

First Aid Kit

Part 2 - Regulating ourselves, our emotions/ soothing ourselves.

In times of stress our bodies and minds can feel like they are in overdrive, everything feels heightened, jumpy, fast, uncontrollable- we call this state hyper-arousal= the body, mind & nervous system is responding to stress with a fight or flight response- it can feel very anxious.

Sometimes though our bodies and minds can respond to stress (even the same stress) by going into a kind of shut-down, a flat feeling, lethargic, no energy- which feels like depression- we call this hypo-arousal- this is the body, mind and nervous system responding to the stress in a feign death or faint response. We kind of collapse.

***Remember hyper= high/up; hypo=low/down*

What we try to do then is to bring ourselves to a place that feels manageable- what we call "The Window of Tolerance"¹

We can do this by learning to regulate ourselves, to soothe ourselves, by handling thoughts and emotions in a way that brings us to that place where we feel we can cope again!

The first thing to do, as with last week, is to not judge what our body and minds are doing but to be grateful and proud that they are responding as they should to a stressful situation. Remember- you are responding in a natural way to an abnormal situation!!

Handling our Emotions

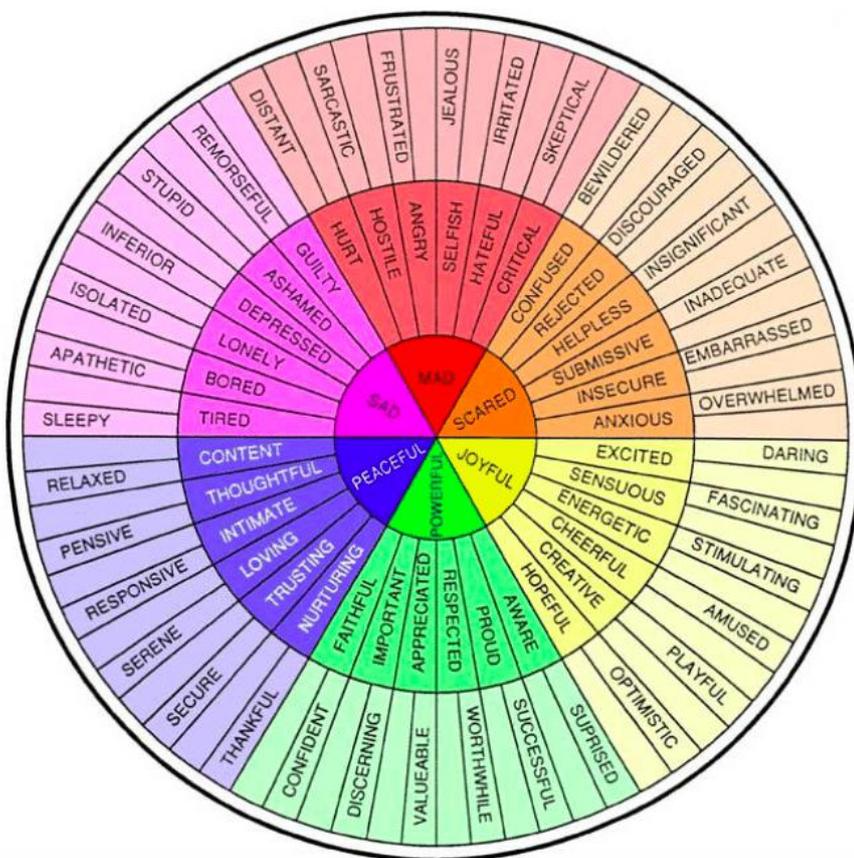
While emotions are very useful and are a huge part of our lives they can be tricky at times. We can feel positive or negative emotions, we can feel many at once, we can feel overwhelmed by them.

Along with our thoughts our emotions, if left unsupervised emotions can really drive that stress cycle we talked about last week- remember the nervous system sensing threat, the amygdala (in the brain) sending out danger signals, adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol (hormones for fight or flight) being sent around the body!

