing emotion-focused exposure procedures.¹

The specific DBT emotion regulation skills taught in this module are grouped into the following four segments: understanding and naming emotions; changing unwanted emotions; reducing vulnerability to emotion mind; and managing extreme emotions.

Understanding and Naming Emotions

The first segment of the module (Sections I–VI) focuses on understanding and naming emotions; identifying the functions of emotions and their relationship to difficulties in changing emotions; understanding the nature of emotions by presenting

a model of emotions; and learning how to identify and label emotions in everyday life.

Understanding the Functions of Emotions

Emotional behavior is functional to the individual. Changing ineffective emotional behaviors can be extremely difficult when they are followed by reinforcing consequences; thus identifying the functions and reinforcers for particular emotional behaviors can be useful. Generally, emotions function to communicate to others and to motivate one's own behavior. Emotional behaviors can also have two other important functions. The first, related to the communication function, is to influence and control other people's behaviors. The second communication function is alerting oneself. In this latter case, emotions function like an alarm, alerting the person to pay attention to events that may be important. Identifying these functions of emotions, especially of unwanted emotions, is an important first step toward change.

Identifying Obstacles to Changing Emotions

Many factors can make it hard to change emotions, even when a person desperately wants to. Biological factors can increase emotion sensitivity, intensity, and time needed to return to emotional baseline. All of us—even those with sunny dispositions—at times have intense emotional reactions, however, and when this happens we need adequate skills to modulate our emotions. Inadequate skills can make this regulation very difficult. Emotion regulation is even more difficult when others in the environment are reinforcing dysfunctional emotions. This is particularly true when concurrent emotion overload, low motivation, or myths about emotions get in the way.

Identifying and Labeling Emotions

An important step in regulating emotions is learning to identify and label current emotions. Emotions, however, are complex behavioral responses. Their identification often requires the ability not only to observe one's own responses, but also to describe accurately the context in which the emotion occurs. Thus learning to identify an emotional response is aided enormously if one can observe and describe

(1) the event prompting the emotion; (2) the interpretations of the event that prompted the emotion; (3) the history prior to the prompting event that increases sensitivity to the event and vulnerability to responding emotionally; (4) the phenomenological experience, including the physical sensation, of the emotion; (5) the expressive behaviors associated with the emotion; and (6) the aftereffects of the emotion on other types of functioning.

Changing Unwanted Emotions

The second segment of the module (Sections VII–XII) has to do with changing emotional responses by learning how to check the facts, take opposite action when the emotion does not fit the facts, and engage in problem solving when the facts of the situation are the problem.

Check the Facts

Emotions are often reactions to thoughts and interpretations of an event, rather than to the actual facts of an event. Checking the facts, and then changing appraisals and assumptions to fit the facts, are basic strategies in cognitive therapy as well as in many other forms of therapy.

Problem Solving

DBT assumes that most people feel painful emotions for good reasons. Although all people's perceptions tend to become distorted when they are highly emotional, this does not mean that the emotions themselves are the results of distorted perceptions. Thus an important way to control emotions is to control the events that set off emotions. Problem solving for emotional situations, particularly when the problematic events are painful, unexpected, or unwanted, can be extremely useful. Often an unwanted emotion is entirely justified by the situation, but the situation can be changed if the person takes active steps to solve the problem at hand. Solving problems also requires a very thorough assessment of the facts, and checking the facts is often the first step in problem solving.

Opposite Action

Actions and expressive responses are important parts of all emotions. Thus one strategy to change

or regulate an emotion is to change its action and expressive components by acting in a way that opposes or is inconsistent with the emotion. This should include both overt actions (e.g., doing something nice for a person one is angry at, approaching what one is afraid of) and postural and facial expressiveness. With respect to the latter, however, clients must learn that the idea is not to block expression of an emotion; rather, it is to express a different emotion. There is a very big difference between a constricted facial expression that blocks the expression of anger and a relaxed facial expression that expresses liking.

Most effective treatments for emotional disorders ask clients to reverse the expression and action components of problem emotions. Some psychotherapy researchers believe this is why these treatments work. The following are some examples.

Behavioral activation, an opposite-action technique, can be an important treatment for depression. It is natural for a person who feels sad and is no longer finding pleasure in activities that were previously enjoyed to attempt to cope by withdrawing socially, ceasing to engage in activities, and “shutting down.” The problem is that such coping strategies do not help alleviate depression; they make it worse.

Behavioral activation targets avoidance. Originally developed as a comparison treatment to CBT, it has gained empirical support from a multisite trial showing it to be as effective as CBT and medication at a 6-month follow-up.³ What is interesting about behavioral activation is that avoidance behaviors (such as inactivity and rumination) are viewed as the key factors underlying and maintaining depression, and treatment aims to combat clients’ use of such maladaptive behaviors.

Similarly, exposure-based treatments where clients do the opposite of avoiding and escaping feared events are the most effective treatments for anxiety disorders. Avoidance of or escape from feared stimuli maintain anxiety disorders and prohibit new learning from taking place. Exposure involves confronting situations, objects, and thoughts that evoke anxiety or distress because they are unrealistically associated with danger. Response prevention is conceptualized as blocking avoidance or escape from feared situations. By encouraging the individual to approach and remain in the feared situation, response prevention allows the realization that the fear is unrealistic. Exposure and response prevention are commonly used in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Foa and colleagues demonstrated the importance of using both

exposure and response prevention in treating patients with OCD; exposure leads to reduction in the anxiety response, and response prevention leads to a reduction in escape behaviors.⁴

Effective treatments for anger stress a number of opposite actions, such as learning to identify the cues to frustration and/or anger and then leaving the situation to cool down, as well as changing thoughts to understand the other person and reduce the demand that reality be different.

Reducing Vulnerability to Emotion Mind

The third segment of the module (Sections XIII–XVII) focuses on reducing vulnerability to negative emotions (emotion mind) and preventing efforts to overcontrol emotions by accumulating positive emotions, building mastery, learning how to cope ahead of difficult situations, and taking care of the body. All people are more prone to emotional reactivity when they are under physical or environmental stress,⁵ are in situations where they are out of control,⁶ or are living in a state of deprivation,⁷ particularly when the deprivation extends to many areas of life. Accordingly, the behaviors targeted here include three major sets of skills: accumulate positive emotions, build a sense of mastery/“cope ahead,” and build a resilient biology.

Accumulating Positive Emotions

Increasing positive emotions can be accomplished in a number of ways. Increasing the number of pleasurable events in one’s life is one approach. In the short term, this involves increasing daily positive experiences. In the long term, it means building a “life worth living” and making necessary changes so that pleasant or valued events will occur more often. To do this, it is often necessary to spend some time figuring out what one really wants out of life, what one’s values are. This is particularly important with clients for whom an uncertain identity is part of their problem. It is very difficult to have a life that is experienced as worth living if one’s life is out of sync with one’s most important values. Building a life worth living is important because it improves one’s sense of resilience. It can be much easier to cope with a loss or a negative event when it is balanced with positive experiences in one’s life.⁸ Losing a dollar may be traumatic for a poor and starving

person, but for a well-fed rich person it may be inconsequential. Having a friend move away can be devastating if it is a person's only relationship. In addition to increasing positive events, it is also useful to work on being mindful of pleasurable experiences when they occur, as well as being unmindful of worries that the positive experience will end.⁹

Building Mastery and Learning to Cope Ahead

In building a sense of mastery, there are two focal points: (1) engaging in activities that build a sense of self-efficacy, self-control, and competence; and (2) learning to cope ahead of time with difficult situations via imaginal rehearsal. The goal of building mastery in DBT is very similar to activity scheduling in both cognitive therapy and behavioral activation for depression.^{10, 11}

Taking Care of the Body (PLEASE Skills)

To build a resilient biology, the focus is on balancing nutrition and eating, getting sufficient but not too much sleep (including treating insomnia and nightmares, if needed), getting adequate exercise, treating physical illness, and staying off nonprescribed mood-altering drugs or misusing prescribed medications.

Poverty can interfere with balanced nutrition and medical care, and can put many goals out of reach that individuals might wish to work toward. Although these targets seem straightforward, making headway on them can be exhausting for both clients and their therapists and skills trainers. With respect to insomnia, many of our clients fight a never-ending battle. Nightmares, anxious rumination, and poor sleep hygiene are often the culprits. Work on any of these targets requires an active stance by clients, as well as persistence until positive effects begin to accumulate. The typical problem-solving passivity of many clients can create substantial interference here.

Managing Extreme Emotions

The fourth segment of the module (Sections XVIII–XX) deals with how to manage very difficult emotions. Decreasing emotional suffering through mindfulness to the current emotion is an important skill here, as well as learning how to identify one's

skills breakdown point and then turning to the distress tolerance skills when that happens.

Mindfulness of Current Emotions

Mindfulness of current emotions means experiencing emotions without judging them or trying to inhibit them, block them, distract from them, or hold on to them. The basic idea here is that exposure to painful or distressing emotions, without association to negative consequences, will extinguish their ability to stimulate secondary negative emotions. The natural consequences of judging negative emotions as “bad” are feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and/or anxiety whenever distressing feelings arise. The addition of these secondary feelings to an already negative situation simply makes the distress more intense and tolerance more difficult. Frequently, a distressing situation or painful affect could be tolerated if only a person could refrain from feeling guilty or anxious about feeling painful emotions in the first place.

Identifying the Skills Breakdown Point

When emotional arousal is so extreme that complicated skills cannot be used, the person has reached the skills breakdown point. It's important for participants to learn to recognize when they have reached this point, and then to turn to the crisis survival skills covered in Chapter 10 of this manual. I do not discuss them here.

The final segment of the module (Sections XXI–XXII) covers troubleshooting when emotion regulation skills aren't working, and revisits the model of emotions described earlier with the addition of DBT skills where relevant.

Selecting Material to Teach

As with the other modules, there is a great deal of material for each skill in the emotion regulation teaching notes that follow. You will not cover all the content the first several times you teach specific skills. The notes are provided to give you a deeper understanding of each skill, so that you can answer questions and add new teaching as you go. For each skill, I have put a checkmark (✓) next to material I almost always cover. If I am in a huge rush, I may skip everything not checked. Similarly, on this manual's special

website (www.guilford.com/dbt-manual), I use stars (★) for core handouts I almost always use. Also as in chapters on earlier modules, I have summarized research in special “Research Point” sections. The great value of research is that it can often be used to sell the skills you are teaching.

It is important that you have a basic understanding of the specific skills you are teaching. The first several times you teach, carefully study the notes,

handouts, and worksheets for each skill you plan to teach. Highlight the points you want to make, and bring a copy of the relevant teaching note pages with you to teach from. Be sure to practice each skill yourself, to be sure you understand how to use it. Before long, you will solidify your knowledge of each skill. At that point you will find your own favorite teaching points, examples, and stories and can ignore most of mine.

Teaching Notes

I. GOALS OF THIS MODULE (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 1)

Main Point: The overall goal of emotion regulation is to reduce emotional suffering. The goal is *not* to get rid of emotions. Some individuals will always be more emotional than others.

Emotion Regulation Handout 1: Goals of Emotion Regulation. Briefly review the goals on this handout. Provide enough information and discussion to orient participants to the module, link the module to participants' goals, and generate some enthusiasm for learning the emotion regulation skills.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 1: Pros and Cons of Changing Emotions (*Optional*). This worksheet is designed to help participants (1) decide whether they want to regulate a current emotion, and (2) decide whether it is in their interest to learn to regulate their own emotions or stay in emotion mind much of the time. Its major use is to communicate that the goal of this module is to regulate emotions they want to change, not to change their emotions just because others want them to. This worksheet can also be used as an exercise to improve the likelihood of being effective when a person is overcome with emotions (e.g., when the person just wants to yell and scream or completely avoid a situation or person). It can also be used as a teaching tool for how to figure out goals. For instructions in teaching pros and cons, see the teaching notes for the Distress Tolerance module (Chapter 10, Section V) on reviewing pros and cons as a way to make behavioral decisions. Assign this worksheet as optional if you teach other handouts in the session that have associated worksheets.


Orient participants to what is meant by “emotion regulation,” to the skills to be learned in this module, and to the rationale for their importance.


✓ A. What Is Emotion Regulation?

Say to participants: “Emotion regulation is the ability to control or influence which emotions you have, when you have them, and how you experience and express them.”¹²

Go on to explain that **regulating emotions can be automatic as well as consciously controlled**. Tell participants: “In this module, we will focus first on increasing conscious awareness and control of emotions. Second, we will provide so much practice regulating emotions that you will overlearn the skills. Ultimately, the regulation should become automatic.”

Continue: “Emotions are out of control or ‘dysregulated’ when you are unable, despite your best efforts, to change which emotions you have, when you have them, or how you experience or express them.”

- ✓  **Discussion Point:** Either before or after reviewing Emotion Regulation Handout 1, ask participants to check off each goal that is important to them in the boxes on the handout and then share their choices.

- ✓  **Discussion Point:** At some point, ask each person to name the emotions that he or she most wants to change. Write the list on a whiteboard (if possible). Discuss similarities and differences.


Explain that the goals of emotion regulation are as follows.

✓ B. Understand Your Own Emotions

Say to participants: “Before you can regulate your own emotions, you need to understand them. You can do this by learning to do two things.”

✓ **1. Identify Your Own Emotions**

“The simple act of naming your emotions can help you regulate your own emotions.”

- ✓  **Discussion Point:** Some people always know what emotion they are feeling. Others have no idea most of the time. For some, trying to figure out how they feel is like looking down into a fog. Elicit from each participant which type of person he or she is.

✓ **2. Understand What Emotions Do for You**


“It can be very hard to change emotions when you do not understand where they come from or why they are there.”

✓ **C. Decrease the Frequency of Unwanted Emotions**

Continue: “Once you understand your own emotions, you can learn how to cut down on the frequency of the ones you don’t want. You can do this in several ways.”


✓ **1. Stop Unwanted Emotions from Starting**

“You can’t stop all painful emotions—but you can make changes in your environment and in your life to reduce how often negative emotions occur.”

-  **Discussion Point:** Ask participants what kinds of emotional situations they have the most trouble solving or changing.

✓ **2. Change Painful Emotions Once They Start**

People often believe myths about emotions—that changing emotions is inauthentic, on the one hand, or that all emotions should be suppressed, on the other hand.

-  **Discussion Point:** Ask participants whether they are afraid of losing all their emotions, hoping to get rid of all their emotions, or both. Discuss.

Note to Leaders: It is essential to highlight that the point is to change the emotions participants themselves want to change, not the emotions other people want them to change. Remind participants that emotion regulation skills will not be crammed down their throats. At each point and for each skill, it is up to the participants to consider the pros and cons of maintaining an emotion or a particular emotional intensity. When the emotion or the intensity of the emotion is ineffective or too painful to bear, change may be desirable, and emotion regulation skills will be useful. If the emotion is not one a participant wants to change, or if the intensity, even though painful, is effective, then changing the emotion or the intensity of the emotion may not be useful.

3. Emotions Themselves Are Neither Good nor Bad

In and of themselves, emotions are not good or bad. They just are. Evaluating our emotions as either good or bad is rarely helpful. Thinking that an emotion is “bad” does not get rid of it. It may lead us to try to suppress the emotion.


4. Suppression of Emotions Makes Things Worse

Suppressing emotions is a temporary solution that causes greater problems in the long run.¹³ Emotions may be comfortable or uncomfortable, wanted or unwanted, excruciatingly painful or ecstatically pleasurable. Judging emotions as “bad” can make painful emotions even more painful.

5. *Emotion Regulation Is for Ineffective Emotions Only*

Say to participants: “Emotion regulation strategies are for emotions that are *not* effective in helping you achieve your own goals in life. Emotions are effective when certain things are true:

- “Acting on the emotion is in your own self-interest.”
- “Expressing the emotion will get you closer to your own goals.”
- “Expressing your emotion will influence others in ways that will help you.”
- “Your emotion is sending you a message you need to listen to.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants when emotions have been useful and when they have been destructive. Have participants discuss the emotions that give them the most trouble.

✓ **D. Decrease Vulnerability to Emotion Mind**

Explain to participants: “Emotion regulation will help you decrease your vulnerability to emotion mind. It won’t take away your emotions, but it will help you balance emotion mind with reasonable mind to get to wise mind. And it will also increase emotional resilience—in other words, your ability to bounce back and cope with difficult events and emotions.”

✓ **E. Decrease Emotional Suffering**

Say: “Finally, emotion regulation will enable you to decrease your emotional suffering. Specifically, you’ll learn to do these things:

- “Reduce suffering when painful emotions overcome you.”
- “Manage extreme emotions so you don’t make things worse.”

Note to Leaders: Be sure to highlight that although it may take a *lot* of work at the start for participants to regulate and control their emotions, over time they will get better and better at it. If they practice a lot, at some point regulating their emotions effectively will become automatic and often easy.

II. **OVERVIEW: UNDERSTANDING AND NAMING EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 2)**

Main Point: It is difficult for people to manage their emotions when they do not understand how emotions work. The point of this section is that knowledge is power.

Emotion Regulation Handout 2: Overview: Understanding and Naming Emotions. When you are teaching this module for the first time or when time is of the essence, you can use this handout to teach the key points for What Emotions Do For You (Emotion Regulation Handout 3) and What Makes it Hard to Regulate Your Emotions (Emotion Regulation Handout 4). Handouts 3 and 4 can be skipped if it is easier to teach the material without handouts. The information itself is critical, but the handouts are not. Orient participants to the content of the model for describing emotions (Emotion Regulation Handout 5), but do not teach Handout 5 yet.

Worksheet: There is no assigned worksheet for this handout. Emotion Regulation Worksheets 2–4a cover the topics in this section.

Orient participants to the skills taught in this part of the module and the rationale for their importance.

✓ **A. What Emotions Do for You**

There are reasons why humans (and other mammals) have emotions. The purpose of regulating emotions is *not* to get rid of them. We need them for survival!

There are three major functions of emotions:

- To motivate action.
- To communicate to others.
- To communicate to ourselves.

Note to Leaders: If you skip Emotion Regulation Handout 3, pick up key points in the teaching notes for this handout and provide them here.

Knowing what emotions do for us can help us figure out how to regulate them, and also how to appreciate them even when they are painful or difficult.

✓ **B. Factors That Make Regulating Emotions Hard**

Regulating emotions is like regulating temperature. We want to be able to raise the intensity of emotions when needed (like making a room warmer), and to decrease the intensity of emotions when needed (like making a room cooler).

Factors that can make it very difficult to get our emotions under control include these:

- Biology.
- Lack of emotion regulation skills.
- Reinforcing consequences of emotional behaviors.
- Moodiness that makes the effort to manage emotions difficult.
- Emotional overload.
- Emotion myths.

Understanding each of these factors can be critical for troubleshooting emotions.

Note to Leaders: If you skip Emotion Regulation Handout 4, pick up key points in the teaching notes for this handout and provide them here.

✓ **C. A Model for Describing Emotions**

Emotions are complex, full-system responses. Changing any part of the system can change the entire response. Assure participants: “Once you know all the parts of the emotion system, you can decide where to try to change it first.”

✓ **D. Ways to Describe Emotions**

Conclude: “Learning to observe, describe, and name your emotions can help you regulate your emotions.”

III. WHAT EMOTIONS DO FOR YOU (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 3)

Main Point: There are reasons why humans (and many other animals) have emotions. They have three important functions, and we need all of them!

Emotion Regulation Handout 3: What Emotions Do for You. If you teach the content from this handout, it can be useful as you talk to write the three major functions of emotions on the board: (1) to motivate action, (2) to communicate to others, and (3) to communicate to ourselves. If time is short, skip this handout and summarize the information when introducing the module or this skills section with Handout 2.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 2: Figuring Out What My Emotions Are Doing for Me; Emotion Regulation Worksheet 2b: Emotion Diary. Skip both of these worksheets (as well as Worksheets 2a

and 2c, which are examples of how to fill these out) for participants starting the Emotion Regulation module for the first time. Adding them will almost always require extra time (which you may not have), and the worksheets can be overwhelming to beginners. Use these worksheets with individuals who have gone through the module at least once or have been in skills training for a while. The worksheets can also be very useful in individual therapy, together with individual coaching. Use Worksheet 2 first. If necessary, instruct participants in how to rate intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion, no intensity to 100 = maximum intensity). When participants become practiced at filling Worksheet 2 out, then move to Worksheet 2b.

Worksheet 2b is for participants who want to identify how their emotions are functioning over time. Knowing the function of an emotion can be extremely helpful in changing it. For example, this worksheet can be very useful for assessing whether a participant's own emotions are being reinforced by people in the environment. If they are being reinforced, and the emotion is one the participant is trying to reduce, then it may be very important to ask those others to change how they react to the emotion's expression—or how they are *not* responding when the emotion is not expressed. (The DEAR MAN, GIVE FAST skills described in Chapter 8 and in Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills Handouts 5, 6, and 7 should be used for such requests.)

Orient participants to the functions of emotions, and give a rationale for their importance.

✓ **A. Emotions Have Functions That Help Our Species to Survive**

Emotional behaviors evolved as immediate, automatic, and efficient ways to solve common problems that humans and other emotional animals must solve to survive. **There are three primary functions of emotions.**

✓ **B. Emotions Motivate (and Organize) Us for Action**

1. Emotions Prepare Us Physically for Action

Emotions prepare our bodies to act. The action urges connected to specific emotions are largely hard-wired in our biology.

2. Emotions Save Time

Emotions save time in getting us to act in important situations. We don't have to think everything through. We can react to situations extremely fast.

✓ *Example:* "Imagine that there is a tsunami, and a huge wave of water 20 feet high is coming at you and your family on the beach. You, however, are the only one who sees it coming. Ask yourself: How likely is it that you and your family will survive if you walk up to them and calmly say, 'A tsunami is coming; let's all run up the hill to save our lives'? How fast do you think each member of your family will run if there is no emotion? To save yourself and your family, you will run and scream, 'TSUNAMI!! RUN! RUN! COME ON!' That is your only hope."

Example: When people are physically attacked, anger can energize them quickly to attack back and protect themselves. Similarly, anger on a football field can energize players to play harder.

Example: Students often do not want to reduce test anxiety, because they are afraid that if they do, they will quit working so hard and then fail their tests.

Example: People are sometimes afraid to reduce guilt, because they are afraid that without guilt, they may start doing dishonest and harmful things.

Example: If there were no emotions, one would not feel the need to comfort a crying baby.


✓ 3. *Emotions Can Be Hard to Change*

Emotions can be very hard to change when the associated behavior is very important. This is because emotions are to an extent biologically “hard-wired” responses to important events.

✓ *Example:* “If your house is on fire and you need to run for your life, it would be very hard to stop being afraid before you get away from the fire.”

Example: “If your child has been molested by a neighbor, and you want him locked up in jail and away from your child, it will be very hard to reduce contempt for the molester before you have reported it to police and he is arrested and put in jail.”

Example: “If someone is threatening to ‘steal away’ the person you want to take to the prom, and he or she is interested in the other person, it will be hard to get jealousy to go down before you have done what is needed to get your intended date to say yes to going to the prom with you.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants what they think would happen if people could really shut down emotions. For example, who would survive if we could actually eliminate fear or love?

4. *Functions of Specific Emotions in Our Lives*

Note to Leaders: If there is not enough time to review all of the emotions listed below, review several, selecting those most relevant to your participants.

a. Fear

Fear organizes our responses to threats to our life, health, or well-being. It focuses us on escape from danger.

b. Anger

Anger organizes our responses to the blocking of important goals or activities or to an imminent attack on the self or to important others.¹⁴ It focuses us on self-defense, mastery, and control.

c. Disgust

Disgust organizes our responses to situations and things that are offensive and contaminating.¹⁵ It focuses us on rejecting and distancing ourselves from some object, event, or situation.

d. Sadness

Sadness organizes our responses to losses of someone or something important, and to goals lost or not attained.¹⁶ It focuses us on what is valued and the pursuit of goals, as well as on communicating to others that we need help.

e. Shame

Shame organizes responses related to personal characteristics or our own behaviors that are dishonoring or sanctioned by our own community.¹⁷ It focuses us on hiding transgressions and, if these are already public, engaging in appeasement-related behaviors.

f. Guilt

Guilt organizes responses related to specific actions that have led to violation of values.¹⁷ It focuses us on actions and behaviors that are likely to repair the violation.

g. Jealousy

Jealousy organizes responses to others who threaten to take away relationships or things very important to us.^{18, 19} It focuses us on protecting what we have.

h. Envy

Envy organizes our responses to others' getting or having things we do not have but want or need.¹⁹ It focuses us on working hard to obtain what other people have.


i. Love


Love organizes our responses related to reproduction and survival.²⁰ It focuses us on union with and attachment to others.

j. Happiness

Happiness organizes our responses to optimal functioning of ourselves, others we care about, or the social group we are part of.²¹ It focuses us on continuing activities that enhance pleasure and personal and social value.

Note to Leaders: You can create more examples by reviewing Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions, or Emotion Regulation Handout 11: Figuring Out Opposite Actions.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit and discuss other examples, especially examples having to do with anger. Suggest an emotion, and then go around the group and ask participants what they have an urge to do when experiencing the emotion. Do this with different emotions, and then highlight the different action urges associated with different emotions.

 **Discussion Point:** Suggest various actions, and then ask participants to imagine engaging in the action with emotion and without emotion. Discuss the differences. Here are some sample actions:

- Soothing a baby or child with and without affection.
- Running away from or avoiding a dangerous situation with and without fear.
- Apologizing for one's own behavior with and without a sense of guilt.
- Lying about one's own behavior with and without guilt (or with and without fear).

✓ **C. Emotions Communicate to (and Influence) Others**

✓ **1. Facial Expressions Are Biologically Hard-Wired Aspects of Emotions**

Among both humans and animals, facial expressions can communicate faster than words.^{22, 23}

2. Some Emotional Expressions Have an Automatic Effect on Others

Several facial expressions of emotion have automatic effects on other people. That is, these effects are not learned. For example, an infant reacts spontaneously to an adult's smile or look of fright.²⁴ This automatic reaction serves infants well until they learn to use words.

Even after children can use words, facial expressions are still very helpful. Having both verbal and nonverbal forms of emotional expression means having two ways of communication for important situations.


✓ **3. Emotional Expressions Influence Others (Whether We Intend It or Not)**


Examples: Expressions of warmth and friendliness toward an acquaintance may result in a later favor; disappointment expressed by a supervisor may result in improved work by an

employee; anger may result in one person's giving another his or her rightful due instead of withholding it.

Example: Communicating agonizing sadness and despair may influence a therapist or another person to reassure, give help, or otherwise make efforts to take away the pain.

Example: Expressed anger may stop others' behavior.

 **Discussion Point:** Ask participants for examples of their emotions' influencing others and of their being influenced by others' emotions. Discuss these examples. Also, elicit examples of times when this strategy boomeranged—that is, when participants' expressions of emotion got them something they didn't want.

 **Discussion Point:** The point that emotions can influence others even when we don't consciously intend them to do so is extremely important to make. This can happen even when we are not aware that our emotions are having such effects on others. Discuss this point with participants. Elicit examples of when their automatic emotional expressions have had an impact on other people, even though they did not consciously intend to have such an effect.

✓ 4. Emotions Can Be Very Hard to Change When a Communication Is Important

As noted earlier, emotions can be extremely hard to change when a communication is important. This is because emotions are to an extent “hard-wired” responses to important events.

Example: John asks Kathy to stop behaviors that are really annoying to him, but she does not change unless he gets really angry. If this is almost always the case, and Kathy only responds to expression of anger, then it will be very hard for John to stop feeling and acting angry when Kathy does annoying things. Kathy is reinforcing John's expressions of anger.

Example: Julie wants her son, Billy, to realize how dangerous a situation is. When Julie is trying to communicate this to Billy, it will be hard for her to stop being afraid. Otherwise, Billy may think the situation is not as dangerous as it is.

Example: If Maria wants Terry to know what she likes, she may want to communicate happiness or joy when he does things that make her happy. In fact, it would be hard for her to stop being happy around someone who often does loving things that she likes. It also would not be in her best interest. This is one reason why communication of happiness or joy is often automatic (i.e., not under our immediate control).


Note to Leaders: Be sure that you understand the examples above before you teach them. The point being made is that if we want to communicate our anger, fear, or joy to someone, it is difficult to do this if we have to consciously organize not only what we say, but our facial expressions, our voice tone, our posture, and so on. And because communication of emotional responses is so important, it is also not in our best interest (from an evolutionary point of view) to be able to shut off emotional communications easily.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit ideas about what different emotions communicate.

