

SECTION 3.
EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

Observing Your Emotions without Judgment

Objective

To observe your emotions without judgment in order to increase your acceptance of them.

You Should Know

Emotions come and go and serve as a compass for understanding ourselves and the world around us. Judgments, which can be positive or negative, are opinions or evaluations. Judgment can be positive, as it allows you to make comparisons or use discernment in certain situations. But when you judge your emotions and label them as “bad” or “wrong,” or scold yourself for having them, your emotions might intensify. Thoughts you have about your emotions, and the desire to make those feelings go away, may cause more distress than the emotions themselves.

However, if you observe your emotions without judgment, you can allow the intense feelings to pass. Here are some statements that can help you become more accepting of your emotions.

- Feelings are not facts. Label the emotion as “just an emotion.”
- You are not your feelings. Instead of saying “I’m sad,” or “I’m angry,” say, “I feel sad,” or “I feel angry.”
- All emotions come and go. Notice your emotions and visualize them as a wave that ebbs and flows.
- Reflect on how you are feeling throughout the day. It is important to focus on pleasant emotions as well as reflect on painful or overwhelming ones.
- Accept your emotions as part of what makes you uniquely you.
- You are not “bad” for having an emotion that is distressing or uncomfortable.

What other encouraging statements can you make to yourself?

What to Do

The first step to observing your emotions without judgment is to identify how you feel and the judgments that go along with them. The next time you experience distressing emotions, answer the following questions.

Why are you experiencing this particular emotion now? Explore the possible meaning of what you are feeling, including specific triggers, conflict, people, places, or situations.

Describe any judgments you had about your emotions.

How do your judgments affect your emotions and how you feel about yourself?

Now, complete the following chart to track your emotions during distressing situations, and your judgments about your emotions. Then, refer back to the list of encouraging statements, and see if you can accept your emotions and challenge the judgment. Finally, describe any changes in your judgments.

Distressing Situation	Emotion(s)	Judgment of Emotion	Challenging Statement	Change in Judgment (Y / N) Describe

Did you notice any changes in your emotions and judgments after you challenged them? What happened?

Did using encouraging statements change how you felt about yourself? Explain.

Did you find it easy or difficult to challenge your judgments? Describe.

Reflections on This Exercise

Do you think being less judgmental about your emotions might change the way you express your feelings to others? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Observing and Accepting Your Emotions

Objective

To observe and accept overwhelming emotions so you can begin managing them in healthier ways.

You Should Know

When emotions are overwhelming, it can feel impossible to sit with the feelings. You may seek out ways to avoid your emotions, or numb them with unhealthy or harmful behaviors. When you begin to recognize and accept your feelings, you can identify healthier ways of managing your emotions and responding to situations that cause upset, distress, or overwhelm.

What to Do

Before you can accept your overwhelming emotions, it is helpful to understand what is causing them. The following exercise will help you identify the situations that contribute to your distress and overwhelm. You can then identify how you typically react or cope. For the next two weeks, keep track of your emotions using the following chart, noting situations that trigger your emotions; the emotions you experience; and finally, your response or reaction. Make copies of this chart, as necessary. Then, review the completed chart and answer the following questions.

Date	Triggering Situation	My Emotion(s)	My Coping Response
<i>February 12</i>	<i>Today is the first anniversary of my divorce</i>	<i>Sad, rejected, lonely</i>	<i>Called out sick from work and slept most of the day</i>

What emotions did you experience most often?

What coping responses did you use most often?

Did those coping responses improve how you felt about yourself and the situation? Explain.

When difficult emotions show up repeatedly, or your coping responses cause even more distress, it is time to face those feelings. The following visualization exercise will help you observe your emotions, and any accompanying physical sensations, without analyzing them or becoming preoccupied by them. When you stop trying to fight or avoid your emotions, the feelings become less intense, and it is easier to let them go.

Find a quiet, comfortable space to sit where you will not be disturbed or distracted, and set your timer for five minutes. As you become more comfortable sitting with your emotions, you can set the timer for longer periods of time. Focus on your breath and your body's sensations throughout this exercise.

- Take several deep breaths and notice how your breath feels in your body.
- Notice your body's physical sensations, including any tightness in your neck or shoulders.
- Observe your emotion as it arises. Describe the feeling to yourself, as well as the intensity of that emotion.
- Notice whether the emotion is increasing or decreasing as you continue breathing.
- Observe any new emotions that join or replace that feeling.
- If you notice a need to push away the emotion, or to act on a harmful urge, that is normal. Keep observing the emotion a little longer, describing those feelings to yourself.
- Observe how it feels to be aware of your feelings, watching them come and go without acting on them.
- Remind yourself emotions are like waves that ebb and flow, and you have faced other emotional waves before.
- Notice any judgments you have about yourself, other people, or the emotion itself, and let them go.
- Keep watching your emotion until it changes or decreases.
- Finish with a few intentional, deep breaths.

Describe any physical sensations you noticed as you observed your emotions.

Describe any urges or impulses that arose as you observed your emotions.