A good place to start in handling emotions is to be able to understand and identify them- this is often called 'Emotional Intelligence' ²

It takes a bit of practice for us to really understand what we are feeling and why- often we may be feeling a certain emotion but that emotion may be hiding or covering up another emotion which is more difficult to feel. For example we may be feeling or acting in anger when what we are truly feeling is fear or hurt- anger is a much easier emotion to experience and acknowledge than fear or hurt. **But it is only when we can properly identify what we are really feeling that we can get to the root or the cause and then help ourselves.**

Below is list of some emotions we experience-



Developed by G. Willcox, taken from Simplemost-

When we experience an emotion, or the sensations in the body that go with that emotion- (those sensations can be butterflies in our stomach, heart beating faster, feeling butterflies or sick) it is a really good idea to scan our environment

to see if there really is something that we need to pay attention to- is there danger for example. If not it may well be a thought or the memory of a difficult past experience driving this emotion. When we realise that there is actually nothing wrong at the moment we can allow ourselves be in the moment which is probably safe, and then calm our bodies and mind calm also.

So to recap-

Learning to identify our feelings-

Tuning in to ourselves, our bodies- what sensations do you feel

Asking- What is going on? What am I feeling?

Use the Feelings Wheel

So lets get to handling and calming those emotions when they do arise or 'hit us' as it often feels like!

At times it can be very difficult to experience some feelings- Learning to regulate ourselves increases safety.

➤ **Coming back to the present moment**

As I mentioned already some emotions arise due to our thoughts, or maybe something which has triggered or brought back a negative past memory. Sometimes the present isn't as bad as our thoughts lead to believe... So as with the the thoughts that we went over last week-

Using our senses is a very useful way of calming us when our emotions feel like they're taking over.

Again- focus on 5 things you can see, four things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, something you can taste.

***Just simply touching or holding onto something can be enough. Then look around you and notice what is there.

Use your senses to come back to present- distinguish between memories and thoughts versus the present.

➤ **Validating the emotion**

It might seem strange but an amazingly effective way of handling emotions is to just let them be there. Often it is the judgement we place on the emotions that make them scary and hard to handle.

So if I think “oh no I’m feeling anxious again” or “what’s wrong with me- I hate that I’m so frightened”-

then I’m telling my nervous system that there is something wrong with being anxious or frightened- this starts off that loop I mentioned last week- our brain and nervous system think that there is something wrong, send out negative hormones around the body, heart races, breath quickens, stomach feels butterflies (adrenaline), and with that the anxiety feels stronger!

Instead maybe try this-

Observing our emotions without judging them- ‘this is just what I’m feeling right now’- (using Mindfulness) ³

Accepting what you feel right now- “It is completely okay and understandable that I am feeling like this right now”

Feel the feeling and it will pass- remember there is a beginning and an end to every emotion- Trying to fight it will only keep it in the body

Remind yourself that just because you’re feeling something doesn’t mean that its reality- question your feelings and thoughts

Welcoming and being grateful to the emotions for protecting us takes the fear away, takes some of the negative impact away, making it more bearable ⁴.

*****An extremely important thing to remember is- as scary as emotions sometimes feel-*

Emotions will never harm us- they are messengers bringing very important information to us!!!!

***It is what we do to escape them- alcohol, drugs, addictive behaviours that can sometimes harm us!*

Emotions are a great way of telling us how a situation, a person, a place is affecting us- it's very important that we listen to them, allow them to be there, and then calmly decide what is the best thing to do with the information they give us. Let them in the front door and out through the back like again like any visitor!

[SEE Poem by M.J. Rumi at end of this document](#)

All of this has a calming effect on the brain (remember that little guy, the amygdala!) and nervous system and with it the body begins to calm.

➤ **Curiosity and mindfulness**

Being curious about what is happening for you or going on with you in the moment is a very effective way of calming emotions when they feel like they're getting out of control.

A good way of doing this is asking the question-

'what is going on for me right now?'

Try to be open, to notice, to discover what exactly it is that is going on- oh I feel sick in my stomach- am I anxious? I wonder what does that mean, what caused the anxiety? Is it this current situation, is this person making me uncomfortable, am I listening to too much media around the virus??

****Science bit-**

when we do this it quietens an area of the brain called the mid-line cortical region which is involved in obsessive behaviours, which are part of anxiety issues. It also quietens the area which is involved in ruminating- which is the constant thinking (like a washing machine) we do when we're anxious or depressed ⁵

✓ **Using cognitive strategies to help us handle or regulate our emotions**

Cognitive - means what goes on in our minds- our thoughts, our interpretations, how we learn.

