

Regulating our emotions in a relationship: self-regulation or co-regulation?

Emotion regulation is key while we are communicating and interacting with our partner. We need to own our own negative emotions (and associated judgments) and to manage them in helpful ways to be able to grow as individuals and for our relationships to be successful.

More about emotions

Emotions are electro-chemical signals that flow through us. They are released in our brains in response to our perceptions, expectations and beliefs about the world. We feel them constantly and some are more intense than others. Emotions flow through our body all the time, impacting everything, including our thoughts, judgments, physiologies and behaviours.

In this wheel there are 12 emotions: peaceful, loving, trusting, intrigued, joyful, proud, angry, disgusted, afraid, surprised, sad and ashamed. We can see visually how each emotion can be further defined and change in intensity.

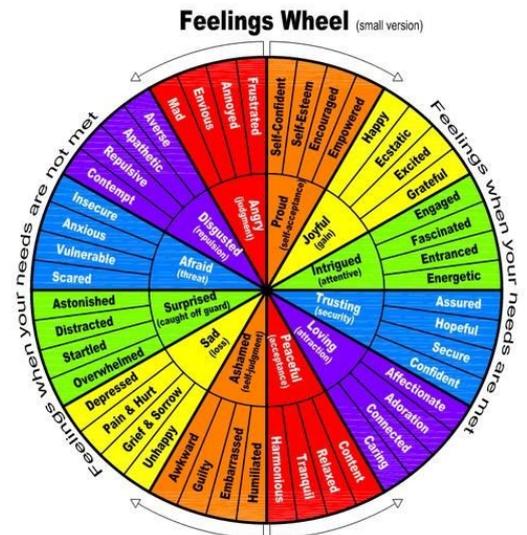
Emotions function to guide us to survive and thrive. Emotions let us know how we perceived that our needs or expectations are being met. Each emotion has a purpose. For example, anger is a signal that we have perceived a situation as threatening. Anger focuses our attention narrowly on the threat and motivates a response of attacking, fighting or pushing through the obstacle. Anger can be used destructively, but it also gives us the energy to find solutions to pressing problems. Joy focuses our attention on an opportunity and motivates us to do more of whatever we are doing. Sadness is often about loss and disappointment. Anxiety causes avoidance and denial and so on. Emotion provides us with very valuable information about ourselves and our surroundings.

Emotions are contagious and spread between people like a virus, even if we are not paying attention or conscious of the emotions. Whether we are in a group or with one other person, we can “catch” both positive or negative emotions. This is part of our evolution: humans have only survived and thrived in groups. We are social creatures. We are constantly sending and picking up emotional messages in many ways such as tone of voice, facial expressions, posture and other non-verbal behaviours.

Negative intense emotions such as anger, anxiety and sadness cause **chemical storms** in our brain and we need to learn to regulate to see the emotion through without feeding it further. It is important to learn about our emotions, that is to recognise the triggers and ways to ease it so they do not escalate conflicts and damage our relationships but instead be part of our growth as an individual in our relationships.

We are constantly looking for ways to regulate our emotions. We can either self-regulate or use our relationship (co-regulate) as a way of regulating our emotions consciously or unconsciously. For example:

- Do you blame your partner for your negative emotional experiences?
- Do you tend to deal with your emotional upset by yourself?
- Do you bring your emotional troubles to your partner hoping (expecting or demanding) that he or she will be able to calm you?



Both self-regulation and co-regulation are valuable, legitimate, and necessary in a relationship. There are effective ways to self-regulate and ineffective ways to self-regulate just as there are effective ways to co-regulate and ineffective ways to co-regulate.

If we want a relationship to become more satisfying and fulfilling, it's important to recognize the difference between self-regulating and co-regulating and to become more effective at both.

Types of self-regulation

Effective approaches to self-regulation include meditation, mindfulness, physical exercise, visualization, yoga, martial arts or other body-centred or psychological practices such as breath-work, journaling, art, prayer, various forms of self-inquiry, self-soothing, and self-validation.

Ineffective self-regulation includes self-criticism, denial, rejection, withdrawal, distancing, avoidance, resistance, isolating, dissociation, over-eating, substance abuse, and self-harm.

Types of co-regulation

Effective approaches to co-regulation might include communication methods like non-violent communication (NVC), active listening, doing massage or bodywork on each other, matched breathing exercises, partner yoga, dancing, hugging or cuddling, constructive discussion, negotiating, loving sexual practices, and making clear requests for assistance or emotional support.

Ineffective co-regulation can include shaming, blaming, insulting, name-calling, nagging, demanding, sulking, manipulation, threats, unreasonable expectations that your partner will "read your mind" and know exactly what we need/want, non-constructive arguments or fighting, passive-aggressive behaviours, and co-dependant behaviours.

Tips to self-regulate emotions while you are interacting with your partner

1. Become present and recognize your trigger.

When you feel triggered, abandoned, insulted, ignored, not important to him or her, recognize the emotion and your associated judgments or self-talks. Allow yourself to feel the emotions and notice the thoughts mindfully, with awareness without necessarily buying into it asking by yourself: *What are my thoughts about this situation? Am I being unduly defensive, taking it personally, generalising or exaggerating? Is it reminding me of some other situations that maybe not be related? What are my expectations/demands/needs in this situation? What is my intention in my communication?*

2. Shift your attention.

When we are upset, we tend to ruminate over the same thoughts or stories and our focus is rather narrow. We lose perspective. Recognize the behaviour that was triggering you and choose to turn the focus on yourself for a while to relax, to find your balance. You can practice mindfulness, becoming present in the here and now, engaging with your five senses, breathe out a long exhale. Choosing a different focus will turn off the part of your brain that is in flight or flees mode (threat system). When we slow our breathing, and belly breathe our thinking will also slow-down. Attend to your body, soothe yourself so you feel calmer, gaining clarity and perspective to better problem solve.

3. Change the thoughts and meaning you are imposing on the situation.

It is easier to change thoughts than it is to change feelings. If you feel that your partner is not listening to you or understanding you, see if you can explore his reactions from his perspective even for a moment.

Ask yourself: *Is there another way to see this that would bring more peace and is fair for both of us? What is an accurate way of thinking about this that is true, kind, helpful for both of us and is pointing to a solution?*

Self-regulation with co-regulation

To effectively help ourselves and our partner in regulating emotions (co-regulation) it's necessary to regulate our own emotions firstly (self-regulation). Otherwise, we will be constantly "triggered" or activated by our or the other person emotional upset, and we will end up in a familiar cycle of emotional escalation creating further conflicts. We need to develop self-regulation mostly so that we can then engage in co-regulation of our emotions more effectively. The ability to self-regulate near our partner if they have a difficult emotional experience helps us to be emotionally available and emotionally supportive of one another which helps us both to thrive and flourish.

This handout was written by Marie Bloomfield, Clinical Psychologist, M. Psychol., MAPS. July 2020.
Websites: www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au or
www.mindfulpath.com.au

For more information please email marie@bloomfieldpsychology.com.au