

Although it might be difficult to control your primary emotional reaction, there's still hope that you can learn to control your secondary emotional responses as well as how you choose to cope without emotions. And it could be later on, when you start using all the skills in this workbook, especially the mindfulness skills, you might even gain some control over your primary emotional responses, too.

First developed for treating borderline personality disorder, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has proven effective as treatment for a range of other mental health problems, especially for those characterized by overwhelming emotions. Research shows that DBT can improve your ability to handle distress without losing control and acting destructively. In order to make use of these techniques, you need to build skills in four key areas -- distress tolerance, mindfulness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

This book, a collaborative effort from three esteemed authors, offers straightforward, step-by-step exercises for learning these concepts and putting them to work for real and lasting change. Start by working on the introductory exercises and, after making progress, move on to the advance skills chapters. Whether you are a professional or a general reader, whether you use this book to support work done in therapy or as the basis for self-help, you'll benefit from this clear and practical guide to better managing your emotions.

find more zines at



[www.littlemouse.fun](http://www.littlemouse.fun)

# The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook

volume 3



## Emotion Regulation Skills

Matthew McKay, PhD  
Jeffrey C. Wood, PsyD  
Jeffrey Brantley, MD



# Basic Emotion Regulation Skills

---

### YOUR EMOTIONS: WHAT ARE THEY?

To put it simply, emotions are signals within your body that tell you what's happening. When something pleasurable is happening to you, you feel good; when something distressing is happening to you, you feel bad. In many ways, your emotions are like an instant news service that gives you constant updates about what you're doing and what you're experiencing.

Your initial reactions to what is happening to you are called *primary emotions*. These are strong feelings that come on quickly, that don't involve having to think about what's happening. For example, if you won a contest, you might instantaneously feel surprised. When someone you care about dies, you quickly feel sad. When someone does something that offends you, you might immediately feel angry.

But in addition to experiencing primary emotions, it's also possible to experience *secondary emotions*. These are emotional reactions to your primary emotions. Or to put it another way, secondary emotions are feelings about your feelings (Marra, 2005). Here's a simple example. Erik yelled at his sister because she did something that made him feel angry. His feeling of anger came on very quickly. But a little later he felt guilty about getting so angry with her. Anger was his primary emotion, and guilt was his secondary emotion.

However, it's also possible that you can experience numerous secondary emotions in response to a single primary emotion. Here's a more complicated example. Shauna became anxious when she was asked to make a future presentation at work. As the day drew closer, she became depressed as she thought about how anxious she was getting, and then she started to feel worthless that she couldn't make a simple presentation. Then, the day after the presentation, she started to feel guilty that she had made such a big deal about it in the first place. You can see how a person's emotions can get very complicated very quickly. Anxiety was Shauna's primary emotion, and depression, worthlessness, and guilt were all her secondary emotions in response to her anxiety.

It's possible that your primary emotional reaction to a situation can set off a limitless chain reaction of distressing secondary emotions that cause you much more pain than your original emotion does. For this reason, it's important that you try to identify what your original primary emotion is in a distressing situation so that you can learn to cope with that feeling before the avalanche of secondary emotions overwhelms you. This is where emotion regulation skills can be helpful. Emotion regulation skills are an important part of dialectical behavior therapy because they will help you cope with your distressing primary and secondary feelings in new and healthier ways (Dodge, 1989; Linehan, 1993a).

These skills are especially useful, because without them, people often choose to deal with their primary and secondary emotions in ways that only cause them more suffering. In Shauna's example, it's easy to imagine that she could have chosen to use alcohol or drugs to deal with her feelings of anxiety, cutting or self-mutilation to deal with her feelings of depression, and binge eating to deal with her feelings of guilt. These are all harmful coping strategies that are often used by people with overwhelming emotions. For this reason, it's extremely important that you learn the emotion regulation skills in this workbook so that you can cope with your primary and secondary emotions in healthier ways and avoid the prolonged suffering that often accompanies them.

Emotion regulation skills are also important for dealing with another problem called *ambivalence*. Ambivalence occurs when you have more than one emotional reaction to the same event and each emotion pulls you in a different direction or makes you want to do something different. For example, Tina had grown up without her father in her life. Then one day when she was twenty-five, her father contacted her and wanted to see her. Tina felt excited about the opportunity of forming a new relationship with him, but she was equally angry with him for abandoning her family. Clearly Tina's emotions were split, and they pulled her in two different directions about what to do.

If you've been dealing with overwhelming emotions for a long time, it's easy to understand that you might feel frustrated and hopeless about controlling your emotional reactions. But remember: although it might be difficult to control your primary emotional reaction, there's still hope that you can learn to control your secondary emotional responses as well as how you choose to cope with your emotions. And it could be that later on, when you start using all the skills in this workbook, especially the mindfulness skills, you might even gain some control over your primary emotional responses too.

## HOW DO EMOTIONS WORK?

Emotions are electrical and chemical signals in your body that alert you to what is happening. These signals often begin with your senses of sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Then the signals travel to your brain, where they are processed in an area called the *limbic system*, which specializes in observing and processing emotions so that you can respond to emotional situations. The limbic system is also connected to the rest of your brain and body so that it can tell your body what to do in response to an emotional situation.

Your emotions are extremely important for many reasons, especially your survival. Here's an example. Louise was walking down Main Street when suddenly a very large and angry dog began

## WATCHING AND ACCEPTING EMOTIONS

- Watched the emotion.
- Didn't act on the emotion.
- Didn't judge the emotion.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

## COPING WITH EMOTIONS

- Used opposite action.
- Used behavior analysis.
- Used problem solving.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

## POSITIVE EVENTS THIS WEEK

Monday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Tuesday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Wednesday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Thursday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Friday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Saturday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Sunday

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

barking viciously and running toward her. In that instant, an emotional signal was sent from her eyes and ears to her brain. Her limbic system then processed the information without Louise having to think about what to do. This type of response is called *fight or flight*, and it determined if Louise was going to stay to fight the dog or run away. Wisely, she chose to run away, and she escaped without being harmed. Her emotions helped her survive and avoid any pain.

