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Vergie Charlery's Self Care e-book #5

# Emotional Self-Care



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# Emotional Self-Care

We, humans, have rich emotional repertoires. Our daily experiences evoke various emotions and feelings of different magnitudes. But what are emotions really, and why should we pursue emotional self-care? Philosophers have been concerned about the nature of emotion since Antiquity; however, the question has proved to be as complicated as the emotions themselves.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), emotion is a “complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements,” allowing an individual to process or handle a situation (APA, 2022).

We can't always have positive emotions such as joy, awe, or love. There are ups and downs in our lives, and the key to well-being is to get in touch with your emotions. This is where emotional self-care comes in.

It's essential to develop healthy coping skills to deal with unpleasant emotions like sadness and anger. Emotional self-care involves acknowledging your emotions regularly. It also means that you learn how to assess or process your emotions. Finally, emotional self-care allows you to regulate your emotions and develop strategies to deal with unpleasant situations.



# Acceptance

Some circumstances can induce negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and helplessness. Maybe some mistakes you made, words you mis-spoke, or opportunities you missed make you wish you could go back in time and fix them. Perhaps you want your sister to be a nicer person. You may not be able to change your circumstances with the snap of a finger, but you can accept how you feel about them.

Acceptance doesn't mean you have to approve of injustice or let others take advantage of you. Nor does it mean that you must learn to love the characteristics and circumstances you aren't fond of. Acceptance means understanding that you will encounter mistreatment, injustice, and unpleasant and unfair circumstances. Then you can adjust your reactions and act towards change.

Suppose you feel angry or frustrated about an issue, such as environmental degradation or your sister's rude comments. Practicing acceptance doesn't mean shrugging your shoulders and saying that you're okay with environmental degradation or that your sister will never be pleasant. Instead, acceptance means that you are aware of the situation and acknowledge and accept your emotions. That way, you can start to take meaningful action. For instance, once you accept your thoughts and emotions about pollution, maybe you decide to join an environmental organization or start a



campaign. Similarly, you may decide to talk to your sister about her behaviour or reduce your interactions with her if needed.

In short, acceptance is acknowledging and allowing your present circumstances and any feelings that may be associated with them. With this acceptance, you gain the ability to take meaningful actions and enjoy the benefits and relief that they may bring.

# Emotion Regulation

Have you ever regretted saying or doing something out of anger, frustration, or jealousy? If so, you're not alone; almost everybody has an emotional outburst at some point in their lives.



Emotions help us process and respond to the circumstances that have induced them. Depending on what we have experienced, our emotions can range from pleasantly positive to neutral to severely negative. Whereas some emotions are beneficial in general, other emotions may be harmful, especially if they lead to outbursts or improper actions. Therefore, we may benefit greatly by knowing how to regulate our emotions.

There are five critical steps of emotion regulation: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 2008). Let's discuss each of them.

## Situation Selection

The first type of emotion regulation, situation selection, involves increasing the likelihood of finding ourselves in situations that induce pleasant emotions while reducing our chances of finding ourselves in situations that may give rise to negative emotions. For instance, if scrolling on social media often leaves you agitated, you can reduce the amount you spend on it or quit it altogether.

In contrast, if taking a stroll around the neighbourhood park enhances your mood, you might want to do it longer or more often.

## Situation Modification

We can't always pick and choose which situations to allow into our lives. Often, we have little or no control over what will happen. This is where the next type of emotion regulation we call situation modification comes in.

Situation modification allows us to modify the situation directly to alter its emotional impact. Many of us do this instinctively. For example, if you are throwing a dinner party, you want everyone to enjoy themselves. Therefore, you probably set the table before your guests arrive, light up a candle or two to set the mood, and maybe even put on some relaxing music.

## Attentional Deployment

Sometimes, you just can't select or modify the situation you find yourself in. Yet, you can still adjust your emotions by redirecting your attention to something else. You might have done this already when you sat in a boring lecture or meeting and thought about what to eat for lunch or buy for your friend's birthday.

## Cognitive Change

We can also regulate our emotions by changing how we view the situation. For instance, you may





be upset that your best friend didn't call you on your birthday. Luckily, you can dampen your frustration by looking beyond what you see. Maybe your friend had a hectic day and didn't get to call you, or their phone ran out of battery, and they couldn't get to charge it yet. Even if they forgot that it was your birthday, it doesn't mean they don't care about you; some people are just not good at remembering special occasions.

## Response Modulation

This type of emotion regulation involves influencing your responses directly. For example, you may

be facing an angry customer screaming at you for something you have no control over. Understandably, this would be quite upsetting. However, most people in this situation manage to keep their cool and de-escalate the problem instead of getting angry and defensive. It doesn't mean these people don't feel anger or frustration; they just know how to modulate it.

An example of response modulation is when people pursue creative endeavours to process or express their emotions. Similarly, journaling can be another way to let out and process our emotions that we couldn't freely express earlier.



# Cognitive Reappraisal

In short, cognitive reappraisal is a coping strategy that involves reframing a situation to diminish the negative emotions associated with it (Troy, et al, 2018). When you use this strategy, you cope with the negative emotions evoked by a situation either by focusing on the positive outcomes of the situation or thinking that there could be worse outcomes.

Imagine a student who earned a bad grade on a math test. This situation may make him feel sad or angry. He can use cognitive reappraisal to give it a positive spin by thinking that now he knows which topics he needs to focus on to do well next time. In other words, this student can use it as a learning experience. He can also practice gratitude and feel glad that he has supportive parents and teachers or for receiving good grades in all other subjects.







