

## EMOTION REGULATION – A USER’S GUIDE

Read the comments made about almost any online article about politics today and you’ll see unrestrained, unfiltered emotional reactions. Imagine that you respond to everything that triggers a strong emotion in that way. That is a scary thought, also exhausting and unhealthy. Here we’re not talking about politics, but coping with the challenges and stress of the daily routine, family life and simply how you feel about yourself.

It is hard work to effectively manage and respond to strong emotion, but gaining self-mastery on this front will contribute to better physical and mental health, stronger relationships and family life lived on a more even keel. A big piece of this work involves what is commonly called “mindfulness,” which is a catch-all for a range of strategies, practices and practical steps you can use to build up your emotional immune system, your resiliency, so that you have more inner resources to call upon when facing some emotional challenge.

First, you need to understand the interplay between thoughts (including reactions to any given situation), feelings and behaviors. We all have a reflexive response to something upsetting, like a driver cutting you off on the highway. Your thought: that person is such an idiot. You’re feeling: anger--you’re pissed off. Your behavior: your body may respond, you may grip the steering wheel more tightly, you blurt out some curses or lay on the horn. Not good right? Best case scenario is that the moment passes without any consequences, but it is possible that your moment of road rage escalates into something ugly or more serious where someone gets hurt.

Second, you want to break that cycle. The goal of emotional regulation is not to deny the feeling, the anger at the other driver, but to respond in a way that breaks the connection between the angry thoughts and your behavior. You know how you react in that situation, it’s happened a thousand times before. Instead of laying on the horn, you want to regulate your emotional reaction by a conscious effort. When you feel your grip tightening on the steering wheel, you want to be able to recognize and acknowledge your anger and let go of it. You

might: take a few deep breaths, relax your arm and shoulder muscles, or focus on the traffic around you by checking your rear-view mirrors.

It may not be easy to take that second step, but there is a set of strategies that you can learn, commonly called “emotional regulation,” based on a reset of your response to difficult situations. To accomplish this, the first step is to reduce your vulnerabilities, physical as well as emotional. Yeah, taking care of yourself is key.

It goes without saying that when you are well rested, healthy and feeling positive about yourself and your life you handle stress better. The question to answer, and act on, is: “What can I do to improve my “baseline” well-being?” Using these questions as a framework, here are some suggestions for helping yourself:

- When I get angry, what do I do? It can be hard to harness anger and keep it from getting out of control. First, you have to recognize the feeling that is building in you as anger. Then you have to make the conscious decision not to give in to the anger, but to let go of it. Move beyond your anger and don’t dwell on what made you angry. There are techniques and strategies that you can learn that will enable you to accomplish this important step. The key is that these strategies aren’t about how you handle anger when you are feeling it, but about giving yourself new habits that will kick-in automatically. This will take a lot of practice. You have to do the work, and figure out what works for you. And then you have to practice, so that when you are in a situation where you can feel your anger building, you will be able to better manage your emotions.
- Am I taking care of myself, getting enough sleep and exercise, is my diet healthy? It’s no secret that healthy habits inoculate you against life’s inevitable hard knocks.
- Self-care; am I able to carve out time for myself when I need it? More basically, do I recognize when I need to take a time-out? It’s important to build some time to decompress into your routine—it can be as simple as sitting at Starbucks to drink your morning coffee rather than jumping back into the car as soon as the barista hands you your cup. Why do you think the adult coloring books are so popular? Why not try it out?

- Are you a glass half-empty or half-full kind of person? Ask yourself: “What can I do to change my thinking?” Your outlook really does affect your outcome. Shift your perspective: practice gratitude, adopt a positive posture (stand up straight, smile, look for the ray of sunshine), hang out with optimists and activists; believe in yourself, form a mental picture of success while setting clear achievable goals. Practice kindness; helping someone else does contribute to feeling better about yourself and it does good in the work.
- Are mindfulness techniques in my tool box? Mindfulness is a mental state where you step back from what you are feeling and thinking and focus on the direct and immediate experience of what your senses tell you. This attention on what you are doing, the space through which you move and the environment around you, allows you to observe your thoughts and feelings without self-judgement. This kind of thinking is like doing a set of crunches for your mind. Just as having a stronger core is essential to having a strong body, a mindful practice has a positive impact on well-being, physical and mental health.

Can you imagine a world where reading the comments to an online article or following a twitter thread leads you to say “Wow, what an interesting perspective, now I see the issue in a different way.” rather than screaming at the screen or adding your own angry or sarcastic diatribe? The life most of us live today isn’t very forgiving, and with its rapid pace and stresses, it is essential that to learn how to regulate and manage your emotions so that you still feel them but that they do not determine your actions. You should do this not only to live a healthier life yourself, but also be a role model for your family.