✓ 5. What Happens When Verbal and Nonverbal Expressions of Emotion Don't Match?

Research Point: When nonverbal expressions of emotion (e.g., actions, facial and body expressions, voice tone) don't go with what a person says, other people almost always will trust the nonverbal expressions over the verbal ones.²⁵

Note to Leaders: This point about verbal and nonverbal expressions is very important. A major premise of DBT is that the nonverbal emotional expressions of many individuals with emotion regulation difficulties do not accurately indicate what they are experiencing; thus the individuals are often misread. See the discussion of apparent competence in Chapter 3 of the main DBT text.

 **Discussion Point:** Ask participants for examples of being misread or of misreading others because of mismatched nonverbal communication.


✓ **D. Emotions Communicate to Ourselves**

✓ **1. Emotions Can Be Signals to Check Things Out**

✓ Emotions can be signals or alarms that something is going on in a situation. This is what is meant by the saying “Listen to your gut.” Likewise, when we say that a person has a “good feel for a situation,” we are referring to emotions as signals.

2. Information about Situations, Based on Emotions, May or May Not Be Accurate


Sometimes signals picked up from a situation are processed out of our awareness.²⁶ This processing sets off an emotional reaction, but we cannot identify what it is about the situation that set off the emotion.²⁷ Through trial and error—that is, experience—people learn when to trust these emotional responses and when to believe they do not provide accurate information.

 **Discussion Point:** Ask participants for examples of when their “feel” for a situation proved to be correct. Discuss how people often ignore their own “sense” or “feel” for a situation simply because they can’t put into words their reasons for this “sense” or “feel,” or because once they say what they are sensing, other people disagree.

✓ **3. Treating Emotions as Facts Leads to Difficulties**

When carried to extremes, emotions are treated as facts: “If I feel incompetent, I am,” “If I get depressed when left alone, I shouldn’t be left alone,” “If I feel right about something, it is right.” People use their emotions as evidence that what they believe is correct.

Example: “If you had a needle phobia and treated the fear as fact, then you might try to get rid of all of the needles in the world.”

 **Discussion Point:** Ask participants for examples of times when the intensity of their emotions seemed to validate their own view of events. Draw from them instances when emotions have been self-validating and when changing negative emotions has been invalidating. Have them give personal examples if possible. Discuss.

Note to Leaders: The points above—that emotions function to communicate to ourselves, and that these communications may not always be accurate—are crucial and very sensitive for many individuals. This is particularly true for individuals who have experienced pervasive invalidating environments. In the absence of validation from others, a primary function of negative emotions can sometimes be self-validation.

The way this works is as follows: When feelings are minimized or invalidated, then it is difficult for individuals to get their concerns and needs taken seriously. One way they counteract this is to increase the intensity of their emotions. Sooner or later, highly emotional people will probably be attended to. If at a later point, these persons do not get very emotional under the same circumstances, this proves other people right: The original emotions weren’t valid in the first place. If a situation is not as bad as a person said it was, then he or she feels shame for having caused so much trouble to others. After enough of these

instances, the person begins to believe that his or her integrity is on the line with emotions. Ergo, the function of negative emotions gradually evolves to that of self-validation.

Getting these points across to highly emotional individuals is fraught with difficulty, because the very idea is invalidating. Care, patience, and skill are needed here.

IV. WHAT MAKES IT HARD TO REGULATE EMOTIONS? (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 4–4A)

Main Point: Regulating emotions is very hard. Biology, lack of skills, reinforcing consequences, moodiness, mental overload, and emotion myths can each make regulating emotions very difficult.

Emotion Regulation Handout 4: What Makes It Hard to Regulate Your Emotions. Review this handout reasonably fast, validating that emotion regulation is very difficult. You can revisit it later to troubleshoot difficulties in using skills successfully.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 16: Troubleshooting Problems in Emotion Regulation (Optional). This worksheet is designed to work with Emotion Regulation Handout 24: Troubleshooting Emotion Regulation Skills. However, it can be given to participants earlier if you do not think it will overwhelm them or interfere with practicing other skills. The worksheet can also be used individually in skills coaching.


Emotion Regulation Handout 4a: Myths about Emotions (Optional). If this handout is used, the best way to work with it is simply to ask participants to read the myths and circle the ones they believe are true. It can be helpful and interesting to ask them to circle the statements they agree with in *emotion mind only*, and to put a checkmark by the ones they agree with when in *wise mind*. Once this is done, and before you move on to any teaching points, use the devil’s advocate strategy described below under F, “Emotion Myths.” (For a fuller description of this technique, see Chapter 9 of the main DBT text.) If you skip reviewing this handout, you can describe several myths about emotions when introducing the Emotion Regulation module.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 3: Myths about Emotions (Optional). You can assign this worksheet whether or not you review Handout 4a. The worksheet is very similar to the list of myths in Handout 4a, but each myth on the worksheet already has one challenge written in. The homework is to develop new challenges or rewrite the challenges already there in more personal language. It is not uncommon for participants to like the challenges as written. If these have personal value for them, this is fine. The important point is for the participants to “own” a challenge, not to necessarily think up a new one. There are also spaces for participants to write in and challenge their own myths.

Orient participants to the following factors that interfere with emotion regulation.

✓ A. Biology

Biological factors can make emotion regulation harder. Some babies are born more emotionally sensitive than others, and they may remain that way as children and adults.²⁸ Emotional intensity also differs across people.²⁹ High emotional sensitivity and intensity can get in the way of learning emotion regulation strategies and of using already learned strategies.

 **Discussion Point:** One way to think about biological differences in emotionality is to consider the children we know or have known. Most parents with multiple children talk about the amazing differences among their children in emotional temperament—differences that become evident shortly after birth. Elicit such experiences in participants’ own lives. Are they more or less emotional than siblings? Have they always had difficulties in emotion regulation, or have the difficulties only shown up recently?

✓ B. Lack of Skill

Say to participants: “When you have skill deficits, you actually don’t know how to change or regulate your emotions and emotion-related actions. You also may not know how to get yourself regulated enough to even want to lower the intensity of your emotions.”

- ✓ **Not having a skill is very different from not having motivation.** People learn emotion regulation starting in infancy.³⁰ The back-and-forth exchange of emotions between mother and baby is the start of emotion regulation training.^{31, 32} Child rearing is, in many ways, a task of teaching children how to regulate their emotions. Some parents are very good at this. Some try hard but do not have the necessary skills. Some don’t have the time or the desire to do it. Some parents can’t regulate their own emotions, and thus find it extremely difficult to teach their children how to do it.³³ Because of biological sensitivity, some children have much more difficulty learning to regulate their emotions than others.

Example: Learning to regulate emotions is like learning to play golf. Although everyone can learn the skill somewhat, it is much easier for some people than for others to get really good at it.

- ✓ **Skills and their use are frequently context-dependent.** That is, a person can have skills in one set of situations, but not in others; or in one mood, but not in another; or in one frame of mind, but not in another.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit descriptions of participants’ experiences in learning emotion regulation.

✓ C. Reinforcement of Emotional Behaviors

As discussed above, emotions have functions. When the functions of certain emotions are reinforced in a particular situation, it can be extremely difficult to change these emotions.

Example: “If every time you are angry, people give you what you want, it will be very, very difficult for you to learn how to regulate your anger. Getting what you want when you are angry can reinforce angry outbursts.”

Example: “If people only listen and help you when you get very sad and depressed and cry a lot, it will be very hard for you to stop being sad.”

Example: “If you are afraid but walk down a dark alley anyway, and then you are attacked, you will have a tough time getting yourself not to be afraid the next time you are tempted to walk down an alley.”

Explain: “Sometimes your emotions do you much good, even when they are very painful or get you in trouble. When this is the case, it can be very hard to change your emotions. You may not even realize that you can’t change your emotions, because they are doing too many good things for you. When this happens, your emotions are being reinforced even if you don’t want them to be. Emotions are reinforced when they do various things for you:

- “They may communicate important messages or cause people to do things for you.”
- “They may motivate your own behavior, so that you do things that are important to you.”
- “They may validate your beliefs about what is going on in a situation.”
- “Or they may make you feel better than you would feel without them.”

✓ D. Moodiness

Regulating emotions takes a lot of effort and energy.^{34, 35} It also takes willingness (a distress tolerance skill; see Distress Tolerance Handout 13). Say to participants: “Moodiness and lack of energy can interfere with your willingness to do the work emotion regulation takes. You may have the capability, but it may be interfered with by your current mood.”

✓ E. Emotional Overload

Continue: “At times, your emotions can be so extreme that you simply cannot get into wise mind in order to figure out what to do. When you are highly aroused, worry thoughts and ruminations^{36, 37} can keep the emotion firing like a computer program that is automatically started when you get highly emotional. Worries like ‘Why did I do that?’ and ‘What will I do?’ get started and trick your brain into thinking that there is actually an answer to the worries.³⁸ Usually, however, there is no answer, so the worries go round and round and round.³⁹ Often worries function as a way to escape your emotions.⁴⁰ Escaping your emotions, however, keeps you from attending to them effectively.^{41, 42} You may have the skills, but ruminating interferes with using your skills.”

Example: Although crying or sobbing can often be reparative, at other times it can become an out-of-control vortex: The more we cry, the more distressed we become, and the more we cry. In these situations, concurrent rumination and rehearsal of all that is wrong repeatedly elicit tears and sobs, so that the reparative function of the emotion is blocked.

✓ *Example:* Extreme anger or other intense emotions can be like falling into a sea of dyscontrol. Reasonable mind does not have a chance to surface and moderate the influence of emotion mind.

✓ F. Myths about Emotion

Faulty beliefs about emotions, the value of expressing emotions, and the ease of recognizing and controlling emotions can cause much trouble when we are trying to learn emotion regulation. Some myths invalidate emotional experiences, such as believing that negative emotions are selfish, or that we can control all our emotions if we just use willpower. What is invalidating is that these myths in no way resonate with our experience of our own emotions. Other myths overvalue emotions. These beliefs ignore the effectiveness of emotions and their expressions, and assert that if we have them, we should not change them. Both sets of beliefs can interfere with emotion regulation.

Example: The myth “Emotions won’t go away” can be replaced with the following: “An emotion can be like being on a surfboard. You will ride up and down on the wave until it finally goes away.”



Practice Exercise: If you are using Handout 4a, distribute it and ask each person to *circle* myths they believe when in emotion mind, and to put a *check* by those they believe when in wise mind. Ask which myths they circled and which they checked. Use the devil’s advocate technique to dispute myths about emotions. In this technique, you play the role of the devil’s advocate, who believes in the myth even more than the participants do. (This can take a fair amount of acting skill on your part.) The task of participants is to develop challenges or counterarguments to the myths. These challenges can be used as cheerleading statements later to help the clients feel better. Have everyone write challenges down as participants think them up. Even when people have been through the myths before and know that you do not really believe your devil’s advocate position, the strategy can still be used, because it provides an opportunity to practice challenging dysfunctional beliefs.

Note to Leaders: For a more expanded set of instructions for this exercise, see Interpersonal Effectiveness Handout 2a: Myths in the Way of Interpersonal Effectiveness. If you only get through a few of the myths on Emotion Regulation Handout 4a, then assign it instead of Worksheet 3 as homework, asking participants to come up with challenges for the rest of the myths.

V. A MODEL OF EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 5–6)

Main Point: Emotions are complex, full-system responses. Changing any part of the system can change the entire response. Knowing the parts of an emotion can guide efforts to change the emotion.

Emotion Regulation Handout 5: A Model for Describing Emotions. This handout shows the components of an emotional response in the form of a flow chart. With some exceptions, the component categories match those on Emotion Regulation Handout 6 and Worksheets 4 and 5. Make every effort to review Handout 6 and at least the basics of the accompanying teaching notes (Section VI, on p. 345) in the same session as Handout 5. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for participants to fill out the worksheets.

Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions. This long handout lists typical components for 10 specific emotions. It gives participants ideas when they have trouble describing characteristics of their own emotions. It does not have to be gone over in detail. You might go over one or two pages in detail (choose your favorites); you can then go through the rest briefly, explaining what they are, and have clients read them between sessions. Some will find this very helpful, others not so helpful. It is essential to convey that the features listed on the handout are not necessary to each emotion. These are typical features, but because of culture and individual learning, features may differ from person to person.

If you must split Handouts 5 and 6 into two sessions, you can assign the reading of Handout 6 as homework, and then instruct participants how to use it to figure out their own emotions and fill out Worksheet 4 or 4a. Alternatively, it might be preferable to put off assigning worksheets until after reviewing Handout 6.

Emotion Regulation Worksheets 4 and 4a: Observing and Describing Emotions. These two worksheets have different formats for filling in the same information—the components of a participant's emotion. Worksheet 4 uses the same graphic format as the model of emotions in Handout 5. Worksheet 4a asks for the components of a specific emotion in a list format. Participants should refer to Handout 6 for ideas when they have trouble describing their own emotions. If necessary, instruct them in how to rate intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion to 100 = most extreme emotion). Common problems in filling out these worksheets are described in the next section.

A. Characteristics of Emotions

Note to Leaders: If you did not review Emotion Regulation Handout 3, review the seven points below either here or later after describing the model of emotions.

- ✓ **1. Emotions Are Complex**
Emotions are complex; they generally consist of several parts or different reactions happening at the same time.⁴³
- ✓ **2. Emotions Are Automatic**
Emotions are involuntary, automatic responses⁴⁴ to internal and external events.
- ✓ **3. Emotions Cannot Be Changed Directly**
We can change the events that cause emotional experiences, but we cannot change emotional experiences directly. We cannot instruct ourselves to *feel* a particular emotion and then feel it. We cannot use willpower to stop an emotional experience even when we desperately want to.

✓ **4. Emotions Are Sudden, and They Rise and Fall**

Emotions ordinarily occur suddenly,⁴⁵ although the intensity of a particular emotion may build up slowly over time. They are also like waves in the sea, because they rise and fall. Most emotions only last from seconds to minutes.

✓ **5. Emotions Are Self-Perpetuating**

Once an emotion starts, it keeps restarting itself. We might even say that “emotions love themselves.” This is because emotions sensitize us to events associated with the emotions.

Examples: When we are in a house at night alone and are afraid, every little sound seems like it may be someone breaking in. When we are in love, we see only the positive points of the person we love. Once we are jealous, every time our loved one looks at someone else, it is proof of betrayal.

6. Emotions Have Components

Emotions have components.⁴² These components are interrelated, and each component influences all others. Thus, although an emotion can be thought of as a complete and transactional systemic response to external and internal events, it can also be very helpful to examine each component separately. A very important take-home message here is that changing just one component can often change the entire emotional response.

7. Some Emotions Are Universal

There are probably about 10–12 universal emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, fear, guilt, joy, jealousy, envy, sadness, shame, surprise, interest, love⁴⁶). People are born with the potential, the biological readiness, for these. Others are learned and are usually some combination of the basic emotions.

✓ **B. Components of Emotions**

Note to Leaders: As you review the components of emotions, it is useful to start drawing the model for describing emotions on the board, using Emotion Regulation Handout 5 as your guide. (Take a copy of the handout with you to the board. I always do.) This way, the model unfolds as you talk about it, and participants don’t get confused about where you are.

The flow of teaching goes much better if you go in the order listed below (points 1–10). You can mention Prompting Event 2 when first presenting prompting events (saying that an emotion just experienced can also be a prompting event), and also as a final comment when completing the explanation of the model.

For each component, give a definition, an example, and one way you can change your emotion by changing that component. (For names of skills that fit each emotion component, see Emotion Regulation Handout 25: Review of Skills for Emotion Regulation.)

✓ **1. Prompting Events**


Prompting events are events or situations that occur right before an emotion starts. They are the cues that set off the emotion at that particular moment instead of at some other moment. (Prompting events are not the events that led up to the prompting event.) Prompting events can be external (outside the person, in the environment) or they can be internal (inside the person).

Note to Leaders: You can help participants remember the meaning of the word “cue” by referring to cue cards in a play which are held up to prompt actors to say their lines.

“Prompting event” is the term used here instead of the word “trigger.” The word “trigger” implies an invariably automatic effect, as when a bullet comes speeding out of a gun when the trigger is pulled.

“Prompting event” is a softer term, implying an easier route to change and the possibility that the event does not always result in an emotional response.

- ✓ **a. Prompts Can Be Internal**
A person’s own thoughts, behaviors, and physical reactions can prompt emotions. One emotion can prompt another secondary emotion.
Example: “When you feel sad, you can then feel angry that you feel sad.”
- ✓ **b. Prompts Can Be External**
Events in the environment, including things that people do, can prompt an emotion.
Examples: “Rain on your wedding day, or a friend’s saying something mean, can make you feel sad.”
- ✓ **c. Events Can Prompt Emotions Automatically**
An external event can prompt an emotion automatically. That is, a person can have an automatic reaction without any thoughts about the event.
Examples: “You may feel fear when looking down from a high place, or joy when seeing a beautiful sunset.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit other examples. Get examples of both primary emotions and secondary emotions. (Remember, a secondary emotion is an emotional response to a preceding emotion.)

- ✓ **d. When Prompting Events Change, Emotions Can Change**
Say: “You can change emotions by changing prompting events. You can avoid these events, or you can take action to change them through problem solving.”

2. Attention/Awareness

Tell participants: “A prompting event will not prompt an emotion if you are not aware that it actually happened. The event has to grab at least part of your attention to have an effect.”

Example: “Your mother says something mean, but your cell phone has died and you do not hear it, and she does not say it again.”

- ✓ **a. There Is No Emotion without Awareness**
Say: “Even when an event is internal—for example, an emotion, an infection, or tense muscles—it will not prompt an emotion if you are not aware of it at some level. The attention grab can be very rapid, but it has to be there at least a little.”
- ✓ **b. When Attention Is Distracted, Emotions Can Change**
“You can change emotions by *distracting your attention away* from prompting events.” (See Distress Tolerance Handout 7: Distracting.)
- ✓ **3. Interpretation of Events Can Be the Prompting Event**
Continue: “Often what really sets off your emotion is your interpretation of the prompting event, not the event itself. Interpretations are thoughts, beliefs, or assumptions about an event, or appraisals of the event.”

Note to Leaders: It is very important to get this point on interpretation across to participants. The more examples you give, the better. It can be particularly effective to tell a story in which at first a person would

misinterpret the situation because of inadequate information, and then change the interpretation when more information is given.

Example: “Your best friend, Jacob, is walking down the mall across from you with another friend of his. You wave and shout his name. He keeps on walking without saying anything. You interpret this as meaning that he likes his other friend more than you, and you feel hurt. If, however, you interpreted it as meaning that the mall was crowded and Jacob did not see or hear you, you would probably not feel hurt.”

Example: Mary doesn’t like Susan or Jenny. Susan gets very angry at Mary for not liking her; Jenny gets very afraid. Why? Susan is thinking how much she has done for Mary; Mary should appreciate it and like her. Jenny thinks that if Mary doesn’t like her, then maybe no one will ever like her.

a. Interpretations Can Contribute to Complex Emotions

Interpretations, as well as the beliefs and assumptions on which they are based, may become part of very complex emotions. For example, despair is sadness combined with a belief that things are terrible and will not get better.

b. Many Interpretations Are Based on Learned Beliefs

Example: People would not be afraid of guns if they did not believe guns can kill.



Practice Exercise: Have participants think up events and interpretations that set off different emotions. One way to do this is to get one person to give a situation or event, have another give an interpretation, and have a third give the emotion. Then, for the same event, have a fourth person give another interpretation and a fifth figure out the emotion that would go with that interpretation. This can be repeated many times with the same event. Go through a number of events. The important point to make is that often people are responding to their own interpretations of an event, not to the event itself.



c. When Interpretations Change, Emotions Can Change

Say: “You can change emotions by checking the facts and changing your interpretations, beliefs, and assumptions accordingly. (Or you can put on ‘rose-colored glasses.’)”

4. Vulnerability Factors

Vulnerability factors are conditions or events that make an individual very sensitive to a prompting event, more likely to make emotional interpretations, and more biologically reactive to specific events. These can occur shortly before the prompting event, or they can occur in the distant past.



a. Events from the Near Past Can Make Us Vulnerable

If we have not had enough sleep, have not eaten, are sick or recently disabled, have drunk alcohol or used mood-altering drugs, or have just been through very stressful events, we are likely to be more vulnerable to emotions than at other times.

In addition, sometimes a prompting event is the “straw that breaks the camel’s back.”

Example: We are more likely to get angry at someone who is asking us for the tenth time for a loan when we have no more money than we are the first time the person asks.

Example: If we are rejected by one person and then rejected by another, we may have a much stronger reaction to the second rejection than we had to the first.

Example: If we go through a very stressful situation that we don't handle very well and feel ashamed about it, we are more likely to say yes if we are offered a drink, drugs, or another way of escaping from ourselves.

Example: If we are in a lot of physical pain or have had many unfair demands placed on us lately, we are much more likely to get very angry if anyone puts one more demand on us.



b. Events from the Distant Past Can Make Us Vulnerable

Events from the distant past can make us more vulnerable to events in the present. This is particularly true if we have not processed or resolved the prior events.

Example: A person who has had a traumatic experience may respond to similar situations as if the traumatic event is happening again, even when it is not. When a person is so traumatized that he or she develops PTSD, for example, the person often responds to even very small events that are associated with the traumatic event as if the trauma is happening again. Thoughts of being shot at, raped, or in a car wreck, or any reminder of such an event in the environment, can evoke the very same reaction as the original experience of being shot at, raped, or in a car wreck.

Example: Many adults find that they sometimes react emotionally to another person in the same way that they reacted to one of their parents, even though the person is in most ways not at all like their parent. Usually the other person has done or said something similar to what a parent said or did. Something in the present can evoke a response from the past, even when we are not consciously aware that the current event is a reminder of the past event.



c. When Vulnerability Factors Change, Emotions Can Change

Say: "You can reduce negative emotions by reducing your current vulnerability factors. For instance, you can do this by getting more sleep; by building a life with less stress; and by increasing resiliency factors in other ways, such as using strategies to desensitize yourself to cues linked to past events."



5. Biological Changes

When emotions fire, several complex biological changes occur so quickly as to be simultaneous.⁴³

a. Emotions Involve Brain Changes

Emotions involve neurochemical changes in the brain.^{47, 48} Some parts of the brain (e.g., the limbic system) appear to be very important in regulating emotions. The brain changes can then have effects on the rest of the body.

Note to Leaders: It is important to note that brain differences between people with a disorder and people without the disorder are not necessarily permanent. It is also not true that the only ways to change the brain are medications or direct stimulation of some sort, such as electroconvulsive treatment (ECT). We now know that the brain can also change when behavior changes!⁴⁹ For example, one study found that individuals with major depression treated with an antidepressant or with interpersonal therapy showed the same regional brain changes after 12 weeks of treatment.⁵⁰ It is thought that psychotherapy is a learning experience and produces change in synaptic plasticity through a retraining of implicit memory systems.^{51–53}

Research Points:

- **Emotional brain circuits.** There appear to be many emotional brain circuits. Different circuits (or systems) appear to be associated with different broad groups of emotions. Examples include the rage/anger system, the fear/anxiety system,⁵⁴ the lust/sexuality system,⁵⁵ the care/nurturance system, the panic/separation system, and the play/joy system. Different parts of the brain (e.g., the amygdala, hypothalamus, and anterior cingulate) and different neurochemicals (e.g., serotonin, norepinephrine, oxytocin, and prolactin) are associated with the firing of emotions and the regulation of emotions. Some people have difficulties regulating all of their emotional circuits. Others have difficulties in only one or a few circuits.⁵⁶
- **Brain asymmetry.** Differences in activation of left and right regions of the brain are related to a predisposition for positive emotional states (right activation low compared to left activation) and negative emotional states (left activation low compared to right activation). For example, some studies have shown that people with clinical depression, compared to people without depression, had decreased left brain activation. Differences in right-brain versus left-brain activation can influence vulnerability to various emotional states. High or low activation in various parts of the brain can make it easier or harder for some individuals to regulate their emotions.^{57–61}
- **Problems in brain chemistry.** Some researchers believe that one reason some people have trouble regulating emotions is that they have a problem in their brain chemistry.⁶²

**b. Emotions Involve Nervous System Changes**

The nerves that are peripheral to the brain and spinal cord send signals to the muscles to contract or relax, and also control autonomic activity—for example, the action of the heart and glands, breathing, digestive processes, and reflex actions. All these responses are also part of emotional responding.

There are two nerve systems controlling autonomic processes that act in opposite directions from each other: an *activating* system and a *deactivating* or quieting system.

When we are under stress, the activating system kicks in. Called the “sympathetic nervous system,” it *increases* heart rate and blood pressure, cools the skin, causes sweating, increases the rate of breathing, and activates the production of sugar to give us energy. It prepares us for actions *now*.

The other system, called the “parasympathetic nervous system,” counteracts these actions by slowing down the body. When we are relaxed, this quieting aspect of the system takes over.

**c. When Biological Processes Change, Emotions Can Change**

We can change our emotions by targeting biological processes with medications, neurofeedback, ECT, behavioral skills aimed at evoking the parasympathetic nervous system, yoga, and many other approaches or techniques.

Psychoactive drugs work to control emotions by changing brain chemistry. Putting drugs into the brain system can have powerful effects on our emotions. However, once the brain knows the drugs are there, it often changes the chemistry again to compensate, and then the drugs quit working.

d. Dysfunctional Behaviors Can Also Regulate Emotions through Biology

Many dysfunctional behaviors (such as using illicit drugs, overusing alcohol, or self-cutting) also regulate emotions by regulating biology. In these cases, however, the behaviors take a great toll on us in other ways.

6. Experiences

Emotions are almost always associated with the experience of feeling sensations and with urges to do something. Both our feelings and our urges prompt us to act in some way.



a. Sensations (Feelings)

When we have emotions, we are actually sensing our body and brain changes. This is usually what is meant by an “emotional experience.” Sensations are an important part of emotions and are the reason we often call emotions “feelings.”

Example: Sadness involves sensations of low energy, heaviness, and emptiness.

Example: Anger involves sensations of high energy and agitation.



The experience of sensations cannot be changed directly. If sensations we don’t like could be changed directly, we would all get rid of physical pain and of emotions we find painful. But what would happen then? We would not avoid dangerous situations. If a child was lost, we would not go out and try to find the child. We would not feel jealousy and thus might not protect what we have. We might decide to give up on anger and not defend ourselves or fight for the rights of others. This would be a disaster. Without feeling emotions, how would we survive? From an evolutionary point of view, the feelings and experiences of emotions are critical for survival.



The experience of sensations can only be changed indirectly. For example, we can focus our attention on something else through distraction, or we can change our biology to block the sensations.



Discussion Point: Say: “When people tell you to quit feeling an emotion, it is like telling you to quit feeling the rain come down on your head or the pain when someone hits you over the head with a skillet. The only way to ‘quit feeling’ it is to divert your attention or change some other aspect of your emotion. Although that is sometimes easy to do, it is sometimes next to impossible. Telling a person to divert attention when his or her foot is in a fire, for example, would not be effective.” Discuss this idea.

Note to Leaders: If participants have been through the Distress Tolerance module already, they may believe that this point contradicts the distraction skills they learned as part of crisis survival. The point to be made is that no skill works for every situation. Problem solving (“getting your hand out of the fire”) and radical acceptance (“when you can’t get your hand out of the fire”) may sometimes be more effective than distraction.



Practice Exercise: If you have not done this previously, lead participants in a series of exercises where they try to quit feeling/sensing something *without* diverting their attention (e.g., their hands on the table, their arms on their chair arms). Then instruct them to try to stop feeling something by diverting their attention.



Discussion Point: Say: “Sometimes the problem with emotion is that you cannot sense your body and its changes. To regulate emotions, you have to be skilled in sensing your body. If you have been practicing shutting off all sensations for years, this can be difficult.” Get feedback from clients: Which participants have difficulty sensing their bodies? Which have difficulty pinpointing exactly what part of their bodies they are sensing? Discuss the notion that for some people, emotions are like a fog; they can’t see (sense) what exactly an emotion is.



b. Action Urges

An important function of emotions is to prompt behavior (e.g., fight in anger, flight in fear). Many of the nervous system changes described above are designed to activate the body to be ready for action. As the body gets ready for action, very strong urges to act can arise.

Discussion Point: Discuss the action urges of several emotions. Elicit feedback from participants. For ideas on actions that go with various emotions, see Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions.

