



# SESSION 4



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## UNDERSTANDING MY EMOTIONS

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this session is to provide an opportunity for students to explore the range of emotions we experience and how we experience them.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of this session students should be able to:

- Explain the different emotions we experience and what causes them
- Understand how we respond to emotions
- Understand the interconnection between feeling, thinking and acting



## SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN

ACTIVITY	METHOD	MATERIALS
Welcome	Trainer led	
Connecting up	Group exercise: My day/week in feelings	Feedback sheet
What are emotions?	Individual exercise: Think, feel, act	Feedback sheet
Different perspectives on emotional experiences	Group exercise: One emotion – different perspectives	Scenario and flipchart
Reflection	Individual exercise	Student notebook/folder

## INFORMATION

Before reading this chapter, try and think of the last time you experienced an emotion. It could be any emotion. Now go ahead and try to explain what an emotion is. It is likely that doing so will not be as simple and straightforward as you might have expected.

### Understanding emotions

Emotions are a big part of our lives. In any one day we will experience many different emotions. Some may be pleasant or easy to deal with while others may be more intense or difficult to manage. We all struggle with emotions at times



but if we find ourselves struggling a lot of the time it can have an impact on our daily lives.

People often talk of emotions as good/bad or positive/negative. However, others believe that emotions are just what they are and only become good or bad when we place judgements on them. It is important to think about this because emotions have a purpose. They are messages which bring attention to important things happening in our lives, whether it is a big event or something smaller and day-to-day. This means that while they may be pleasant or unpleasant to experience, emotions have an important role to play in our lives. Learning to acknowledge and develop a good understanding of our emotions can help us to manage them.

## WHAT ARE EMOTIONS?

When we think of emotions, we usually think of feelings; the way emotions make us feel a certain way, such as happy or sad. However, our emotions affect us in a number of different ways through:

- Our mind – how we think, our judgements and memories
- Our body – how we feel and how our body reacts
- Our behaviour – how we act or don't act

### **For example:**

If we feel sadness about something ending or the loss of family or friends:

- We think about what we have lost and can become focused on the negative
- We can feel sluggish, empty, numb and tired
- We feel the urge to withdraw

If we feel surprised at good news for us or a loved one

- Our thoughts tend to be fast and focused on the positive



- We feel energised
- We feel the urge to approach and be with others

It is useful to think about our emotions in terms of mind, body, behaviours (or think, feel, act) as it helps us to be better aware of our emotions. It isn't always easy to do this, particularly if we feel an emotion intensely, but it is something we can learn to do and improve with practice.

## HOW MANY EMOTIONS ARE THERE?

There is no consensus on the number of emotions, however, scientists agree that some emotions are more fundamental (i.e., experienced by the majority of individuals, regardless of where they grew up in) than other. We call these emotions *basic emotions*.

There is agreement, that at least six basic emotions exist (Ekman, 1992):



You may think of other emotions or use different words for these emotions. Let us look at some examples of these basic emotions that we all experience.



### **Fear**

Fear occurs when a person believe that the situation they are in is potentially dangerous or threatening to their wellbeing. It happens when we think that our coping abilities are not good enough to deal with the situation. The emotion of fear functions as a warning signal. It tells us to withdraw from the situation. If fleeing the situation is not possible, it can motivate us to use coping skills such as being still and quiet. It can also motivate us to learn new skills to avoid similar situations in the future.

### **Anger**

Anger occurs when we believe that something or someone interfered with our goals. Anger energises our behaviour and motivates us to face the perceived barrier directly and try to overcome it. Anger can be productive when it energises our behaviour and endurance in order to cope productively with the situation.

### **Disgust**

Disgust occurs when we encounter an object or situation we deem is contaminated in some way, such as bodily contamination (i.e., spoiled food), interpersonal contamination (i.e., proximity to undesirable people) or moral contaminations (i.e., child abuse). Disgust motivates us to reject the object or situation and motivates us to change personal habits and attributes in order to avoid this emotion.

### **Sadness**

Sadness occurs as a result of experiences of separation or personal failure. Sadness is an emotion that motivates us to initiate behavioural change to avoid experiencing it in the first place and thus facilitates productive behaviors (such as maintaining social contacts). Not all situations that lead to sadness can be avoided, however. In situations that cannot be changed, people sometimes do not act in order to relieve their sadness but become inactive or lethargic and withdraw from other situations.

### **Happiness**

Happiness occurs when we experience events that produce desirable outcomes. It provides us the evidence that things are going well and thus motivates us to



continue to behave in the same manner that led to the desirable outcomes in the first place.

### **Surprise**

Surprise occurs when we experience something unexpected. The surprise can be a positive one or one we feel less comfortable with, depending on the situation. The function of surprise is to interrupt an ongoing action and direct our attention to a new event, that could be potentially significant for us.

## **WHAT CAUSES AN EMOTION?**

Over time we as human beings have evolved to experience many emotions – each of which has a different message for us. Our emotions are designed to make us respond in particular ways. When we experience an emotion there are different things going on inside us. According to psychologists, we have two systems that activate and regulate our emotions. The first system is a spontaneous, physiological system that reacts in an involuntary way to things that trigger emotions. Another way to think about this is that the part of the brain dealing with emotions is the limbic system – a part of the brain that developed fairly early on in human history, making it quite primitive. This explains why an emotional response is rapid and often quite straightforward but very powerful – you want to cry, or run away, or shout.