Describe what it was like to observe your emotions without acting on them.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise change the way you regard your overwhelming emotions? Explain.

Did this exercise change the way you react to your overwhelming emotions? Explain.

Can you think of ways to cope with overwhelming emotions in the future?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Identifying Barriers to Healthy Emotions and Behaviors

Objective

To understand the connection between your upsetting emotions and destructive behaviors in order to replace them with positive alternatives.

You Should Know

Your emotions can be both the cause and the effect of your thoughts and behaviors. When you experience overwhelming emotions, your thoughts and behaviors may become self-destructive. You may self-injure, overeat, abuse drugs or alcohol, lash out at other people, or become physically aggressive. Consequently, you may feel depressed, ashamed, or guilty – which, if unmanaged, can lead to additional self-destructive behaviors.

Did you know you receive reinforcement or benefits for your thoughts and behaviors, even when they are self-destructive? That is why it might be difficult to break out of a cycle of harmful reactions, and the longer the negative behaviors continue, the more temporary the relief can become, and the more destructive the consequences of that behavior

Consider Jane's situation. Jane's sister was seriously injured in a car accident. Jane was supposed to have been a passenger in the car, but she decided to stay home. Following the accident, Jane felt guilty about not getting hurt or being with her sister when it happened. She started drinking to cope with her painful emotions. In the short term, Jane got positive reinforcement from her actions – she was able to tune out her feelings of guilt and self-loathing. But in the long term, her actions had dangerous consequences because she became dependent on alcohol and was fired after missing too many days of work due to hangovers.

The good news is that the opposite about behaviors and emotions is also true. When you engage in healthy behaviors and self-affirming thoughts, your emotions become more positive and fulfilling. As you receive positive reinforcement for healthy choices, it becomes easier to repeat those behaviors or identify additional positive ones.

Consider Tom's situation. Tom's office announced a Steps Challenge to encourage staff to get active. Tom wanted to lose some weight but he disliked exercising at the gym. He joined the competition and started walking a few miles a day. Although he did not win the challenge, Tom still received positive benefits that reinforced his behavior. In the short term, he could walk upstairs without getting winded and he had more energy. He decided to continue his daily walking routine. Over the long term, he noticed his stress level was lower, he was sleeping better, and he was losing weight.

What to Do

In order to increase your healthy behaviors and emotions, first identify harmful behaviors that impact your thoughts and feelings.

The unhealthy or self-destructive behaviors I engage in are:

The temporary emotional benefits I receive from my unhealthy behaviors are:

The long-term risks and consequences of my unhealthy behaviors are:

Describe how harmful behaviors negatively affect your thoughts and feelings.

The next step is to identify healthy behaviors to help you manage upsetting emotions during times of distress. Here are some suggestions.

- Calling a friend or visiting an online support community.
- Working out or taking a walk.
- Journaling or writing poetry.
- Having a good cry.
- Screaming or yelling in a location where others won't hear you.
- Playing with a pet.
- Doing deep breathing exercises or meditating.

Describe other ways you can manage upsetting emotions.

Have you ever experienced overwhelming emotions but chose behaviors that were helpful instead of harmful? What happened? What behaviors did you choose instead?

Now, over the next week, keep track of situations that lead to unhealthy behaviors and distressing emotions. Using the chart below, identify the unhealthy behavior you chose (or wanted to use) to manage those emotions, and the short-term benefits you experienced. Then, write down a healthier alternative that you used (or could have used) instead to help manage your emotions and develop healthier ones.

Situation	Emotions I Experienced	Unhealthy or Destructive Behavior	Short-Term Benefits	What I Did/Could Have Done Instead

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Improving Your Emotions by Improving Your Health

Objective

To understand how your physical health can influence your emotions and identify ways to take better care of your body.

You Should Know

Your body and mind are intimately connected. Your body reacts physically to the way you think, how you feel, and the choices you make. Additionally, your health can influence your emotions in positive or negative ways, depending on your habits and choices. The foods you eat, the amount of sleep you get, and even your level of physical pain can further impact the intensity of your emotions and your ability to cope with them. When you are not physically at your best, it can negatively affect your concentration and decision-making skills and make it harder to resist unhealthy urges.

What to Do

Here are some suggestions for improving your physical habits and overall health.

Eating: Eat regularly throughout the day. Limit the amount of foods high in fat to avoid feeling heavy and sluggish. Limit the amount of sugary foods, which can cause bursts of energy before you “crash.” If you tend to eat too little, make sure you are eating enough nutrients and calories to keep you nourished to avoid physical weakness, drowsiness, headaches, or irritability.

Alcohol and recreational drugs: While you may feel happy, numb, or uninhibited at first, both alcohol and drugs can leave you feeling depressed, anxious, combative, or even paranoid. Excessive use can cause addiction, health issues, and other serious consequences. Limit your use of these substances, or eliminate them, if possible. If you have a history of alcohol and drug abuse and want to stop, contact a medical professional or someone you trust.