7. Expressions

One of the most important functions of emotions is to communicate.⁶³ If it is to do that, an emotion has to be expressed.



a. Facial Expressions Communicate Emotions

The facial expression of primary or basic emotions is “hard-wired” into human beings.^{64, 65}

Research Point: Research shows that in all cultures, there are some facial expressions that are linked to the same basic emotions. (Many actions that express emotions are also hard-wired.) A change in facial muscles when emotions are activated is universal. People are extremely sensitive to facial expressions from early childhood onward.^{66, 67} During infancy, emotional expressions are especially important social signals at a time when verbal communication is not possible.^{68–71} Researchers now think that changes in the facial muscles play a very important role in actually *causing* emotions. We humans have more nerves in the face than anywhere else in the body. Facial expressions for many of our basic emotions are the same across cultures. The importance of facial expressions in communicating with others is likely very important to our survival.



b. Body Language Communicates Emotions

Even when our faces cannot be seen, our bodies can communicate emotions. Our posture can be relaxed, tense, drooping, or shoulders back. Our hands can be clenched and tight, or open and relaxed. Each different posture sends a message to others about how and what we are feeling.

People can learn to inhibit emotional expressions or to express them differently. For complex emotions that are learned, the expressions are also learned.


Some facial expressions and behaviors may express different emotions, depending on one’s overall culture;⁷² one’s regional culture (e.g., the South vs. the Northwest in the United States); and one’s family culture, school culture, and individual differences.⁷³


Discussion Point: Discuss the fact that each family, town, state, and so on is a “miniculture.” Expressiveness that is OK in one miniculture may not be OK in another. Get examples from participants’ own experience.

Discussion Point: Discuss the point that what an expression means can vary from time to time and person to person. Thus reading emotions is easy in some ways, but very difficult in others. People often misread other people’s emotions. The same behavior can express many different emotions, and the same emotion can be expressed by many different behaviors. Discuss how one behavior can mean many things and how different behaviors can mean the same thing. Get examples from participants’ own lives.

Discussion Point: Many individuals have learned to hide their emotions by controlling the facial muscles and body language that express emotions. This is a natural result of social learning in an emotionally invalidating environment. The hiding is usually automatic; that is, the individuals do

not intend it, or are not aware of it. This is a major reason why others often do not know that these persons are as upset as they are—they don't look it! Discuss how participants have learned to conceal their emotions in this way.


 **Discussion Point:** It is also possible that some individuals are born with emotional systems that are less obviously expressive than the systems of others. It may be that this initial tendency to under-express emotions (e.g., through facial expressions) sets up a situation where others do not get the feedback they need to interact with these persons appropriately. Thus the environment becomes less responsive to the *emotional* expressions of these individuals, setting up an invalidating pattern. Discuss this hypothesis with participants.

 **Practice Exercise:** Go around the room and have participants try to express a particular emotion nonverbally with their facial expressions or just with their bodies. Ask other participants to try and guess what emotion they are expressing.



c. Words Communicate Emotions

Telling other people how we feel about them, ourselves, or a particular event, or how we feel in general, can be very powerful (e.g., “I love you,” “I hate you,” “I am sad,” “I’m sorry”). It can improve others’ understanding of us and also elicit reactions in others.

 **Discussion Point:** Some people have learned never, or hardly ever, to tell other people how they really feel. This can be an advantage in situations where others will punish them for their feelings, or where their true feelings will unnecessarily hurt others. However, this can create a lot of problems with trustworthy people. Discuss when telling the truth about participants’ emotions has been hurtful and when it has been helpful. When has concealing emotions been helpful or hurtful?




d. When Facial and Body Expressions Change, Emotions Can Change

We can change emotions by changing our facial and body expressions. In particular, the connection among our bodies, faces, and emotions is so tight that we can change our emotions simply by changing our facial expressions. This is called the “facial feedback hypothesis.”⁷⁴ We can also change our emotions by changing our posture, how we hold our hands, and the tightness of our muscles.

Example: If we are very afraid or anxious, we can feel calmer by relaxing our muscles.

Research Point: In a study examining the facial feedback hypothesis,⁷⁵ each participant was asked to hold a pencil in the mouth to either facilitate or inhibit smiles. Those participants in the “facilitate smile” condition reported more positive experiences when pleasant scenes and humorous cartoons were presented to them. These results support the theory that our emotions change to match our facial expressions.

Emphasize that **changing emotional expressions is different from suppressing emotion**. Explain to participants: “When you suppress an emotion, you are working hard to restrain, stifle, or hold back a natural expression. It is like trying to smother the expressive part of your emotion. Suppressing emotions can actually lead to more extreme emotions. In contrast, when you change an emotional expression, you are replacing one expression with another. You are actively altering your muscles to modify your expression. Generally, this is very hard to do if your face and body are very tense, as they usually are when you are trying to suppress an emotion.”

 **Discussion Point:** The relationship among facial expression, body language, and each individual’s actual emotional experience is not an exact correspondence. This is particularly so when what we

say does not match our voice tone, our facial expression, and/or our body posture. When this happens, almost everyone will pay attention to the nonverbal communication and ignore the words. This, of course, is a real problem for those of us whose words are more accurate than our nonverbal expressions. Go around the group and have participants discuss ways in which their emotions have been misread, as well as ways in which they have misread others' emotions.

8. Actions



a. Emotions Prepare the Body for Action

One of the primary functions of emotions is to prepare the body for action (e.g., kissing, hitting, running toward someone, withdrawing passively, avoiding, doing cartwheels). Thus an action itself can be thought of as a part of an entire emotional response. Emotions in general can be thought of as a rapid response system. Tell participants: "Remember, emotions evolved in order to prompt actions necessary for survival. Later in this module, we will review how particular types of action typically go with specific emotions."

Discussion Point: One of the most important tasks in development is to learn when to inhibit emotional actions and when not to. People who are very impulsive often have great difficulty here: When they act in accord with their emotions, and this is viewed by others as inappropriate, it is often called "acting out." Other individuals may be so inhibited that they rarely engage in emotional actions. Discuss who is overly impulsive and who is overly inhibited. Often the same person is impulsive in some situations and inhibited in others. Again, discuss.



b. When Actions Change, Emotions Can Change

Say to participants: "You can change emotions by acting opposite to the emotion's action urge. Again, this is something we will work on later in this module."

9. Emotion Names

a. Naming Emotions Is Universal and Helpful

Every culture gives names to emotions. To name an emotion also requires **awareness** of the emotion. When we are communicating to others how we feel, it is important to be able to identify what emotion we are actually feeling, so that our communication will be accurate. There is also some evidence that people who can give an emotion a name experience less negative emotion.⁷⁶ How to name emotions is learned.⁷⁷ Obviously, it is easier to name simple emotions than complex ones.



b. Through Awareness and Naming, Emotions Can Change

Tell participants: "You can change emotions by learning to be aware of and to name your emotions. Again, we will work on this later in this module."

10. Aftereffects

Intense emotions have powerful aftereffects on memory, thoughts, the ability to think, physical functioning, and behavior.



a. "Emotions Love Themselves"

One of the most important aftereffects of emotions is that we become hypervigilant to cues and events that could set off the same emotions and attention is narrowed to information that is incompatible with our emotion. In this way, emotions organize us in such a way as to continue (or keep "refiring"). An emotion that feels as if it has gone on for a very long time is one that is refiring over and over again.

Example: When we are afraid, we often become hypersensitive to any threat to our safety.

Example: When we are angry, we often become hypersensitive to any insulting behavior of others or to behaviors that threaten to interfere with our goals.

Example: When we are in love we ordinarily see all the positives in the person we love and do not see the negative.

b. Monitoring Aftereffects of Intense Emotions Can Help Us Change Subsequent Emotions

Tell participants: “Once you know that intense emotions narrow attention and increase sensitivity to cues for the same emotion, you can remind yourself to check the facts. Knowing you may be seeing things through the lenses of the emotion you are trying to change rather than the lenses of present reality can be helpful at this point.

C. Primary and Secondary Emotions (Optional)

Note to Leaders: This section on the differences between primary and secondary emotions is likely to overload people taking this module for the first time. It can be useful new information for people going through the module a second time.

1. Primary Emotions Are Our Immediate, First Reactions

Our spontaneous emotional reactions to events outside of ourselves are examples of primary emotions.

2. Secondary Emotions Are Usually Reactions to Our Primary Emotions

Sometimes secondary emotions follow primary emotions so quickly that we do not even notice the primary emotions. Sometimes we have spent so many years suppressing our primary emotions that we automatically “jump over” the primary emotions and never even experience them. That is, we develop a habitual secondary emotional response.

Example: Anger is often a secondary emotion to fear. In fact, for some people, anger is a secondary emotion to many primary emotions. Fear can also be a secondary emotion—for example, when a person is very fearful of anger.



3. Secondary Emotions Can Make Identification of Primary Emotions Difficult

If we cannot identify and describe a primary emotion, we will have trouble changing it. Thus problem solving in regard to the primary emotions is difficult. This topic will come up again and again in working with emotions.



Discussion Point: Elicit examples from participants of occasions when they have a secondary emotional reaction to a primary emotion (e.g., getting depressed about being depressed, getting angry or feeling ashamed for getting angry). Ask which usually causes them more trouble and pain—the primary or the secondary emotion?

VI. OBSERVING, DESCRIBING, AND NAMING EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 6)

Main Point: Learning to observe, describe, and name emotions can help with regulating emotions.

Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions. This handout gives participants ideas when they have trouble describing characteristics of their own emotions. It does not have to be gone over in detail. It is essential to convey that the features listed on the handout are not necessary to each emotion. These are typical features, but because of culture and individual learning, features may differ from person to person.

Emotion Regulation Worksheets 4 and 4a: Observing and Describing Emotions. These two worksheets differ in format, but ask for exactly the same information and have the same instructions. Let participants choose which one they want to use, and then review them with participants.

Common problems and errors on these worksheets include the following:

- *Prompting Event:* Participants often want to write an entire story for “Prompting Event.” However, this section should just describe the few moments immediately before the emotion fired. The “story” goes in the “Vulnerability Factors” section.
- *Vulnerability Factors:* The history preceding the prompting event can be communicated under “Vulnerability Factors.” This section is here so participants can tell the story that explains their reaction to the prompting event. Here participants can list events from the distant past (to explain their learning history), as well as events in the immediate past that may have increased their vulnerability to emotion mind. Participants often forget to put in physical illness or pain, alcohol or drug use, lack of sleep, over- or undereating, and stressful events in the 24 hours before the prompting events; it is often important to remind them to do this.
- *Biological Changes and Expressions:* It is easy to confuse “Face and Body Changes and Experiences” as part of “Biological Changes” with “Face and Body Language” as part of “Expressions.” Biological body changes refer to physical changes (blushing, muscles tensing, sweating, hair follicles standing up, etc.). These are the automatic physiological changes that take place with emotions. Describing the experience of body sensations (feelings) sounds similar to describing biological changes (e.g., feeling muscles tensing, feeling hairs standing up). The point to make to participants here is this: “These very same things can also happen without your feeling them, so it is important to note whether you do feel these changes. Face and body language is expression visible to others. It is sometimes the result of face and body changes, as when blushing makes your face visibly red. It can also include such things as frowning, grimacing, smiling, slumping, clenching hands, slinking back, looking down, staring, and crossing arms.”

A. Why Observe and Describe Emotions?



1. To Improve the Ability to Regulate Emotions

Research Point: Research shows that in processing an emotional experience, it is more effective to be very specific about the emotion and emotional events than to try to regulate the emotion in overly general or nonspecific ways.^{78, 79} For example, anxiety is reduced by observing and describing the specific fear-producing cues, in contrast to general impressions regarding cues prompting fear and anxiety.⁸⁰

2. To Learn to Be Separate from Emotions

Explain to participants: “By learning to observe your emotions, you learn to be separate from them and not to be identified with them. In order to control your emotional responses, you must be separate from your emotions so that you can think and use coping strategies.”

3. To Learn to Be at One with Emotions

Continue: “Nevertheless, you also need to be one with your emotions, in the sense that you identify them as part of yourself and not something outside of yourself.”

Example: To the extent that a rider is “one” with a horse, he or she can control the horse. If the rider is separate, fighting the horse, the horse will fight back, and the rider cannot control it smoothly. On the other hand, if the rider is mindless, so to speak, and has no identity separate from the horse, he or she will just cling to the horse for dear life, and the horse will assume all control.

✓ B. Steps in Observing and Describing Emotions

Review the organization of Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions with participants. The emotions on this handout are grouped in families, and each emotion family has one page describing its characteristics. The sequence of emotions is alphabetical except for guilt, which is put after shame because they are often confused. (Shame is a response to evaluating one's entire self as bad or unworthy; guilt is a response to evaluating one's specific behaviors as bad or immoral.) Although the word "jealousy" is commonly used to mean both jealousy and envy, they are separated here, because instructions for changing these emotions are different from each other. Explain to participants: "Jealousy is when you have something of value and someone else is threatening to take it away; envy is when someone else has something you want but don't have."

The key idea to convey to participants is this: "**You can figure out what your emotion is by matching events and your responses to sets of events and responses on Handout 6.** If you can't identify your own emotion—either a current emotion or a past emotion—you can figure it out by systematically reviewing each emotion component and writing it down if necessary. When the components are put all together and you can see your responses in their totality, it can be much easier to figure out your emotion. If necessary, you can review Handout 6 to see which group of emotion components matches your emotion the best."

Note to Leaders: Depending on the group you are teaching, it may be important to provide some discussion of each of the emotions on Emotion Regulation Handout 6 *as you review how to describe and name emotions*. Some are very easy to understand; others may be more difficult. Many of the descriptions in this handout were made up by ordinary people in response to questions about their emotional experiences. Identify each of the following components when reviewing a specific emotion from Handout 6. In my groups, I usually review two or three emotions and assign reading the entire handout as homework.

In reviewing one or several of the emotions on Handout 6, use the outline below to highlight each of the characteristics of these emotions. Note that each of these characteristics map onto the model of emotions previously described.

✓ 1. Prompting Events

Tell participants: "For each specific emotion, these are typical prompting events that set off the emotion—events that occurred right before the emotion started." Here is a place to remind participants that the story of what led up to the event goes under vulnerability factors, which are unique to each person and are not on Handout 6.

✓ 2. Interpretations of Events That Prompt Emotion

Say: "For each specific emotion these are typical interpretations, thoughts, and assumptions about the event that prompt the emotion."

3. Biological Changes and Experiences

Continue: "For each specific emotion these are typical biological changes and experiences, feelings, body sensations, and action urges. Focus here on body changes that you sense (or that you can sense if you pay attention). Note that changes and experiences are similar across some emotions and very different for others."

4. Expressions and Actions

Continue: "Expressions and actions are typical facial expressions, body language, verbal communications, and actions associated with specific emotions. Remember that a primary function of emotions is to elicit actions to solve specific problems. Attend to the actions associated with each emotion."


5. *Aftereffects of Emotion*


Say: “Aftereffects are what happened to your mind, your body, and your emotions just after your first emotion started.”

6. *Name of the Emotion*

As you review various emotions described on Handout 6, check in with participants at the end of each review to be sure that they are correctly identifying and naming this emotion in themselves.

Note to Leaders: Remind participants to use the “Other:” blanks to write in idiosyncratic prompting events, interpretations, biological changes, experiences, expressions and actions that are typical for them for the various emotions. But check the items to be sure that they really do go with the emotion listed. Some participants may not understand their primary emotion, or may not realize that what they are experiencing is a secondary emotion occurring so quickly they do not even realize they have skipped over (or simply avoided experiencing) the primary emotion associated with the prompting event.

 **Discussion Point:** As you go through Emotion Regulation Handout 6, ask participants to give their own ideas about characteristics of emotions. Suggest that all write down new ideas on their handouts.

 **Practice Exercise:** First, ask each person to think of an emotional situation to role-play, or use one of the following situations.

- “Interacting with a friend who gets very angry at you during the interaction.”
- “Being afraid of a very shady-looking person who moves in very close to you at a bus stop.”
- “Meeting a loved one at the airport.”
- “Sitting next to a person you find disgusting.”
- “Talking with a friend about something very sad.”

Second, give instructions on how to do a role play. Have two clients role-play the situation, or you can role-play it with one client. The client who chose the emotional situation needs to communicate as much as possible his or her emotions during the role play.

Third, have everyone observe the role play and describe the nonverbal expressive behavior of the role players. Guide clients to pay special attention to faces.

Fourth, have the role players describe how they actually felt and what they were expressing in the role play.

Note to Leaders: For further suggestions regarding role-play techniques, see Chapter 8, Section V (the Practice Exercises for the DEAR MAN skills).

C. Factors That Interfere with Observing and Describing Emotions

Note to Leaders: The points in the section below are usually best made during homework sharing. Participants should fill out as many homework sheets (Emotion Regulation Worksheets 4 or 4a) as there are prompting events. Thus, if a person has a secondary emotional reaction prompted by the original emotion or set of emotions, he or she should fill out a second worksheet. You need to be particularly vigilant about this during homework sharing; it can be very difficult to sort out.

1. *Secondary Emotions (Emotional Reactions to Emotions)*

As noted earlier, when a secondary emotion comes on the scene, it can cover up or confuse the primary emotional reaction. Sometimes the only way to sort this out is to pay significant atten-

tion to the prompting event and the interpretations of the event. You might ask participants: “What emotion would most people have following that emotion?” or “If you were not afraid [guilty, ashamed] of your own emotions, what emotion would you have experienced after that prompting event?” or “Is there any emotional response you were probably avoiding?”

2. *Ambivalence (More Than One Emotional Reaction to the Same Event)*

Explain to participants: “People often experience two or more emotions at almost exactly the same moment. This can confuse the situation. For example, you might love your parents, and at the same time be furious with them and want to get as far away from them as possible. When moving to a new town, you might be excited and afraid at the same time. To sort this out, complete a worksheet for each emotion experienced, and don’t worry about which is primary and secondary before completing the worksheet. It will probably be less confusing to figure this out after completing the worksheet, even if it is difficult to separate the primary and secondary emotions.”

VII. OVERVIEW: CHANGING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 7)

Main Points: To change unwanted emotions, we must first check the facts. Sometimes this is all that is needed. When the emotion does not fit the facts, we need to practice acting opposite to our emotion. When the emotion fits the facts and the situation is the problem, we need to do problem solving.

Emotion Regulation Handout 7: Changing Emotional Responses. Review this handout even if only briefly, so that participants know that besides checking the facts (covered next in Section VIII), there are two other skills for changing emotional responses: opposite action (covered in Section X) and problem solving (covered in Section XI). Section IX covers how to decide which of the two latter skills to use after checking the facts. This overview, then, orients participants to the three emotion change strategies and prepares them for Section IX and the flow chart in Emotion Regulation Handout 9. Teach the individual skills in Sections VIII–XII, using the handouts described there.

✓ A. Check the Facts

Say to participants: “Changing beliefs and assumptions about a situation to fit the facts can help you change your emotional reactions to it. This requires that you first check out the facts. Checking the facts is a basic strategy in cognitive therapy as well as in many other forms of therapy.”

✓ B. Opposite Action

Continue: “When emotions do not fit the facts, and knowing the facts does not change your emotion, then acting opposite to your emotions—all the way, repeatedly—will change your emotional reactions. This is similar to the old adage ‘If you fall off a horse, get right back on.’”

✓ C. Problem Solving

Go on: “When your emotions fit the facts of the situation and you want to change your emotions, then the situation is the problem. Solving problems will reduce the frequency of negative emotions.”

✓ D. The “Yes, But” Barrier to Changing Emotions

Doing what is needed to change emotional responses can be very difficult. It requires effort, willingness, and an ability to determine what is in one’s own best interest. “Yes, but” is a typical response to efforts to help a person change emotions, particularly when emotional intensity is high and changing emotions is experienced as admitting that the person’s own feelings are invalid. The problem is that “yes, but” does not lead to feeling better or to solving emotional problems. When

“yes, but” rears its head, it can be useful to remind participants that there are only four possible responses to any problem:

1. “*Solve the problem* by changing the situation or by leaving the situation.”
2. “*Change your emotional reaction to the situation*, so that painful emotions are reduced even though the problem remains.”
3. “*Radically accept the situation*. That is, acknowledge that the situation can’t be helped and you can’t change how you feel either, but that completely and willingly accepting this state of affairs can give you a sense of freedom and reduce your suffering.”
4. “*Stay miserable*. (Or you can make things worse.*)”

Note to Leaders: The four options above are presented in the orientation to DBT skills (see Chapter 6). If you have reviewed these steps, remind participants. If this is the first time you are covering these points, see Chapter 6 for a fuller description. If time permits, you might also want to give out General Handout 1a: Options for Solving Any Problem.

VIII. CHECK THE FACTS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 8–8A)

Main Point: We often react to our thoughts and interpretations of an event rather than to the facts of the event.⁸¹ Changing our beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations of events to fit the facts can change our emotional reactions.⁸²

Emotion Regulation Handout 8: Check the Facts. If you have a lot of time, this handout may be easier to teach if you have participants pull out Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions and look at the sections on prompting events and interpretations of events that prompt feelings of specific emotions. If time allows, it can also be helpful to have participants take out copies of Worksheet 5; then, using situations from participants’ own experiences as examples, you can have people fill in a worksheet as you go. The principal strategies used and taught here are those of cognitive modification (see Chapter 11 of the main DBT text).

Emotion Regulation Handout 8a: Examples of Emotions That Fit the Facts (Optional). This handout can be skipped if you are not going to teach opposite action after checking the facts. The same information is also included in Emotion Regulation Handout 13: Reviewing Opposite Action and Problem Solving. However, for many participants, understanding opposite action is much easier if you have first reviewed how emotions fit with facts.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 5: Checking the Facts. It is important to review this worksheet with participants. It can be particularly useful to fill out one of these worksheets while teaching Check the Facts to both demonstrate what is meant by each instruction and to demonstrate how to do it. If necessary, instruct in how to rate intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion, no intensity; 100 = maximum emotion intensity). The “Before” and “After” spaces are for rating emotions before and after checking the facts. If participants have trouble figuring out what emotion they are feeling, instruct them to review Handout 6 and/or fill out Worksheet 4 or 4a. Notice that each step in checking the facts has two sections: one for writing down the descriptions of the situation and of thoughts and interpretations that are probably setting off the emotional response; and one section for considering alternative thoughts, interpretations, and descriptions of the facts.

*Again, the fabulous idea of adding on “you can make things worse” was sent to me in an e-mail from a person who had gone through DBT skills training. Unfortunately, I cannot find the e-mail to give proper credit to this person. I hope to hear from her for a correction in the future.

✓ **A. Why Check the Facts?**

Note to Leaders: Review only a few of the points in Section 1 below, using examples where needed. This section gives the theory behind checking the facts, and you will have many opportunities to teach this material when reviewing homework and when teaching subsequent skills where checking the facts is an integral component.

1. Thoughts and Interpretations of Situations and Events (Instead of the Facts) Can Set Off Painful Emotions⁸³
a. Beliefs about Reality Can Cause Powerful Emotions

Example: A person who believes that a loved one has died in a car accident will feel deep sadness and grief, even if the information the person was given was incorrect and the loved one did not in fact die.

Example: A person who believes that someone is trying to hurt him or her may feel very afraid, even if the facts are completely different and the other person is trying to help, not hurt.

b. Faulty Beliefs about What We Think We Need Can Lead to Emotional Misery

Example: “I need illicit drugs to control my pain,” instead of “I need to find an effective, nondestructive way to deal with my pain.”

Example: “I must be in control!” instead of “I like being in control better than being out of control.”

Example: “You should be different [e.g., nicer, on time, more understanding, willing to give me more pay],” instead of “You are who you are. Something caused you to be this way. But I want you to be different.”

c. Faulty Beliefs about Events Can Cause New Problems

Example: “I can pass a test without studying for it beforehand,” when the person has a low grade point average.

Example: “I have enough gas in the car to get where I am going,” when the fuel gauge is on empty.

Example: “Your spending time with your friends means that you do not love me and I should move out of the house.”

Example: “Your not inviting me to the party means that you do not like me.”

d. Thinking in Absolutes Can Set Off Extreme Emotions

“Thinking in absolutes” means extreme thinking, black-and-white thinking, all-or-none thinking, and either–or thinking.

Example: “He hates me,” instead of “He is pretty annoyed with me.”

Example: “This job is terrible! I can’t stand it!” instead of “Some parts of this job are difficult, but other parts are not so bad. I can tolerate this.”

Example: “If I don’t make straight A’s in this course, I am a failure,” instead of “I may want an A, but less than an A is not a failure.”

Example: “You are either vulnerable or invulnerable,” instead of “A person can be tough at times and vulnerable at times.”



Practice Exercise: Ask participants to imagine the following scene: “Your car has had a flat tire on the expressway. You are parked on the side of the road right after a ramp. You are standing by your car and hoping someone will stop. You see your best friend [mother, father, sister, teacher] coming up the ramp onto the expressway, in the car alone. You wave and jump up and down. Your friend [or whoever it is] looks right at you, but then speeds up and goes by. How would you feel? Would you feel angry? Hurt? Disappointed?” Ordinarily participants will say one of these emotions. Elicit their thoughts about the situation, suggesting interpretations (such as “What a mean thing to do!”), unrealistic demands on reality (“Friends always stop for a friend in need”), absolute thinking (“He hates me”), and so on. Then continue the story: “You discover later that a small child was in the car that you didn’t see, and the child was seriously hurt and your friend was desperately trying to get to the hospital to save the life of the child. Knowing this new fact, how would you feel?” Ordinarily, feelings will change. Point out to participants that the only thing that really changed was their interpretation of the event.



Discussion Point: Elicit examples of times when participants’ interpretation of an event or thoughts running through their minds have influenced how and what emotion they feel. Check for examples of thinking and interpretations that did not fit the facts, unrealistic demands on reality, and thinking in absolutes.



2. Our Emotions Can Affect What We Think about Events and How We React to Thoughts

Temporary moods, for example, can influence ideas, memories, perceptions,⁸⁴ and interpretations of important events, particularly when the events are complex and ambiguous.⁸⁵ The very same information can take on very different coloring, depending on our current emotional state.⁸⁶

Example: When we are angry or annoyed, the cheery friend who calls us up seems more like a pest than a loyal friend.

Example: When we are anxious or afraid, the sound of the wind rattling our bedroom window sounds like someone breaking in.

Example: When we are in a happy mood, even a sour friend can seem like a great person to get together with.

Example: When we are ashamed of making a mistake at work, we may interpret two co-workers laughing in the hall as making fun of our job performance.

Example: When we are sad, we may think a bad grade means we’ll never graduate from college.



Discussion Point: Elicit examples of times when participants’ mood or current emotions have colored how they interpreted events.

Note to Leaders: Relate the fact that emotions can influence thoughts to the concept that “emotions love themselves” and thus perpetuate themselves, discussed both earlier and below.



3. Believing That Our Thoughts Are Absolute Truths Can Be a Recipe for Disaster

It is important to keep these things in mind:

- No one has the absolute truth.
- Believing that “I have a hold on the absolute truth” ordinarily leads to conflict and can even precipitate wars.
- Different opinions on the facts can be valid even if we don’t agree with them.
- There is always more than one way to see a situation, and more than one way to solve a problem.

- Two things that seem like (or are) opposites can both be true.
- Meaning and truth evolve over time.

Note to Leaders: The points listed above are also covered in Chapter 8, Section XV, in the discussion of dialectics as part of the skills for walking the middle path.

✓ 4. *Knowing the Facts Is Essential for Solving Problems*

Incomplete knowledge of the facts, or faulty beliefs about them, can interfere with problem solving.

Example: Believing that my roof is not leaking when it is leaking means that I will not get the roof fixed.

Example: Believing that I failed my exam because the grading was unfair, when in reality it was because I did not study, means that I may not study for the next exam.

✓ 5. *Examining Our Thoughts and Checking the Facts Can Change Our Emotions*

When we respond to incorrect facts, learning the correct facts can change our emotions. In addition, knowing the actual facts of a situation can help us problem-solve emotional situations. That is, knowing the facts can help us change the facts.

Note to Leaders: It may be useful to point out that several effective mental health treatments are based on helping people change cognitions (i.e., thoughts, beliefs, interpretations). One of the major treatments for depression is cognitive therapy. Various forms of CBT (which focuses on changing both cognitions and behaviors) have been developed for treating anxiety disorders, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and many others.⁸⁷ Two of the major treatments for personality disorders—Schema Therapy⁸⁸ and Mentalization-Based Therapy⁸⁹—also target changing cognitions.