## Exercise: Reframing Unpleasant Situations

Cognitive reappraisal may not come naturally. Yet, it is a strategy we all can improve with practice. Consider the following scenarios and write which emotion(s) you'd feel in those situations. Next, reframe each scenario by finding the positive outcomes as well as the worst outcomes that were avoided. Write as many of each as you can, and for each reframed situation, also note which emotions you'd have. You can do this exercise with a partner or your friends and come up with other scenarios as well.

1. **You forget your umbrella and it starts pouring.**
2. **You fall down the stairwell and break your ankle a week before your favourite cousin's wedding.**
3. **You fly to an unfamiliar city or country for vacation, and the airline notifies you at the baggage claim that they lost your luggage.**

### Take home:

This exercise was designed to give you a sense of how reframing can change your emotions about a situation. You can then apply this strategy to unpleasant situations you find yourself in.

# Increasing Positive Emotions with Positive Psychology

Joy, love, contentment, hope, and other positive emotions provide many benefits, such as fueling psychological resilience and undoing negative emotions' physical and psychological effects (Fredrickson, 2001). Lately, popular media has been talking more about positive emotions in the context of positive psychology, which has gained a lot of momentum in recent years. But what is positive psychology about? This research-based field of study proposes that life satisfaction and emotional well-being are achieved by focusing on our strengths and positive emotions in our personal and professional lives (Fredrickson, 2001).

So, how can you increase positive emotions with positive psychology? Counting your blessings may help. However, research suggests that imagining a positive future where you have accomplished your goals and fulfilled your potential may take you even further (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). If you are interested in increasing your positive emotions this way, give it a try in the next exercise.





## Exercise: Your Best Possible Self

This exercise was adapted from the study conducted by Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Although this exercise will take six to eight weeks to complete, you won't need more than a few minutes per day.

Start by thinking about your best possible self. This means that you will imagine yourself in the best-case scenario in the future. In other words, you will visualize that everything in your life has gone well, your hard work has paid off, and you have accomplished all your life goals. You may also think of this visualization as if all your dreams have come true in the future.

Now, write about your best possible self in as much detail as possible, using the following prompts.

- **What stands out about you in this ideal future?**
- **What are the emotions of the future you?**
- **What can you do to make that future a reality?**

The next day and later, take a moment to read and reflect on your best possible self. Connect with this new you as much as you can. Repeat this exercise for at least six weeks. It is okay if you miss a few days here and there. Just try to do it as consistently as you can.

### Take home:

Imagining ourselves in an optimistic future scenario helps us recognize our strengths and abilities and increases our hope for the future. Moreover, it may also put our current situation in perspective. With this exercise, you may realize that some of the things that are upsetting today may lose all their emotional weight in the grand scheme of things.

## Self-Compassion

Are you your worst critic? Many of us are. We criticize our imperfect looks and unproductive habits. We complain about our flaws and weaknesses. We ruminate about things we could have done better. Interestingly, we never put down or criticize anyone else as mercilessly as we do it to ourselves. Even if we notice their flaws and imperfections, we treat them better than we treat ourselves; we give them compassion.

Why not treat yourself this way with the warmth and respect we treat others? That is precisely what we do when we practice self-compassion. Treating ourselves with the kindness we deserve enables us to accept ourselves the way we are, with our quirks, failures, and shortcomings. Self-compassion allows us to understand the situation we are in and, as a result, our emotions. We can embrace and forgive ourselves and move on from our negative emotions with this understanding.

How can you practice self-compassion? The first step is developing a supportive inner voice as if you are talking to a friend, you dearly love. With this inner voice and a constructive approach, you can cultivate a compassionate attitude toward yourself and treat yourself with kindness.



## Do Things You Enjoy

Another way we can take care of our emotional well-being is by doing things we enjoy. That's right. When we do something, we enjoy, we simply increase our joy, amusement, and contentment. These positive emotions help us balance any negative emotions we might have. Therefore, doing an enjoyable activity can reduce our negative emotions and lessen the effects of stress on our bodies and minds.



### Here are a few ideas to consider.

- **Engage in a creative hobby.** Doing something creative may be pretty fulfilling, and you may learn new skills or improve existing ones. Moreover, when you are immersed in a creative pursuit, such as playing an instrument or doing a craft project, you shift your focus from your worries and negative emotions to something else.
- **Read.** Reading is one of the easiest ways to enter another person's mind. If you read a magazine article or a nonfiction book, you get to learn about a topic that interests you. When you read a novel or story, you find yourself in other people's shoes and experience the main character's emotions.



● **Do something relaxing.** When it comes to relaxing activities, we all have different tastes. Do whatever makes you feel good, whether it is yoga, a walk in the park, sipping your favourite tea, listening to music or a podcast, watching an episode of your favourite show, or taking a bubble bath.

● **Socialize.** Spending quality time with friends and family can help you share your emotions, get and give advice, share some laughs, and make good memories together. It also allows you to feel connected and supported while strengthening your bonds.



## In Sum

Our lives have good and bad moments, and emotional self-care involves caring for your emotional needs. It is vital to develop these healthy coping skills to deal with negative emotions, like sadness and anger. By learning how to assess or process your emotions, you can develop strategies to balance unpleasant emotions and increase your life satisfaction and well-being.