Caffeine and cigarettes: Caffeine is a stimulant that can leave you feeling jittery and irritated, intensifying feelings of anxiety you may already have. Products like sports drinks and energy drinks have large amounts of caffeine. While cigarettes can make you feel more relaxed, the physical dangers of smoking, including vaping, are well documented. If possible, cut back on these substances.

Exercise: Physical activity keeps your body healthy and strong. It is also proven to help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety, while improving your memory and the quality of your sleep. Try to get 20 minutes of exercise a day. Walking is an excellent low-impact activity for beginners. If you have physical limitations, consult your doctor about the best activities for you.

Sleep: The average adult needs 7–9 hours of sleep a night. A lack of sleep can cause issues with memory, concentration, and reflexes. It can also worsen depression. Avoid caffeine and alcohol at least 3 hours before bedtime. Eliminate the use of cell phones and other electronic devices in

bed. Try to go to bed and wake at the same time each day. Avoid exercising or having a big meal shortly before bedtime.

Illness and Physical Pain: Experiencing pain and illness, especially long term, can intensify depression and anxiety. Seek a doctor's care as needed, and take medications as prescribed. Follow the advice of your health care providers, including changes to your diet and levels of physical activity.

Have you identified physical habits you engage in that you feel are unhelpful or harmful to your emotions and physical health? Explain.

Which habits would you most like to improve or reduce?

What steps can you take to improve or reduce them?

Who can support you and hold you accountable in taking these steps (friends, family, doctor)?

The following chart can help you track your habits and the steps you are taking to improve them. If it does not apply, put an “x” in the box. Rate your pain and/or illness on a scale, where 1 = No pain/illness to 10 = My pain/illness severely limits me and negatively affects my quality of life. Track your progress for one week.

Day of the Week	Eating Habits and Food Choices	Drug, Alcohol, Caffeine, or Cigarette Use	Sleep (hours, quality)	Exercise (activity and time spent)	Physical Pain or Illness (Rate 1–10)
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

Now, review your week of habits and activity. Are there any patterns that stand out? Is there anything that surprised you? Explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

Describe people, resources, or other supports that can help you and motivate you in setting goals for positive change.

What steps have you taken to make improvements in your physical health?

Describe any improvements you have observed in your emotions or moods.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Improving Your Healthy Sleeping Habits

Objective

To improve your healthy sleeping habits to feel better physically and emotionally.

You Should Know

When you have a bad night's sleep, it can negatively impact your body and brain. Your energy level, memory, and ability to focus and concentrate can all be affected. Lack of sleep may make it harder to control your emotions and urges or make productive decisions. It can even worsen feelings of depression and negatively affect your immune system.

The average adult needs 7–9 hours of sleep each night. When you are experiencing worry, fear, stress, and other intense emotions, that target can seem impossible.

How does your lack of sleep affect how you feel physically and emotionally?

What to Do

Note: If you have sleeping problems three or more times a week for at least three months, you may want to ask your doctor about medications, herbs, or supplements that might be helpful. Additionally, if you wake up multiple times a night or wake yourself up gasping for breath, these may be signs of a sleep disorder. Discuss your symptoms with your doctor.

Here are some strategies that can help you feel more physically and emotionally relaxed at bedtime and improve your healthy sleeping habits.

- Listen to soft music, read, or take a warm shower before bed.
- Avoid using your phone, tablet, TV, or other electronic devices in bed. Shut your phone off at bedtime to avoid waking up from notification pings.
- Exercise regularly, but not right before bed.
- Create a to-do list for the following day to clear your head.
- Process your thoughts in a journal, sketchbook, or notebook.
- Practice deep breathing, meditation, or prayer before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine in the evening.
- Keep your bedroom at a cool temperature (65–68 degrees).

- If you are sensitive to light and sound while sleeping, wear earplugs and a sleep mask.
- A white noise machine may also help; if you use a white noise app on your phone, remember to turn off your notifications.
- If you have trouble falling asleep or falling back to sleep, get out of bed and do some soothing activity (like reading or listening to classical music) in another room. Return to bed when you feel drowsy.
- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Avoid eating heavy meals at least two to three hours before bed.
- Make sure your mattress and pillows are comfortable.
- If you take a nap during the day, limit it to 15–20 minutes.

Write down your own ideas here:

Which of the suggested strategies are you most likely to try?

What steps do you need to take, or what supplies do you need to get?

Next, keep track of your sleeping habits using the chart below. Indicate when you have trouble sleeping, the strategy you used to fall asleep or get back to sleep, and whether not it worked. Then, describe how you felt the next day. Track your progress for at least two weeks, making copies of the chart as necessary.

Date	Hours Slept	Strategy Used to Fall Asleep/ Return to Sleep	Successful? (Y/N)	How You Felt Next Day (groggy, alert, cranky)

Reflections on This Exercise

Did you experience any changes after taking steps to improve your sleeping habits? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Seeing the Big Picture

Objective

To manage your emotions by making sure you are seeing the “big picture” and not just paying attention to the negative aspects of a situation.