✓ B. *How to Check the Facts*

✓ 1. *Ask: What Is the Emotion I Want to Change?*

Tell participants: “It is much more difficult to change an emotion when you don’t know what emotion or set of emotions you are actually feeling. Facts about a situation might fit one emotion but not another. Reviewing Emotion Regulation Handout 6 can be very helpful to you here. Pay careful attention to current thoughts, physical sensations, posture, action urges, actions, and verbal statements when you are reviewing ways to describe emotions.”

✓ 2. *Ask: What Is the Event Prompting My Emotion?*

Say to participants: “Describe the facts observed through the senses. Just the facts! Challenge judgments, extremes, and absolute black-and-white descriptions. A more balanced view of the facts may change your emotions.”

Explain that a prompting event can be an event outside of ourselves or an internal event such as a previous emotion, series of thoughts, or an ability or inability to do a task. A prompting event can be a secondary reaction to a previous emotion (e.g., anger at ourselves for feeling afraid), thought (e.g., feeling guilty at judgmental thoughts about someone), or lack of ability (e.g., feeling ashamed at our inability to remember someone’s name). Our emotions can also be elicited by our own actions (e.g., joy at playing well in a piano recital).

One problem in figuring out emotions is that we often describe situations and our own emotions, thoughts, and actions in judgmental language, with absolute black-and-white statements. Usually this is not an effective way to describe an event, because it can evoke strong negative

emotional reactions. Indeed, our mental description of the event, rather than the event itself, may be the actual prompting event.

✓ 3. Ask: What Are My Interpretations, Thoughts, and Assumptions about the Event?

Often we add to what we observe and then react to what we have added, rather than to what we observed. We jump to a conclusion and then act on that.

Say to participants: “Think about some erroneous interpretations you might make (and then act on) when feeling particular emotions.” Or use these illustrations:

- **Anger:** “Listening to a person express disappointment in something you do (fact) and thinking the person is trying to control you (interpretation).”
- **Disgust:** “Seeing a man looking in your window from the street (fact) and thinking he is a sexual predator (interpretation).”
- **Envy:** “Observing someone receiving a hug (fact) and thinking that this person gets a lot more love than you do (interpretation).”
- **Fear:** “Hearing a creaking sound in the night (fact) and thinking someone is breaking into your house (interpretation).”
- **Happiness:** “Seeing no clouds in the morning sky (fact) and believing it won’t rain on your way home (interpretation).”
- **Jealousy:** “Watching the person you love sitting close to someone else (fact) and believing he or she is now in love with that person (interpretation).”
- **Love:** “Realizing a person wants to have sex with you (fact) and assuming the person is in love with you (interpretation).”
- **Sadness:** “Finding out that a person made plans without you (fact) and deciding the person does not love you (interpretation).”
- **Shame:** “Dropping the ball in a game (fact) and then thinking of yourself as being a loser (interpretation).”
- **Guilt:** “Not wanting to share your food with someone (fact) and deciding that you are being selfish (interpretation).”

✓ “Consider all the other possible interpretations. Other reasonable interpretations, particularly if they are more benign, can be an effective way to regulate your emotions. Practice looking at all sides of a situation and all the various points of view.”

✓ 4. Ask: Am I Assuming a Threat?

Say to participants: “Ask yourself whether you are imagining a threatening event or outcome. Painful emotions are almost always related to some type of threat. What negative outcomes might you be anticipating from the event?” Explain that often we are not even aware that we are assuming some sort of threat. The threat is implicit in our minds. It can be important to really search for the threat we are associating with the prompting event. This is particularly important when we have checked all the facts and still are having very intense emotions. This is a clue that our current emotion may be a secondary emotion, and that it may be very important to figure out what implicit (i.e., nonverbal) threat we are actually reacting to.

✓ a. Label the Threat

The first thing to do is to label the threat, which involves labeling the emotion. Here are the types of threat we may sense when we are feeling particular emotions:

- **Anger:** Being attacked or important goals being blocked.
- **Disgust:** Being contaminated.
- **Fear:** Encountering danger to life, health, well-being.
- **Sadness:** Losing something permanently or not attaining goals.
- **Shame:** Being kicked out of the community.

- **Guilt:** Violating one's own values.
- **Jealousy:** Someone else's taking away a valued person and/or thing.
- **Envy:** Not attaining what is wanted or needed because others have substantially more power, influence, and belongings.



b. Evaluate the Chances That the Threatening Event Will Really Occur

It is important to be in wise mind when considering the likelihood that a threatening event will occur. Often what seems threatening at first glance is not so threatening once we think about it.

Example: “You think, ‘I’m going to be robbed,’ when seeing two men walking towards you on a street at night. Evaluate the chances that the threatening event will really occur by observing if there are other people around, if the men are carrying weapons, and so on.”

Now present the following points to participants, and give the examples that follow:

- “Consider: What was the outcome previous times you had a similar thought?”

Example: “When having a headache, you think, ‘I probably have some terrible disease.’ Remind yourself that you have had many headaches in the past that were not serious and went away before long.”

- “Ask questions; seek more information; check and review the known facts of the situation.”

Example: “When a co-worker walks by you at the mall without saying hi, you think, ‘She doesn’t like me.’ Seek information: Ask the co-worker whether she saw you at the mall.”

- “Observe the problem situation, after first calming yourself down so as to see clearly.”

Example: When your son tells you he had an accident while driving your car, you think, ‘My car is destroyed.’ Observe by checking out the car yourself.”

- “Perform experiments in the real world to see if your predictions come true. How factual are your worries and predictions about events?”

Example: “You think, ‘I can’t get a job.’ Conduct this experiment: Apply for lots of jobs that you qualify for, and see what happens.”



c. Think of Other Possible Outcomes

Tell participants: “Now imagine as many other possible outcomes as you can. The simple act of generating alternative outcomes can itself increase your belief that other outcomes are possible.”

Example: “When told by your boss that he would like to meet with you, you think, ‘I’m going to be fired.’ Generate alternative outcomes: ‘He’s going to ask me for the status of the project I’m working on,’ ‘He’s going to ask me if I can stay late to help him with the project that’s due tomorrow,’ ‘He’s going to give me a bonus for all the overtime I put in this year.’”



5. Ask: What Is the Catastrophe?


What if the threatening event actually does occur?

a. If the Worst Outcome Does Occur, What Are the Realistic Consequences?

Sometimes the facts are every bit as bad as we think they are. However, we often make a bad situation even worse when we catastrophize the facts. “Catastrophizing” is exaggerating the negative characteristics of the facts, and focusing on the worst possible outcome (e.g., “It’s terrible and it’s never going to get any better,” “I’m going to die”). Panic induced by the

thought “Oh my God, I’m dying” can constrict the blood vessels and actually increase the probability of having a heart attack.³⁴ Catastrophizing can increase both physical pain and emotional pain.^{90–92}

Note to Leaders: Help participants see that catastrophizing thoughts are just that: thoughts and images arising and falling within the mind. This can be a difficult concept for them to grasp at first. Refer to the skill of mindfulness of current thoughts (Distress Tolerance Handout 15).

 **Discussion Point:** Ask: “Can anything really be a catastrophe?” Dr. Albert Ellis, a famous therapist who was well known for telling people to stop catastrophizing, was once in a debate with someone who tried to get him to admit that some things really are catastrophes. The person said to Ellis: “What if you are in a plane, and all of a sudden it goes into a nose dive, and it is falling to the earth with you in it? What about that? What would you say then?” Ellis replied very calmly: “Hmm, if you die, you die.” Discuss this with participants. Is there really any fact that one could not accept with equanimity? Even if real catastrophes occur, does catastrophizing (i.e., focusing on the most distressing or hopeless parts of the catastrophe) help anything?



b. Imagine Coping Well with Catastrophes

Encourage clients to imagine that they are coping well with catastrophes in various ways:

- *Problem solving* (see Emotion Regulation Handout 12)
- *Cope ahead* (see Emotion Regulation Handout 19)
- *Radical acceptance* (see Distress Tolerance Handouts 11–11b)

Note to Leaders: At times, participants may find it difficult if not impossible to stop catastrophizing. They may begin fighting you, resisting any attempts on your part to help them move to alternative responses to very painful facts. At these times, it can be very helpful to move to the next point below.



6. Ask: Does My Emotion and/or Its Intensity Fit the Facts?


Encourage clients to check out whether the emotion they are trying to change fits the actual facts of the situation. As noted earlier, emotions evolved as a way for individuals to respond effectively to common problems. There are common situations likely to elicit each of the basic emotions. When such a situation occurs, the corresponding emotion is likely to be useful in the situation—it is likely to fit the facts.

Examples of situations that fit the facts of particular basic emotions are listed in Emotion Regulation Handout 8a. Be sure to note that these are not the only valid prompting events for the emotions in question. Often the problem is not with the specific emotion; it is with the intensity of the emotion. You can also give these examples:

Example: “You get laid off from work and react as if you have been sent into a lifetime of poverty.”

Example: “A person cuts ahead of you into a grocery line, and you react as if the person had physically attacked you and your child in line with you.”

Note to Leaders: It can be very difficult for intensely emotional persons to see through irrational, non-factual descriptions, faulty interpretations, unrealistic worries, and catastrophic versions of the facts. Once again, it is important to remember that “emotions love themselves.” The aftereffects of emotions include narrowing of attention and sensitivity to threat, which can also make it very difficult to change thoughts and images. At these points, participants might be better advised to first use crisis survival skills (e.g., actively working to change body chemistry, using TIP skills, distracting, self-soothing, and doing pros and cons of remaining so emotional [see Distress Tolerance Skills Handouts 5–8]).

 **Discussion Point:** It can be helpful to discuss with participants the concept of “middle-of-the-night thinking.” This is the type of thinking that occurs when we wake up at night with worries and catastrophizing thoughts about our lives. When we wake up in the morning, we often wonder how we could worry so much and believe such catastrophic thoughts. In the middle of the night, it can be helpful simply to say to ourselves: “These are middle-of-the-night thoughts. I am going to ignore them until morning.” Elicit from participants times when they have had “middle-of-the-night thinking” that in the morning did not seem nearly as distressing. Elicit and provide ideas on skills that might be helpful in the middle of the night: “For example, it can be helpful to splash very cold water on your face, and then use paced breathing to distract from your thoughts for a time.” (See Distress Tolerance Handout 6a for a description of how cold water works.)

✓ C. Examples of Emotions That Fit the Facts (*Optional*)

Review Emotion Regulation Handout 8a with participants.

Note to Leaders: Handout 8a can be a helpful review of prompting events for various emotions. It also is good for clarifying what emotions fit what facts. Review one or two of the items on this handout, and suggest that participants review the rest of the handout between sessions.

- ✓ Handout 8a gives examples of basic emotions that fit the facts. In general, the situations listed fit the emotions they are linked to. They are not the only valid prompting events, however. Most important in deciding whether or not to try to change an emotion is to ask wise mind whether specific emotional responses are effective in the specific situation for advancing important personal goals.

Explain to participants that **emotions function to solve problems of common situations we encounter.**

1. *Fear*

Fear functions to keep us safe by urging us to escape danger through avoiding, running away, or hiding from anything that threatens us.

2. *Anger*

Anger functions to protect us from assault or loss of important people, things, or goals by urging us to threaten and attack those who might hurt us.

3. *Disgust*

Disgust functions to keep contamination away from us. It urges us to get rid of or away from whatever we find disgusting. Emphasize that disgust is related to people (including the self), as well as to things such as foods, bodily fluids, or excrement. Consider the words we use sometimes to describe such people or things (“slimy,” “greasy,” “smarmy,” “scumbag,” etc.).

Example: Disgust keeps us from eating foods that will poison us, getting into water that is so polluted it will kill us, and picking up or touching things that might cause a disease.

4. *Envy*

Envy functions to motivate us to work hard to obtain what others have, in order to improve our lives and those of people important to us. It can also mobilize us to try to reduce what others have (when they have a lot more than we do), in order to equalize the distribution of resources. In this way, envy can be thought of as the emotion that redistributes wealth and power.

Envy often fits the facts when others may have a lot more than we do in areas that are very important to us, and it is ultimately unfair that we have less. The problem is that envy is so often corrosive of the mind and spirit that it does us little good. Bitterness is a common outcome of envy. Thus, because it does us little good, it can be ineffective.

Research Point: Research suggests that happiness is not determined by the absolute value of an event or a person's situation, but by its value in relation to other events or situations both interpersonally (among those in the person's environment) and intrapersonally (compared to the person's experience in the past).⁹³ When others have more than we do, not only does this generate envy, but it also adds to our unhappiness. This is why envy is often ineffective, and why we might want to bring it down even when it is justified.

5. Jealousy

Jealousy is justified when someone is threatening to take away relationships or things very important to us. Jealousy is the emotion that ensures we do everything possible to protect these relationships or things. We often do this by trying to control the actions of people we want close to us, or by refusing to share what we have with others.

Note to Leaders: It can be very difficult to know when a relationship is threatened and when it is not. Many people can give examples of situations where they felt very safe within a relationship, only to have the person they loved suddenly leave for another person, without apparent warning signs. Checking the facts (Emotion Regulation Handout 8) can itself be a form of jealous behavior. The important question to ask here is this: "Is it effective to act jealous?"

6. Love

Love functions to motivate us to find, be with, and attach ourselves to other people and things. It is justified when those we love enhance our survival and well-being. Although one can argue that everyone and everything are lovable (and therefore love is always justified by the facts), one can also easily argue that sometimes we love the "wrong" people or things. This can be the case when we are in love with a person who does not love or care for us—or when the person we love actively harms us (such as in violent or otherwise abusive relationships, in friendships with individuals who require co-dependence on addictive behaviors to sustain the relationship, or in friendship groups that threaten to abandon us if we improve our lives more than they do or want to).

7. Sadness

Sadness functions to pull us into ourselves so that we can figure out what is really important to us and what to do when we have lost important things. It also signals to others that help is needed.

8. Shame

Shame has two important functions. First, it prompts us to hide behaviors that would elicit rejection from others and lead to our being rejected from the community. Second, if our behavior somehow becomes public, shame prompts us to grovel and appease those we have offended so that we are not rejected.

Shame is a community-based emotion. It is easy to conclude that if behaviors or personal characteristics are not immoral or wrong, then shame is never justified. This is not the case, however. Shame's evolutionary advantage is that if behaviors sanctioned by one's community elicit shame, then shame-based expressions and actions can keep one in the community. Although staying in a community that elicits shame may not be beneficial in many instances, it is not completely useless. It could have made the difference between life and death in earlier times, and may even do so now in some cultures or groups.

Note to Leaders: If participants in skills training have a mental disorder, the discussion of shame can be critical. It is important for these participants to see that identifying themselves as having a mental disorder, especially when this is done before others get to know them, can not only result in rejection but can also increase a sense of shame. In most cultures, shame is a justified emotion with respect to having a mental disorder. Validate that this is not fair.

9. *Guilt*

Guilt functions by urging us to repair behaviors that violate our moral values, and to prevent future violations.

IX. PREPARING FOR OPPOSITE ACTION AND PROBLEM SOLVING (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 9)

Main Point: If checking the facts does not reduce unwanted emotions, we then have to decide which skill to try next: opposite action or problem solving. A flow chart can help us decide what skills to use for changing emotional reactions to situations.

Emotion Regulation Handout 9: Opposite Action and Problem Solving: Deciding Which to Use.

This handout is a flow chart to help participants figure out what skill to use to change frequent but unwanted emotions. It can be reviewed here to highlight that sometimes a participant has the facts straight and what has to change is the situation. Alternatively, you can make that point while reviewing opposite action, and then teach this handout as a review after teaching problem solving. The key to teaching and understanding this handout is in the examples, so be sure to give at least one example for each situation. Also, it can be useful to elicit examples at each point from participants.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 6: Figuring Out How to Change Unwanted Emotions (*Optional*).

This worksheet mimics Handout 9, but has instructions for using the flow chart to decide what skills to use for changing emotions. Although this worksheet is optional, it can be extremely useful. You can use it for teaching instead of using Handout 9. If you do so, however, give out an extra copy. If it is given to participants, go over the instructions, and be sure participants understand how to use the flow chart.

✓ **A. Three Ways to Change Unwanted Emotions**

Remind participants: “In this module, we are focusing on three ways to change unwanted emotions.”

- ✓ ■ “*Checking the facts* has already been covered. Sometimes just knowing the true facts can change how you feel.”
- ✓ ■ “*Problem solving* is changing your emotions by avoiding, modifying, or solving the event prompting the emotion.” (This skill is covered in Section XI, after opposite action.)
- “*Opposite action* is changing your emotions by acting opposite to your emotional urge to do something.” (This skill is covered next, in Section X.)

✓ **B. When to Use Opposite Action versus Problem Solving**

Say to participants: “The flow chart in Emotion Regulation Handout 9 is designed to help you figure out when to practice opposite action and when to practice problem solving. For both, you have to check the facts first.”

Note to Leaders: It is important to reassure participants that you are not telling them that the way to change all emotions is opposite action. This can seem invalidating when the problem is a serious, ongoing

ing negative event in their lives. Point out that problem solving is also important and that you will teach it after opposite action.

- ✓ Now present the following instructions for following the Handout 9 flow chart to participants. As you go through them, ask each of the questions on the flow chart and then give a good example for that particular situation (your own or from below).

Start by asking: “Does this emotion (and its intensity) fit the facts?”

1. If yes (the emotion fits the facts), ask: “Is acting on this emotion effective?”

a. If yes (the emotion fits the facts) and yes (acting on the emotion is effective):

- **“Be mindful of the current emotion.** Suppressing or avoiding emotions you do not want is rarely useful, and positive emotions are to be enjoyed.”

Example: “When you are afraid your 3-year-old daughter may be hit by a car as she runs into a street with traffic, experience the fear. Don’t try to suppress it, or you may not run out and bring your child back to the curb.”

Example: “When you are in love with a truly wonderful person, enjoy and revel in it.”

- ✓ ■ **“Act on the emotion. Follow your urges.”**

Example: “When you are afraid of walking down a very dangerous alley, avoid it.”

Example: “When you are in love with a truly wonderful person, be with the person.”

Example: “When you are ashamed about events in your past that would likely result in social rejection if others knew about them, keep them private.”

- ✓ ■ **“Engage in problem solving.”**

Example: “When anxiety about money fits the facts because you are having trouble paying your bills, create a budget and work on ways to cut spending or bring in more money.”

Example: “When you are frequently apart from the partner you love, find a way to get together more often.”

Example: “When you are angry at being denied your apartment deposit unjustly, use interpersonal effectiveness skills to fight to get it back.”

- ✓ b. If yes (the emotion fits the facts) but no (acting on the emotion is not effective):

- ✓ ■ **“Do not act on the emotion. Consider opposite action.”**

Example: “You are on a mountain near the top. There was an avalanche behind you, which blocks your ability to go back. There is a crevasse in front of you, which is not impossible to jump over. You are terrified of jumping but have no way to get help. You have waited a long while for help but are now beginning to freeze. Acting on your fear and not jumping will lead to your freezing to death. Opposite action is to summon all your courage and jump.”

Example: “When a car cuts in front of you, you’re angry and have an urge to speed up and cut it off. Anger fits the facts, but cutting off the other car is unlikely to be effective; opposite action is to slow down and accept that some drivers cut people off.”

Example: “Your mother is dying, and you are very sad, but your mother cannot tolerate people being sad around her. Give her cheerful news and focus on positive events.”

Example: “You have applied for a lot of jobs, but haven’t gotten any offers. You find a job opening you could apply for that is just the job you are hoping for, but you are afraid to apply for it because you think you might not get it. Acting on your fear and not applying will not be effective. Opposite action is to get your courage up and apply for the job.”

- ✓ 2. If no (the emotion does not fit the facts) and no (acting on the emotion is not effective):
 - ✓ a. “Do not act on the emotion.”
 - b. “Change your thoughts to fit the facts. This is the easiest way to change emotions. When it works, nothing else is needed.”
 - ✓ c. “Do opposite action. At times, even knowing the facts does not change emotions. In these instances, changing your behavior to change your emotions will be more effective.”

Example: “If you fall off a horse that is not dangerous and are afraid to get back on, get back on.”

Example: “You are afraid to apply for jobs, because you think you will never get a job. Extremes, like ‘I will never get a job,’ are unlikely to fit the facts, and acting on your fear and not applying will not be effective. Opposite action is to get your courage up and start applying for jobs.”
- ✓ 3. If no (the emotion does not fit the facts) but yes (acting on the emotion is effective):
 - ✓ a. “Be mindful of current emotions. Effectiveness depends on your goals. At times an emotion is viewed as effective simply because it makes you feel good to experience the emotions.”
 - ✓ b. “Gracefully accept the consequences of acting on the emotion. Once you decide that an emotion that does not fit the facts is effective for your own goals, then it is important to remember that you may not like the consequences of acting on the emotion.”

Example: “If acting on anger is effective because it makes you feel good, then you may need to accept the consequence that it may put a strain on a relationship you value.”

X. ACTING OPPOSITE TO THE CURRENT EMOTION (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 10–11)

Main Point: When emotions do not fit the facts of a situation, or do not lead to effective behavior, acting opposite to these emotions will change the emotions if this is done repeatedly and all the way.

Emotion Regulation Handout 10: Opposite Action; Emotion Regulation Handout 11: Figuring Out Opposite Action. Make every effort to review Handouts 10 and 11 in the same session. Without examples, it can be hard for participants to understand what an opposite action would look like. Handout 11 is a multipage guide for identifying opposite actions for nine specific emotions. Although the handout gives suggestions for effective opposite actions, it is important to teach participants how to identify their own action urges and how to figure out effective actions opposite to those urges. Brief versions of the critical points are summarized on Emotion Regulation Handout 13: Reviewing Opposite Action and Problem Solving.

It is not necessary to go over every line of every emotion on Handout 10. You should, however, review several emotions so that participants see how to use the handout. In our experience, helping participants differentiate between jealousy and envy and between shame and guilt can be very important. Because the situation that justifies shame is not intuitively obvious (i.e., the threat of being kicked out of the group if shameful behavior or personal characteristics are made public), it is essential that you review this emotion at least briefly. You can also go over each emotion, make one or two highlighting comments, and then ask for questions. Or you can ask participants which emotions they have questions about. I often assign reading through this handout as homework.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 7: Opposite Action to Change Emotions. The homework is to practice opposite action. Filling out the worksheet is used to record the homework so that it can be discussed. Review the worksheet with participants. If necessary, instruct participants in how to rate intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion, no discomfort; 100 = maximum emotion intensity, maximum discomfort).

The “Before” and “After” spaces are for rating the intensity of an emotion before and after practicing opposite action. If participants have trouble figuring out what emotion they are feeling, instruct them to review Emotion Regulation Handout 6, and/or to fill out Worksheet 4 or 4a. When analyzing whether the emotion is justified, participants should focus on the prompting event. Thus it is important to remind participants to be very specific in describing the facts surrounding the prompting event. If necessary, review the mindfulness “what” skill of describing.

✓ A. What Is Opposite Action?

Opposite action is acting opposite to the emotional urge to do or say something.

✓ B. Why Act Opposite?

Opposite action is an effective way to change or reduce unwanted emotions when your emotion does not fit the facts. The old adage “If you fall off a horse, get back on it,” is an example of acting opposite to fear’s urge to avoid the horse.

Most effective treatments for emotional disorders ask clients to reverse the expression and action components of problem emotions. Some psychotherapists believe this is why these treatments work. Here are some of these treatments:

- **Behavioral activation**—that is, doing the opposite of avoidance behaviors, such as isolating, inactivity, and rumination—is an effective treatment for depression.⁹⁴
- **Exposure-based treatments**, which involve doing the opposite of avoiding and escaping feared events, are effective treatments for anxiety disorders.⁹⁵
- **Effective treatments for anger** stress learning to identify the cues to frustration and/or anger, and then leaving the situation to cool down rather than going on the attack.⁹⁶

Note to Leaders: It is essential to get across to participants the rationale for this technique and to elicit their cooperation. See the section on exposure-based procedures in Chapter 11 of the main DBT text for a more extensive discussion.

C. When Opposite Action Works Best

✓ 1. When Knowing the Facts about a Situation Does Not Work

Say to participants: “When knowing the facts about a situation does not work to change your emotional responses, then opposite action can be effective.”

Example: “Knowing something is not dangerous, but still being very afraid of it. This is very common.”

Examples: “Finding out a person did not intend to hurt you, but still feeling angry; knowing your husband loves you and will never leave you, but reacting with jealousy when he looks at beautiful women.”

Example: “Being loved and completely accepted by your friends, but still hiding your body out of shame when you are in the locker room with them.”

Example: “Knowing that asking your boss for a raise is not a threat to your well-being or safety, but still not getting yourself to ask.”

Example: “Knowing intellectually that your behavior in a specific situation was not immoral, but still feeling guilty.”

✓ 2. When the Emotion (or Its Intensity or Duration) Is Not Justified by the Situation

Tell participants: “When your emotion—or its strength, or the length of time it lasts—is not justified by the situation, opposite action can be effective. Problem solving is needed when an emotion is justified by the situation.”


Emphasize that emotions are *not* justified when they do not fit the facts of the actual situation.

Note to Leaders: Evaluating whether an emotion is justified by the facts is similar to determining whether a person has an anxiety disorder or not. For example, a diagnosis of specific phobia requires that the fear or its intensity is irrational, given the facts; in social phobia, fear or anxiety must be out of proportion in frequency and/or duration to the actual situation.⁹⁷ The term “unjustified by the facts” is used here to avoid using the term “irrational.”

Example: “You are told a person said mean and untrue things about you (prompting anger) when in fact he did not.”

Example: “When your boss is introducing a new manager to your work group, she praises two of your co-workers, but not you (prompting fear and hurt). Then you find out she didn’t say anything about you because she had praised you excessively to the manager just an hour previously.”

Example: “The person you love actively harms you, such as in a violent or otherwise abusive relationship, or friends that you love require you to share their dependence on addictive behaviors to sustain the relationship.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit examples of situations where participants have experienced emotions that they then discovered did not fit the facts.

Note to Leaders: You can say that if an emotion does not fit the facts, the emotion is not justified, and that this means it is not justified by the facts. Asking whether an emotion is justified is a shorthand way of asking if the emotion fits the facts. Some therapists or skills trainers (more clinicians than participants, in my experience) find it difficult to say to a person that the person’s emotion is not justified. Generally this is because the clinicians believe that this invalidates the emotion and the person. It is important to remember that a behavior or emotional response can be understandable, while at the same time not being valid. If you or your participants have a lot of trouble with the term “justified,” you can substitute “fits the facts” or another term. When you are changing a term, however, it is important not to “fragilize” the participants. “Fragilize” is a word I invented for DBT; it means treating participants as if they are fragile and unable to tolerate, learn, or do what is needed. The idea is that treating a person as fragile can have the unintended effect of increasing fragility.




Practice Exercise: Tell the following story: “You are going into your office, and when you open your office door you see a poisonous snake hissing and moving near you. You slam the door and are afraid to open it again.” Then ask: “Is fear in that situation justified?” (The answer is yes. Fear fits the facts and is justified.)

Now continue the story. “Overnight, your office manager gets someone to come in and get rid of the poisonous snake. It is no longer in your office, and there are no snakes in your building. You get to the office, but no one tells you that the snake has been removed from your office. You are afraid to open the door to your office.” Then ask: “Is fear justified now?” (The answer is no.) Most likely, however, almost all participants will say yes. The reason is that they think if fear is understandable (there is no way of knowing that the snake is no longer in the office), it is also justified. Discuss how an emotion can be understandable but still not justified by the facts.

Note to Leaders: The point that emotions can be understandable and at the same time not justified by the facts can be very difficult for participants (and often for skills trainers also) to grasp. The main problem is that people often think that if a response is reasonable (such as grieving for a son one has been told is dead when he is in fact alive), then it must be justified. Your task here is to disentangle these two ideas. An emotional response can be both reasonable *and* unjustified. Give extreme examples to make

your point. Use examples both where someone is told the wrong facts and where a misinterpretation of the facts is reasonable.

 **Discussion Point:** Solicit from participants and discuss other times when information appears to fit the facts but does not.

✓ **3. When the Emotion (or Its Intensity or Duration) Is Not Effective for Meeting Goals in the Situation**

Continue: “When your emotion—or its strength, or the length of time it lasts—is not effective for meeting your goals in the situation, opposite action works. Sometimes your emotions may fit the facts very well, but experiencing and expressing the emotion may do you little good and may even cause you harm. In considering opposite action, it is important to think through whether your emotional responses are effective.”


Example: “Your boss criticizes you in front of people you are trying to impress, and then asks for your opinion on an important point. If you want to impress your boss and others at the meeting with your competence, responding with anger may not be in your best interest, even though anger would be justified.”