Now let's suppose that two weeks later she was once again walking through town when she started to turn down Main Street. Very quickly, she began to feel afraid. This is called a *conditioned response*. Louise's limbic system was trying to protect her by helping her remember the dangerous dog on Main Street. Sensibly, she chose to walk down a different street to avoid the dog. In this example, Louise's emotions initially helped her escape danger and pain, and later, they also helped her avoid potential harm.

Here's another example of how emotions work. Sheila was walking through town when she suddenly saw Courtney, a good friend from many years before. Immediately, Sheila felt happy. When Courtney saw Sheila, she smiled right away. Sheila noticed her smile and thought, "She must be happy to see me too." So Sheila smiled as well. The two women quickly reconnected and made plans to do something together in the near future. The encounter made both women feel happy that they'd met accidentally after so many years.

In this example, the smile was an act of communication for both women. It helped each person recognize how the other person was feeling. If Courtney had frowned and looked the other way when she saw Sheila, Sheila would have recognized the expression as one of disgust and would probably have avoided contact with her. Every person, no matter what their culture, has the ability to express emotions in the same way and to recognize emotional expressions in other people. A smile is a smile no matter where you were born.

These are just two very simple examples, but you can see that emotions serve many purposes. Emotions are signals that help you to do the following:

- Survive ("fight or flight").
- Remember people and situations.
- Cope with situations in your daily life.
- Communicate with others.
- Avoid pain.
- Seek pleasure.

---

## WHAT ARE EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS?

As you've already learned, emotion regulation skills will help you cope with your reactions to your primary and secondary emotions in new and more effective ways. (Remember, you can't always control what you feel, but you can control how you react to those feelings.) These are some of the

most important techniques to learn in dialectical behavior therapy, so you might not be surprised that you've already been practicing some of them in the chapters on distress tolerance and mindfulness skills. The four skill groups in dialectical behavior therapy (distress tolerance, mindfulness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness) overlap and reinforce each other because this helps you learn the skills more easily and to remember them more quickly.

In dialectical behavior therapy, there are nine emotion regulation skills that will help you gain control of your emotions and the behaviors associated with them (Linehan, 1993b). These skills are as follows:

1. Recognizing your emotions
2. Overcoming the barriers to healthy emotions
3. Reducing your physical vulnerability
4. Reducing your cognitive vulnerability
5. Increasing your positive emotions
6. Being mindful of your emotions without judgment
7. Emotion exposure
8. Doing the opposite of your emotional urges
9. Problem solving

This chapter will cover the first five emotion regulation skills, and the next chapter will cover the last four skills. As in the previous chapters, the exercises in these two chapters will build on each other, so make sure that you do the exercises in order.

## RECOGNIZING YOUR EMOTIONS

Learning how to recognize your emotions and their effect on your life is the first step to controlling your high-intensity emotional reactions. Very often, people spend their lives paying little attention to how they feel. As a result, there are a lot of important things happening inside them that they know little about. The same holds true for people struggling with overwhelming emotions, but it occurs in a different way. Very often, people struggling with this problem recognize the tidal wave of distressing emotions that overcomes them (such as sadness, anger, guilt, shame, and so on), but by the time they recognize the tidal wave, it's too late to do anything about it.

To control your overwhelming emotional reactions, it's first necessary to slow down the emotional process so that it can be examined. And then, after it's examined, you can make healthier decisions. This exercise will help you begin this process by examining an emotional situation that has already occurred in the past. It will require you to be as honest with yourself as possible. The

## WEEKLY REGULATOR LOGSHEET PHYSICAL VULNERABILITY

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

- Took proactive steps to deal with physical illness/pain.
- Committed to balanced eating.
- Didn't use drugs/alcohol.
- Got enough sleep.
- Exercised.
- Used relaxation or mindfulness to cope with stress/tension.

## COGNITIVE VULNERABILITY

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

- Observed trigger thoughts.
- Used coping thoughts.
- Noticed at least one positive event.

## BEST IDEAS: EVALUATION STEP

Sam evaluated the different ideas he'd come up with, and decided to try the following:

1. I'll distract myself with music or get involved in my photography.
2. I'll run things past Millie before getting on anyone's case; and I'll give thought-out, written feedback if I decide to say anything critical.

## COMMITMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION

Finally, Sam decided to follow his plan with his mother-in-law for the rest of his visit, particularly whenever he was alone with her and she said something annoying.

Notice that Sam developed specific alternative behaviors to replace key actions that happened before he got angry, and he identified a situation where he was committed to using his new plan.

The most important thing about problem solving is to know *exactly* what you're going to do differently—and when and where you'll do it. The more concrete and specific you are, the better. Now, using your own example from your Behavioral Analysis Worksheet, work through the same steps, writing your ideas on a blank piece of paper, so that you can create a plan you can commit to following.

---

## WEEKLY REGULATOR

Emotion regulation is best achieved when you employ your new skills on a regular basis. The Weekly Regulator Logsheets are essentially a reminder system to help you do that. Here are the skills you'll focus on:

- Managing physical vulnerability
- Managing cognitive vulnerability
- Noticing and remembering positive events
- Watching and accepting emotions
- Opposite action
- Problem solving

The Weekly Regulator Logsheets should be filled out every Sunday night. Make plenty of photocopies, and review the skills you've utilized during the past seven days. Checkmark the appropriate boxes to indicate when you used your skills.

purpose of this exercise is to discover what emotions you were feeling (both primary and secondary emotions) and then figure out how those emotions affected your actions and feelings later on.

Let's consider an example. Ling struggled with overwhelming emotions that often got out of control. One evening, she came home from work and found her husband drunk on the sofa again. He refused to go to psychotherapy and he didn't consider himself an alcoholic, so he wouldn't go to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Ling immediately felt angry, so she started screaming at her husband, calling him a "worthless drunk." But he just lay there without arguing or moving. She wanted to hit him, but she didn't. After a few minutes, Ling started to feel hopeless and ashamed too. She had tried everything to help her husband, but nothing seemed to work. She didn't feel like she could stay in her marriage any longer, but she also didn't believe in divorce. Ling went to the bathroom and locked herself in. She thought about killing herself, to end the pain she was feeling. But instead, she took out a razor and started cutting herself on her leg just enough to make herself bleed. That night she forgot to set her alarm because she was too upset, so she missed the first few hours of work and got reprimanded by her manager.