You Should Know

When a situation triggers overwhelming emotions, it is common to only pay attention to the upsetting or painful parts of your experience. As a result, you may overreact to the situation and jump to conclusions that are not based in reality. By focusing on the negative things you experience – a type of thinking called “negative filtering” – you limit your ability to experience the realities of that situation.

Here are some examples of negative filtering thoughts:

Amy accidentally deleted one page of notes before her class presentation. As she spoke, she tried to remember those missing points but became increasingly self-conscious, stammering through the rest of the presentation.

Negative filtering thought: “I can’t do anything right.”

Mike broke his ankle after slipping on an icy sidewalk and it prevented him from going on an important business trip.

Negative filtering thought: “This is just my luck. Why does this stuff always happen to me?”

Cassie’s boyfriend broke up with her after dating for five months. This was her second breakup in less than a year.

Negative filtering thought: “Why can’t I find the right guy? What’s wrong with me?”

What You Should Do

Seeing the “big picture” means evaluating a situation from all sides, not just the negative aspects. Seeing the big picture enables you to take a step back from a difficult situation and observe things in a more objective way. This helps you better manage the thoughts and emotions that arise.

There are several questions that can guide you to see the big picture. In this example, Amy will answer the questions.

What happened during this situation?

“I deleted a page from my presentation and got so distracted that I had a hard time focusing.”

How did you think and feel as a result of this situation?

Thoughts: *“I can’t do anything right.”*

Feelings: *“Embarrassed and mad at myself.”*

What evidence supports your thoughts and feelings?

“In spite of the hours I spent preparing, I still screwed up.”

What evidence opposes your thoughts and feelings?

“I’m doing well in this class and my other classes, too.”

What would be a more accurate and objective way to think and feel about this situation?

“I’m disappointed in myself. I moved too fast and deleted an important page. I’ll be more careful next time.”

How could you react to that situation in a healthier way (e.g., calling a friend, using positive statements)?

“I’m human, and mistakes happen to everyone.”

Now, think of a recent situation when you were only seeing the negative aspects. Use the following chart to help you see the big picture.

Questions About the Situation	Your Answers
What happened during this situation?	
How did you think and feel as a result of this situation?	Thoughts: Feelings:
What evidence supports your thoughts and feelings?	
What evidence opposes your thoughts and feelings?	
What would be a more accurate and objective way to think and feel about this situation?	
How could you react to that situation in a healthier way?	

Do you often only see the negative aspects of a situation? Give another example of when you have done this.

What is an area of life where it will help you most to see the “big picture” (e.g., work, school, relationships, family, and so on)?

Do you know of anyone else who has difficulty in seeing the “big picture?” How does negative filtering affect them?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Problem Solving for Healthier Emotional Responses

Objective

To use problem solving to respond to challenging situations with healthier emotions and behaviors.

You Should Know

It can be difficult to respond to difficult situations objectively when they cause you painful emotions. When these situations are recurring, you may find yourself in a cycle of undesirable reactions and overreactions, which can damage your relationships and the way you see yourself.

While it is difficult to control challenging situations in your life, it is possible to improve your reactions to them. By using problem solving, you can strategize ways to respond to challenging situations with healthier thoughts and behaviors.

What to Do

The ABC Problem-Solving technique involves three steps to help you identify healthier ways of reacting to events or situations that trigger you.

A: Alternatives – Brainstorm alternative responses to your undesirable thoughts and feelings. How could you react differently to the situation?

B: Best Ideas – Select one or two of the best responses you have identified.

C: Commitment – Determine a situation where you use your alternative behaviors. Try to be as specific as possible, including time and location, so you can follow through and establish a new pattern of behavior. It also may be helpful to identify a person who can support you in changing your undesirable reaction.

Here is how this technique works, using Sam as an example.

Sam, a single father, noticed he was often rude and disrespectful to his coworkers on the mornings his daughter had temper tantrums before childcare drop-off. The frustration and impatience he experienced at home turned into anger and annoyance at the office. He then felt ashamed about lashing out at his colleagues.

A: Alternatives: Sam created two brainstorming lists of alternatives to the thoughts and behaviors he most wanted to change: his feelings of frustration at home, and his rude behavior at work.

Alternatives to Feelings of Frustration	Alternatives to Rude Behavior
<i>Take deep breaths</i>	<i>Go to gym at lunchtime to work off stress</i>
<i>Focus on making it fun for my daughter to get ready for daycare in the morning</i>	<i>Avoid speaking to coworkers until I've cooled off – usually after my first few sips of coffee</i>
<i>Set alarm earlier in the morning so tantrums won't make me late</i>	<i>Talk to other single parents at work for support and suggestions</i>
<i>Listen to stress relieving music or podcasts on my drive to work</i>	<i>Listen to stress relieving music on my computer</i>

B: Best Ideas – Sam decided to focus on making it fun for his daughter to get ready for daycare, and to talk to other single parents at work. Both of these plans would enable him to refocus his energy from anger to relationship building, and to replace stress with constructive activities.