The second system is cognitive (i.e., related to our thought processes) and depends on our social environment and the learning history of the individual. Emotions are strongly linked to our experiences and memories. If something bad has previously happened to you, your emotional response (mind, body, behaviour) to a similar situation is likely to be strong. This also explains why different people can have very different emotional responses to what appear to be similar events.

These two systems are complementary and work together in order to regulate our emotional responses. While we may experience strong reactions or emotions this is not just about the stimuli or trigger but also our interpretation of a situation. So even though emotions can occur automatically, our understanding of the situation plays a crucial role in the way we respond to events. In fact, some believe that it is



the interpretation of or meaning we give to an event, rather than the event itself that gives rise to the emotional response.

### **Example**

Imagine, for example, that you have an important event coming up, where you have to give a speech in front of other people. If your answer to the question “am I capable of coping with the situation” is “yes”, then you will probably see the situation as challenging, but not impossible and thus experience positive emotions.

If, on the other hand, your answer would be “no”, you will more likely experience negative emotions, such as fear. In that sense, *our perceptions are the core of our emotional experiences.*

The idea that emotions are events that are not only biological, but also rely heavily on our thought processes, is very popular among psychologists and other mental health professionals. This is mainly because it sheds light on the active role that we all can have when dealing with negative emotions.

### **Example**

Imagine that you are waiting in a café to meet a friend and that friend is already 15 minutes late. You try calling your friend, but they are not picking up. If you think to yourself “This is so rude, I bet my friend forgot about our meeting, because everything is more important to her/him than me” you will experience anger or perhaps sadness. However, if you think to yourself “this is very unlike her/him, something urgent must have come up and that’s why she/he is late. I’m sure she/he will let me know when she/he gets a chance” you will most likely not experience sadness or anger, but perhaps concern or feelings of empathy. From this example, it is clear that you can experience different emotions in the same situation. It is therefore not the situation that dictates your emotions, but your thoughts and appraisals of that situation. Of course, this process happens quickly and cannot always be controlled, but you can practice and improve your skills in identifying your appraisals in order to better control your emotions.





## MANAGING OUR EMOTIONS

We are not born knowing how to manage our emotions. It is something we learn over time from our experiences and through our relationships with people. We all have very different experiences and relationships so what we learn will differ. Our temperament or the way we look at life and our environment will also shape how we manage our emotions. Sometimes we find an immediate way or a ‘quick fix’ to manage difficult emotions. This can work for some time, maybe years, but over time it can become less effective or bring its own issues, and we have to reassess and relearn.

One way to think about how we can manage our emotions is through what some people call the **window of tolerance**. This is a simple idea that believes we all have a comfort zone where we manage our emotions productively. It is based on seeing emotions in terms of how intense they are and how this affects us.

<p><b>TOO INTENSE</b></p> <p>too connected with the emotion</p> <p>Can't think, impulsive, reactive, feel out of control</p>
<p><b>FINE – THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE</b></p> <p>connected with the emotion</p> <p>Can think, remember, make choices about how to respond</p>
<p><b>NOT INTENSE ENOUGH</b></p> <p>not connected with the emotion</p> <p>slow, empty, numb, no motivation, want to withdraw</p>

**Our emotion feels too intense** – we are too connected with the emotions and it feels overwhelming. This can lead us to take the emotion as fact and just react to it. We don't think, are impulsive and can feel out of control.



**Our emotion feels fine** – we are connected with the emotion but are not overwhelmed by it. It feels tolerable. This means we can think about the emotion and make choices about how to respond. We can think, remember, make decisions and get on with our lives.

**Our emotion feels not intense enough** – we are not connecting with the emotion and may feel empty, numb or depressed. This means that we can get stuck in circular thinking or find it difficult to think about anything at all. We can feel slow, vacant, want to withdraw from the world and lack motivation.

Everyone comes out of their **window of tolerance** from time to time. For some people or for some of us at particular points in our lives this may happen more often. Thinking about the things that take you out of your window of tolerance can be very helpful. This way we can identify the emotional reactions that are not working for us, even if they did in the past.

Having a better awareness of our emotional reactions is the starting point for thinking about how we can change or manage them. Being able to take a step back and think about how we are feeling and why we believe we are responding in a certain way helps us to identify what is making the emotion challenging and what may help us to manage it. This means that we have to be open to experiencing difficult emotions and also staying with them even when our urge is to avoid or withdraw.

The exercises in this session and in Session 5 Self-management and self-care will provide students with ideas and examples of emotional coping strategies to try out.



### **TUTOR NOTES**

This exercise will build on the previous one and encourage students to explore how they could react differently to the same experience and why different people react differently to similar experiences. It will encourage them to explore the difference between our physiological, immediate system and our cognitive system. If there is time you could ask them to consider what it is that makes some emotions tolerable or pleasant and to think about what helps them stay in their window of tolerance