Ling's story is common for many people. Using this story, let's follow the six-step process that will help you recognize your emotions (Linehan, 1993b).

1. *What happened?* This is your opportunity to describe the situation that led to your emotions. In this example, Ling comes home and once again finds her husband drunk. He refuses to get help or to talk about his problem.
2. *Why do you think that situation happened?* This is an opportunity for you to identify the potential causes of your situation. This is a very important step because the meaning that you give to the event will often determine what your emotional reaction is to that event. For example, if you think someone hurt you on purpose, you will react very differently than if you think someone hurt you by accident. Here, Ling believes that her husband is an alcoholic who hates her and regrets marrying her in the first place, so he has just given up on his life to hurt her.
3. *How did the situation make you feel, both emotionally and physically?* Try to identify both primary and secondary emotions if you can. Learning how to identify your emotions will take practice, but it will be worth the effort that you make. If you need help finding words to describe how you feel, see the List of Commonly Felt Emotions in chapter 3. Also, try to identify how you were feeling physically. Emotions and physical sensations, especially muscle tension, are strongly related. In this example, Ling's primary emotion is anger (after seeing her husband drunk), and then she feels the secondary emotions of hopelessness and shame. Physically, she notices that all the muscles in her face and arms become very tense, and she feels sick to her stomach.
4. *What did you want to do as a result of how you felt?* This question is very important because it identifies your *urges*. Often, when a person is overwhelmed with emotions, he or she has the urge to say or do something that is drastic, painful, or extremely dangerous. However, the person doesn't always do these things; sometimes the urges are just thoughts and impulses. When you start to notice what you *want* to do and compare it

with what you *actually* do, the results can be cause for hope. If you can control some urges, chances are good that you can control other urges too. In this example, Ling had the urge to do two things that would have been very dangerous and deadly: hit her husband and kill herself to end her pain. Thankfully, she didn't do either one, which later gave her hope that she could control other urges as well.

5. *What did you do and say?* This is where you identify what you actually did as a result of your emotions. In this example, Ling locks herself in her bathroom and begins to mutilate herself. She also yells at her husband and calls him a “worthless drunk.”
6. *How did your emotions and actions affect you later?* Here you can identify the longer-term consequences of what you felt and did. In Ling's example, she oversleeps for work the next morning since she forgets to set her alarm, and she is disciplined by her boss, which puts her job at risk.

---

## Exercise: Recognizing Your Emotions

---

On the next page is an example of the Recognizing Your Emotions Worksheet with Ling's experience filled in. On the following page, there's a blank worksheet for you to fill in an example from your own life. Before you use the blank worksheet, make photocopies of it so that you can continue to use it in the future. Or simply write the headings on a clean sheet of paper to make your own worksheet.

For now, use the worksheet to examine an emotional incident from your recent past. Pick a situation that you can clearly remember. Do your best to identify your primary and secondary emotions. And remember, be as honest as you can with yourself. No one has to see this worksheet except for you.

Then, for at least the next two weeks, pick a situation that happens to you each day and examine it using the Recognizing Your Emotions Worksheet. Remember, you need to practice examining past situations so that you can later learn how to identify your emotions and their consequences *while they are happening*.

## ABC Problem Solving

This is the second step of problem solving after you've completed your Behavioral Analysis Worksheet. It will teach you to identify the ABCs of problem solving:

- A. *Alternatives.* Brainstorm alternative responses. How could you change precipitating or secondary thoughts or behaviors?
- B. *Best ideas.* Evaluate your list and choose one or two of your best ideas to implement.
- C. *Commitment to implementation.* Identify the time and place you'll try your new responses. Write out the new thoughts or behavior you'll use.

### ALTERNATIVES: BRAINSTORMING

Let's go through the problem-solving steps with Sam as an example. Sam had two brainstorming lists—one to replace his shame-triggering thoughts and the other to change his attacking behavior.

### SAM'S BRAINSTORMING IDEAS

Shame Thoughts	Attacking Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Think of things I do right.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Remind myself how crazy this makes me, how eventually I get angry.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Distract myself; listen to music.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Ask Millie [his wife] for support.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Take a drive; take some pictures.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Validate the person before saying anything negative.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Never say anything critical if I'm feeling upset or ashamed.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Give written, not verbal, feedback. I get too upset and say mean things.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Remember how the other person would feel before saying anything.</i></li> <li>■ <i>Check with Millie about whether I'm going off the deep end before giving criticism to anyone.</i></li> </ul>

## BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

1. Problematic emotion: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Precipitating event (what happened before the emotion)
  - External event: Did something happen over which you have no control (losing a job, getting sick, disturbing news, and so on)? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Thoughts: What thoughts, prior to the emotion, might have triggered or intensified your reaction? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Emotion: Was there a prior and different emotion that triggered your reaction? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Behavior: Was something you or someone else did a trigger for your reaction? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Secondary events: Identify what happened immediately after the precipitating event (but before the problematic emotion). Break it down into a series of steps (a, b, c).
  - a. Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Emotion: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Emotion: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Emotion: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_

When you complete a Behavior Analysis Worksheet, you'll see how emotions are built. Something always triggers them. Sometimes that trigger is internal—like your thoughts or feelings—and sometimes there are multiple causes, all of which need to be recognized and traced.