C: Commitment – Sam found ideas on the internet for ways to use games and rewards while getting his daughter ready for daycare, which turned out to be enjoyable for both of them. He also decided to invite some of his single parent coworkers to coffee, to get their support and advice, with a goal of at least one meeting a month.

Now, describe a recurring situation that causes you repeated emotional distress or undesirable reactions.

What thoughts and behaviors would you like to change in reaction to this situation? Why?

Next, use the ABC technique and describe each step.

Alternatives – Brainstorm responses to the thoughts and feelings you would like to change.

Best Ideas – Select one or two of the best responses you have identified.

Commitment – Determine a situation where you can try using your alternative behaviors. Be as specific as possible, including time and location, so you can follow through on this.

Name at least one friend or family member who can support you in putting this plan into practice.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did you notice any improvement in your emotions and behaviors after using the problem-solving technique? Explain.

During what other challenging situations could you use this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Building Positive Emotions

Objective

To practice building positive emotions to balance out the unhealthy or destructive emotions.

You Should Know

All day long you are confronted with situations where you must manage your emotions. You might encounter an unexpected setback and need to manage stress, or you might need to manage your anger when a coworker snaps at you. Fortunately, there are many strategies that allow you to manage your reactions and feelings, including building positive emotions.

This might sound intimidating at first if your feelings and moods are negatively impacted by what is happening around you. This might create drama and stress in your life. Fortunately, you can focus on pleasant activities and experiences in order to build positive emotions. Positive emotions allow you to be more resilient through creating social, mental, and emotional resources. You effectively develop a positive emotional reserve to pull from when you experience stressful or upsetting experiences. You will also develop problem-solving skills. There are two main strategies when it comes to building positive emotions, including maintaining or prolonging and increasing or enhancing positive emotional experiences.

What to Do

Identifying pleasant activities will start you on your way to feeling more positive emotions. Positive emotions include:

Happiness	Gratitude	Pleasure	Admiration
Enthusiasm	Excitement	Euphoria	Contentment
Amusement	Silliness	Love	Pride
Curiosity	Joy	Passion	Ease

Add your own ideas for activities here:

Now, list up to ten activities you are currently doing or would consider doing. Then name at least four people you would like to contact to join you – family, friends, or acquaintances.

Part of learning Emotion Regulation through building positive emotions is by being around other people and learning to be in balance in your relationships – remaining in the present moment, listening and sharing compassionately, and being with people who understand you.

Refer to the list of activities below if you need some help identifying what you would like to participate in.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

People I could contact to do activities together:

1. _____ 3. _____
2. _____ 4. _____

Here is a list of activities. When you get up each morning, make a plan to do at least one social activity that day and keep a record of what you do.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| attending a prayer group | entertaining | horseback riding |
| camping | exercising | dating |
| canoeing | fishing | picnicking |
| dancing | lying kites | taking a vacation |
| discussing books | gardening | eating at a restaurant |
| doing arts and crafts | bowling | sailing |
| skating | jogging | skiing |
| swimming | kayaking | watching spectator sports |
| going to a Meet Up group | surfing | attending a meditation class |
| seeing a movie | painting | registering for a college class |

- going to church
- visiting a museum
- going to a play or concert
- going to the beach or mountains
- golfing
- hang gliding
- playing softball, soccer, volleyball, or tennis
- practicing karate or martial arts
- photography
- teaching
- playing cards
- volunteering
- dancing
- sightseeing
- walking or hiking
- traveling abroad or in the United States
- taking children places
- practicing yoga or Pilates
- singing with groups
- shooting pool
- lunch with a friend
- having a political discussion
- organizing a family get-together

Your own ideas: _____

Now list the activities you would like to schedule. Record over the next week or two which activities you actually did and what it was like for you. Refer back to this list, delete and add as needed. Remember to have fun!

Activity	Date Scheduled	With Whom?	Completed?	Reflections

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you notice about yourself and your feelings while doing pleasant activities?

Describe what happened when you engaged in activities with other people. Did you have fun? Was it challenging? Both? Describe below or on a separate piece of paper.

How would you like to continue building positive emotions? Elaborate below or on a separate piece of paper.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

Managing Catastrophic Thinking

Objective

To manage your catastrophic thinking by assessing the risk of your feared situation, and identifying resources in the unlikely instance the situation happens.

You Should Know

Catastrophic thinking refers to ruminating about irrational, worst-case outcomes. It can increase anxiety, prevent you from taking action, or cause you to avoid situations entirely. When you fear the worst possible outcome, your choices, behaviors, emotions, and relationships can be negatively affected. You might constantly worry that something terrible will happen, and you might frequently experience “what if” thinking: “What if I catch a disease from visiting a sick friend in the hospital?” or “What if my teenage son becomes a drug addict?”

Fear can be a helpful reaction to situations where there are proven threats or dangers. It is important to know the difference between fear that is justified and based on evidence, and fear that is based on catastrophic thinking or unjustified worries.

