

Understanding and Managing Emotions

What are emotions?

Emotions are signals in the body that tell you what's happening. We do not need to learn emotions or because they are biological and bodily responses to what happens around us. They supply us with automatic responses that have been important for human survival.

We process our emotional experiences in the limbic system in the brain. This helps us respond to information we receive from our senses about the world around us. Because of upbringing and socialization, people can be distanced from their natural, emotional reactions. This means that people can react emotionally, but that they do not necessarily feel their emotions. Emotions can be suppressed. We can also have thoughts and feelings about emotional reactions and so understanding our feelings and emotions can very quickly become very complicated.

Why do we have emotions?

- Emotions motivate us (this includes surviving threat, seeking pleasure and enjoyment and to make changes to avoid pain)
- Emotions help us to communicate with others and get our needs met
- Emotions help to maintain social bonds and relationships

Trauma and Emotion Regulation

Traumatic experiences understandably can leave people with many distressing feelings and memories. You may experience intense and overwhelming emotional pain and feel quickly very overwhelmed by your environment. Alternatively you might feel detached and numb and struggle to feel anything or recognise emotions.

What can help (emotion regulation strategies)

Recognising and describing your emotions. Understanding more about how you are feeling can help you to choose how to respond. Very often, we do not pay attention to how we are feeling. This may also be particularly difficult if you have experienced trauma and coped by detaching and dissociating from feelings. Learning to focus on what you are feeling right now and noticing where you can feel this in your body is an important first step to understand your emotional responses).

Labelling your emotions. You may find it difficult to put your emotional experience into words, particularly if you are used to suppressing your feelings. You may also have thoughts or judgments about particular emotions and try not to feel a particular way. You may also feel a mix of emotions at the same time. This is normal. Try using a feelings chart or the emotion wheel to identify and label what you feel.

When you are more aware of how you feel, you can think about what you need to cope with the feelings.

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Take care of your physical health. Getting a good night's sleep, eating well and exercising are really important to enable us to better manage how we are feeling. This can also help to reduce your vulnerability to negative emotions and thought patterns.

Paying attention to where you are in your window of tolerance. We all have a limit to what we are able to cope with and what might feel too much for us. This can be thought of as our 'window of tolerance'. When we go outside our window of tolerance, we might become 'hyper-aroused' and feel anxious, angry or out of control or 'hypo-aroused' when we feel numb or cut off from feelings. If you notice you are beginning to become hyperaroused, focus on activities and strategies that reduce your arousal levels. Try distraction techniques so that you focus on something else for a while. Focus on slowing your breathing and relaxing your body. If you notice you are becoming hypoaroused, focus on activities and strategies to increase your arousal levels. Use grounding exercises to orientate you in the here and now. Stand up and go for a walk outside. Feel the floor under your feet. Hold an ice cube or squeeze an object.

Increasing positive emotions. Engage in activities that you enjoy and build a sense of achievement. Pay attention to what makes you feel positive and fulfilled. Keeping a gratitude journal can also help to notice what you appreciate and what makes you feel good.

Connecting with others. Talking through how you are feeling with someone else can help you to understand and make sense of why you are feeling the way you do and allow you to hear another person's perspective. It can feel important to know that someone else has heard and can understand your feelings even though they may feel difficult to talk about.

Challenging negative thinking patterns. Thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all linked and can become a vicious cycle where we learn to react to how we feel in particular ways. Noticing what may be a trigger for negative emotions can help us to think about how we can respond differently. It may be helpful to notice the thoughts and beliefs we hold onto about things that happen and how we feel and to reflect on alternative ways to think or feel.

Developing self compassion. Be kind to yourself for how you feel and what you have been through. This may not come naturally if you have experienced trauma and abuse from others. Learning to treat ourselves, our bodies and our emotions with kindness and compassion rather than self criticism and judgment can be an important step. This involves developing an understanding that our difficult feelings arise in response to things that happen and that these feelings are temporary and will pass, like waves that rise and fall in the ocean. We can learn to develop compassion for ourselves, by first considering how we might feel towards people we care about who are in distress and then trying to apply these same feelings towards ourselves.

Developing positive compassionate coping statements. These are statements that remind you of your strength and resilience. Reflect on ways you have managed in the past and think about what you might need to hear when you are struggling. Write them down and keep them with you. Examples might be 'I can cope with this', 'I have done this before and I can do it again', 'It's OK to feel like this'.