### EXAMPLE: RECOGNIZING YOUR EMOTIONS WORKSHEET

Questions	Your Responses
When did the situation happen?	Last night.
What happened? (Describe the event.)	<i>I came home and my husband was lying on the sofa drunk again. He still refuses to go to therapy or AA. I yelled at him and called him a "worthless drunk." But he just sat there, without saying anything. So I went in the bathroom and cut myself.</i>
Why do you think that situation happened? (Identify the causes.)	<i>My husband is an alcoholic who hates me and regrets marrying me. I also think he's given up on his own life and just does things like this to hurt me on purpose.</i>
How did that situation make you feel, both emotionally and physically? (Try to identify both the primary and the secondary emotions.)	Primary emotions: Anger Secondary emotions: Hopelessness and shame Physical sensations: Face and arms became tense, sick to my stomach
What did you want to do as a result of how you felt? (What were your urges?)	<i>I wanted to hit my husband, and I had the urge to kill myself to end my pain.</i>
What did you do and say? (What actions or behaviors did you engage in as a result of how you felt?)	<i>I locked myself in the bathroom and started cutting myself. Then I went to bed by myself because I was so angry. I yelled at my husband and called him a "worthless drunk."</i>
How did your emotions and actions affect you later? (What short-term or long-term consequences were there as a result of your actions?)	<i>I was so angry when I went to bed that I forgot to set my alarm. So I woke up late for work. When I got in, my boss yelled at me again. He said that if I'm late one more time, he'll have to fire me.</i>

Questions	Your Responses
When did the situation happen?	
What happened? (Describe the event.)	
Why do you think that situation happened? (Identify the causes.)	
How did that situation make you feel, both emotionally and physically? (Try to identify both the <i>primary</i> and the <i>secondary</i> emotions.)	Primary emotions: Secondary emotions: Physical sensations:
What did you want to do as a result of how you felt? (What were your urges?)	
What did you do and say? (What actions or behaviors did you engage in as a result of how you felt?)	
How did your emotions and actions affect you later? (What short-term or long-term consequences were there as a result of your actions?)	

Notice that the external event—the mother-in-law’s visit—is only one step in a series. And most of the steps leading to the rage are internal—both thoughts and other painful feelings. If Sam is going to better regulate his anger, he may need to identify which steps in the triggering process he wants to change and then use problem solving to plan a different response.

The point here is that you *can* change or soften overwhelming emotions by changing what you do *before* the emotion sweeps you away. The first step, after completing your behavior analysis, is to decide which of the precipitating or secondary events you want to alter. This must be (1) an event you have control over (for example, your own thoughts or behavior) and (2) an event, if altered, that’s likely to reduce your problematic emotion.

In Sam’s case, he decided to do something about his shame-generating thoughts and the verbal attack. Sam realized that all too often over the years, this same pattern had repeated itself prior to his getting angry. He’d start with self-shaming thoughts, which would soon feel intolerably painful. Then he’d try to mask the shame by finding fault with others, which would trigger anger and eventually an attack.

Once you’ve identified the precipitating or secondary event(s) you want to change using your own Behavior Analysis Worksheet, the next step is to use the ABC Problem Solving technique.

---

## PROBLEM SOLVING

Sometimes emotion regulation has to start *before* the overwhelming feelings begin. Problem solving focuses on the triggering event and finds new, more effective ways to respond.

### ***Behavior Analysis***

Problem solving begins with something called *behavior analysis*. Basically, this amounts to tracing the sequence of events that led up to a problematic emotion. The Behavior Analysis Worksheet will take you step by step through the process.

#### EXAMPLE: BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

When he did a behavior analysis of his anger reactions, Sam found multiple internal triggers he hadn't expected.

### SAM'S BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

1. Problematic emotion: *Rage at mother-in-law*
2. Precipitating event
  - External event: *Mother-in-law's visit. She looks disgusted when she sees my house.*
  - Thoughts: *House needs paint. The yard is full of weeds and run-down looking. Place is a dump.*
3. Secondary events
  - a. Emotion: *Sadness*  
  
Thought: *I hate this place.*
  - b. Emotion: *Shame*  
  
Thoughts: *Why do I spend my life in dumps like this? Why can't I do better than this? I know why—because I'm a loser who can't make any money.*
  - c. Behavior: *Accused my mother-in-law of not helping us when we needed it, of not caring about our problems, and when she disagreed, blew up.*

---

## Exercise: Emotional Record

---

To help you recognize your emotions, it's often helpful to say how you're feeling out loud. This method of labeling might sound silly at first, but the act of saying how you feel out loud will highlight your emotions for you and help you pay extra attention to what you're experiencing. Describing your emotions aloud, especially your overwhelming emotions, can also help deflate your distressing feelings. So the more you can talk about an emotion, the less urge you might have to do something about it. You do not have to scream how you feel; it might be enough to say your emotion quietly to yourself. Just find what works best for you. Say to yourself: "Right now I feel ...". And remember to pay attention to your pleasant and joyful emotions too. The more you're able to recognize them and say them out loud, the more fully you'll be able to enjoy those feelings.

Then, in order to further reinforce the experience, record your emotions in your Emotional Record. Recording your feelings throughout the week will help you recognize, label, and describe your emotions.

EXAMPLE: EMOTIONAL RECORD

When Did It Happen and Where Were You?	How Did You Feel? ("Right now, I feel ...")	Did You Say How You Felt Out Loud?	What Did You Do After You Recognized How You Felt?
Thursday night, at home	I feel angry.	Yes	I went to the kitchen and had a glass of wine.
Thursday night, at home	I feel sad.	No	I tried to go to sleep, but I kept thinking about how sad I was.
Friday morning, on the bus	I feel agitated.	Yes	I tried to calm down by distracting myself and reading the newspaper.
Friday morning, at work	I feel pissed off.	Yes	I went outside and had a cigarette.
Friday afternoon, at work	I feel jealous.	No	I continued to ignore my friend who's dating a woman that I like.
Friday night, at home	I feel lonely.	Yes	I decided to go to the movies by myself and have a good time.
Saturday afternoon, at the park	I feel happy.	Yes	I stayed at the park with my friends.
Saturday night, at Ben's house	I feel cheerful.	Yes	I didn't say much to anyone because I didn't want to mess up my feelings.