When fears are justified:

- There is evidence of a threat or danger to your life, or to someone you care about.
- There is evidence of a threat or danger to your health, or to someone you care about.
- There is evidence of a threat or danger to your safety and well-being, or to someone you care about.

Can you describe some examples of justified fears from your own life?

Examples of catastrophic thinking and unproven fears:

- My house is going to get struck by lightning because I just replaced the roof.
- My spouse isn't answering his cell phone – he must have been in a car accident.
- I can't go on a cruise because the ship will sink.

Can you think of other examples from your own life?

Catastrophic thinking often causes people to avoid situations out of fear. Unfortunately, avoidance tends to reinforce this type of thinking; the more you avoid the fearful situations, the more power you give them. The best way to conquer your feelings of anxiety and worry is to examine the situations and determine the likelihood of that scenario happening.

Describe a recent situation you avoided because you were afraid something terrible would happen.

What were you afraid would happen?

Has that feared situation ever actually happened to you before? Describe.

Describe a time your fears stopped you from taking action regarding your relationships, work, health, and so forth.

Describe a time your fears negatively impacted your choices, emotions, or relationships. What happened?

Catastrophic thinking may relate to old beliefs and core values that produce overwhelming emotional reactions. You can examine your thoughts to determine how meaningful, accurate, and useful they are in the present situation. Challenging and changing those beliefs and values is often the key to managing persistent unhealthy or self-sabotaging thoughts.

What to Do

In order to overcome catastrophic thinking, it is important to dispute the thoughts. You can:

1. Identify it for what it is – an irrational, worst-case scenario.
2. Identify best-case possibilities – the best possible outcomes you wish to see.
3. Look at these best-case possibilities and identify whether or not they are the most likely outcomes.
4. Weigh the evidence and facts available to you, so that you can develop a realistic contingency plan for coping with the situation.

Using the chart below, identify your feared situations and rank your level of fear from 1 to 10, where 1 = no distress or discomfort, to 10 = extreme upset or anxiety. Next, list the evidence that the situation will happen and evidence that it will not happen. Then, describe a best-case possibility. Finally, estimate the odds of that situation actually happening.

Feared Situation	Level of Fear (1–10)	Evidence That It Will Happen	Evidence That It Won't Happen	Best-Case Possibility	Estimated Odds of Fear Happening (%)

Did you notice any changes in your level of fear as a result of this exercise? Explain.

Next, in the *unlikely event* that the feared situation actually does happen, you will develop a contingency plan that includes resources so you feel safe and prepared. After you compile the following lists, make copies and keep them with you.

Write down the names and phone numbers of people who can help and support you – your personal “Response Team.”

The people on my Response Team are:

Now, think of local agencies and groups you can reach out to for help and support, such as the American Red Cross, your local police or fire departments, or your local FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Write down a list of organizations, websites, and phone numbers that will be most helpful.

Finally, write down a list of your own skills and strengths you can use to get through this situation (for example, you are good with tools, you know CPR, or you think fast under pressure).

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise changed the way you see your feared situations? If so, how?

What other steps can you take to cope with feared situations in the future?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Increasing Your Sense of Control

Objective

To increase the sense of control you have in your life by identifying things you can control.

You Should Know

You might feel you have little or no control over what happens to you, no matter how hard you work or how careful you are. Sometimes things go wrong in spite of your best efforts. However, if you believe all of your experiences, both good and bad, are caused by luck or fate, it can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, or depression.

What to Do

Rate the following statements, where 1 = this does not apply to me at all, to 10 = this always applies to me.

- ___ I feel I have very little control over my life and what happens to me.
- ___ I rarely get what I deserve.
- ___ I avoid setting goals or making plans because there are too many bad things that can happen along the way.
- ___ I am often pressured into doing things or making decisions I later regret.
- ___ Bad luck has caused many of the disappointments in my life.
- ___ In spite of my hard work and effort, my accomplishments go unnoticed.
- ___ Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.
- ___ I often feel hopeless and powerless about situations in my life.
- ___ I just make my decisions by flipping a coin.

Review the statements you checked off and add up your total score: _____

If your score is above 50, you probably feel you have little control in your life and you might experience depression, anxiety or feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

Can you think of situations where those beliefs about control impacted your decision to change or improve your life? Describe.

Next, you will focus on things you *can* control.

Describe a situation when you accomplished a task you set out to complete. For example, completing a home improvement or creative project. Describe what you accomplished. What skills and strengths did you use to accomplish it? How did you feel about yourself afterward?

Describe an accomplishment you are proud of that required your planning, motivation, and/or problem-solving skills. For example, raising a child, quitting smoking, or planting a garden.

Describe what you accomplished. What skills and strengths did you use to accomplish this task? What goals and intentions did you set for yourself? How much effort did it require? How did you feel about yourself afterward?

Describe a time when your efforts made you feel valuable, effective, and successful. For example, volunteering at a food pantry or running a 5K race. What did you do? How did you feel during the activity? How did you feel afterward?

Next, identify three small, achievable goals that are important or interesting to you. Include your desired date of completion. Then, answer the questions that follow each goal.