Becoming mindful and learning to tolerate emotions. It is normal to feel a range of emotions at different times, including sadness and anger. Learning to tolerate and accept how we feel without judgment (eg thinking ‘I should not feel angry, I should be managing better’, and without trying to minimise or get rid of how we feel) decreases the chances that they will grow in intensity or become more overwhelming and painful. It also allows us to recognise that how we feel is important and valid which is particularly important to learn if you have experienced trauma or abuse. This does not mean accepting difficult things that have happened to you or liking the emotion. Mindfulness exercises can help you to learn to tolerate difficult or painful emotions without pushing them away. Try the exercise below:

- Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath without changing this in any way. Just noticing how it feels to breathe in and out for a few moments
- Now, check in with yourself about how you are feeling. Notice any physical sensations or tension in your body
- Try to name the emotion or emotions you are feeling
- Notice any judgements about the emotion or yourself. Notice any urges to block the emotion.
- Cultivate a attitude of acceptance and openness to whatever you are experiencing. Soften and open to any sensation that comes up. Pay attention to whether this changes. Your task is simply to notice what you are feeling, breathing with them, accepting them, letting them be just as they are
- Remind yourself you have a right to your feelings
- End with bringing your focus back to your breathing and continue with that as the object of your attention, noticing again how it feels to breathe in and out, in and out, letting your breath breathe itself

Further reading and resources:

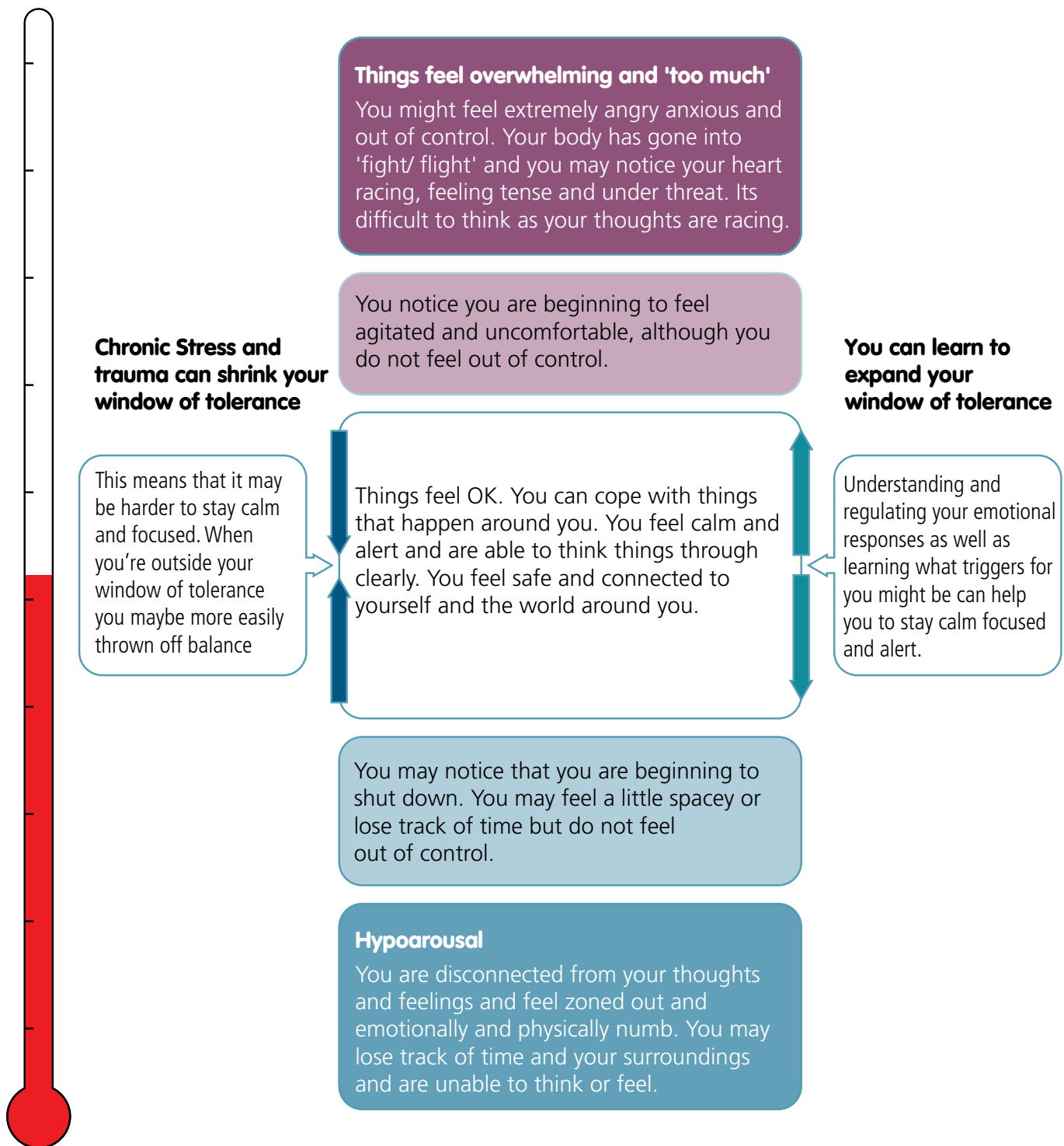
Compassion focused therapy helps people to develop compassion and empathy for themselves. This workbook has lots of exercises and activities about how to respond with compassion to difficult emotions:

- Irons, C. and Beaumont, E., (2017). *The compassionate mind workbook*. London: Little Brown Book Group