OPPOSITE-ACTION PLANNING WORKSHEET

Emotion	Emotion-Driven Behavior	Opposite Action	Time Period	Outcomes

## EXAMPLE: LINDA'S OPPOSITE-ACTION PLANNING WORKSHEET

Emotion	Emotion-Driven Behavior	Opposite Action	Time Period	Outcomes
<i>Feeling rejected, angry</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Withdrawing</i></li> <li><i>Attacking</i></li> <li><i>Little revenges</i></li> </ol>	<i>Say what hurt me in a soft, nonattacking voice. Be civil; end the conversation quickly. Do something for myself rather than planning revenge.</i>	<i>As long as the conversation lasts</i>	<i>My conversations were calmer, they didn't escalate into fights. I expressed how I felt in a civil way.</i>
<i>Guilt</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Being "phony nice"</i></li> <li><i>Attacking</i></li> </ol>	<i>Apologize straight up, but let people know I don't like how I was treated.</i>	<i>As long as the conversation lasts</i>	<i>People appreciated my honesty. I expressed how I felt in an honest way.</i>

Over several weeks, Linda monitored her opposite-action outcomes to see how the new behavior worked. What she found was that her anger passed more quickly when she followed her opposite-action plan. Using a quiet voice and saying out loud what hurt her seemed to soften the upset. At first, she had been afraid to acknowledge her feelings of rejection because it made her more vulnerable. But after trying it several times (for example, telling her father she was sad not to be with him on Christmas day), Linda found that her anger often shifted to something less sharp, less painful. And she spent less time ruminating about ways she felt victimized.

Opposite action isn't easy. We won't pretend that it is. But opposite action quickly dulls the razor edge of overwhelming emotions. Fear often turns to empowerment, sadness to engagement, anger to detachment, and shame and avoidance to willingness. Planning opposite-action strategies can give you an incredibly effective tool for emotion regulation.

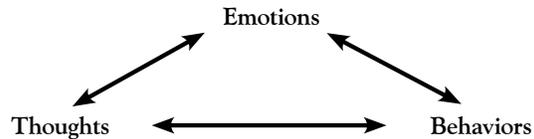
## EMOTIONAL RECORD

When Did It Happen and Where Were You?	How Did You Feel? ("Right now, I feel ...")	Did You Say How You Felt Out Loud?	What Did You Do After You Recognized How You Felt?						

---

## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO HEALTHY EMOTIONS

Now that you've started to recognize your emotions more fully, hopefully you're also noticing how your emotions can influence your behaviors and thoughts. Please look carefully at the following diagram.



This diagram depicts how your emotions can *influence* your thoughts and behaviors and also how your emotions can be *affected by* your thoughts and behaviors. For example, Jim lost his favorite watch (a behavior). He felt sad (an emotion), and then he thought to himself, “I’m so absentminded; I’m an idiot” (a thought). But this thought just made him feel more depressed (an emotion), so he went home and got drunk (a behavior) and later felt ashamed (an emotion). Do you see how your emotions can be both the result and the cause of your thoughts and behaviors?

This can become a vicious cycle for your emotions if you get caught in self-destructive behaviors or self-critical thinking. But this cycle can also lead to more fulfilling emotional experiences if you engage in healthy behaviors and self-affirming thoughts. For example, maybe after Jim lost his watch (a behavior) and felt sad (an emotion), he could have used a coping thought like “Mistakes happen; nobody’s perfect.” Then he might have been able to forgive himself for his mistake (another thought) and continue his day, feeling at ease (an emotion). Or after feeling sad about losing his watch, maybe he could have gone for a long walk (a behavior), which would have made him feel refreshed (an emotion). There were many coping thoughts and behaviors Jim could have used to prevent getting caught in a cycle of distressing emotions.

---

## EMOTIONS AND YOUR BEHAVIORS

Clearly, your emotions and your behaviors are strongly linked, and, not surprisingly, stronger emotions often lead to bigger behavioral reactions. As a result, many people with overwhelming feelings also struggle with out-of-control behaviors. People with overwhelming emotions often do many self-destructive things when they feel angry, depressed, or anxious. They cut or mutilate themselves, manipulate others (which often leads to fights and destructive relationships), overeat, undereat, drink alcohol excessively, and use street drugs. Obviously, these types of behaviors are harmful to everyone who’s involved. Yet people who engage in these behaviors often do them repeatedly. So the question remains: why do people do these types of things? The answer lies in your emotions.

Let’s start with the basics: many behaviors are repeated because they are rewarded. A person goes to work for the reward of a paycheck. A student goes to school for the reward of a degree. People play sports for the reward of competing. A musician plays an instrument for the reward of

There are six steps to creating opposite action:

1. Start by acknowledging what you feel. Describe the emotion in words.
2. Ask yourself if there’s a good reason to regulate or reduce the intensity of this emotion. Is it overpowering you? Does it drive you to do dangerous or destructive things?
3. Notice the specific body language and behavior (see the “Emotion-Driven Behavior” column in the table on page 171) that accompanies the emotion. What’s your facial expression, your posture? What are you saying and how are you saying it? What, specifically, do you do in response to the emotion?
4. Identify opposite action. How can you relax your face and body so it doesn’t scream “I’m angry” or “I’m scared”? How can you change your posture to convey confidence and vitality rather than depression? How can you move toward, not away from, what scares you? When you are angry, how can you acknowledge or ignore rather than attack? Make a plan for opposite action that includes a *specific* description of your new behavior.
5. Fully commit to opposite action, and set a time frame to work at it. How long will you maintain the opposite behavior? As you think about making a commitment, keep in mind why you want to regulate your emotions. What’s happened in the past when you gave in to emotion-driven behavior? Were there serious costs to you, to others?
6. Monitor your emotions. As you do opposite action, notice how the original emotion may change or evolve. Opposite action literally sends a message to the brain that the old emotion is no longer appropriate—and it helps you shift to a less painful emotion.

Now it’s time to do some advanced planning. You’re going to identify some “frequent flyer” emotions and commit to opposite-action strategies that can help you with regulation.

Filling out the Opposite-Action Planning Worksheet is simple but potentially very important. In it you’ll identify emotions you can expect to feel in the future and prepare a radically different response than you’ve had in the past.

Here’s an example. Remember Linda and the Emotion Log she filled out just before Christmas? When she began working on her Opposite-Action Planning Worksheet, she identified several opposite actions that she thought might help with her anger, feelings of rejection, and guilt. Here’s what she decided.