We are now going to look at how we can use our minds to help us handle our emotions-

➤ **Distraction**

Sometimes when situations are very difficult or stressful or for us and especially if they go on for a long time we can find it almost impossible to calm our minds, our emotions and our bodies. In this instance a good trick which has been found to help is distracting ourselves from the situation⁶. Just like the positive imagery I mentioned last week, this gives our minds and bodies a break from the stressful situation. Any healthy distraction is useful- like thinking of something or someone positive, a phone call to a kind and positive friend, something funny on tv or YouTube, anything that is more positive and healthy will work well. Then when we are rested and have a break from the negativity we can function better and begin to handle the difficult situation again from a stronger place.

➤ **Reappraisal-**

Changing how we view a situation-

This tool- reappraisal- is one which gets us into the habit of changing the way we view things, from negative or catastrophising way to a positive way.

Going back to last week- remember that our emotions are often driven by our thoughts. So it is vital that we are aware of what those thoughts are- often the emotion such as fear or anger is a direct result of a thought we just had- so a good trick is to look back at the thought that started the emotion and decide:

Is that a rational thought, is it definitely true, am I interpreting this situation properly? Can I interpret things a little differently? Can I look at this in a more positive light? Is there something in my past which is driving that thought I just had- is that thought now driving this emotion?

***For example

Instead of thinking that this 'staying at home' is the worst thing ever, we can change that interpretation to - 'you know its not so bad- I am spending good quality time with my children and connecting with them more'- or if that doesn't help you cos they're driving you to distraction- you could think 'I'm able to save a bit of money by staying inside and this will help me down the line, maybe for a rainy day or for a trip away for a night or two with my family.

These examples may not work for you so its important for you to find your own example!

Remember that changing how we view a situation from a terrible thing to a thing which we can handle is the trick here.

- ✧ Remind yourself of the skills you have which will get you through this time- if you can't think of any skills maybe someone once told you about a skill they felt you had!
- ✧ Remind yourself of time in the past when you got through tough situations!
- ✧ Make yourself as powerful as you can in your own mind

✧ For a few minutes think of someone kind who cares or once cared about you and then try solving the problem of this situation- thinking of someone kind or caring brings our mind to a positive place and this make it easier for us to think more positively!

****Science bit-**

Reappraisal- Studies found that using reappraisal increased activity in the **prefrontal cortex** (remember the rational part of the brain!!) and decreased activity in the **amygdala** (the guy that sets off the stress response!) ⁷

We always want to be increasing activity in the pre-frontal cortex and decreasing activity in the amygdala- this brings us calm!

➤ **Labelling**

Labelling our emotions goes back to the start of this week's piece- *Labelling is just as it says- It is the act of putting a label on an emotion, a description or even a rating of the emotion*

It is a strategy that helps to decrease emotional reactivity in highly intense situations-

****in other words it calms us in situations that are very emotional**

Example: 'I feel really scared' or 'This is fear', 'I am feeling really overwhelmed right now', 'I am so angry', 'I'm hurt'.

Labelling however allows learning, since we are paying attention to the emotion and the situation which caused it which helps us recognise our emotions and why they happen.

For example someone with spider phobia can say out loud- **"there are spiders here** (appraisal), **I'm afraid,** (label) but **they are little and harmless."** (reappraisal).

This sentence contains appraisal of the situation, labelling of the feelings and reappraisal of the situation that reduces the negative feeling- It helps in understanding thoughts, beliefs and behaviours

****Science bit-**

- *It results in increased activity in prefrontal areas and Broca's area- (language part of the brain near Pre-frontal cortex) and decreased activity in the amygdala!!⁷*

As with last week, just give these a go- some might suit you, some might not work for you- just play around with them and see if you can adapt them to work for you. And remember you can get help from your project worker if you need.

Next time we're going to look at techniques to soothe us and handle emotions using our bodies- for example breathing etc.

Good luck with it all!!

Best wishes,
Marina

References-

For more information on this topic

- 1- Look up Dan Siegal
- 2- Look up Daniel Goleman
- 3- Look up- Jon Kabat- Zinn- Mindfulness/Mindful Meditation
- 4- Look up Bessel Van der Kolk
- 5- Look up Ron Hanson
- 6- Look up some research carried out by Richard Gross (1998)

7- Look up research-

Aldao, A., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Schweizer, S. (2010). Emotion-regulation strategies across psychopathology: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 217-237.

Moyal, N; Henik, A; & Gideon, G.E. Cognitive strategies to regulate emotions—current evidence and future directions

Poem-

The guest house

by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.*

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,

*Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent,
As a guide from beyond.*