*In TAKING ACTION below, we have further suggestions for strategies for controlling anger, mindfulness practices and other ways to build up your emotional resiliency—for both yourself and for your family. In FURTHER READING there are links to learn more about the ideas, concepts and practices discussed in this article.*

# Taking Action

**Taking care of your physical health** enables you to cope better with mental distress and emotional challenges. The acronym *PLEASE Master* can remind us what we can do regularly in order to keep ourselves healthy and stable.

Treat **Physical Illness** (take care of yourself both physically and mentally)

Eat healthy (diet, especially sugar, affects your mood and can cause mood swings)

Avoid mood-altering substances (don't use alcohol or drugs in response to emotional distress)

Sleep well (practice good habits: no electronics before bed, limiting caffeine)

Exercise regularly: walking or stretching for 15 minutes in the morning or evening counts even if you're not a gym rat.

**Master:** Do something daily (outside of your job or family responsibilities) that gives you a sense of achievement or ability.



**Strategies for Controlling Anger:** It can be hard to harness anger and keep it from getting out of control. These strategies aren't about how you handle the anger when you're feeling it, but setting yourself up to better respond to the feeling.

1. Learn how to identify warning signs your body gives you, like suddenly your muscles tense, your breathing quickens, or it feels like your blood pressure jumps higher. Now's the time to use the relaxation technique you've been practicing. Step away when you begin to get annoyed or frustrated. Take a time-out. Calm yourself before engaging.
2. Let go. Don't dwell on what made you mad. Learn to recognize and avoid the triggers to your anger.
3. Think differently, Focus on solutions, actions, flexibility. Think before you speak. Use humor to release tension. Use "I-statements" to talk about what made you angry.
4. Take care of yourself: relax, this includes getting enough exercise. Use the relaxation/mindfulness technique that works for you: deep breathing, relaxing imagery, progressive muscle relaxation.
5. Sharpen your communication game: listen before reacting--make sure you understand what someone is saying; before speaking then pause to think through what you want to say, then take a breath before you say anything. Make the conversation about the issue not the feeling.
6. Don't go it alone. Know when to get help, whether it is turning to someone you trust or a professional.

## **Homework for becoming a more positive thinker:**

- Think about how your mind may race when you've got a few minutes to spare – sitting in your in the car-pool line or at the corner waiting for school bus to drop-off your child.

Are you replaying the feedback you got at work from your boss, or the argument at breakfast that morning? If you focus your awareness on the present moment, feeling each breath, how the sun or drizzle feels on your skin, or how the ground feels under your feet, you are detaching your mental energies from your usual preoccupations.

- By working these muscles routinely, when faced with an upsetting situation or confrontation, you will be able to respond from a position of better well-being, a position of strength; the kind of strength that allows you to draw on your inner resources not in an impulsive, emotional way, but in a manner that will allow for a resolution where everyone comes out a winner.
- This may not come naturally, and you learn to do it by repeating the effort; think of the movie “Groundhog Day” as a kind of metaphor for working toward developing this kind of mental refocusing.

## **Active Listening:**

The basics:

1. Be present. Don't multitask – that means put the phone on mute and put all electronic devices away.
2. Re-set your own mind to assume that you can learn something from the conversation.
3. Show that you are listening: use non-verbal signs to show that you are listening: make eye contact; sit or stand facing the person, give them your full attention.
4. Give cues along the way: nod your head, smile in encouragement, or say “un-huh,” “wow,” “oh” or by repeating something the other person has said, restating it to show that you heard and understand. You can also echo what they say to show you understand: “it sounds like you are still upset.”
5. Ask open-ended questions. Use who, what, where, when, or how. Ask “What was that like?” instead of “Was that terrible?” or “How are you feeling?” instead of “Are you still angry?” Ask questions that seek to make clear what the person is telling you.
6. Summarize what the person has said. This demonstrates that you heard what was said and allows the other person to clarify any misunderstanding.
7. Empathize. Show that you hear what the other person is saying. You don't have to agree, but it's important to acknowledge that you understand what the person is saying.

### **Hints on putting this into practice:**

*Active Listening Skills – 4 Tips to Practice*

<http://bemycareercoach.com/soft-skills/communication-skills/active-listening-skills.html>

**Tune in to any (or all) of these TedTalks/YouTube videos hear and see what it takes to really listen to someone and turn any conversation into a meaningful exchange.**

*TedTalk--Celeste Headlee: 10 Ways to Have A Better Conversation*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1vskiVDwI4>

*6 Tips for Active Listening*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWe\\_ogA5YCU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWe_ogA5YCU)

*The Power of Listening*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saXfavo1OQo>

*A Teen's Summary of Active Listening*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WER63AY8zB8>

## **Further Reading**

### **Emotional Regulation**

*Click here to take a deeper dive into this topic with additional readings*

Emotional regulation is the process of reorganizing, labeling and adjusting emotions. The term *emotion regulation* is used to describe one component of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy -- which combines cognitive and behavioral therapy, incorporating techniques from various traditions and was developed to treat certain types of mental health issues. Learning how to self-regulate emotions is an important part of a child's development, and as we know from experience, and life-long quest.