Example: “You are in the middle of driving on the cliff side of a high, two-lane, winding mountain road. You look down; there is no guard rail, and the road is very narrow. You are suddenly overcome with intense fear; however, panic may actually cause you to go over the cliff rather than keep you safe. Freezing by stopping your car and refusing to go forward is also not an effective option.”

Example: “Just before you go for your driver’s test, you get news that you did not get into the school you applied to. Intense disappointment and perhaps anxiety fit the facts, but these emotions might also interfere with doing well on the driver’s test.”

Example: “A car wreck creates a long backup when you are in a hurry to get somewhere, and you get angry. Being angry does not help you safely get to your destination faster.”

Note to Leaders: When evaluating whether emotions are effective, participants can use Emotion Regulation Worksheet 1 or 2. If they are unsure of goals, you might introduce Emotion Regulation Worksheet 11 or 11a: Getting from Values to Specific Action Steps.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit examples where an emotional reaction has been well justified by the situation, but experiencing and/or expressing the emotion has been ineffective.

4. When You Are Avoiding What Needs to Be Done

Go on: “Sometimes the issue is not really whether an emotion fits the facts, but rather whether acting on your urges has the outcome of avoiding doing things that you need to do. If you find that you are avoiding doing something for this reason, opposite action can be effective.”

Example: “You are depressed and want to stay in bed all day; you want to isolate yourself and avoid everyone and everything. Getting up and active, and engaging with people rather than avoiding them, however, are necessary to reduce the depression.”

Example: “You are so anxious that you don’t want to engage in a treatment that will reduce your anxiety. Acting on your urge to avoid, however, will lead to more anxiety.”

Example: “You borrowed a friend’s book with an inscription from a famous person, and you promised to return it. You have lost it on a camping trip, however, and are avoiding going anywhere near where your friend might be, because you don’t want to let your friend find out

that you lost the book. Unless you want to stop being friends, you will have to tell your friend what happened sooner or later. This calls for opposite action.”

Example: “After looking for a job for 2 years, you get a fabulous job offer at a nursing home for elderly people. A small part of your job will be to manage the bodies of people when they die. You are terrified of dead bodies. This calls for opposite action if you want the job.”

✓ **D. How to Do Opposite Action, Step by Step**

Note to Leaders: Do not skip any of the steps 1–7, as it is important that participants have a good grasp of how and when to use opposite action.

✓ **1. Identify and Name the Emotion You Want to Change**

Instruct participants: “Use Emotion Regulation Handout 6 or Emotion Regulation Worksheets 4 or 4a, if necessary. Then fill in the emotion’s name and rate its intensity (0–100) on Worksheet 7: Opposite Action to Change Emotions.”

✓ **2. Check the Facts**

Tell participants: “The second step can be difficult to figure out. Is there any chance you have misinterpreted a situation or missed important facts about the situation? Check the facts to be sure.”

a. Ask: Does the Emotion Fit the Facts of the Situation?

Continue: “Ask yourself: ‘Is the emotion a reasonable response, given the situation? Is it justified by the facts?’ If your answer is no, move to Steps 3 and 4. If you need to, use Emotion Regulation Handouts 8, 8a, or 11. The last two list the major events (or sets of facts) that ordinarily justify specific emotions. You can also use Emotion Regulation Worksheet 5 to check the facts if necessary.”

✓ **3. Identify and Describe Your Action Urges**

Say: “Pay attention to your impulses, desires, and cravings. Focus on what you feel like doing or saying. Ask yourself: ‘What do I feel like doing? What do I want to say?’ Review Emotion Regulation Handout 6 for some ideas if you can’t figure it out.”

✓ **4. Ask Wise Mind: Is Expressing or Acting on This Emotion Effective in This Situation?**

Go on: “Ask wise mind: ‘If I act on my urge, will it make things better or worse? Will acting on my emotion solve the problem I am faced with? Is expressing my emotion a wise thing to do?’ If the answer is no, move to Step 5.”

✓ **5. Act Opposite to the Emotion’s Urges**

Say to participants: “If you have gotten this far in the process, you have decided that your emotion is not justified by the facts or not effective for your goals. So you should do the *opposite* of your action urges. Look over Emotion Regulation Handouts 11 and 13 for ideas on possible opposite actions for various emotions.”

a. Do the Opposite of Your Actual Action Urges

Instruct participants: “Do the opposite of what your own, *actual* action urges are. Do not blindly follow the actions in Handouts 11 and 13.” The reason for this instruction is this: The opposite actions¹⁷ in these handouts assume that emotions are relatively straightforward and have universal and identifiable common action urges. Emotions, however, are often much more complex and may be a blend of several emotions occurring all at the same time. The

expression and action urges may be unique to that blended emotion. Even when an emotion is simple and easy to identify, its action urges may be unique to an individual or to the individual's cultural or ethnic group.



Practice Exercise: Ask participants to close their eyes and imagine a situation during the past week when they felt angry. Instruct them to imagine the situation and the interaction as if it were happening in the present moment. Then ask them to notice how they feel. Now, as they continue to imagine, instruct them to relax their fingers and their arms and turn the palms of their hands upward on their thighs (if they are sitting) or at their sides (if they are standing). Suggest that they relax their faces from forehead to chin, smoothing them out as much as possible, and then turn the corners of their mouths slightly up. Ask them to notice their emotions again. It is common for people to report a lowering in anger. Explain: "This is opposite action with the hands and face."

Note to Leaders: In this exercise, you are teaching "willing hands" and "half-smiling" as opposite actions. Both are actions opposite of anger. See Distress Tolerance Handout 14 for a fuller set of instructions and rationale for half-smiling and willing hands.

b. Let Opposite Actions Do the Work; Do Not Suppress Emotions

Go on: "Let your opposite action do the work for you. Don't try to suppress your emotional experiences or feelings. If you try to suppress an emotion while doing opposite action, then you are not letting the strategy work—and it may not work. If you experience your emotion, all the while keeping your eyes, ears, and senses open, then you will learn in a fundamental way that, indeed, the emotion is *not* justified. Once your brain gets that information encoded, you will find your emotional reaction going down, down, down over time. Opposite action is a strategy that works over time to reduce your unwanted emotional reactions. If it does not seem to be working, give it time."



Practice Exercise: Have participants close their eyes and pay attention to sensations in their faces. Guide them in noting any areas of tension. Now instruct participants to imagine a situation during the past week when they felt sad or worried. While thinking about it, they should again notice sensations in their faces. Instruct participants to raise a hand slightly to signal to you when they have the situation in mind. Now, as they continue to imagine, instruct them to try to mask the feelings so that no one else in the room (if anyone was looking) would know what they were feeling. Have them notice the sensations in their faces; have them notice what happens to their emotions. Next, instruct each person to relax the muscles in the face, smoothing them out as much as possible. Have participants notice how their emotions change (or don't change); have them notice how different their faces feel. It is common for people to report that when they relax their faces, they feel much more vulnerable. Explain: "This means you are allowing feelings to come and go. You are not holding them in or pushing them out."



6. Do Opposite Action All the Way

Emphasize to participants: "When you do opposite action, do it *all the way*. This means opposite posture, facial expression, thinking, what you say, and how you say it. 'Halfway' opposite action does not work. It is important to work on every part of your response to make sure your opposite action is done *all the way*. See Emotion Regulation Handouts 11 and 13 for ideas."

a. Examples of Halfway Opposite Words and Opposite Thinking

Example: "Going to a party to try to reduce your social phobia, but spending all your time looking down and standing in corners, is halfway opposite action."

Example: “Getting on a plane to reduce your fear of flying, but thinking, ‘It’s going to crash,’ is halfway opposite action.”

Example: “Acting kind and sweet to reduce anger or disgust, but thinking, ‘You jerk! How disgusting!’ is halfway opposite action.”

Example: “Answering a question in a group to reduce feeling humiliated when you are talking in these settings, and then saying, ‘Oh, that was so stupid!’ is halfway opposite action.”

b. Examples of Halfway Opposite Facial Expression, Opposite Voice Tone, and Opposite Posture


Example: “Saying, ‘I understand your point,’ to reduce irritation, but saying it with a sarcastic voice tone, is halfway opposite action.”


Example: “Going to the park with your children to reduce sadness, but doing this with a very sad facial expression and slumped posture, is halfway opposite action.”

Example: “Slumping and looking like you are trying to hide when you reveal actions you are ashamed of is halfway opposite action.”

c. Halfway Opposite Actions Don’t Work

Say: “As you can see from these examples, changing your thinking and your emotional expressions without changing your emotional actions very rarely works. The central aspects of this skill are figuring out what your emotional action urge is, figuring out what the opposite action would be, and then *doing it*.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants examples of times when they or others have done halfway opposite actions. What effect did it have? Check how people felt during and after doing halfway opposite actions.

 **Practice Exercise:** Elicit from participants times they have tried to change their own emotions by acting opposite to the emotion urge—for example, by going to a party they are afraid to go to, or letting a boyfriend or girlfriend out of their sight to get over jealousy. Then have participants role-play or demonstrate acting opposite all the way and then acting opposite halfway. If participants do not want to act scenes out, get them to describe situations where they did opposite actions only halfway.

Note to Leaders: It is important to note again that you are not suggesting suppressing emotions, which many participants may have learned to do quite effectively already. Opposite action, in some ways, is even the opposite action of suppressing emotions.^{97, 98}




7. Continue Acting Opposite until the Emotion Goes Down

Tell participants: “Act opposite in a situation long enough for it to work. That is, keep doing it until you notice your emotion coming down in intensity even just a little bit.”

Also, emphasize the need for practice: “**Repeat opposite action over and over every chance you have.** Sometimes opposite action works immediately. Most of the time, however, you have to practice a lot to get over habitual unjustified emotions. You also sometimes have to practice a lot to get over an emotion that was justified by a situation for years, but now is not.”

Example: “If you are anxious when talking in groups, it may take a lot of times talking in friendly groups to reduce anxiety about it. This is also true of people who do public speaking. It is usual to feel very anxious at first, and then, over time and many practices, to feel much more comfortable.”

Example: “If you are ashamed of something you have done, even though you will not be rejected by your friends if they find out, you may have to talk about it multiple times in your group before you stop feeling ashamed.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants examples of times when they have done the opposite of their emotional urges and found that over time their emotional reactions changed. Fear is generally the easiest emotion to work with, so you may want to start with that first. Then ask for other emotions where opposite action has worked.

✓ E. Figuring Out Opposite Actions

Review Emotion Regulation Handout 11 with participants.

Note to Leaders: The justification for each emotion listed in Emotion Regulation Handout 11 and below is related to the evolutionary function of the emotion. Examples of situations that ordinarily elicit the primary emotions are very similar to those listed in Emotion Regulation Handout 8a. (Review this handout with participants, if necessary.) Fear is placed first below, because opposite action when there is no actual danger makes sense to just about everyone. You need to give many examples, starting with the proverbial example of getting back on a horse after falling off. Anger is placed after fear, because people so frequently confuse anger with fear.

Note that for each emotion in Handout 11, there is a line for participants to put in a personal example that may justify the emotion. Although there is much commonality across cultures in eliciting events for basic emotions, there may be variations on the relationship of situations to emotions across cultures, and it is important to be open to these. This can be a good place to ask participants to put down such information, if appropriate.

Do not let participants drift too far off course. Be sure that the situation itself elicits an emotion, *not* an individual's interpretation of the situation. New facts that justify an emotion should be common or normative in the person's culture, not idiosyncratic to a person or family.

Finally, the suggestions for opposite action are just that—suggestions.

1. Fear

Tell participants: “When fear is *not justified*, approach what you fear rather than avoid it. Do what you are afraid to do rather than avoid it.”



Practice Exercise: The very best practice exercises for opposite action to fear, or to any emotion, are those in which you can get participants to act differently from how they feel right in the group. Over and over across modules, look for opportunities to instruct members to do their best not to act in accord with their emotions of the moment. For example, when people want to leave a session out of anxiety, anger, hurt feelings, or panic, instruct them to stay, orienting them to how staying is practicing acting opposite to their emotions. Periodically ask, “What do you do when you are afraid?” Coach participants until they can always chime out, “Do what you are afraid of!” “What do you do when you're depressed?” “Get active!” “What do you do when you feel guilty?” “Figure out if it is justified, and either repair it (if it is) or do it over and over and over (if not)!” And so on. Drill members until they have this cold.

2. Anger

Say to participants: “When anger is *not justified*, gently avoid the person you are angry with, rather than attacking. Also avoid thinking about him or her, rather than ruminating about all the terrible things the person has done. Distract yourself. Do something kind rather than mean. Try to see the other person's point of view rather than blaming them. Practice half-smiling and/or willing hands.”

Note to Leaders: As mentioned in an earlier note, see Distress Tolerance Handouts 14 and 14a for instructions on how to teach half-smiling and willing (open) hands. Half-smiling here replaces anger’s scowling or hostile grinning, so it is particularly important that the face is completely relaxed before a person engages in a half smile.



Practice Exercise: Briefly teach participants how to half-smile if you have not covered it already. Have participants close their eyes and imagine the person they are angry with. Instruct them: “Bring to mind what the person has done that has caused so much anger. Notice your emotions.” After a few minutes, instruct participants: “While you continue to think about the person and what he or she has done, relax your whole face. Relax your forehead, relax your eyes, relax your cheeks, and let your jaw relax (teeth slightly apart). Then half-smile ever so slightly. Continue half-smiling, and notice your emotions.” Discuss any changes that occurred.



Practice Exercise: Repeat the exercise above. But instead of half-smiling, instruct participants in willing hands if you have not covered it already. Substitute willing hands for half-smiling in the exercise above. Discuss any changes that occur.



Practice Exercise: Repeat the exercise with either half-smiling or willing hands. But now add: “Attempt in your mind to consider the feelings, thoughts, and wishes of the person you are angry with. Try to validate aspects of the other person’s behavior, if only in terms of the behavior being caused. Notice your emotions. Discuss any changes that occur. Discuss experiences.”

Note to Leaders: No matter which of these three practice exercises you use, it is important to tell participants to choose a person they have been angry with recently, but *not* to choose a person who has abused or traumatized them unless they are very sure they are ready to handle their emotions. This is particularly important if participants have PTSD that has not yet been treated.

3. Disgust

Instruct participants: “When disgust is *not justified*—that is, there is no danger of contamination or harm—bring the food or item that you find disgusting very close to you, and keep it close while distracting yourself from irrelevant disgusting thoughts. Or embrace a person you find disgusting, once you find out that your perception was inaccurate.”

Note that increased exposure to a person results in increased liking for that person.^{100, 102} But add: “The exception here is that this is true primarily for people who are similar to you. If it becomes clear after spending more time with a person that this person is dissimilar to you, liking may decrease.”¹⁰¹



Discussion Point: Elicit examples of things people have found disgusting in the past that they no longer find disgusting. Discuss what made their disgust go down over time. Examples may include foods participants found disgusting in childhood, changing diapers the first few times, or taking care of a sick relative or another patient.



Practice Exercise: Bring in something very safe (such as durian fruit or fish sauce) that has a terrible odor. Have each person keep smelling the odor until participants acclimate to the smell.

4. Envy

Say: “When envy is *not justified*, the opposite action is to count your blessings and inhibit urges to diminish what others have.”

5. Jealousy

Say: “When jealousy is *not justified*—in other words, there is no threat at all to what you have or possess—opposite action is to let go of controlling others or the situation and to share what you have with others.”

6. Love

Say: “When love is *not justified*—that is, you love an inappropriate or wrong person or thing—opposite action is to avoid and distract from the person or thing that is loved and all reminders, including loving thoughts, and to remind yourself constantly of why love is unjustified.”


Example: “The person you love does not love you.”

Example: “Friends require you to share their dependence on addictive behaviors to sustain the relationship.”

Example: “Friendship groups threaten to abandon you if you improve your life more than the other members do or want to.”

Example: “You have difficulties moving away from home, changing schools, jobs, or residences, ending relationships (such as therapy, teacher–student, or boss–employee relationships), or tolerating friends moving away.”

Example: “You are overly attached to possessions, rituals, or habits.”

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit examples of situations where participants have “loved too much” or been too attached to persons, places, or things. How did they “recover”?

7. Sadness

Say: “When sadness is *not justified*, and particularly when you are also depressed, get active. Do things that make you feel competent and self-confident, rather than being passive. Increase rewarding activities and pleasant events. Approach, don’t avoid.”


Example: “When you lose a credit card, you have to call and get it canceled to move forward, not sit around being sad that you lost it.”

Note to Leaders: Sadness and disappointment are normal emotions and are often justified by the facts. They become problematic when they outlive their usefulness. The behaviors of sadness (e.g., slowing down, isolation, ruminating about what is lost) can by themselves create a situation in which it is very difficult to stop feeling sad. This can lead to a vicious cycle of depression, which also slows us down, often includes isolation, and so can keep regenerating over and over the very depression we are trying to get out of.

8. Shame

Say: “When shame is *not justified*, there is no threat of being rejected by others. The opposite action for shame is to stop hiding your behavior with people who you know won’t reject you. If your behavior violates your own moral values, but you will not be rejected by others if they know about your behavior, act on the emotion of guilt [see next page]—but do not act on the emotion of shame. For example, instead of avoiding a person when you lost something you borrowed from him or her, meet with the person, apologize, and offer to replace the borrowed item. If, in contrast, your behavior does not violate your own moral values, reduce shame by repeating the behavior over and over in a group that will not reject you.”



 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants examples of behaviors and personal characteristics that can get people devalued and ejected from groups. Behaviors might include criminal behaviors; personal characteristics might include race, sexual orientation, weight/other physical character-

istics, mental disorder, criminal convictions, family origins, and personal history. Discuss how cultural values change, and how with these changes what is “shameful” also changes. Ask about cultural values when participants were children as opposed to now.

Note to Leaders: Remember, behavior and personal characteristics can be moral and valued by the individual, and yet shame can still be justified if others the person cares about will ostracize him or her for that behavior or those personal characteristics. In these situations, it can be important to fight the social norms of the group and advocate to change its values.

9. Guilt

Say: “When guilt is *not justified*—that is, your behavior does not violate your own values or moral code—several opposite actions might be called for. The main opposite action is to continue with the behavior and stop apologizing for it. If your behavior violates other people’s values but not your own (so shame is justified but guilt is not), you can either hide the behavior (this might be important if the community is one you want to stay in *and* the community might kick you out if they know about your behavior); leave and join a different community; or try to change your community’s values. In the third case, social action to change community values would also be a form of opposite action to shame.”

Note to Leaders: If participants don’t know what their own values or moral codes are, it can be hard for them to know whether they have actually violated them. See Emotion Regulation Handout 18 for a list of possible values that may be helpful in figuring this out. You can also suggest readings from the commandments and precepts of the world’s major religions as a starting point. Remember to be respectful of participants from various religious traditions, as well as of those without a religion. If you are treating a person or group from a single religion, you might want to present only the commandments/precepts of that religion.

a. Differentiating “Values” and “Moral Codes”

Although values and moral codes are very similar, they can be differentiated. As the term is used here, a “moral code” is a set of beliefs about what behaviors are wrong or immoral (or, in some vocabularies, sinful). “Values,” in contrast, are what is viewed as important and valuable in one’s life. Although there may be an overlap between behaviors that are important to avoid and behaviors that violate one’s moral code, they are not identical ideas. Values usually refer to what one wants to do in life. Morals usually refer to what one wants to avoid doing. This, again, is not an absolute truth, but it is useful for teaching these concepts.

People and cultures may have different views about what behaviors are moral and immoral. Morality can be learned by observation, by consequences while being raised, or by indirect teaching. Our personal moral codes may have been learned in school or in attending religious activities. Some people can articulate their own moral codes very clearly. Others who may be just as moral would have difficulties describing their moral codes.

Note to Leaders: Summarize opposite action before going on. Make sure that participants understand the concept clearly and know how to use the skill effectively.

F. Troubleshooting

Note to Leaders: If participants say that opposite action is not working, it is important that you do troubleshooting to figure out the problem. Review all the steps of opposite action above and in Emotion Regulation Handout 10, to be sure the procedures are being carried out according to the directions.

1. Is the Emotion Actually Unjustified by the Facts of the Situation?

If the emotion is really justified by the facts, problem solving could be a better way to reduce the emotion.

2. Are Participants' Actions Really Opposite to Their Action Urges?

Perhaps participants are following Emotion Regulation Handout 11 too closely, rather than paying attention to their own individual action urges.

3. Was Opposite Action Done All the Way?

Check out participants' automatic thoughts during opposite action. You might want to ask them to demonstrate how they did it. Often you will find that voice tone, eye gaze, and posture were really not carried out all the way, even though the participants thought they were.

4. Review "Before" and "After" Emotion Intensity Ratings

Was a person's opposite action so brief that the individual did not learn anything new? Check the person's emotion intensity ratings before and after the opposite action, and discuss whether the person was actually processing the information in the situation.

5. Remind Participants That Opposite Action Can Take Time

Children do not get over their fears of ghosts under the bed by looking under the bed one time. Similarly, opposite action does not work if it is only carried out once or a few times.

XI. PROBLEM SOLVING (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 12)

Main Point: When an emotion is justified by the situation, avoiding or changing the situation may be the best way to change one's emotion. Problem solving is the first step in changing difficult situations.

Emotion Regulation Handout 12: Problem Solving. The steps in problem solving are clearly laid out in this handout. Consider starting with one or two sample problems from participants. Put them up on a whiteboard, and then review each step for each problem. If you start by eliciting more than one problem to work on, be sure you have sufficient time to complete all the steps for all problems.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 8: Problem Solving to Change Emotions. The homework for this skill is to practice solving problems that elicit unwanted emotions. Filling out the worksheet can be helpful in figuring out the problem and how to solve it. But actually solving the problem (i.e., taking Steps 5 and 6) is most important for changing emotions. It is useful to review both pages of this worksheet with participants, to be sure they understand what to write where. As with reviewing previous worksheets, tell participants to begin by writing down the emotion name and the starting ("Before") intensity of the emotion. If necessary, remind participants of how to rate the intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion; 100 = maximum intensity). The "After" space is for the intensity rating after implementing a solution. For problems you have worked on in the group, you might want to demonstrate how the worksheet would be filled out.

✓ A. Why Learn Problem Solving?

Say to participants: "When an unwanted emotion fits the facts, the facts are the problem, and you need problem solving. In addition, the ability to solve problems is a basic skill that everyone needs in order to build a life worth living. It is one of the core skills necessary for improving emotion regulation or solving emotional problems."

1. Solving Problem Situations Can Change Difficult Emotions

The specific type of problem solving covered here focuses on solving problem situations that elicit unwanted emotions. When the situation is the problem, the problem-solving skills described here are called for. Most importantly, when the emotion that one wants to change is justified by the situation, changing the situation may be the best way to change one's emotions. Problem solving is the first step in changing difficult situations.

**2. Problem Solving Is Needed When Acting on an Emotion Is Not Likely to Be Effective**

Problem solving as a coping strategy increases the probability of effective coping with a wide range of problematic situations. In contrast to skills that are automatic and effortless (at least after a lot of practice), problem solving ordinarily requires a conscious and focused effort aimed at developing and applying new solutions to the problems one encounters in everyday life.

B. Acknowledge When There Is a Problem to Be Solved

Tell participants: “Before starting problem solving, you have to recognize that there is indeed a problem to be solved.”

1. Types of Problem Situations**a. Situations or People That Elicit Painful or Destructive Emotions**

Situations or persons that bring out painful or destructive emotions call for problem solving, even if we do not immediately see what could be done to change a situation or to deal differently with a person.

b. Situations or People That Are Habitually Avoided Because They Cause Painful Emotions

Situations or persons that we tend to avoid because they bring out painful emotions definitely call for problem solving—particularly if our avoidance interferes with getting what we want in life.

c. One-Time Problem Situations

One-time problem situations—for example, not having a ride to an important appointment, or having an acute illness—call for problem solving.

d. Repeated Problem Situations

When problem situations tend to occur over and over—such as repeatedly being misinterpreted by a friend, or repeatedly failing important exams—problem solving can break the cycle.

e. Repeated Failures to Inhibit Destructive or Ineffective Behavior

A special type of repeated problem situation involves repeatedly failing to keep from engaging in behaviors that are destructive or ineffective. Such behaviors include self-harm, substance abuse, angry outbursts, missing work or therapy, or not doing therapy or school assignments.

f. Chronic Problem Situations

Ongoing situations that create continual misery in life—such as living with a partner who is abusive, or working in a job one hates—may call for problem solving most strongly of all.

**2. Defining Problems: Let Go of Judgmentalness****a. Problems Are Specific to Persons and Situations**

Situations that are a problem for one person may not be a problem for another. Also, the very same painful emotion may be caused by very different situations depending on the person.

b. Problems Are Specific to Time and Circumstances

The same situation may be a problem at one time, but not at another time, depending on changing circumstances within the same person.

Note to Leaders: Problem solving is easiest to teach if you try to solve a problem you have (or think up), or a problem offered by one of the participants, assuming that the problem is not too complex. When solving the problem be sure to review and model steps 1–7 below.

✓ **C. Seven Basic Steps in Problem Solving**¹⁰²

✓ **1. Observe and Describe the Problem Situation**

a. Describe the Situation

Tell participants: “First, use the mindfulness ‘what’ skill of describing to give just the facts of the situation.” (Refer them to Mindfulness Handout 4, if necessary.)

b. Describe What Is Problematic about the Situation

Say: “Next, describe just what about the situation is problematic. Include the consequences of the situation that make it a problem for you.”

Example 1: “Not having a ride to an important appointment means I can’t get to my appointment; I am afraid I will miss it.”

Example 2: “Being ill is not only distressing, but makes it hard for me to do a good job at work; I am worried about the quality of my work.”

Example 3: “Repeatedly being misinterpreted by my friend creates conflict; it makes me irritated; it makes me want to stop talking with my friend.”

Example 4: “Failing important exams might lead to my failing the course; I need the course to graduate; I am afraid I may not graduate.”

Example 5: “Destructive and ineffective behavior ensures that I will not be able to build a life I want to live.”

Example 6: “Living with a partner who is abusive is very painful and feels threatening; I feel ashamed that I have not done anything about this.”

Example 7: “Working in a job I hate is a big factor in my not having a life I want to live; I hate my job more each day.”

c. Describe the Obstacles to Solving the Problem

Continue: “Now describe the conflicts or other obstacles making it hard for you to solve this problem.”

Example 1: “By the time I find another way to get to my appointment, it will be too late, and I will miss it.”

Example 2: “I don’t have enough money to get the medicine I need to feel better.”

Example 3: “This is just about my only friend, and I am afraid of alienating her and losing her friendship.”

Example 4: “I don’t know what to do to get better grades. I study, but I can’t seem to understand the material.”

Example 5: “I don’t know what sets off my problem behaviors.”

Example 6: “If I leave my abusive partner, I will have no one who loves me.”

Example 7: “I don’t have another job to go to. I can’t afford not to have a job.”



Practice Exercise: Elicit examples of current problems from participants. Write them on a board. Include a description, the participants' emotions, the problematic consequences of the situation, and any conflicts or other obstacles evident in the situation. When you are doing this in large groups, you can "fill in the blanks" as needed to move the process along.



2. Check the Facts

If necessary, refer participants to Emotion Regulation Handouts 8 and 8a.

a. Ask: Are My Facts Correct?

Often we respond to our interpretations of situations, rather than to the situations themselves. Our interpretations may be correct; they may also be incorrect. It is important to check the facts.

b. Ask: How Distressing Is the Situation?

It is easy to catastrophize a situation and make it into a much bigger problem than it really is. Radical acceptance and other distress tolerance skills are ways to help us reduce emotion, stop catastrophizing, and see the problem situation more clearly.

c. Ask: Do the Conflicts or Other Obstacles I've Described Reflect the Facts of the Situation?

It is also important to check the facts about conflicts or other obstacles. In periods of emotional distress, it is easy to see many more obstacles than are really there. Interpersonal situations that feel like conflicts in one emotional state may feel like minor disagreements in another emotional state.

Note to Leaders: At times it can be extremely difficult for participants to pinpoint what has set off problem behaviors or what is getting in the way of change. When this is the case, it can be useful for participants to do a chain analysis on themselves to trace the events that led up to a problem behavior or painful emotion. If you have not reviewed the section on analyzing behavior in Chapter 6 and have time, review it here. It may be useful to teach here General Handout 7: Chain Analysis and General Handout 8: Missing-Links Analysis. If so, be sure to include a procedure for giving feedback on participants' use of General Worksheets 2 and 3.