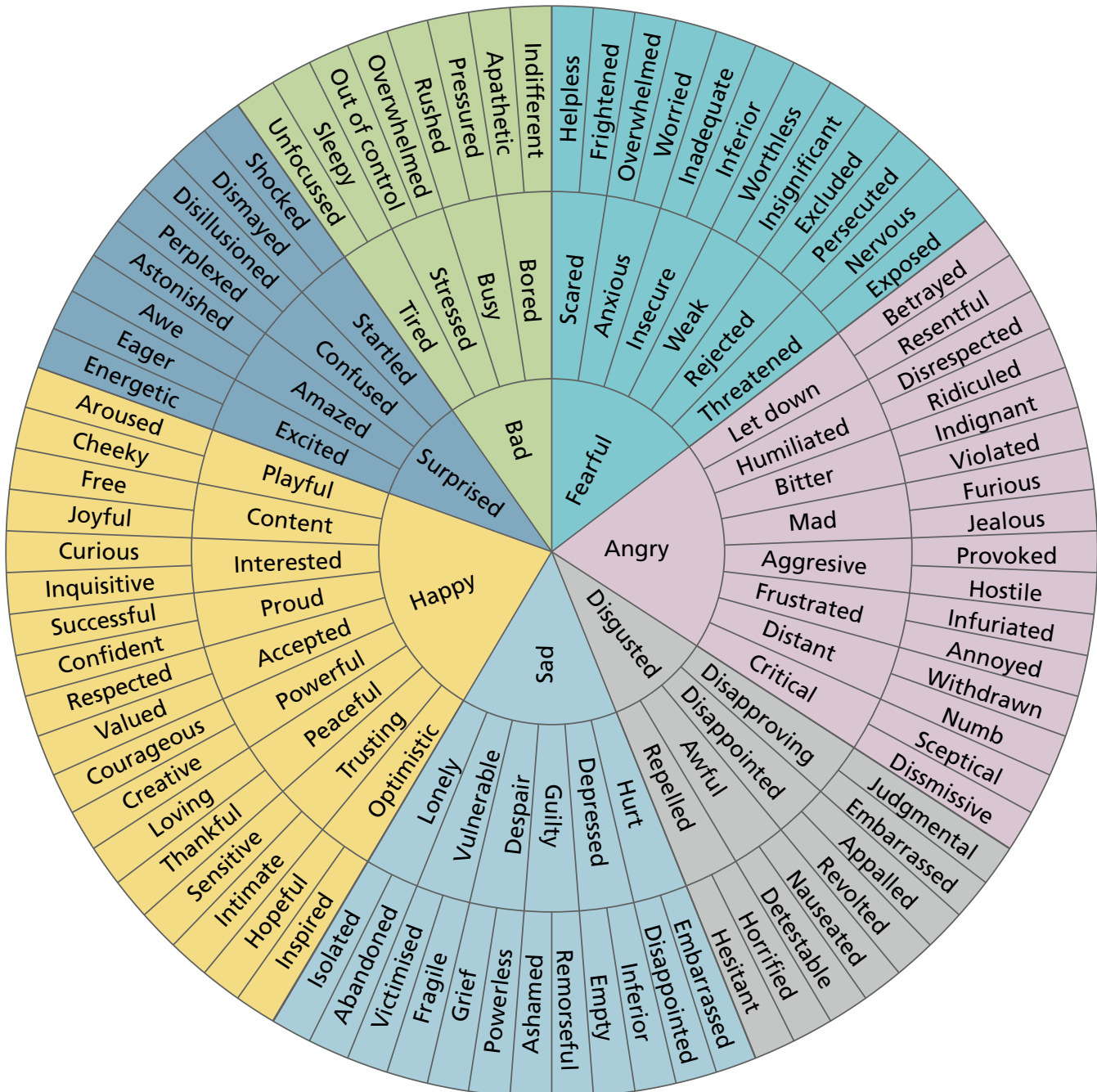
Dialectical behavioral therapy is a skills based therapy approach to support people to increase their understanding of managing emotions and relationships. This is a helpful book to support you to develop these skills:

- McKay, M., Wood, J.C., and Brantley, J. (2007). *The dialectical behaviour therapy skills workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications

The window of tolerance: Your emotional thermostat



The Emotions Wheel



How do I feel?



Aggressive



Angry



Anxious



Ashamed



Bashful



Bored



Cautious



Confident



Confused



Curious



Depressed



Determined



Disappointed



Disbelieving



Disgusted



Ecstatic



Embarrassed



Enraged



Envious



Exasperated



Exhausted



Frightened



Frustrated



Grieved



Guilty



Happy



Hopeful



Hurt



Indifferent



Interested



Jealous



Joyful



Lonely



Loved



Loving



Miserable



Optimistic



Overwhelmed



Pained



Puzzled



Regretful



Relieved



Sad



Satisfied



Shocked



Shy



Smug



Sorry



Stubborn



Stupid



Surprised



Suspicious



Sympathetic



Thoughtful



Undecided



Withdrawn