The techniques formalized in DBT can be used by all of us to identify and change negative patterns of thinking. Basically, it provides ways to help get "unstuck" and shift how you think and act in a more positive direction. In addition to emotional regulation, the other components of the therapy are strengthening tolerance for distress and negative emotions, teaching mindfulness strategies and improving interpersonal effectiveness. To learn more about DBT specifically: <https://psychcentral.com/lib/an-overview-of-dialectical-behavior-therapy/>

*What is Emotional Regulation*

<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/what-is-emotion-regulationsinfo-brief.pdf>

### **Letting go and Thinking Differently: Change the way you think**

*Click here to take a deeper dive into this topic with additional readings*

*4 Articles from Psychology Today on changing the way you think*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/collections/201709/change-the-way-you-think>

*7 Little Habits That Can Change Your Life, and How to Form Them*

<https://zenhabits.net/7-little-habits-that-can-change-your-life-and-how-to-form-them/>

*Tricks to Becoming A More Positive Thinker*

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2016/12/12/positive-thinking-day-steps\\_n\\_5810744.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2016/12/12/positive-thinking-day-steps_n_5810744.html)

*Cheat Sheet for Finding Your Funny Bone: 15 Funniest Websites for the Best Humor on the Web*

<https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/15-funniest-websites-best-humor-web/>

### **Self-Care**

*TedTalk: The Importance of Self-Care*

[https://www.ted.com/talks/guy\\_winch\\_the\\_case\\_for\\_emotional\\_hygiene?referrer=playlist-the\\_importance\\_of\\_self\\_care](https://www.ted.com/talks/guy_winch_the_case_for_emotional_hygiene?referrer=playlist-the_importance_of_self_care)

*Self-care is Active Participation in Enhancing the Quality of Your Health*

<https://counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu/self-care/>

### **Controlling Anger**

*10 Steps for Controlling Anger*

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/anger-management/art-20045434>

*Strategies for Controlling Anger*

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/controlling-anger.aspx>

### **Active Listening and Better Communication**

*Click here to take a deeper dive into this topic with additional readings focusing on developmentally appropriate ways of using active listening skills in your family*

*The Skill of Listening*

<https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/healthy-communication/the-skill-of-listening/>

*7 Ways to Reinforce Active Listening at Home*

<http://truparenting.net/getting-kids-listen-7-ways-reinforce-cycles-active-listening-home/>

### **Mindfulness**

*Click here to read two related COPETalk: Mindful Parenting: Getting Your Emotions Under Control and Can Meditation Positively Impact Your teenager? It Absolutely Can! There are additional links at the end of each article.*

*Benefits of Mindfulness*

<https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm>

*Free Mindfulness Apps*

<https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-apps-worthy-of-your-attention/>

*Free web-based guided meditations*

<https://heromovement.net/blog/free-guided-meditation-resources/>

*All It Takes Is 10 Mindful Minutes*

[https://www.ted.com/talks/andy\\_puddicombe\\_all\\_it\\_takes\\_is\\_10\\_mindful\\_minutes?language=en#t-74188](https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes?language=en#t-74188)

*Breathe. Exhale. Repeat: The Benefits of Controlled Breathing*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/well/mind/breathe-exhale-repeat-the-benefits-of-controlled-breathing.html>

*Bill Murray's Surprising Wish + Meditation*

<https://www.improvisedlife.com/2015/07/06/bill-murrays-surprising-wish-meditation/>

## Further Reading: A Deeper Dive

### **Emotional Regulation**

*The 5-Point Scale and Emotional Regulation*

<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/5-point-scale-emotional-regulation/>

*More information about the cycle of thoughts, behavior and feelings*

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/emotionregulation.htm>

### **Letting go and Thinking Differently: Change the way you think**

*Forget Positive Thinking: This Is How to Actually Change Negative Thoughts For Success*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/melodywilding/2016/08/15/forget-positive-thinking-this-is-how-you-actually-change-negative-thoughts/#656542c6c462>

*Cognitive Restructuring: Reducing Stress by Changing Your Thinking*

[https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS\\_81.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_81.htm)

*PTSD COACH ONLINE: Changing negative thinking patterns*

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline/tools/change-negative-thinking-patterns/pages/files/change-negative-thinking-patterns-worksheet.pdf>

*Critical Thinking in Everyday Life: 9 Strategies*

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-in-everyday-life-9-strategies/512>

### **Active Listening**

*Active Listening with Toddlers and Pre-schoolers*

<https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/communication/activelistinging.html>

*Active Listening: How to Master the Skill That Will Make You a More Effective Parent*

<https://afineparent.com/emotional-intelligence/active-listening.html>



*Preventing Teen Drug Use: How to Talk with Your Teen*

<https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-talk-with-your-teen/>

*Talking and Active Listening with Your Teen*

<https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Talking-and-Active-Listening-With-Your-Teen-Quiz.pdf>