## DOING THE OPPOSITE OF YOUR EMOTIONAL URGES

There are good reasons for feeling whatever it is you feel. Even when they are painful, your emotions are legitimate and valid. The larger problem is emotion-driven behavior, because acting on emotions often creates destructive outcomes. Letting anger drive you to attack with words can disrupt your relationships. Letting fear drive you to avoid critical tasks and challenges can paralyze you at work.

A second problem with acting on emotion-driven impulses is that they *intensify* your original feeling. Instead of getting relief, you may get even more consumed with the emotion. This is where *opposite action* comes in. Rather than fueling your emotion, opposite action helps to regulate and change it. Here are some examples of opposite action.

### EXAMPLE: OPPOSITE ACTION

Emotion	Emotion-Driven Behavior	Opposite Action
Anger	Attack, criticize, hurt, shout.	Validate, avoid or distract, use soft voice.
Fear	Avoid, hunch shoulders.	Approach what you fear, do what you've been avoiding, stand tall.
Sadness	Shut down, avoid, be passive, slump, hang your head.	Be active, get involved, set goals, stand straight.
Guilt/shame	Punish yourself, confess, avoid, shut down.	If unfounded guilt, continue doing whatever is triggering guilt; if guilt is justified, atone and make amends.

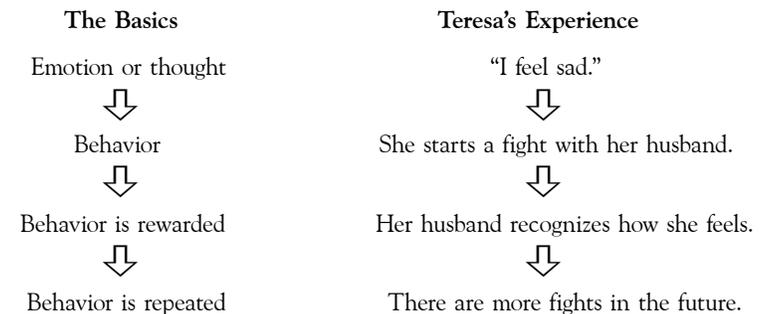
Notice that opposite action changes both body language (posture, facial expression) and actual behavior. Opposite action isn't about denying or pretending an emotion isn't happening. Rather, it is about *regulation*. You acknowledge the emotion but use the opposite behavior to reduce it or encourage a new emotion.

creating music. And a gardener plants flowers for the reward of seeing them blossom. All of these rewards *reinforce* these behaviors and make them more likely to be repeated in the future. If you didn't get a paycheck for going to work, you wouldn't go anymore. If your teachers told you that there was no chance for you to graduate, you'd probably drop out. And if you only got weeds every time you planted a garden, you'd probably stop doing that too.

In the same way, your emotions can serve as rewards that reinforce your behavior. Here's a simple example of how pleasurable emotions can reinforce a behavior: Phil helped his friend Stefan move into a new apartment (a behavior). Stefan was very grateful, which made Phil feel happy about helping him (an emotion). So the next time Stefan asked for a favor, Phil was happy to help him again (another behavior) because it would make him feel good again (another emotion).

However, emotions can reinforce self-destructive behaviors as well. Consider this example: Teresa, who struggled with overwhelming emotions, once said, "If I feel bad, I want my husband to feel bad too." Logically, this doesn't make sense, but thoughts, emotions, and behaviors aren't always logical. As a young girl, Teresa had never been taught how to cope with her distressing emotions. When she was in emotional or physical pain, she suffered alone without anyone's help. No one paid attention to how she felt.

Then, as an adult, she realized that someone would give her and her pain attention if she hurt the other person too, usually by making them feel upset. For example, when Teresa felt upset at work, she would go home and pick a fight with her husband about something unimportant (her behavior), and he would feel miserable as well. Then he would finally recognize how Teresa felt and talk to her about her feelings (which was her emotional reward). Teresa may not have been consciously aware that she was hurting her husband on purpose, but that didn't matter. At some point in her life, her thoughts had become automatic: "I feel bad, so I have to make someone else feel bad; then I'll feel better." And because her behavior was consistently rewarded with a positive (although illogical) emotional experience—validation from her husband—her behavior was reinforced and repeated in the future.



However, the way Teresa coped with her distressing feelings only made her feel better for a very limited amount of time. In the long term, her marriage suffered at the expense of her emotional validation. Teresa and her husband had frequent fights as a result of her behaviors, and these fights always made her feel even worse.

The emotional rewards that reinforce self-destructive behaviors are important to understand. Two types of self-destructive behaviors that people with overwhelming emotions often engage in are cutting/self-mutilation and manipulating others. Both of these behaviors offer short-term rewards that make them likely to be repeated, but both types of behaviors are also followed by long-term damage. (In the next section, Reducing Your Physical Vulnerability to Overwhelming Emotions, you'll learn about self-destructive eating and substance-use behaviors too.)

### Cutting/Self-Mutilation

Many people who cut, burn, or scar themselves say that their actions make them feel better or that their actions relieve some of their pain. To a certain degree, they're right. Cutting and other types of self-mutilation can cause the body to release natural painkillers called *endorphins* that help heal the wound. These painkillers can make a person feel physically and emotionally better for a very short amount of time. Yet as temporary as these rewards are, these physical and emotional feelings reinforce self-mutilation in the future. But remember, these behaviors can be dangerous and possibly lead to death or infection. And while the pain relief is temporary, the scars, the memories, and the guilt that often accompany these actions still remain.

If you engage in any cutting or self-mutilating behaviors, identify what those behaviors are in the space below. Then identify what the temporary rewards might be. And finally, identify what the long-term cost and dangers are, due to those behaviors.

The cutting and self-mutilating behaviors that I engage in are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The temporary rewards for my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The long-term costs and dangers of my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Manipulating Others

In the earlier example, you saw why Teresa picked fights with her husband when she was feeling upset. Her actions, though damaging to her marriage, made her feel better for a short

half the week at each parent's home. Virtually every time they had contact, Adam's ex said something that enraged him. And it didn't end there. He seethed for days afterwards, plotting what he might say or do to get revenge.