Practice Exercise: Check the facts for the problem descriptions written on the board in Step 1. If the descriptions are clearly factual, move to the next step. It may also be useful to elicit from participants times when they responded to a situation as if it were a major problem when it really wasn't. Modeling examples of this can be useful as well.



3. Identify Your Goal in Solving the Problem

Go on: "The third step is to identify your goal in solving the problem. Keep it simple and something you can really achieve. Naturally, the ultimate goal is to reduce painful emotions. The major task for this step is to identify what has to happen for you to feel better."

Example 1: "Finding a way to get to the important appointment."

Example 2: "Finding a way to get the treatment needed to feel better—or, if that can't be done, finding a way to improve the quality of my work."

Example 3: "Getting my friend to understand me better, or at least stop misinterpreting me."

Example 4: "Finding a way not to fail my exams."

Example 5: "Getting help for understanding my behavior and a strategy for changing it."

Example 6: "Living without a partner who abuses me."

Example 7: "Finding a way to work and like my job, or at least not hate it."



4. Brainstorm Lots of Solutions

Continue: “The next step is to come up with as many novel ideas as possible for solving the problem.”

a. Solutions Can Be Thought of as One or More Actions That Lead to the Goal

Example: To avoid getting harmed by a boss who is mean, solutions may include leaving the job, writing a letter of resignation, or making an appointment with the human resources manager at work.

Example: “Your parents have moved in with you and are driving you crazy. Solutions might include putting a lock on your bedroom door, accepting them for who they are, or getting cable television to distract them.”

Example: “You are afraid of failing a hair-coloring exam in your cosmetology course because the instructor said you cannot take home the mannequin to practice. Solutions might include practicing on a friend, doing visualizations of the procedure, buying a large doll to practice on, or arranging to use the mannequin at the school on the weekend.”

Example: A first step to managing a drinking problem might be to join Alcoholics Anonymous and get a sponsor as quickly as possible.

b. All Ideas Are Welcome; Don’t Evaluate While Brainstorming

It is imperative that ideas not be judged during the brainstorming process. The aim is to generate as many ideas as possible, without censoring any ideas that come to mind—to let thoughts run free and wild. Brainstorming requires an atmosphere of psychological safety. It can take time, but it is important to get every idea anyone can think of down in writing.

Note to Leaders: When demonstrating problem solving it is also important for you as the leader to generate some ideas, particularly if the group’s ideas are rigid or noncreative. In these cases, it would be a good idea for you to generate clearly outrageous ideas. You can suggest clearly antisocial ideas (burn the house down) or clearly ineffective ideas (go to bed and ignore the problem). However, if the group is generating primarily impulsive, ineffective solutions, then you can generate a number of possibly effective ideas. The idea is to get the participants to open up their minds to new possibilities. Continue generating ideas until there are no new ideas or until it is clear that all potentially effective ideas have been generated. Remember that it is never too late to add new ideas to the pool.

Some people almost immediately start to evaluate suggestions, analyze the practicality of each solution, or point out problems rather than continuing to generate new ideas. It can be difficult to leave an idea alone and wait until a later time to evaluate it. But this is a necessary condition of brainstorming. Distress tolerance and impulse control are often necessary to achieve this.



Practice Exercise: In a group setting, there are two ways to do brainstorming. One is to have individuals first generate ideas on their own, either by writing them down or by simply thinking about different options. You can then go around the group and have each person share one idea. Keep going around until the ideas run out. Alternatively, you can elicit ideas from the group as a whole. That way, those who cannot think of any ideas are not put on the spot. Interesting research suggests that you will get more and more creative ideas if you let folks think them up on their own and then share them with the group.^{102, 103}



5. Choose a Solution That Fits the Goal and Is Likely to Work

Although brainstorming can be fun, it is not an end in itself. The point is to generate an effective solution to a problem where no solution was immediately evident. Thus, once many ideas have been generated, it is time to identify which one or two are the best to implement.

a. Prioritize the Suggested Solutions

The potential solutions can be prioritized by organizing them in order of likelihood to work and feasibility of implementation. A solution that might work is useless if it is impossible to put it into action.

b. Do Pros and Cons, and Consult Wise Mind

One or two of the best solutions from the priority list should be chosen. These should be evaluated with wise mind, and a formal pros-and-cons exercise should also be conducted on each.



Practice Exercise: Select solutions generated for one or more of participants' problems. Use the Figure 9.1 schematic to practice pros and cons.



6. Put the Solution into Action

The entire enterprise of problem solving is aimed at putting into action an effective solution to the problem at hand. As the tire commercials say, this is where “the rubber meets the road.”

The chief problems here are as follows:

- Inertia (“This is too hard!” “I am too tired,” “I don’t have time,” etc.).
- Fear-generating thoughts (“If this doesn’t work I will look like a fool,” “This won’t work and I will be a failure,” “People will get mad at me,” etc.).
- Willfulness (“I shouldn’t have to solve this; they caused it,” “If I do something to solve this, I’ll look weak,” etc.); and
- Impulsiveness (i.e., running head first into the problem with an impulsive, ineffective solution, rather than the one initially thought through).



Discussion Point: Elicit from participants examples of times when they have known a solution that might work, but then did not follow through with implementing it. Remind them that this is just

	Solution 1	Solution 2
Pros		
	Solution 1	Solution 2
Cons		

FIGURE 9.1. Chart for figuring out pros and cons of potential solutions to problems.

a new problem to solve. Ask whether the main problem was inertia, fear, willfulness, impulsiveness, or something else. Troubleshoot how to overcome such problems in implementing solutions.


✓ 7. *Evaluate the Results of Implementing the Solution*

Instruct participants to ask themselves: “Am I satisfied with the results of my problem solving? Do I feel better about my situation than before? Were there any negative outcomes for myself or for others?”

The bottom line is that the best-laid plans can go awry. Even when a solution is carried out exactly as planned, it can fail. Unanticipated obstacles can arise, or others can respond in unexpected ways. Thus a critical step in problem solving is to examine how well one’s actions work in solving a problem.

Explain to participants: “Once you realize that you have to evaluate your problem solving, you may be more open to the idea that effective problem solving can take multiple efforts with different solutions before you find the one solution or set of solutions that actually solves the problem. Often if a first effort does not solve a problem completely, it will at least improve the situation somewhat. Then applying other solutions to the problem may reduce all or most of the factors that made the situation distressing.”

Note to Leaders: It is critical to present problem solving as a process that takes time and patience. The idea that there are simple, one-shot solutions can present a tremendous barrier to the focused, difficult, and time-consuming process that solving some problems can require. The more examples you provide of successful problem solving following extended effort, the better—whether these are from your own life or from the lives of others you know.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants examples from their own lives of problems that have been solved with the first solution they tried, and problems that required multiple attempts before getting solved.

XII. REVIEWING OPPOSITE ACTION AND PROBLEM SOLVING (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 13)

Main Point: It is important not only to know when to use opposite action and when to use problem solving, but also to have a clear idea of how these two skills differ in actual practice.

Emotion Regulation Handout 13: Reviewing Opposite Action and Problem Solving. This handout summarizes justifying events for each basic emotion, and then lists sets of opposite actions (for unjustified emotions that don’t fit the facts, or for justified emotions that are ineffective) and problem solutions (for justified emotions). It is reviewed after problem solving is taught, to clarify the relationship of opposite action to problem solving. If time is short, review only the problem-solving column, as this is information that has not been presented before.

When you are reviewing the problem solutions, it is helpful if you link the solutions to the justifying events. (You can also point out that in these cases, justifying events are the same as prompting events in Emotion Regulation Handout 6, and that both justifying events and opposite actions in this handout are shorthand versions of what is presented in Emotion Regulation Handout 11.)

Worksheet: None.

Highlight to participants that the information in the first two columns of Emotion Regulation Handout 13 (justifying events and opposite actions) constitutes a review of what has already been presented in previous handouts (or in previous classes if this is being used in an advanced skills class). Then review different types of problem solutions.

✓ A. Review Problem Solutions

Point out that for each emotion, the first solution is acting on the emotion if that is reasonable. This is followed by solutions aimed at changing the situations, followed by avoiding the situation, and then (when reasonable) changing thoughts about the situation. Be careful not to suggest that this is an exhaustive list of problem solutions. Instead, present it as a starting list of ideas.

Describe the four types of solutions for justified emotion to participants as follows.

✓ 1. Acting on the Emotion

A major function of emotion is to motivate action. Often the action urges associated with the emotion are the same as actions that represent solutions. The actions associated with basic emotions generally function to solve common types of problems.

- ✓ *Examples:* “If a tsunami is coming in from the ocean, run for high ground; if you love someone, spend time with this person; and so on.”

2. Changing the Situation

Say: “At other times, simply acting on an emotion urge may give you only temporary relief when permanent relief is needed. In these situations, you will need to use your problem-solving skills to come up with a strategy for actually changing or solving the situation.”

- ✓ *Example:* “Running away from a rat in your kitchen and jumping up on a chair will temporarily reduce fear and panic, but sooner or later you have to get down from the chair. If you don’t get the rat out of the kitchen, you are likely to have a lot more fear. Problem solving in this case might involve getting a rat trap, baiting it, and putting it in your kitchen, or getting a friend or exterminator to come and get the rat out.”

3. Avoiding or Leaving the Situation

Go on: “Sometimes you can’t change the situation, because other people or situations are more powerful than you are. In these cases, you might choose to avoid the situation altogether.”

- Example:* “If you are a student in a school where you are being bullied, and no amount of complaining to the school or others seems to stop it, you can change schools—or, if possible, avoid walking anywhere near the bullies or block their messages on Facebook.”
- ✓ *Example:* “If you discover that you are really not good in a particular area of school or work and want to stop doing poor work in that area, you can change classes or find a new job in an area you are good at.”

4. Changing Thoughts and Interpretations of the Situation

Continue: “Sometimes you can’t really change the problem situation, and you can’t avoid it either. In these cases, you might try changing how you are thinking about the situation.”

Example: “Cheerlead yourself (‘I can do this; I am going to be OK’) in scary situations where you have to act opposite to your fear, even when there is real danger.”

Example: “If you are envious of someone who has a lot more money than you, you can try putting on a pair of rose-colored glasses about your own status, or placing less value on what others have. An example of this might be to join a group advocating simple living, in hopes it will change your attitude.”

Example: “If someone breaks up with you, you can remind yourself that it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all.”

Note to Leaders: Although many of the problem solutions provided are very clear and easy to understand, some are not so easy and will need clarification and discussion. It is important to note that the

solutions provided are for use when the person actually wants to change an emotion by using one of the problem-solving strategies: acting on emotions, changing the situation, avoiding or leaving the situation, or changing how one views the situation. Some of the points that have been difficult for participants are outlined below. Review as many as you can. Knowing these possible solutions for each of these emotions can also be very helpful when you are coaching clients.

B. Review Typical Solutions for Each Emotion

Review the list of steps covered in Section XI and in Emotion Regulation Handout 12 for solving problem situations. In addition, briefly highlight the following:

1. Fear

Many people do not think of solving fear by doing things that give them a sense of control and mastery. However, this can be very useful over the long run in learning how to respond effectively to events that initially are frightening. (See Emotion Regulation Handout 19: Build Mastery and Cope Ahead.)

2. Anger

It is very important to note here that one should only fight back when that is likely to be an effective response. Say: “An example when fighting back might be needed could be being grabbed from behind when getting into your car at night. If someone only grabs for your handbag or wallet, on the other hand, it might be more effective to give it to the person.”

3. Disgust

Imagining understanding a disgusting person, or imagining really good reasons for something disgusting that has happened (problem solving by changing thoughts about it), might not at first glance appear to be a very good idea. As some participants might say, it seems disgusting in itself. You can point out: “However, if you have no choice except to be around people who do disgusting things on occasion—say, on a bus ride or in a school or work group—this might be an alternative to never-ending feelings of disgust. It is also useful if you yourself have done something truly disgusting in your lifetime. It beats hating yourself for life.”

4. Envy

Say: “Although many people do avoid others who have more than them, many also believe that you should be able to stop wanting what others have. From their perspective, the problem is that you want things you don’t have, not that others have a lot more than you. What is important here is to focus on what is effective problem solving and give up a judgmental attitude.”

5. Jealousy

People who are locked into intimate relationships with others whom they depend on for sustenance and therefore cannot leave have become outraged at the thought that they should work at being more desirable to the persons they depend on. As one participant yelled at me, “You mean I should make myself more desirable to my pimp?” The only response one can give to this critique is this: “Becoming more desirable should only be used if the person you depend on is threatening to leave, and you absolutely want to keep the person from leaving you. Note also that I did not put in the option of changing your thought or interpretation of the person leaving you, because if you actually delude yourself that the person will not leave you, you might lose him or her.”

6. Love

What is important to make clear here is this: “You only fight to find or get back your beloved when loving the person actually fits the facts—that is, the person has all the qualities that justify love.”

7. Sadness

Grieving does not sound at first like a strategy to reduce sadness, but it is. Tell participants: “Grief is necessary to process and comes to terms with loss. If you avoid it, you may end up with long-lasting grief that makes things worse, not better.” There is a large overlap between acting opposite to sadness and problem-solving sadness. This is because acting opposite, once grief has subsided, actually reduces sadness through building back a life that is experienced as worth living. See the ABC skills for reducing vulnerability and building a life worth living (Emotion Regulation Handouts 15–19) for more on these topics.

8. Shame

Many participants will be distressed at the suggestions that they hide or change what will get them rejected, avoid a group, or find a new group to be part of, even when they do not agree that they should be rejected in the first place. It is important to remind participants that the only reason to hide behaviors or characteristics or avoid or find new groups in these situations is if they don’t want to be rejected. Remind them that they can skip these solutions, and instead become activists and work to change the group’s and society’s values and beliefs.

9. Guilt

The important point to be made about guilt when it is justified is this: “To repair what you have done or said, you first have to figure out what you have harmed. If out of anger you kick in a wall, figuring out the repair is easy: Fix or replace the wall. If you have told a mean lie about someone, repair by telling everyone the truth in a manner that gets people to believe you now, not the lie you told. It can be much more difficult to repair, however, when you have done something that loses another’s trust or destroys or takes something away that you cannot replace or give back. In these cases repair may take a long time. It can also be difficult to repair something when it is important that you keep anyone from knowing that you are the person who has done the damage. In these cases, you may need to repair by helping others, rather than the person you have harmed.”



Discussion Point: Be sure to take questions about problem solving for each of these emotions as they arise. For emotions that create a discussion, elicit examples of problem-solving strategies for those emotions from participants, and share any of your own that will clarify the material.

XIII. OVERVIEW: REDUCING VULNERABILITY TO EMOTION MIND (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 14)

Main Point: Emotional distress and anguish can be reduced by decreasing factors that make us vulnerable to negative emotions and moods.

Emotion Regulation Handout 14: Overview: Reducing Vulnerability to Emotion Mind—Building a Live Worth Living. This handout is an overview to orient participants to what is coming next. It can be reviewed very quickly, or skipped (with the information written on the board).

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 9: Steps for Reducing Vulnerability to Emotion Mind. This is a summary worksheet for all the ABC PLEASE skills. If time is short, or you have a group whose members do not like to write, this is a good worksheet to use. Review each section, and point out that participants

can use it to record their pleasant events, as well as their work on developing long-term goals and values, building mastery activities, coping ahead, and using PLEASE skills.

A. Becoming Less Vulnerable to Painful Emotions

Say to participants: “The skills here are about how to build your life so that you become less sensitive and vulnerable to painful emotions. All of us have times when we are more vulnerable to painful emotions than at other times. When we are vulnerable, we can be much more sensitive to events that prompt painful emotions. Some people lead lives that make them vulnerable to painful emotions almost all the time. Accumulating positive events in your life, and practicing the other skills you will learn here, will help increase your resilience.”

✓ B. The ABC PLEASE Skills

Tell participants: “You can remember this set of skills with the term ABC PLEASE.”

- “A is for **Accumulate** positive emotions. When you accumulate positive experiences, events, and valued behavior patterns, you build a wall between you and the sea of emotional dyscontrol.”
- “B is for **Build** mastery, which means doing things that make you feel competent and effective. This is a line of defense against helplessness and hopelessness.”
- “C is for **Cope** ahead of time with emotional situations. Before you get into an emotional situation, rehearse a plan so that you are prepared to cope with the situation skillfully.”
- “PLEASE stands for a set of skills that will help you take care of your mind by taking care of your body.”

Note to Leaders: As noted earlier, DBT assumes that it is often (but not always) the events in life that cause unhappiness, not faulty appraisals of events. This is the opposite of what many therapists assume. However, a reconciliation between the two points of view is possible. A person who gets emotional often begins distorting;¹⁰⁴ thus vigilance for distorting is useful, and reappraisal can be helpful. However, over-focusing on cognitive distortions as the source of difficulty simply further invalidates the behavior, emotions, and thinking processes of the suffering individual. Instead, the goal is to *validate* the individual's responses.

XIV. ACCUMULATING POSITIVE EMOTIONS: SHORT TERM (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 15–16)

Main Point: Most people who feel painful emotions do so for good reasons. It is usually (but not always) the events in life that cause unhappiness. Increasing positive events now can accumulate into a happier life.

Emotion Regulation Handout 15: Accumulating Positive Emotions: Short Term; Emotion Regulation Handout 16: Pleasant Events List. Handout 15 is an overview of building positive experiences now by increasing pleasant events. Move from Handout 15 to Handout 16 in the same session. If there is not a lot of time, ask participants to skim Handout 16 quickly for events that they would find pleasant, and to review the complete schedule during the week. Encourage participants to do as many events as possible that would make them feel happy or joyful, even if only a little bit at first.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 10: Pleasant Events Diary. This worksheet is designed to be filled out daily. It can be useful to have participants write out their plans for pleasant events during the session. During the week, participants should write out what they actually did, and then rate how mindful they were to each event (i.e., how focused and in the moment they were, and how much they participated), how unmindful they were to worries (with no worries = 0), and how pleasant the experience was. Emo-

tion Regulation Worksheets 9 and 13 also have brief sections for tracking pleasant events, along with the other ABC PLEASE skills.

A. Why Add Positive Events to Your Life?



1. Positive Events Increase Positive Emotions/Decrease Negative Emotions

First, positive events not only increase positive emotions, but decrease sadness and other negative emotions. In fact, they are so important that they are important components of two of the most effective behavioral interventions for major depression, cognitive therapy¹⁰⁵ and behavioral activation.¹⁰



2. All People Need Positive Events in Their Lives to Be Happy

We all need positive events in our lives. However, each person needs different things to be happy, and the same person can have different needs at different times.



3. The Absence of Positive Experiences Has Negative Effects

The absence of positive experiences in life reduces happiness, increases sadness, and creates vulnerability to events prompting painful emotions.¹⁰⁶

Example: “Positive events are like food: Food does you no good if you don’t eat it, and positive events do you no good if you don’t experience any.”

4. Negative/Aversive Events Have Negative Effects

Too many negative or painful events in life make it very difficult to feel happy and content,¹⁰⁷ particularly when a person is living a life deprived of positive events.

Example: When people diet, they are often in a state of deprivation, which then results in negative emotional states. Too much work and no play can have the same effect.



Discussion Point: Elicit examples from participants when a sense of deprivation has had a negative impact on their emotions and moods. Discuss.

5. Both Short-Term and Long-Term Positive Events Are Needed

Building a life worth living requires attention to both short-term and long-term positive events.

- Short-term positive events are those that make us feel better *now*—right this minute.
- Long-term positive events are those parts of our lives that give a lasting sense of happiness or contentment.

6. Pleasant Events Are Possible Even in Deprivation

Even in a very deprived life, a person can find or develop pleasant events that will lift the spirits, at least momentarily, and increase positive emotions, even if only slightly.

7. Avoiding Negative Events Can Result in Avoiding Positive Events

People sometimes accidentally avoid pleasant events because they spend so much energy avoiding painful events. This is a recipe for unhappiness.

8. Developing Pleasant Events Is Worth the Effort

People sometimes don’t bother to develop pleasant events, or they are too depressed, tired, overworked, or overwhelmed to make the effort. Often people don’t realize how important it is to add “little positives” into their daily routines. The saying “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” could be changed to “All blah and no pleasure makes Jack an unhappy boy.”

✓ **B. How to Build Positive Experiences Now**

✓ **1. Do at Least One Pleasant Thing a Day**

Tell participants: “To start with, do at least one thing each day that prompts positive emotions, such as enjoyment, pleasure, serenity, calmness, love, joy, pride, or self-confidence.”

Note to Leaders: It can be very important to stress to participants that getting themselves to engage in positive events and to avoid avoiding (see below) often requires a concerted effort to use the skill of opposite action. Problem solving may also be required. I have found it very useful to have everyone check off possible pleasant events on Emotion Regulation Handout 16 and then plan a week of pleasant events on Emotion Regulation Worksheet 10 before the session is over.

2. Use Problem-Solving Skills

Say: “Use problem-solving skills to figure out how to increase the positive events in your life. This is particularly important when you have very little money, an inflexible schedule, or many demands. It can be difficult, but it is possible.”

3. Plan Pleasant Events Ahead of Time

Go on: “Plan pleasant events ahead of time when they are hard to do. Also, try to agree on the plan with someone else. This can help mobilize you, even when your mood says no to doing anything.”

✓ **4. Practice Opposite Action When Necessary**

Continue: “Practice opposite action when you need to activate yourself. (For ideas, see Emotion Regulation Handout 10.) Once you are unhappy, it can be extremely difficult to activate yourself to increase the pleasant events in your life.”

5. Don’t Think in Terms of “Deserving” and “Not Deserving”


Say: “Don’t think in terms of ‘deserving’ and ‘not deserving.’ It is *not* effective. It is also judgmental thinking. If you are a person who thinks this way, you may have to do opposite action by engaging in pleasant events when feeling you don’t deserve them. You may also have to practice nonjudgmentalness, one of the mindfulness ‘how’ skills in Mindfulness Handout 5.”


6. Positive Events Are Reinforcers

Go on: “Keep in mind that positive events are reinforcers. That is, they make you want to activate yourself and keep having positive experiences.”¹⁰⁸

✓ **7. Avoid Avoiding**

Continue: “A special case of taking opposite action is to avoid avoiding events that are pleasant or that will lead to pleasant events. People often avoid pleasant events or taking the sometimes difficult steps that will lead to pleasant events when they are in a bad mood. They say, ‘Why bother?’ and sometimes just give up. This, of course, does not work in the long run, even though at times it does work for the short term. When this is happening to you, the best strategy is to look at the pros and cons of avoiding, and also consult wise mind.”

 **Discussion Point:** Ask participants to find three to seven pleasant events listed in Emotion Regulation Handout 16 that they can do in the next week. Ask them to circle these items and write them down on Emotion Regulation Worksheet 10. Ask participants to share what they circle and/or write down.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit little things that participants find pleasant. Be creative. Get new ideas from Distress Tolerance Handout 2: Overview: Crisis Survival Skills (see also Chapter 10 of this manual).

✓ **C. Be Mindful of Positive Experiences**

A pleasant event that is not attended to will have little effect on our emotions. Often when we think that a pleasant event isn't pleasant, the reality is that we did not pay attention to it.

1. Focus Your Attention on Positive Events As They Happen

Paying attention to positive events can sometimes take a lot of effort. We may be too absorbed with something else to notice the event, or we may have trouble focusing on one thing because there are many distractions. We can also be in the habit of avoiding our own experiences so that we try to suppress even pleasant emotions.

Example: "When you are absorbed in reading a book, it is hard to appreciate that your children are playing right beside you."

2. Refocus on the Positive When Your Mind Wanders to the Negative

When the number of positive events in our lives is much smaller than the number of painful events, it can be hard to tear our minds away from what is painful. This can be particularly difficult when we are angry or bitter and think that feeling better will mean we have "given in." In these situations, refocusing on positive parts of events is an example of opposite action. Completing a pros-and-cons worksheet can motivate doing opposite action and building positive experience (see Emotion Regulation Worksheet 1).


Example: "When you are angry at someone and ruminating about how terribly the person has treated you, it is hard to pay attention to the wonderful meal you are eating with a very good friend."

3. Participate and Engage Fully in the Experience

Boredom is a common problem in trying to increase pleasant events. Boredom, however, is often the result of watching events rather than participating in events. Watching the world go by is nowhere as interesting as participating fully in the flow of life's events. Mindfulness is the practice of being present to our lives. It is difficult to benefit from events we are not present to.

Example: "You go to a party you were once looking forward to, but now sit back and just watch others have fun. This is unlikely to boost your morale as much as it would if you threw yourself into the party and engaged with others."

Note to Leaders: Note that each of the core mindfulness skills is essential to benefit from adding pleasant events to one's life. Observing or noticing the event in the present, describing it as it really is without distortion, participating, and engaging nonjudgmentally, one-mindfully, and effectively are all important to experiencing and integrating the pleasant moment.

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit from participants times when they have been completely mindless or "zoned out" when positive events occurred, and times they have been very attentive to positive events. Discuss the differences in experiences.

✓ **D. Be Unmindful of Worries**

✓ **1. Don't Destroy Positive Experiences by Worrying**

It is common for some people to worry about various aspects of a positive experience:


- When the experience will end.

- Whether they deserve the experience or not.
- How the experience might cause others to expect more of them.

Worrying about these things, however, only detracts from the positive experience as it is happening.

✓ 2. *Refocus on the Positive When Necessary*

Encourage participants: “Refocus your mind on the positive parts of ongoing events when worries come up.”

 **Discussion Point:** Discuss factors that make it hard to focus attention on positive events when they are happening.

Note to Leaders: Many people have to work hard to get positive emotions to linger. The skills described above are extremely important. Many emotionally dysregulated individuals can experience positive emotions, but these evaporate in a second; they do not last. Often they are afraid that if they feel good, bad things will happen—that is, they have a phobia of positive emotions¹⁰⁹—or a negative thought intrudes so quickly it erases the positive. These points should be stressed.

✓ E. **Be Patient**

Tell participants: “Adding one or two small pleasant events is unlikely to make a dramatic difference in the quality of your life. But adding them is helpful in changing emotions a little at a time. For pleasant events to be effective, you have to practice them often and try many different activities. Over time, the small changes they make in mood will add up to a noticeable difference. Be patient, be patient!”

Example: Even a pleasant event as small as noticing enjoyable things while walking from place to place can make a small difference. These small differences add up over time.

XV. **ACCUMULATING POSITIVE EMOTIONS: LONG TERM (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUTS 17–18)**

Main Point: It is hard to be happy without a life experienced as “worth living.” Building such a life requires attention to one’s own values and life priorities over the long term. This can take time, patience, and persistence.

Emotion Regulation Handout 17: Accumulating Positive Emotions: Long Term; Emotion Regulation Handout 18: Values and Priorities List. These two handouts should be discussed in the same session. Handout 17 breaks down the process of building a life worth living into seven steps. Handout 18 helps with Step 2 (“Identify values that are important to you”). Remember that the goal of reviewing values is for participants to get to Steps 5 (“Choose one goal to work on now”), 6 (“Identify small action steps toward your goal”), and 7 (“Commit to taking one action step now”). If you wish to accomplish each of these steps in one session, you cannot linger too long on identifying values.

Some individuals know what values are and have a clear sense of their own values. However, many people don’t know what you are talking about when you mention values, and they are unable to articulate their own values. Rather than spending much time trying to define what a value is, just give them Handout 18’s listing of values. Ordinarily this is sufficient to get the point across. Values on Handout 18 are grouped into 14 general categories, A through N. Under each general value are more specific values for a total of 58 specific values. Let participants know that they can choose the more general values, the more specific values, a combination of both, or values not on the list (in which case they should write them down on the lines provided under O for “other”).

Emotion Regulation Worksheets 11 and 11a: Getting from Values to Specific Action Steps.

Both these worksheets are designed for working out what steps are needed to build a life worth living. Worksheet 11 is linear, provides more space, and also emphasizes attending to relationships as a value. Worksheet 11a is much briefer and works well with adolescents. It can also be reviewed at the same time you are teaching Handout 17. Having participants fill out Worksheet 11 or 11a during a group session is a good way to teach this skill if you have time. Alternatively, select one or two group members to guide others through the worksheet on the board. Note that doing the homework on this skill is not designed to have an immediate effect on the quality of participants' lives. Such work may improve a sense of mastery (see Emotion Regulation Handout 19: Build Mastery and Cope Ahead), but major shifts in the quality of life take time.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 11b: Diary of Daily Actions on Values and Priorities. Worksheet 11b is an advanced worksheet for keeping track of actions taken across different life goals and values. This sheet is ordinarily too advanced for most participants at the beginning of skills training, but can be useful for experienced participants who are working on several different goals at once. This worksheet is often very useful in individual therapy. Working on values is also tracked on Emotion Regulation Worksheet 9, which covers all of the other ABC PLEASE skills.