For this example, Jim wants to improve his photography skills while meeting new people.

Goal #1 _____

(Jim: To take an adult education class in photography by next spring.)

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

(Jim: 1) Search online for local photography classes; 2) Visit my local camera shop for suggestions; 3) Determine how much tuition I want to pay; 4) Register for the class.)

The things I can control within those steps are:

(Jim: All of these things are under my control, except for the pricing of the classes and the availability of the classes. But I will select which class I register for based on those factors.)

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

(Jim: I will use my research skills to find a class that meets my needs. I will also use my organization skills by creating a list to track my class options and narrow down my choices.)

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

(Jim: In addition to asking my camera shop for recommendations, I can reach out to my social media connections for suggestions.)

Goal #2 _____

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

The things I can control within those steps are:

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

Goal #3 _____

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

The things I can control within those steps are:

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

Of course, even with planning, things do not always go according to the plan. It is important to use self-compassion instead of beating yourself up or blaming other people/circumstances.

Using the photography class example, it turned out the class was full, so Jim was unable attend. Instead of saying, "I'm so stupid for waiting too long to register," he can say, "I'm disappointed I'm not able to attend the class by the spring, but I will register early for the summer class and add a reminder in my calendar."

Who can you count on for support and help if you are unable to meet a goal, in spite of your best efforts?

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise increased the sense of control you have in your life? Explain.

Has this exercise changed the way you see the role of luck and chance in your past successes or lack of success? Explain?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Identifying the Physical Signs of Your Emotions

Objective

To identify the physical signs of emotion in order to manage your feelings more effectively.

You Should Know

You may have heard the phrase “body-mind connection,” which refers to the relationship between your emotions and physical sensations. As you experience overwhelming emotions, you may feel uncomfortable changes in your body. These can include an increase in your heart rate or changes in your breathing, body temperature, digestion, and perspiration. Your emotions can also alter your energy level, resulting in sluggishness. Sometimes these physical reactions can intensify your already-distressing moods or lead to anxiety.

When you are aware of your physical reactions, you can begin to identify healthy ways to manage them and the emotions that cause them.

What to Do

The first step to increase your awareness is to track the physical signs of your emotions. For example, if you recently experienced acute anger, you might have noticed physical sensations such as throbbing temples or tightly clenched fists.

Use the following chart to identify the physical responses you experience when you have distressing or overwhelming emotions.

- Under ‘Emotion and Intensity’ label your emotion and rank its intensity from 0 – 10, where 0 = no emotion and 10 = the most uncomfortable level of intensity.
- Under ‘Heart Rate’ describe any increase or decrease, or the feeling of pounding in your chest.
- Under ‘Body Temperature’ describe any increase or decrease, and the areas affected (for example, cold hands or flushed face and neck).
- Under ‘Muscles’ describe tension, tingling, or shaking, and where this occurred.
- Under ‘Energy’ describe your level of stamina, strength, or level of calmness (for example, you are unable to sit still or you feel anxious).
- Under ‘Other’ name any other body sensations you noticed, such as sweating, loss of appetite, headache, and so forth.

Emotion and Intensity	Heart Rate	Body Temperature	Muscles	Energy	Other
<i>Anger: intensity 8</i>	<i>Pounding heart</i>	<i>Face feels hot</i>	<i>Pain in neck</i>	<i>Can't sit still</i>	<i>Queasy</i>

Which of the emotions you listed cause you the most physical distress?

Did you notice changes in your emotions or physical sensations while completing the chart? Describe.

What have you tried in the past to reduce or eliminate the physical discomfort?

Next, you will identify physical movements that can decrease the level of uncomfortable sensations. Research has found that as you change your body movements and posture, you can improve how you feel. Believe it or not, even a small change in your facial expression can help; for example, when you smile, it releases “feel-good” chemicals in your brain like dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin that fight stress and elevate mood.

Here are some physical movements and activities that can help you reconnect to your body while reducing uncomfortable sensations. Place a check mark next to the activities you would be most likely to do the next time you feel physical discomfort.

Engage in intense exercise, such as running, weight lifting, basketball, or CrossFit to burn off energy and stress.

Take a walk.

Stretch or practice yoga, Pilates, tai chi, or karate.

Do deep breathing exercises.

Splash cold water on your face or take a hot shower.

Get a massage.

Other activity: _____

Which of the above activities can you commit to doing when you experience uncomfortable physical reactions to your emotions? _____

Explain why you chose those activities.

Name a person you trust who can support you in regular engagement in those activities.

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise changed the way you view your physical reactions to emotions? Explain.

Has this exercise changed the way you respond to overwhelming emotions

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Managing Urges by Burning Bridges and Building New Ones

Objective

To manage urges and decrease access to the means to act on unhealthy habits.