The Being Mindful of Your Emotions Without Judgment exercise seemed daunting to Adam, but he was exhausted with the constant emotional upheaval. And his doctor had recently warned him about borderline hypertension. He started by focusing on current emotions—nothing to do with his ex-wife. To his surprise, he tended often to feel sad rather than angry.

As Adam observed his sadness, he became conscious of a heavy feeling in his abdomen and shoulders. He had a sudden image of himself carrying a great weight. Judgments came up—he should be stronger, he wasn't a good father, he had screwed up his life. He noticed these thoughts and let them go, imagining them as a string of boxcars passing before him.

Adam didn't fight the sadness—he watched it swell and recede like an ocean wave. He gave himself the right to be sad. Noticing the judgments and letting them go became easier after a few experiences with the exercise. And Adam gained confidence in his ability to calm himself with mindful breathing.

Emotion exposure was more challenging. For this exercise, Adam chose to work on feelings that came up around his ex-wife. His first emotion exposure incident followed a phone call where she accused him of being “cheap and never voluntarily spending anything on the kids.”

Adam began by noticing the effect of these words on his body. He felt hot, with a disturbing sense of pressure in the chest and neck. (He wondered if it was his blood pressure.) Now he described the anger to himself. It felt hard and sharp, surging up with deep disgust. There was something else too—a sense of helplessness that seemed, he noticed, almost like despair. It was a feeling that things would never be better, never be different.

As the despair got stronger, Adam noticed an impulse to turn it off, to block it. He wanted a beer, and he started planning the retorts he would make to his ex-wife. With an effort, Adam continued to observe his emotions, not trying to hold on to any particular feeling but keeping his attention on *whatever* he felt.

Adam was also aware of impulses to act on the despair. He wanted to get angry instead, to call his ex and shout that she was poisoning his relationship with his kids. Then he had images of getting in his car and driving into a tree—half for revenge and half to end all the pain he was feeling.

While Adam observed his feelings, judgments kept coming up. His ex was evil, he had been stupid to marry her, she had destroyed his life, and it was too messed up to go on living. It took effort, but he put every thought on a boxcar and let it roll away.

After a time, Adam noticed something that surprised him. The despair feeling, if he didn't hold on to judgments, began to fade. It softened to a feeling closer to regret.

Adam now returned the focus to his breathing, counting and observing each breath. Three minutes later he felt a dark sort of calm—not the greatest feeling in the world but something he could live with.

Notice what it's like not to act on your feelings, not to blow up or avoid, not to hurt yourself. Just be aware of the feeling without action, watching but not doing.

Remind yourself that this is a wave that passes, like countless other emotional waves in your life. Waves come and go. There are many times when you've felt good. Soon this wave will pass, and you will feel, again, a period of calm. Watch the wave and let it slowly pass.

If judgment—about yourself or another—arises, notice it and let it go. If you have a judgment about feeling this emotion, notice it and let it go. As best you can, try to accept this feeling. It is just one of life's struggles.

Stay aware of your emotions just a little longer. If they are changing, let them change. Describe to yourself what you feel. Keep watching until the emotion either changes or diminishes. [Pause here for a few seconds if you are recording the instructions.]

Finish the exercise with a few minutes of mindful breathing—counting your breaths and focusing on the experience of each breath.

We encourage you to do emotion exposure for brief periods at first—perhaps as little as five minutes. As you become more used to focusing on feelings, you will be able to tolerate emotion exposure for longer periods. Always be sure to end exposure with mindful breathing because it will soften high-intensity feelings and help to relax you. It will also strengthen mindfulness skills and increase your confidence in your effectiveness.

Remember, the key steps to doing the Emotion Exposure exercise are:

- Focus on your breathing.
- Notice how you feel inside your body.
- Notice and describe your emotion.
- Notice if the feeling is growing or diminishing; see it like a wave.
- Describe any new emotions or changes in quality.
- Notice any need to block the emotion, but keep watching.
- Notice impulses to *act* on your emotion, but keep watching without acting.
- Notice judgments (about self, others, or the emotion itself), and let them go.
- Keep watching until the emotion either changes or diminishes.
- Finish with a few minutes of mindful breathing.

### ***Example: Using Mindfulness of Your Emotions and Emotion Exposure***

Adam had struggled for more than five years with feelings of hurt and anger regarding his ex-wife. They were now co-parenting Adam's seven- and ten-year-old children, with the kids spending

amount of time. Her behavior was rewarded with emotional validation, so it was repeated in the future. But, the frequent fights with her husband made her feel even worse in the long run.

Similarly, other forms of manipulation can have short-lived emotional rewards that lead to repetition. When you force someone into doing what you want, maybe you feel satisfied or in control. These can all be strong emotional rewards, especially considering that many people with overwhelming emotions feel like their own lives are out of control. But, again, even these emotional rewards are temporary.

Here are some examples. Whenever Brandy felt bored she liked to “mess with people,” just to give herself pleasure. Often she would lie to her friends and tell them phony rumors she claimed to have heard about them. Then, when her friends would get upset, Brandy would pretend to comfort them. This made her feel powerful, until her friends discovered the truth and then stopped talking to her. Similarly, Jason was very controlling of his girlfriend Patricia. When they would go out for dinner, he would order for her, even if she wanted something different. He also wouldn't let her spend time with her friends; he was constantly calling her on her cell phone to see where she was; and he told her that if she ever left him, he'd kill himself. Patricia really cared about Jason, and she didn't want to see him get hurt, but eventually, Jason's manipulative behaviors wore her out. So, despite his suicidal threats, Patricia broke up with him.

Remember, no one likes to be manipulated. Eventually, the person who is being manipulated gets tired of being controlled and puts up resistance. Then the relationship becomes confrontational and unrewarding and often ends very painfully. This is usually the worst possible result for a person struggling with overwhelming emotions because he or she is often extremely afraid of being abandoned by others. In fact, all the manipulative behaviors are usually attempts to cope with this fear of being left alone and to force people to stay with them. But when the relationships fail, the fear of being abandoned becomes a reality, and this can set off even more incidents of self-destructive behaviors.