✓ **A. Long-Term Happiness Means Experiencing Life as Worth Living**

- ✓ Tell participants: "It is hard to be happy without a life worth living. This is a fundamental tenet of DBT. Of course, all lives are worth living in reality. No life is *not* worth living. But what is important is that you *experience* your life as worth living—one that is satisfying, and one that brings happiness."

1. Accumulating Positive Events May Require Changing Your Life

- ✓ Say: "If positive events do not occur in your life very often, you may need to make changes in your life so that positive events will occur more often. Accumulating events that build a life worth living is like saving pennies in a piggy bank."

2. A Life Worth Living Is a Life That You Value and That Contains Things You Value

Go on: "Two things are important here. First, you need to go into Wise Mind to find and describe your most important values. Second, you may need to push yourself to overcome fear, regret, shame, guilt, and hopelessness in identifying the values you want to pursue in your life."

✓ **3. Building a Life Worth Living Takes Time and Patience**

a. Short-Term Pleasures versus Long-Term Happiness

Short-term pleasures can sometimes interfere with building a life of stable happiness and contentment. Always seeking things that make us feel different or better *right this minute* can at times get in the way of building permanent positive events into our lives. Sometimes we seek a pleasant event to avoid working on long-term goals that will make permanent changes in our lives. If there are not permanent positive events in our lives, pleasant feelings will probably be temporary rather than lasting.

b. Permanent Positive Events

Permanent positive events are related to the following:

- Living our lives according to our own personal values.
- Achieving goals that are important to us.
- Developing lasting and loving interpersonal relationships.

✓ **B. Building a Life Worth Living, Step by Step**

✓ **1. Avoid Avoiding**

The central problem for many people in building a life worth living is that they avoid doing what is needed to build such a life. Factors that can interfere include not knowing what they want in life; moodiness; emotional overload; and inability to accept that life is often unfair. Although these factors and others may be very understandable reasons for avoiding the hard work necessary to build a life worth living, getting to work on the task is what is needed now. Ultimately, each of us has to build our own lives worth living.

✓ **2. Identify Values That Are Important to You**

a. What Are Values?

- *Values are things that really matter.* Say: “Values are the things that are important to you, what you cherish about life. They are your highest priorities in life.”
- *Values are not goals; they are not outcomes, and they are not in the future.* “Values are ways of living; they are about engaging in activities that you value. It is keeping priorities straight when you make life decisions—big ones and little ones. Values are like a ‘pathless path.’ They give your life direction and meaning, but they do not have an endpoint. Values are like guideposts that remind you of what you care about. Values may tell you that a specific goal is important to work on, but achieving the goal does not mean you can forget that value in your life.”

Example: “You can work on relationships, achieving things in life, and having integrity. But there is no date in the future when you can say, ‘I have achieved that value and don’t need to keep it a priority in my life any longer.’”


- *Values change over time and often are not simple to figure out.* “Values can change during your lifetime and as a result of major life events. Values can also be in conflict with each other. Figuring out which values are most important at any given point in your life can be very important.”

Example: “Having a good time, seeking fun and things that give pleasure, and having free time may be very important when you are young and fancy-free, with few obligations. But, once you are married and have a baby, having a family, staying close, and spending time with your spouse and child may be far more important.”

Good questions to ask participants (and to have them ask themselves) in figuring out values include the following:

- “What in life are your highest priorities? What in life really matters to you?”
- “What is the direction you want your life to go in?”
- “What is in your life now that you do not want to lose?”
- “What things of value are *not* in your life right now?”

And add: “Simply affirming your own values in this way has been found to buffer psychological stress responses.”¹¹⁰

- ✓  **Practice Exercise:** Ask participants to review Emotion Regulation Handout 18, and to check off values that are important to them. Be sure to remind them that they can also write down any important values not included in this handout. Then have each person count up the number of values he or she checked. Share the number of values checked and some of the most important ones with the group. Ask, “How many checked 1–10 values?” How many checked 11–20? How many 21–35? 36–45? Over 45?” My experience is that almost always there is a typical curve, with few at the extremes and most in the middle. Give participants a chance to share one or two values, as well as any new values they wrote out.

Note to Leaders: Be prepared for some distress when participants are looking at the list of values. The list will make many people aware of how far their own lives are from their values. To head this off, you might want to ask participants first to identify one or two important values that are already present in their lives. These might include things that they already have (such as having people to do things with or secure and safe surroundings) or things that they are already doing in their lives (such as working toward goals or treating people equally).

Note to Leaders: If you ask participants to check off only values they believe are really important, or if you suggest an arbitrary number of values to check, you may be waiting a very long time for them to finish the task. It takes a lot of thought to figure out which values are *most* important. When you are responding to participants' values, remember, it is not to suggest or recommend values. It is your task to help participants find their own values.


Research Point: This emphasis on values and their role in building a life worth living is similar to the emphasis on values in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy,⁴² a form of CBT that is very similar to DBT. Most of the values in Handout 18 were adapted from research done in Europe comparing values across different countries.¹¹¹ Thus these values are very general and are widely shared, at least in Western cultures. Similar lists of general values, however, come up in many different research studies on values.

b. Decide Whether Values Are Really Your Own

Often we have made other people's values our own values without really thinking about them. Sometimes we speak and act as if we value things that, in fact, we don't value. We value others' opinions of us, and so we live according to their values to get their approval. Most of us do this some of the time. Some of us do this all of the time. It can be hard to live according to our own values when what we really want is to fit in with others. This is especially difficult if the group we want to fit in with has values different from our own. To have a life worth living, however, we have to live according to our own values. Of course, if we also highly value having others love and approve of us, we may also have to live at least some of our life according to others' values. It's important to know when our highest value is getting love and approval from others and when it's living according to other wise mind values. This can take a lot of thought—and a lot of checking the facts.

Good questions to ask participants (and to have them ask themselves) to see whether a value is really their own value include the following:

- “If you could act according to a particular value but could not tell anyone about it, would you do it? For example, if being an educated person is an important value, but you could not tell anyone that you are taking courses to further your education, would you still take the courses?”
- “If anything were possible, what direction would you want your life to go toward? (This is not about what you think is realistic or what others may think you deserve.)”

 **Discussion Point:** Ask each participant to think of one value he or she currently struggles with that has mostly or completely come from others. Then have participants select one they themselves are ambivalent about or have already rejected. Discuss how difficult it can be for participants to live according to their own values when they have been punished for not living up to other people's values, or when they have been promised great rewards for living according to other people's values.



3. Identify One Value to Work On Now

Tell participants: “Most people have many important values. Focus on just one that is your highest priority. Otherwise, the task will feel too big and overwhelming. Be sure to pick a value you

actually want to work on at this time in your life. Look at what is in your life now that you really value, and at what valuable things are not in your life right now.”

Good questions to ask participants (and to have them ask themselves) include the following:

- “Which value is your highest priority right now?”
- “In what areas does your current life not match your values very well?”
- “Is your own behavior in accord with your wise mind values?”
- “Are there things you really value that are not in your life enough?”
- “Are you doing things that you value?”
- “Are you doing things that go against your core values?”
- “Where do you need to make changes in your life so that it will match what is most important to you?”



4. Identify a Few Goals Related to This Value

a. Goals Are Something Specific That You Can Achieve

Say to participants: “Identify a few goals that will get you closer to your values. Once you have achieved a goal, you don’t have to work on it any more.”

Example: “If you value being powerful and influencing others, you can work on increasing that over your entire life. In contrast, a goal that could help you get more power and influence would be to get a college degree. Once you get it, you don’t continue to work on it.”

Example: “If your highest value is contributing to the larger community, you can continue to do that all your life. Goals that could get you closer to that value would be to get a part-time volunteer job or to donate time to a neighborhood spring cleanup. Once you have done these things, you have achieved those goals.”

b. What Goals Will Get You Closer to Living Your Value?

Goals need to be very specific. Good questions to ask participants (and to have them ask themselves) include the following:

- “What is one thing you could accomplish that would be in accord with the value you are working on?”
- “What is one thing about your behavior that you could change to be living in accord with the value you are working on?”
- “Are there major impediments that must be overcome before you can accomplish your goal?”

Examples:

- “If your value is to make a great deal of money, your goals might include first to get an education, and then to look for a high-paying job or one with potential for advancement.”
- “If your value is to live in secure and safe surroundings, a goal might be to get an apartment in a safe area of town.”
- “If your value is to have a steady income that meets your basic needs, a goal might be to get a job.”
- “If your value is to care for nature and the environment, a goal might be to keep your room or apartment clean and well maintained.”
- “If your value is to have close and satisfying relationships with others, a goal might be to make one friend.”
- “If your value is to be courageous in facing and living life, a goal might be to do something that you are afraid of or that you are avoiding.”

- “If your value is to be a healthy person, a goal might be to lose or gain weight when your doctor recommends it.”

c. Remember the “Art of the Possible” in Setting Goals

Continue: “Be sure that your goals are reasonable. There is no point in setting up goals that cannot be achieved. If the value is to compete successfully with others, setting a goal to be a national tennis champion in 2 years when you have never had tennis lessons is unrealistic. It is also important to avoid goals that will reduce your quality of life if they are met. For example, if your value is to make sacrifices for others, giving away your college education savings to a friend who wants a new car is likely to cause long-term harm that is much greater than the benefits of solving the friend’s temporary transportation needs.”



5. Choose One Goal to Work on Now

a. Put Goals in Order of Importance and Reasonableness

Go on: “You cannot work on every goal related to a value at once. It can be very helpful to organize goals in a list, with the most important and realistically possible goal at the top of the list. This will enable you to set your priorities, so that you know which goal to work on first.”

b. Select One Goal

Select the one goal that is reasonable and important to work on now.



6. Identify Small Action Steps toward Your Goal

Say to participants:

- “Figure out what small steps will move you toward your goals.”
- “Ask yourself what you have to accomplish to get to the goal.”
- “Break the task into small steps you can take now.”
- “Break it down again if the steps are too big.”



7. Take One Action Step Now

Example: Value: Be part of a group.

Possible goals:

- Reconnect with old friends.
- Get a more social job.
- Join a club.

Pick one goal to work on right now:

- Join a club.

Figure out a few action steps for moving toward the goal:

- Look for clubs on craigslist.
- Go to the bookstore by my house and ask about book groups.
- Join an interactive online game or chat room.

Take one step:

- Turn on the computer.



Practice Exercise: Participants often have trouble telling the difference among values, goals, and action steps. Ask participants to work on Worksheet 11 or 11a during session time, and then share what they filled out on the sheet with each other. This also provides you with an opportunity to provide feedback before participants leave the session.

XVI. BUILD MASTERY AND COPE AHEAD SKILLS FOR EMOTIONAL SITUATIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 19)

Main Point: Feeling competent and adequately prepared for difficult situations reduces vulnerability to emotion mind and increases skillful behavior.

Emotion Regulation Handout 19: Build Mastery and Cope Ahead. As its title indicates, this handout covers the steps for building mastery, as well as for coping ahead with emotional situations. Both skill sets are ordinarily taught in the same session.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 12: Build Mastery and Cope Ahead. On this worksheet, participants are to schedule activities to build a sense of accomplishment and then report on what they actually did. Remember that doing activities to build mastery is the target. The point of scheduling is to increase the probability that participants will actually do the homework assignment. However, in reviewing the homework it is important to not penalize participants if they did something other than they planned.

There is space on this worksheet to report two practices of coping ahead. This assignment is hard to do if no difficult situation comes up. In this case, you can assign practice on past situations that were not handled very well.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 13: Putting ABC Skills Together Day by Day. This worksheet has a brief section for tracking Accumulate positive emotions, Build mastery, and Cope ahead. These skills are also tracked on Emotion Regulation Worksheet 9.

✓ A. Build Mastery

1. What Is Mastery?

Tell participants: “Mastery is doing things that make you feel competent, self-confident, in control, and capable of mastering things. Human babies have a natural tendency to increase mastery. This tendency can be lost over time, however, if efforts to increase mastery are not reinforced.”

✓ 2. Why Build Mastery?

Doing things to build mastery is an important component of two of the most effective treatments for depression, cognitive therapy and behavioral activation.³ Building a sense of confidence and competence makes a person more resistant to depression and other negative emotions.^{112, 113}

Building mastery usually requires doing something that is at least a little bit hard or challenging. The idea is to generate a sense of accomplishment. Over time, a series of accomplishments leads to a more positive self-concept, higher self-esteem, and an overall greater level of happiness.^{114, 115}

Note to Leaders: In teaching how to build mastery, it can be helpful to draw lines like those in Figure 9.2. The heavy line two-thirds of the way up on a whiteboard represents the point at which a task becomes impossible. Trying to do a task above this line leads to failure (and a consequent sense of failure and a lowered sense of mastery and competence). Doing tasks at the bottom third of the board, below the dotted line, does not increase mastery. The best place to be trying to master something is midway up, in a space that is difficult but possible. Accomplishing that type of task will give a sense of mastery.

3. How to Build Mastery

a. Do at Least One Thing Each Day

Tell participants: “Do at least one thing each day to build a sense of accomplishment.”

**b. Plan for Success, Not Failure**

Say: “Do something difficult, but possible. Lives of failure are lives where expectations are too high.”

Example: “When you are starting to work out, it is not a good idea to try to run 5 miles the first day just because you heard that a person who is in good shape can do that.”

Impossible
Difficult but possible
Easy

FIGURE 9.2. Different levels of task difficulty for Building Mastery.

**c. Gradually Increase the Difficulty over Time**

Continue: “Once you have mastered the first task, try something a little more difficult each time. However, if any task is too difficult at first, do something a little easier next time.”

Example: When I was learning how to go camping, I started by setting up a tent in the front yard; then I started sleeping in a sleeping bag in the bedroom; then I tried doing both at a car camping site.

d. Look for a Challenge

Note to Leaders: It is extremely important to give examples of very small things that can give a sense of mastery, either from your own life or from the lives of others. An academic bookworm, for example, can get a tremendous jolt of mastery from something as simple as learning how to light a campfire. A person who has never exercised seriously before can get a high from going from lifting 5-pound weights to 10-pound weights. A person with a phobia can increase mastery through taking small steps of opposite action.



Discussion Point: Describe a time in your own life when you had a surge of mastery from an accomplishment. Ask participants for examples from their own lives. Discuss how it felt to succeed at something.



Discussion Point: Elicit activities that give participants a sense of mastery. These will probably differ for each person.

B. Cope Ahead**1. What Is Cope Ahead?**

Say to participants: “Coping ahead is figuring out which situations are likely to cause you trouble, and then not only planning ahead how to cope with expected difficulties, but also imagining being in the situation and coping effectively.”

**2. Why Cope Ahead?**

Research Point: There is a large amount of research showing that we can learn new skills simply by imagining and practicing new skillful behavior in our minds. This is true for all sorts of skills from sports (e.g., tennis players can improve their tennis by practicing their tennis service in their minds¹¹⁶) to interpersonal skills (e.g., individuals can improve their assertion skills by practicing assertive behaviors in their minds¹¹⁷). As it turns out, imagining an activity fires many of the same regions of the brain as actually engaging in that activity does.¹¹⁸ Not only does coping ahead help us in planning how to deal with emotionally pro-

vocative situations, but it also increases the likelihood that we will more automatically respond with the skillful sequence of behaviors we have practiced.

✓ 3. *When to Use Cope Ahead*

✓ Tell participants: “Cope ahead is useful in many types of emotional situations. Here are some of them.”

- ✓
 - “In any situation coming up where there is a threat or you feel afraid.”
 - “When you know your emotions may get so high that you will forget your skills, or you will be unable to put skillful actions together.”
 - “In a new situation where you are very unsure of your skills, and your insecurity may elicit an emotional reaction that will make it very difficult for you to manage the situation effectively.”
 - “When you may have difficult urges—such as to run away, hit someone, or say yes to using alcohol or drugs—which would get in the way of skillful behavior if you followed them.”
 - “When you could get so emotional or your destructive urges could be so high that you don’t even want to behave skillfully.”

✓ 4. *How to Cope Ahead*

✓ a. Describe a Problem Situation

Say: “Start by describing a problem situation for which you are worried about coping well.”

- “Once you have described the situation, check the facts to be sure that the problem you perceive would be an actual problem if it occurred. (If you need to, use Emotion Regulation Handout 8.)”
- “Then name the emotions and urges likely to interfere with using your skills.”

✓ b. Decide What Skills to Use

Continue: “Next, decide what coping or problem-solving skills you want to use in the situation. Be specific. Write it out in detail. You may need to use problem-solving skills to figure out how to cope effectively. Mindfulness, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness skills may also be useful.”

✓ c. Imagine the Situation

Go on: “Now imagine the situation in your mind as vividly as possible. Be sure to imagine yourself *in* the situation, not watching the situation. Also, be sure to imagine in the present tense—not the future or the past.”

✓ d. Rehearse in Your Mind Coping Effectively

- “Rehearse in your mind exactly what you could do to cope effectively, including rehearsing your actions, your thoughts, what you can say, and how to say it.”
- “Rehearse coping with new problems that come up.”
- “Rehearse coping with your most feared catastrophe.”

✓ e. Practice Relaxation after Rehearsing

Note to Leaders: Some participants may not have visual imagery. With individuals whose imagery is primarily verbal, suggest that they rehearse verbally, in their minds, going over the strategies they will use. Suggest that they give themselves subvocal instructions in what to do. Other participants may find kinesthetic imagery (a sense of body place) or audio imagery useful.



Example: I suddenly became afraid of driving in tunnels. To reduce this fear, I started driving in every tunnel I could find, reassuring myself that there was no danger of its falling in on me. When this didn't work (because the fact is that a tunnel could fall in on me, since earthquakes are possible in Seattle), I asked myself, "What's the threat?" I realized that telling myself the tunnel wouldn't fall in was avoiding the threat. Next I drove in tunnels and imagined that one *did* fall in on me. I then imagined jumping out of the car, putting on my Wonder Woman outfit and rushing to save others, and then running out of the tunnel to safety. I noticed that my fear came down a lot (from 80 to 30 on a 100 scale), but it did not come down to zero. I asked myself again, "What's the threat?" and realized that the primary fear was that the tunnel would not only cave in, but I would be trapped in the tunnel in extreme pain with a fire raging and no one who could get to me to save me. I then practiced radical acceptance of pain and death, and after several practices my fear went away completely.

Note to Leaders: Note that in this story I've included imagery of saving others and radical acceptance, both of which have allowed me to imagine the event ending with me in a peaceful state. In other words, it may be useful to end imaginal practice with a behavior that solves a problem or provides a positive outcome for self or others. If you are using this strategy, it is important to discuss with each participant what positive event as an outcome of their behavior would bring them a sense of peace. It is also important to notice that I used fantasy (jumping out of my car in my Wonder Woman outfit). See Emotion Regulation Handout 20a: Nightmare Protocol, Step by Step for another example of this strategy.



Discussion Point: Give either my example above or one of the following examples in segments, and at each coping point ask participants what they think the protagonist in the example should be practicing in his or her imagination.

Example: Joe is getting ready to sing solo for the first time at a recital given at his university. He has had a cold, and he is afraid his voice might give out for a minute or two in the middle of his performance. To cope ahead, he imagines first singing with no troubles. This is helpful, but he is still anxious. Then he practices in his mind walking out on stage with a glass of water in his hand, bending over, and putting it on the floor before he starts. Then he imagines singing, having his voice go out suddenly, bending over to gather his wits together, picking up his glass of water, taking a sip of water, and then continuing to sing when he is ready. In this real life example, Joe's anxiety went all the way down, and he sang his solo without incident.

Note to Leaders: It is very important to help participants figure out what the emotion cue actually is in a situation. This is particularly true where the emotion is fear; it is typical for individuals to misperceive what they are actually afraid of.

Example: Sharon is addicted to drugs, and her bus stop to work is on a street where there are a lot of drug dealers. Many of them know her, and when they see her, they approach and offer to sell her drugs. She cannot move to a safer neighborhood right now. She practices cope ahead skills every morning before going to work by imagining herself waiting for the bus, having a dealer approach her, and then telling the dealer in a determined voice, "No! Stay away from me!" With her therapist, she imagines standing at the bus stop with cravings, reviewing her pros and cons in her mind, and telling the dealer, "No! Stay away!" At a later point, she practices this at home.



Practice Exercise: Elicit several problem situations, and then select one or two to practice with participants. Discuss possible ways to cope with each situation, and have participants write out specific steps. Then encourage the participants to sit back, close their eyes, and rehearse in imagi-

nation using the coping skills to manage the situation. At the end, lead participants through a brief relaxation exercise. Get feedback and discuss.

Note to Leaders: It is important throughout skills training to look for situations where participants can practice cope ahead. Add it as an individual homework assignment where appropriate.

XVII. TAKING CARE OF YOUR MIND BY TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 20)

Main Point: An out-of-balance body increases vulnerability to negative emotions and emotion mind. Taking care of one's body increases emotional resilience. The mnemonic PLEASE covers treating Physical illness, balanced Eating, avoiding mood-Altering substances, balanced Sleep, and Exercise.

Emotion Regulation Handout 20: Taking Care of Your Mind by Taking Care of Your Body. It is rare that a participant has difficulty understanding this handout. If pressed for time, you can usually go through this handout rather quickly. Emotion Regulation Worksheet 14 (see below) is used for recording practice.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 14: Practicing PLEASE Skills. On this worksheet, participants are to record their use of the PLEASE skills during the week. There is a row for each day, and participants can record how they practiced each of the PLEASE skills that day. At the bottom of each column is a space for checkmarking whether each specific skill was helpful over the week.

✓ A. The Body's Influence on the Mind

Tell participants: "An out-of-balance body increases vulnerability to negative emotions and emotion mind. If you use the skills in this part of the module to take care of your body, this will increase your emotional resilience."


✓ B. The PLEASE Skills

Explain to participants: "You can remember these skills with the term PLEASE. This stands for the following: Treat Physical illness, balance Eating, avoid mood-Altering substances, balance Sleep, and get Exercise."

✓ 1. Treat Physical Illness

Say to participants: "Being sick lowers your resistance to negative emotions. The healthier you can become, the better able you will be to regulate your emotions."


Many individuals fear going to a physician or do not have the behavioral regulation to get themselves to doctor appointments. Others do not have the self-regulation to take prescribed medications (either psychotropics or general medication).

- ✓  **Discussion Point:** Discuss any illnesses participants have had. What interferes with treating illness? Common obstacles may include embarrassment about the problem (as in the case of sexually transmitted diseases), lack of assertion skills, lack of money, problems with self-regulation, fear of medical treatment, and negative previous experiences of seeking medical care.

✓ 2. Balance Eating

Say: "Try to eat the amounts and kinds of foods that help you feel good—not too much or too little. Both eating too much¹¹⁹ and excessive dieting¹⁰⁷ can increase your vulnerability to emotion mind. When and how often you eat and your daily eating routine can be especially impor-

tant for some individuals, such as those diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Stay away from food that makes you feel overly emotional.”


 **Discussion Point:** Encourage people to avoid foods that make them feel bad. Ask participants for foods that make them feel good (e.g., chocolate), calm (e.g., milk), or energized (e.g., sugar, meat); stress the role of such foods, in moderation.


Research Point: Research on restrained eaters on self-imposed diets shows negative effects of eating too little. For example, restricting food intake has been shown to lead both to eating binges and to psychological problems (such as preoccupation with food and eating, increased emotionality and dysphoria, and distractibility).¹⁰⁷

Note to Leaders: Do not try to convince participants that foods they think are bad for them are not actually harmful. This is likely to become a losing battle.

✓ **3. Avoid Mood-Altering Substances**

Explain: “Alcohol and drugs, like certain foods, can lower resistance to negative emotions. Stay off illicit drugs. Use alcohol in moderation, if at all.”


 **Discussion Point:** Use this as an opportunity to discuss alcohol and drug problems participants may be having. Discuss the effects of mood-altering substances on emotions,¹²⁰ as well as difficulties in staying off these substances.

✓  **Discussion Point:** Mood-altering substances alter moods! This is why it is not a good idea to drink alcohol or use drugs before a job interview, or before or during other events where behavioral and emotional control is very important. Elicit other examples from participants of when it has been important for them not to use alcohol or other drugs.

✓ **4. Balance Sleep**


Continue: “Try to get the amount of sleep that helps you feel good—not too much or too little, usually between 7 and 9 hours. Keep to a consistent sleep schedule, especially if you are having difficulty sleeping.”

Research Point: An increasing amount of research suggests that lack of sleep is related to a wide variety of emotional difficulties.¹²¹

 **Discussion Point:** Elicit participants’ troubles with sleep. This is usually an important problem for emotionally dysregulated individuals. Too little sleep, especially, can make them particularly vulnerable to negative emotions; it may be part of a depression syndrome. What has helped? What has made things worse?

5. Get Exercise

Explain: “Aerobic exercise, done consistently, is an antidepressant.¹²² In addition, a regular exercise schedule can build mastery. Do some sort of exercise 5 to 7 days per week. Try to build up to 20 minutes of exercise each time.”

 **Discussion Point:** Ask what forms of exercise participants engage in. An important problem here is that consistent exercise requires self-management skills, and most emotionally dysregulated individuals have few such skills. This discussion is an opportunity to discuss principles of

self-management, especially reinforcement principles. (For information on reinforcement, see Interpersonal Effectiveness Handout 20: Strategies for Increasing the Probability of Behaviors You Want.)

Note to Leaders: The nightmare and sleep hygiene protocols are ordinarily not reviewed in skills training groups unless the participants are in the group specifically to deal with nightmares or sleep disturbances. I ordinarily assign these handouts as reading material and suggest that if needed they ask their individual therapist to work with them on the protocols. I have not put any checkmarks on these protocols. If you teach them, each numbered step in each protocol should be reviewed.

XVIII. NIGHTMARE PROTOCOL (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 20A)

Main Point: Recurrent nightmares are not only highly distressing but they also interfere with adequate and restful sleep.

Emotion Regulation Handout 20a: Nightmare Protocol, Step by Step (*Optional*). This optional handout, together with Worksheet 14a (see below), can be used when participants have recurrent nightmares.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 14a: Target Nightmare Experience Forms (*Optional*). If Handout 20a is used, it is very important to go over this worksheet in detail. Note that this worksheet consists of three forms. On the Target Nightmare Experience Form, the participant describes in detail the distressing dream. For some individuals, this may be very difficult, and you might want to have such a participant fill it out in the presence of a therapist. Some therapists in our group have skipped this first form and started the protocol with the second form, the Changed Dream Experience Form. Here, the participant describes a changed dream in detail. The changed dream scenario should be reviewed with each individual to be sure he or she follows the instructions exactly. When practicing the nightmare protocol, participants track their progress on the third form, the Dream Rehearsal and Relaxation Record.

Research Point: The nightmare protocol described below and outlined in Emotion Regulation Handout 20a is based on the Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) for chronic nightmares developed by Barry Krakow and colleagues.¹²³ Several controlled clinical trials of IRT have shown that it is effective in reducing the frequency of nightmares.^{124, 125}

- ✓ Explain to participants that this treatment is based on the following ideas:
 - Nightmares are behaviors that are learned, often as a result of traumatic events. Once learned, they may be maintained by habit.
 - ✓ ■ Habitual nightmares can be changed by practicing new dreams to replace them.
 - ✓ ■ New dreams are learned by rehearsing a changed dream—one without the negative and traumatic events in the old nightmare—and following the rehearsal with relaxation.
 - In developing new dreams, it is important to put in changes that elicit a sense of mastery and control. In nightmares people ordinarily feel not only terrified but also out of control. Current clinical thinking is that this factor—the increase in personal mastery in the dream—appears to be important in how IRT works.

Point out as well that the nightmare protocol is very similar to the skill of cope ahead. Both focus on writing out a script and rehearsing it mentally. Thus both seek to change problem behaviors by imaginal rehearsal of coping and mastery behaviors.

✓ **A. Practice Necessary Skills**

Tell participants: “Practice necessary skills first to be sure you are ready to work on changing nightmares.”

1. Relaxation

Say: “Practice relaxation. Decide what relaxation method you want to use while working on your nightmares. Practice it to be sure that you can do it, and that when you practice you do become more relaxed.”

2. Pleasant Imagery

Go on: “Practice pleasant imagery to be sure that you can evoke imagery.”