You Should Know

You are probably familiar with the expression “burning bridges,” which refers to destroying your path, connections, reputation, opportunities, and so forth – often intentionally. If you have self-destructive or harmful urges, burning bridges is a productive activity where you eliminate the means to act on unhealthy urges like overeating, abusing drugs or alcohol, or engaging in self-injury. Without the means, it becomes difficult (if not impossible) to engage in unhealthy habits and act on your urges. You can then “build new bridges” to manage your urges in healthier ways.

What to Do

To burn bridges to your urges, first identify the tools, resources, and temptations that enable you to engage in harmful or self-destructive habits. Describe the actions you will take.

Describe the unhealthy urge or habit you would like to manage.

Make a list of the tools, items, resources, or temptations that make it possible to act on your urges. For example, this might include people who encourage unhealthy habits or access to websites that trigger or reinforce urges.

Write down the steps you will take to discard, eliminate, or disconnect from those resources and temptations. For example, if you compulsively overeat you might throw away unhealthy foods, delete the food delivery app from your phone, and find alternatives to the local bakery where you hold your breakfast meetings.

Next, you will begin building new bridges – identifying resources and tools to help manage your urges and emotions in healthy ways.

Identify trustworthy and supportive people who can provide encouragement and accountability as you work to reduce your harmful habits. Share your goals and intentions with them. Write down their names and contact information.

Identify enjoyable activities that can provide distraction from your urges.

Identify calming and pleasant scents or images you can use to distract yourself.

What other strategies could you use to build new bridges to manage your urges?

Consider some of the ways your life will improve when you are no longer acting on your harmful urges. For example, if you overeat, you might feel healthier, fit into your clothes better, and have more energy. Write down your thoughts here. Make copies to post on your mirror or carry with you.

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise changed the way you understand your urges and unhealthy habits? Explain.

How can you use this exercise to better manage your urges?

Did you find it challenging to “burn bridges,” or was the process easier than you expected? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Using Opposite Action to Deal with Difficult Emotions

Objective

To take action in response to difficult emotions contrary to what you might naturally do, using a technique called “Opposite Action.”

You Should Know

When you experience a strong emotion, such as fear, anger, or sadness, your tendency might be to take action in response. It is a natural instinct to do something to make it go away.

Sometimes that is a good strategy. For instance, if you see a poisonous snake slithering on the sidewalk and you experience fear, it is a good strategy to run in the other direction as a response to potential danger. But sometimes you experience fear when there is no actual danger, and running away from the situation does not solve the problem.

There is a tool called “Opposite Action” to help you identify and regulate your emotions. So, while the snake example makes sense, what about a person who has to give a speech and feels fear? That fear may be very real but dashing out of the room might not make sense – in reality, there is no actual danger, just a worry about something bad happening. The person might choose to face into it, take deep breaths, tell themselves they are going to be all right.

The skill of Opposite Action is not the same as suppressing our emotions. Instead, you take charge of the emotion and, with repeated practice, master it. You remain present and notice the emotion, then consciously use it to take a different action. With practice, this action can actually *change the emotion* over time. With sadness or depression, for example, the habitual action is to stay in bed or hide away. An Opposite Action would be to visit a friend, go to the gym, or cook a nice meal. You are not denying the emotion. You are working with it, challenging it by acting opposite to it, and, eventually, turning it around.

What to Do

In this worksheet, you will notice when and in what situations you experience distressing emotions, then keep track of what you typically do in response. Then you will have a chance to try out various ways of taking “Opposite Action” in response.

Typical responses to difficult emotions include:

Fear – running away or avoiding the perceived danger.

Anger – fighting back or becoming defensive.

Sadness – isolate, withdraw, or retreat.

In the chart below, write down your experience of fear, anger, or sadness, and your typical response.

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Typical Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

To practice Opposite Action, try the following.

Fear – stay in the situation; take deep breaths; tell yourself “I can do this”; stand up straight; keep your eyes up.

Anger – step away from the situation or person you feel anger toward; take deep breaths; count to ten; consider the other person’s side; practice compassion; write down your feelings.

Sadness – face the situation; let yourself cry if you feel sad; avoid “numbing” distractions such as substances or entertainment; choose an activity that is engaging and productive, with other people; do not isolate or retreat.

Opposite Action is most effective when your emotions *do not fit* the actual reality of the situation, as in the public speaking example above where there is no actual danger. So your experience of “terror” ends up not being effective in helping you overcome your fear. Doing the opposite, and doing it with all of your energy and commitment, is important to this skill. You can change your thoughts, your words, even your facial expressions and physical stance.

Start with emotions that are not too intense so you can practice experiencing the change from “habitual/typical” to “effective.” Repeat this as often as necessary before moving on to tackling, and mastering, stronger or more intense emotional situations. Think of the process as learning and practicing a new language – it might feel awkward at first, but it will get easier over time.

Date/Situation	Emotion Experienced	Opposite Action Taken	Reflections/Notes

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you notice about your typical or habitual ways of dealing with difficult emotions?

Are your typical ways of handling emotions effective or ineffective? Explain.

Describe what happened when you tried to do "Opposite Action." Was it easy? Challenging? What can you do to continue practicing this skill? Elaborate below or on a separate piece of paper.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?