3. Coping Skills

Continue: “Decide on and rehearse coping skills in case you become distressed when thinking about your nightmares.” Explain that TIP skills (see Chapter 10 and Distress Tolerance Handout 6) may be useful if arousal gets very high. Other distress tolerance skills, such as temporary distraction or self-soothing, may also be useful. Problem solving (see Section XI of this chapter) may be necessary to determine whether the target nightmare is too severe to work on at the moment.

B. Choose a Recurring Nightmare

Tell participants: “Choose a recurring nightmare to work with. Select one you are prepared to manage. Do not start with your most severe or traumatic nightmare unless you are very prepared. First practice on easier ones, and work up to harder ones.”

C. Write Down the Target Nightmare

Say: “Now write down your target nightmare in moment-to-moment detail. Include events in the environment, as well as thoughts, feelings, and assumptions about yourself during the dream.”

Note to Leaders: The step of writing down the nightmare can be skipped for individuals with PTSD, for whom the nightmare is itself traumatic. The key event in this protocol is developing a sense of mastery, not exposure to the nightmare itself.

D. Choose a Changed Outcome for the Nightmare

Continue: “Next, choose a way to change the outcome of the nightmare. This can be any change before anything traumatic or bad happens. It can be anything you want it to be, as long as it prevents the bad outcome of the usual nightmare from occurring. There are some people who believe that the more outrageous the change (for instance, a gun turning into a banana), the better the protocol works.”

Explain that the outcome can include insertion of new information. For example, a male veteran who feels ashamed of his own behavior in war and believes he has let down his troops can stand up in the dream and see a huge group of people whose lives have been saved by his behavior. A woman who has been raped and feels weak for not fighting back can imagine her arms and legs bulging with muscles and an auditorium of people giving her a standing ovation for speaking up and admitting the rape.

Note to Leaders: It is important to work with participants to be sure that any new ending has the desired effect of making them feel competent and good about themselves.

E. Write Down the Full Nightmare with the Changes

Go on: “Now write down the full nightmare, with the changed outcome and any other changes you have made.”

F. Rehearse and Relax Each Night

Say: “Rehearse the entire changed dream by visualizing it each night *before* practicing relaxation. The relaxation should be something that is effective; each person might use a different strategy.”

Note to Leaders: Suggest mindfulness practices, or progressive relaxation as described in Distress Tolerance Handout 6b: Paired Muscle Relaxation, Step by Step.

G. Rehearse and Relax during the Day

Conclude: “Finally, rehearse the new dream as often as possible during the day, followed by relaxation. The key idea here is to remember that changing nightmares takes practice, practice, practice. But, in general, the effects should show up within a few weeks.”

Note to Leaders: See www.huffingtonpost.com/belleruth-naparstek/getting-rid-of-repeating_b_487024.html for variations on this protocol as used with veterans. The basic idea here is to follow the protocol as described, but also to add to the dream an ending that will allow the person to wake up in a peaceful state. In other words, the aim is to add an ending where the dreamer engages in a behavior that solves a problem or provides a positive outcome for others. If you use this strategy, it is important to discuss with each participant what positive event as an outcome of his or her behavior would bring the participant a sense of peace.

XIX. SLEEP HYGIENE PROTOCOL (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 20B)

Main Point: Adequate sleep on a daily basis is essential for both mental and physical health. Difficulties in sleeping can often be solved by using a series of sleep-inducing strategies.

Emotion Regulation Handout 20b: Sleep Hygiene Protocol (*Optional*). This optional handout, together with Worksheet 14b (see below), can be used when participants have these particular sleep difficulties.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 14b: Sleep Hygiene Practice Sheet (*Optional*). If Handout 20b is used, review this worksheet with participants.



Research Point: There is an enormous amount of research showing that both quantity and quality of sleep are related to physical and mental health.¹²⁶ Length of sleep is also related to longevity: Either too little or too much sleep is associated with a shorter lifespan.¹²⁷

Evidence for the particular importance of sleep in the mood disorders has mushroomed over the past decade. Among adolescents and adults with a mood disorder, sleep disturbance:

- Is a risk factor for mood disorder episodes.
- Can contribute to relapse.
- Has an adverse impact on emotion regulation.
- Has an adverse impact on cognitive functioning.
- Compromises health.
- May contribute to substance use comorbidity and suicidality.

Sleep disturbance is now seen as an important but underrecognized mechanism in the cause and main-

tenance of the mood disorders.¹²⁸ Because the biology underpinning the sleep and circadian system is an open system, readily influenced by inputs from the environment, there are now several powerful, simple, and inexpensive treatments.

The suggestions for good sleep hygiene in the following protocol are, for the most part, extremely common in most sleep hygiene lists.

Steps 1–6 in this protocol are intended to increase the likelihood of restfulness/sleep.



1. Develop and Follow a Consistent Sleep Schedule Even on Weekends

Explain to participants: “When it comes to sleep, ritual is everything. Go to bed and get up at the same times each day. Engage in the same ritual each night when it is time for bed. Avoid anything longer than a 10-minute nap during the day. The idea here is to get time of day to be a prompting event for sleep.”

2. Do Not Use the Bed for Daytime Activities

Say: “Do not use your bed for activities such as watching TV, talking on the phone, or reading during the day. This will make you more likely to associate your bed with sleep.”

3. Avoid Certain Things before Bed

Continue: “Avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and heavy meals late in the day, and exercising for 3–4 hours before going to bed. Also, do not watch TV before bed if a show is emotionally arousing (for example, it is election night and your candidate is losing).”

4. Prepare the Room for Sleep

Continue: “Turn off the light, keep the room quiet, and make the temperature comfortable and relatively cool when you are preparing to sleep. Try an electric blanket if you are cold; putting your feet outside the blanket or turning on a fan directed toward your bed if you are hot; or wearing a sleeping mask, using earplugs, or turning on a ‘white noise’ machine if needed.”

5. Give Yourself Half an Hour to an Hour to Fall Asleep

Say: “Give yourself from 30 to 60 minutes to fall asleep. If this doesn’t work, evaluate whether you are calm, or whether you are anxious or ruminating, and follow the appropriate steps after Step 6.”



6. Do Not Catastrophize about Not Sleeping

Explain: “Catastrophizing about not sleeping is sure to keep you awake. Worrying about not sleeping is one of the major factors in continuing insomnia.¹²⁹ If sleep is completely elusive, rest in bed, reminding yourself that you will be OK with reverie and resting. Do not decide to give up on sleeping for the night and get up for the ‘day.’”

Steps 7–9 are for use if participants are calm but wide awake.

7. Get Out of Bed and Pursue a Quiet Activity

Say: “Go to another room and read a book, or do some other quiet activity that will not wake you up further.”

8. Listen to Public Radio

“With eyes closed, listen to public radio (BBC, NPR, or the like) at low volume. Public radio is a good choice for this, because there is little fluctuation in voice tone or volume.” (Do not listen to news that will disturb you.)

9. Eat a Light Snack

“Eat a light snack of complex carbohydrates¹³⁰ (such as an apple).”

Steps 10–15 are for use if participants are anxious or ruminating.

**10. Use TIP Skills**

Say: “Splash your face with cold water, or put your face in a bowl of ice water or cold water on your eyes and upper face (this will reduce arousal for a brief time). Then get right back in bed. To block ruminating, practice paced breathing as soon as you lie back down. Remember, if you have any medical condition, get medical approval before using cold water.” (See Distress Tolerance Handout 6a: Using Cold Water, Step by Step.)

**11. Try the 9–0 Meditation Practice**

“Try the 9–0 meditation practice, to put a slight burden on your memory that will interfere with worries. Breathe in deeply and breathe out slowly, saying in your mind the number 9. On the next breath out, say 8; next, say 7; and so on until you are saying 0. Then start over, but this time, instead of starting with 9, start with 8 as you breathe out, followed by 7 and so on until you reach 0. Next, start with 6 and so on to 0; then start with 5; then with 4 and so on until you have gone all the way down to starting with 1. Continue with the practice, starting over as often as necessary until you fall asleep. There are other similar strategies, such as counting to 10 at least 10 times, first pausing after the count of 1, the next time pausing after the count of 2, then pausing at 3, 4, and so on to 10. Then, if you are not out like a light, start over.”

12. Focus on Bodily Sensation

“Focus on the bodily sensation of the rumination if you find yourself ruminating.”^{38, 131}

13. Read an Emotionally Engrossing Novel

“Read an emotionally engrossing novel for a few minutes until you feel somewhat tired. Then stop reading, close your eyes, and try to continue the novel in your head.”

14. Reassure Yourself

“Remind yourself that what appear to be very big problems in the middle of the night often do not seem so worrisome in the morning. In the middle of the night, remember those times and tell yourself, ‘These are just middle-of-the-night thoughts, and in the morning I will think and feel differently.’”

15. If Rumination Doesn’t Stop . . .

“If rumination doesn’t stop, follow these guidelines. If it’s solvable, solve it. If it is insolvable, go deep into the worry all the way to the ‘catastrophe’—the very worst outcome you can imagine—and then imagine coping ahead with the catastrophe.”¹³² (See Emotion Regulation Handout 19: Build Mastery and Cope Ahead.)



Discussion Point: Discuss with participants how using these strategies for combating rumination can be useful at others times of the day—not just when they are trying to sleep.



Discussion Point: Elicit from participants difficulties they have with sleep and any strategies they have used that were helpful. Discuss use of prescription medications for sleep, and emphasize that really good sleep hygiene practices can be as helpful in the long run. Do not hesitate to share sleep strategies you have found helpful.

XX. OVERVIEW: MANAGING REALLY DIFFICULT EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 21)

Main Point: At times, the intensity of negative emotions can be so high that special skills are necessary to manage them.

Emotion Regulation Handout 21: Overview: Managing Really Difficult Emotions. This handout is an overview to orient participants to what is coming next. Review it quickly. It can also be skipped and the information written on the board.

✓ A. Mindfulness of Current Emotions

Say to participants: “Suppressing emotion increases suffering. Mindfulness of current emotions is the path to emotional freedom.”

✓ B. Managing Extreme Emotions

Say: “Sometimes emotional arousal is so high that you can’t use any skills, particularly if the skills are complicated or take any thought on your part. This is a skills breakdown point. Crisis survival skills, like the ones described in Distress Tolerance Handouts 6–9a, are needed.”

✓ C. Troubleshooting Emotion Regulation Skills

Remind participants: “Troubleshooting emotion regulation skills helps you figure out why a skill isn’t working. When you are learning many new skills, it is easy to forget many of them or forget how to practice them.”

✓ D. Reviewing Skills

Point out that reviewing emotion regulation skills can also be helpful. The flow chart model of emotions (see Section V of this chapter, and Emotion Regulation Handouts 5 and 25) puts the skills in order so that they are better understood and remembered.

XXI. MINDFULNESS OF CURRENT EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 22)

Main Point: Suppressing emotion increases suffering. Mindfulness of current emotions is the path to emotional freedom.

For advanced groups, or participants who you feel confident can experience their own emotions without trauma, mindfulness of current emotions can be moved up and taught before Emotion Regulation Handout 6: Ways to Describe Emotions.

Emotion Regulation Handout 22: Mindfulness of Current Emotions: Letting Go of Emotional Suffering. Do not try to skip over this handout or rush through it. Mindfulness of current emotions is a critical skill underpinning many if not most of the skills in DBT. Avoiding emotions interferes with using almost every other skill in this module.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 15: Mindfulness of Current Emotions. The worksheet allows participants to check off what skills they have used in practicing mindfulness of emotions. This can be very helpful, because participants often forget exactly how to practice the skill. If necessary, remind participants how to rate intensity of emotions (0 = no emotion; 100 = maximum intensity). The “Before” and “After” spaces are for rating the intensity of the emotion before and after practicing mindfulness of current emotions. If participants have trouble identifying what emotion they are feeling, instruct them to review Emotion Regulation Handout 6, and/or to fill out Emotion Regulation Worksheet 4, 4a, or 5. Worksheet 15 ends with a section for comments and a description of experiences while practicing.

✓ **A. What Is Mindfulness of Current Emotions?**

Mindfulness of current emotions means observing, describing, and “allowing” emotions without judging them or trying to inhibit them, block them, or distract from them.

✓ **B. Why Be Mindful of Current Emotions?**

1. To Learn That Emotions Are Not So Catastrophic

Tell participants: “By exposing yourself to emotions, but not necessarily acting on them, you will find that they are not so catastrophic. You will stop being so afraid of them. Once you are less afraid, the fear, panic, and anger that you feel in response to your own emotions will dissipate. Observing emotions works on the same principle as exposure does in treating phobias and panic.”

✓ **2. To Find a Path to Freedom**


Say: “Over time and with practice, you will gradually feel more and more free, less controlled by your emotions. Letting go of controlling emotions is a path to freedom. Many people believe that they have to control their emotions at all times. When you believe this, it is easy to become controlled by your own rules about emotions. You lose your freedom to be and feel as you do. Other people believe that they simply cannot bear painful emotions—that they will fall into the abyss or they will die if they do not control their emotions. This is the road to losing freedom. Wisdom and freedom require the ability to allow the natural flow of emotions to come and go, experiencing emotions but not being controlled by emotions. Always having to prevent or suppress emotions is a form of being controlled by emotions.”

✓ **3. To Decrease Suffering**

Explain to participants that accepting painful emotions eliminates the suffering, leaving only the pain. At times, acceptance even reduces the pain. Fighting emotions ensures that they stay.¹³ This is simply a restatement of the principles of mindfulness (see Chapter 7 of this manual) and of distress tolerance (see Chapter 10), but these points are extremely important to get across.

4. To Accept Painful Emotions as Part of the Human Condition

There are valid reasons for negative emotions. Short of making tremendous life changes, people probably cannot get rid of a lot of them; even then, negative emotions will always be a part of life. Ergo, the trick is to find a new way of relating to negative emotions so that they do not induce so much suffering. The way is through acceptance.

 **Discussion Point:** Learning to let go of emotions is extremely difficult. It takes a lot of practice. Discuss the role of acceptance of emotional suffering. Usually, you can expect participants to get this point. Get feedback.

✓ **C. How to Let Go of Emotional Suffering**

✓ **1. Observe Your Emotion**

Tell participants: “Start by just observing your emotion. Acknowledge its presence. Step back. Get unstuck from the emotion.”

✓ **a. Experience the Emotion as a Wave**

Say: “Try to experience your emotion as a wave, coming and going. Imagine that you are on a beach and that emotions, like the waves of the ocean, are coming in and out, in and out. Dig your toes into the sand and allow them to come and go.”

**b. Imagine Surfing the Wave**

Continue: “Now imagine you are on a surfboard, riding the waves of your emotions. Try to keep your balance and just ride the surfboard.”

Explain that surfing emotions is very similar to surfing urges in the treatment of substance use disorders.¹³³ Surfing urges and surfing emotions are similar if not identical skills. Surfing emotions can be extremely useful when it is important to inhibit the action linked to the emotion.

**c. Try Not to Block or Suppress the Emotion**

Go on: “Open yourself to the flow of the emotion. Do not try to get rid of the emotion. Don’t push it away. Don’t judge or reject it.”

d. Be Willing to Have the Emotion

Trying to build a wall to keep emotions out always has the effect of keeping emotions in. It is like trying to keep the ocean off the beach by building a wall of sand. The ocean inevitably seeps through, but it pools behind the wall because it is unable to go back out to the ocean quickly.



Research Point: More and more research shows that trying to block or suppress emotions actually makes them worse.^{97, 134} In fact, avoiding emotional sensation appears to be at the root of generalized anxiety disorder. Thus it is important to practice tolerating emotional sensations, without either trying to shut them down or to avoid them by going in circles with worry.

e. Do Not Try to Keep the Emotion Around

Say: “Don’t cling to the emotion. Don’t rehearse it. Don’t hold on to it. Don’t amplify it.”

2. Practice Mindfulness of Body Sensations

Tell participants: “Pay attention to your physical sensations. It can be very useful here to concentrate on just physical parts of the emotion.”

- “Notice where in your body you are feeling emotional sensations.”
- “Experience the sensations as fully as possible.”
- “Watch to see how long it takes for the emotion to go down, or the quality of experience to change. Adopt a curious mindset.”

**3. Remember: You Are Not Your Emotion**

Remind participants: “You are not your emotion. Do not necessarily act on the emotion. Continue to observe it. Also, remember times when you have felt different.”

4. Practice Loving Your Emotions

- “Respect your emotion. Don’t assume that it is irrational or based on faulty perceptions or distortions.”
- “Let go of judging your emotion.”
- “Practice willingness to have the emotion.”
- “Practice radical acceptance of your emotion.”

Note to Leaders: See Distress Tolerance Handout 11: Radical Acceptance and Distress Tolerance Handout 13: Willingness. If necessary, comment on the meaning of willingness and radical acceptance, for those who have trouble understanding the concepts.

Point 4 above is of course a difficult one. “Loving” in this context means “acceptance.” The idea of loving and accepting emotions does not mean increasing or augmenting them. Fighting emotions does not make them go away. Accepting emotions allows a person to do something about them.

Note to Leaders: These general instructions for mindfulness of current emotion often do not appear useful to participants at first. Remind participants that the point of mindfulness is to become free so that even intense emotions are not so disturbing. This takes a lot of practice. It is important to practice this skill with participants. Throughout skills training in this and other modules, often refer back to mindfulness of current emotion.

The following story is adapted from one I was told by a Zen teacher, who read it in a book by another spiritual teacher, Anthony de Mello.¹³⁵ The story is a very helpful one in teaching the concept of loving one’s emotions.



✂ **Story Point:** A man bought a new house and decided that he was going to have a very beautiful lawn. He worked on it every week, doing everything the gardening books told him to do. His biggest problem was that the lawn always seemed to have dandelions growing where he didn’t want them. The first time he found dandelions, he pulled them out. But, alas, they grew back. He went to his local gardening store and bought weed killer. This worked for some time, but after summer rains, alas, he found dandelions again. He worked and pulled and killed dandelions all summer. The next summer he thought he would have no dandelions at all, since none grew over the winter. But, then, all of a sudden, he had dandelions all over again. This time he decided the problem was with the type of grass. So he spent a fortune and had all-new sod put down. This worked for some time, and he was very happy. Just as he started to relax, a dandelion came up. A friend told him it was due to the dandelions in the lawns of his neighbors. So he went on a campaign to get all his neighbors to kill all their dandelions. By the third year, he was exasperated. He still had dandelions. So, after consulting every local expert and garden book, he decided to write the U.S. Department of Agriculture for advice. Surely the government could help. After waiting several months, he finally got a letter back. He was so excited. Help at last! He tore open the letter and read the following: “Dear Sir: We have considered your problem and have consulted all of our experts. After careful consideration, we think we can give you very good advice. Sir, our advice is that you learn to love those dandelions.”

This story can be told as often as necessary. The idea is to get to the point where clients say to you, “I know, this is a dandelion.”



Discussion Point: Have participants share times when radical acceptance of emotions has reduced suffering. Share your own experiences. Discuss the idea of “loving” one’s emotions.



Practice Exercise: Play a few minutes of emotion-generating music. This can be dissonant jazz fusion (e.g., Track 1 of John Coltrane’s album *Meditations*) or other emotional music (such as Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, Dimitri Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 10*, or Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*). Instruct participants to experience their emotions while listening. Elicit reactions.



Practice Exercise: It can sometimes be very hard to get participants to have emotional responses just when you want to practice mindfulness of current emotions. A current emotion is needed to practice on! Be creative and try exercises that are very likely to generate some sort of emotion. For example, go around in a circle and have everyone sing one line of a song. Interrupt them periodically to redirect them to pay attention to their bodies and not escape into self-judgment, or into thinking about what they’re going to sing. Or ask everyone to yell as loudly as they can at the same time, for about 10–20 seconds. Instruct participants to pay close attention to their emotional responses while engaging in the exercise.



Practice Exercise: Review Emotion Regulation Worksheet 15 with participants, and ask them to check off the ways they are willing to practice mindfulness of current emotions. Discuss.

XXII. MANAGING EXTREME EMOTIONS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 23)

Main Point: Knowing one's own skills breakdown point is important. It signals the need first to use crisis survival skills (see Chapter 10 and Distress Tolerance Handouts 6–9a) and then to return to emotion regulation skills.

Emotion Regulation Handout 23: Managing Extreme Emotions. This handout teaches participants how to identify their skills breakdown point. Crisis survival skills are listed on this handout, and you can give brief descriptions from the teaching notes below. You may be tempted to stop teaching emotion regulation skills and go to the crisis survival skills. Don't! Simply mention that set of skills, and spend time helping participants know when they should use emotion regulation skills first and when they should try crisis survival skills first.

Worksheet: None. If needed, refer participants to the appropriate Distress Tolerance Worksheets.



A. What Is the Skills Breakdown Point?

Tell participants: “You are at your skills breakdown point when your emotional distress is very high—so extreme that you go into overload.”

- “You are completely caught in emotion mind. You can't focus on anything but the emotion itself.”
- “You are emotionally overwhelmed.”
- “Your mind is shutting down. Your brain stops processing information.”
- “You can't solve problems or use complicated skills.”

Go on: “Knowing at what point emotional distress interferes with your own coping and problem solving can be very important. In these times of crisis, special skills may be needed.”



B. Identify Your Personal Skills Breakdown Point

Continue: “When you are *not* in a crisis situation, think back on previous emotional episodes, and figure out how emotionally distressed you were when you ‘hit the wall’ and simply could not use your emotion regulation skills. This is your skills breakdown point.”

1. How Distressed Were You?

“At what level of distress were you when you couldn't focus your mind on anything but the emotion, couldn't solve problems, or couldn't use any other complicated skills? Think back.”



2. Check the Facts

“Check the facts. Do you really ‘fall apart’ at this level of arousal? Check to be sure the problem is not that although you could use skills, you just don't want to because they seem too hard. If you really do want to use skills but just can't figure out how to do it at this level, then this is indeed your personal skills breakdown point.”

Note to Leaders: It is important to note that reaching the point where their skills have broken down does not mean that participants themselves have broken down.

✓ **C. What to Do at the Skills Breakdown Point**

Note to Leaders: Ordinarily I do not teach what to do at the skills breakdown point during the emotion regulation module. Instead I tell them they will get these skills in the next module, distress tolerance skills. If you need to teach these skills here, use the distress tolerance skills handouts and worksheets listed below.

✓ **1. Use Crisis Survival Skills**

Tell participants: “The first thing to do when you know you have reached your skills breakdown point is to use the crisis survival skills covered in Distress Tolerance Handouts 6–9a.”

a. TIP Skills for Changing Body Chemistry

- “Change your body temperature by putting cold water on your face, or by having a warm bath or foot soak.”
- “Do intense aerobic exercise for 20 minutes or more.”
- “Do paced breathing.”
- “Focus on your body to tense and then relax muscles, one group at a time.”

b. Distraction from the Event Prompting the Emotion

- “Shift your attention: Move your mind away from what is distressing you.”
- “Focus your mind on something else—anything else.”
- “Leave the situation completely.”

c. Self-Soothing through the Five Senses

- “Look at something pleasant (vision).”
- “Listen to soothing music or other pleasant sounds (hearing).”
- “Touch something soft or soothing.”
- “Smell something pleasant.”
- “Eat or drink something good (taste).”

d. Improving the Moment You Are In

- “Imagine being somewhere else or in a different situation.”
- “Pray.”
- “Find relaxing things to do.”
- “Encourage yourself.”
- “Find some kind of meaning in the present moment.”
- “Focus your entire mind on one thing in the moment.”
- “Take a short vacation from the moment by briefly avoiding the situation.”

2. Return to Mindfulness of Current Emotions

Go on: “At times the most useful thing to do, even with very extreme emotions, is to just ‘sit’ with them. Sooner or later they always go down. It may be difficult, but it can keep you out of trouble for now.”

3. Try Other Emotion Regulation Skills

Say: “If nothing seems to be working, go to Emotion Regulation Handout 24: Troubleshooting Emotion Regulation Skills.”

XXIII. TROUBLESHOOTING EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 24)

Main Point: When one or more emotion regulation skills do not seem to work, it is important not to give up on the skills. Instead, participants should troubleshoot how they are being applied.

Emotion Regulation Handout 24: Troubleshooting Emotion Regulation Skills. This handout helps participants figure out what is interfering with their efforts to control or regulate difficult and ineffective emotions. Worksheet 16 provides much of the same information. Teaching works best if participants have Worksheet 16 out, as well as Handout 24, while you go over it. If you are tight for time, teach this section by only going over the worksheet, or have participants use the worksheet during the week and then discuss it during homework review in the next session.

Emotion Regulation Worksheet 16: Troubleshooting Emotion Regulation Skills. For many, this worksheet teaches itself.

✓ A. Questions for When Skills Aren't Working

✓ 1. *Ask: Am I Biologically More Vulnerable?*

Advise participants to check for temporary changes in biology, such as physical illness, menstrual cycle (for women), too little or too much food, effects of mood-altering drugs or alcohol, too little or too much sleep, too little exercise or movement or over-exercise, or biological imbalance caused by some mental disorders (such as bipolar disorders or schizophrenia). If biological disruptions are suspected, then it is important to get the body back in balance. At times, with some mental disorders, taking psychotropic medications may also be important.

✓ 2. *Ask: Did I Use My Skills Correctly?*

The first step in answering the second question is for participants to carefully read over the instructions for each skill tried. If this does not help, the next step is for them to get some coaching in how to use the skills or in how to select the skill(s) likely to be the most effective.

✓ 3. *Ask: Is My Environment Reinforcing Intense Emotionality?*

Say to participants: "If you have tried everything else to change your emotions and nothing has worked, then it is reasonable to suspect that your emotions are giving you some hidden benefit. Outside of your awareness, something might be reinforcing your emotions. To find out, these activities can be very useful."

- "Review Emotion Regulation Handout 3."
- "Fill out Emotion Regulation Worksheet 2 and/or 2b."

✓ 4. *Ask: Am I Putting in the Time and Effort That Regulating My Emotions Will Take?*

- "Do a pros and cons (Emotion Regulation Worksheet 1)."
- "Practice radical acceptance and willingness skills (see Distress Tolerance Handouts 11 and 13)."
- "Practice the mindfulness skills of participating and effectiveness (see Mindfulness Handouts 4c and 5c)."

5. *Ask: Am I Too Upset to Use Complicated Skills?*

Say to participants: "Trying complicated skills when you are at your skills breakdown point can lead to intense frustration and eventually giving up on skills altogether. However, you may be so far into emotion mind that you don't even know you have hit your skills breakdown point."

The secret is to practice your most important skills intensely when you are *not* in emotion mind. However, sometimes even when you have practiced the skill, your skills simply don't help. When this happens, try the following steps."

- "If the problem can be easily solved now, then immediately begin problem solving (see Emotion Regulation Handout 12)."
- "If the problem cannot be solved now and you are worrying about it, practice mindfulness of current emotions (see Emotion Regulation Handout 22). Worries often are just your mind's way of trying to escape from painful emotional sensations.⁴¹ Escape, however, often does not work. It is hard to escape your own self. It may be paradoxical, but it appears to be true that if you simply focus your mind on experiencing your sensations, neither trying to suppress them or enlarge them, they will start to fade away before too long. Watch and see how long it takes for intense sensations to go down. Pay attention to which physical sensations you are actually feeling. Focus on physical sensations rather than on emotional thoughts or images."
- "If the emotional intensity is too high for you to think straight or use any skills, then use TIP skills or other crisis survival skills (see Emotion Regulation Handout 23 and Distress Tolerance Handouts 6–9a)."



6. Ask: Are Emotion Myths Getting in the Way?

Conclude: "Finally, are myths about emotions getting in your way? For example, are you being judgmental about your emotions ('My emotions are stupid')? Or do you believe that your emotions are who you are? If so, complete Emotion Regulation Worksheet 3. Or simply check the facts, challenge the myths, and practice thinking nonjudgmentally."

XXIV. REVIEW OF SKILLS FOR EMOTION REGULATION (EMOTION REGULATION HANDOUT 25)

Main Point: Modifying any part of the emotion system will have an effect on the emotion. Specific DBT skills are aimed at specific components of emotions.

Emotion Regulation Handout 25: Review of Skills for Emotion Regulation (*Optional*). This optional handout is an overview of the major groups of DBT skills. The flow chart is very similar to the one in Emotion Regulation Handout 5: A Model for Describing Emotions. The handout can be used in a number of ways to summarize what has been learned in the entire module. It can be pinned up to remind participants of their emotion regulation skills (this works even better if the handout is laminated). It can also be distributed to other providers working with participants as an aid in figuring out what skills to use. When time is short, reviewing this handout with participants should be skipped.

Worksheet: None.

Briefly go over the model of emotions on Emotion Regulation Handout 25, reminding participants of the skills they have learned.

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