If you engage in any manipulative behaviors, identify what those behaviors are in the space below. Then identify what the temporary rewards might be. And finally, identify what the long-term cost and dangers are due to those behaviors.

The manipulative behaviors that I engage in are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The temporary rewards for my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The long-term costs and dangers of my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

---

## REDUCING YOUR PHYSICAL VULNERABILITY TO OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS

In addition to recognizing how your thoughts and behaviors can influence your emotions, it's also important that you recognize how other health-related issues influence how you feel. Here are some examples.

### Food

Your body needs the nutrients it gets from food in order to keep functioning properly, just as a car depends on gasoline to keep running. As a result, the food you eat affects how you feel directly, both emotionally and physically.

Different foods can affect the way you feel as can the amount of food you eat. For example, foods with a lot of fat in them, like ice cream and pastries, can temporarily make you feel pleased and satisfied. But if you eat too much of them, you might start to feel heavy and sluggish. Over time, if you eat an excessive amount of food with high levels of fat or sugar, you'll also gain weight. This often makes people feel sad or unhappy about themselves, and it can also lead to health problems like diabetes and heart disease. Other foods with high sugar content, like candy and soda, can quickly make you feel energized. But as the effect wears off, these foods can leave you feeling very tired or even depressed.

Just as eating too much of certain foods can make you feel ill, eating too little food can also make you feel unhealthy. Getting too few nutrients in your diet can make you feel dizzy or light-headed since you're not getting the energy you need to keep functioning.

It's recommended that you eat a moderate amount of a wide variety of healthy foods every day, including fruits, vegetables, grains, and proteins. If you are curious about your diet or need help creating a healthy diet, contact a medical professional or a certified dietician for advice. Or visit a reputable nutrition Web site, such as the site for the United States Department of Agriculture at [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov) where you can find recommendations and guidelines for eating a healthy, well-balanced diet.

In the space below, record any thoughts you have about how your own eating habits affect how you feel, and then write at least two ways you can improve your eating habits in order to feel better.

My eating habits affect how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

As you look back over your Emotion Log, we'd like you to pay attention to two things. First, identify the emotions that seem chronic, that show up over and over. Second, notice what coping or blocking mechanisms you typically use and their outcome. Do they work? Do you feel better or worse a few hours after you use them?

Emotions that show up repeatedly or have blocking strategies that create more pain than they relieve will be good targets for emotion exposure. Emotions with ineffective or destructive blocking strategies require exposure because you need practice facing and feeling them—without your traditional methods of avoidance. Those don't work and often just get you in more trouble.

Linda, after reviewing her log, realized that the things she did to cope with feelings of rejection (attacking or criticizing people, being cold and rejecting) were only digging her into a deeper emotional pit. She ended up with overwhelming feelings of guilt and self-hate and seemed even more alienated from her family.

Linda needed to learn how to *be* with her feelings and how to observe them without the traditional avoidance strategies. Emotion exposure would prove to be a tremendously important skill for her. Here's how it works.

---

### Exercise: Emotion Exposure

---

As soon as you start feeling the emotion you've chosen to work on, do the following procedure. You can either read the instructions to yourself or record and listen to them.

#### Instructions

*Take three or four deep diaphragmatic breaths. Notice how the breath feels in your throat, as it fills your lungs, and as it stretches your diaphragm. While breathing slowly, notice how you feel inside your body, particularly your stomach and chest. Notice your neck and shoulders and face. [Pause here for a few seconds if you are recording the instructions.]*

*Now notice how you feel emotionally. Just keep your attention on the feeling till you have a sense of it. Describe that feeling to yourself. Label it. Notice the strength of the feeling. Find words to describe the intensity. Notice if the emotion is growing or diminishing. If the emotion were a wave, at what point of the wave are you now—ascending on the leading edge, on the crest, beginning to slide down the far side? [Pause here for a few seconds if you are recording the instructions.]*

*Now notice any changes in the feeling. Are there other emotions beginning to weave into the first one? Describe to yourself any new emotions that have appeared. Just keep watching and looking for words to describe the slightest change in the quality or intensity of your feelings. [Pause here for a few seconds if you are recording the instructions.]*

*As you continue to watch, you may notice a need to block the emotion, to push it away. That's normal, but try to keep watching your emotions for just a little while longer. Just keep describing to yourself what you feel and noticing any changes. [Pause here for a few seconds if you are recording the instructions.]*

Date	Event	Emotion	Coping or Blocking Response				

I can improve my eating habits by

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Overeating and Undereating***

Also, be aware that some people with overwhelming emotions use food in self-destructive ways, either by drastically overeating or undereating. Sometimes people overeat because the food makes them feel emotionally calm, or even numb, for a short amount of time. And, again, these feelings lead to the person's behavior being repeated in the future. Equally dangerous is the fact that some people try to control their overeating by engaging in purging activities like vomiting. Frequent purging can lead to a very dangerous eating disorder called *bulimia* that can have devastating effects on your body.

Drastic undereating can also make a person feel good for a short amount of time. Undereating can serve as a form of self-control. Many times, people with overwhelming emotions feel like their lives are out of their own control, and undereating gives them a sense of power over their lives that makes them feel better. However, this quest for control can be dangerous because excessive undereating can lead to *anorexia*, an extremely unhealthy and potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by a person's drastically reduced weight.

If you engage in any overeating or undereating, identify what those behaviors are in the space below. Then identify what the temporary rewards might be. And finally, identify what the long-term costs and dangers are due to those behaviors.

The overeating or undereating behaviors that I engage in are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The temporary rewards for my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The long-term costs and dangers of my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Drugs and Alcohol

Like food, anything else you put in your body will affect how you feel. Alcohol and drugs often make a person feel temporarily happy, numb, excited, or just different. Naturally, these feelings can lead to repeated use of these substances, especially after the temporary feelings have worn off. However, the excessive use of alcohol, street drugs, or abused prescription drugs can lead to many health complications, addiction problems, legal issues, financial difficulties, and relationship problems.

For example, alcohol is a depressant that makes you feel tired, sluggish, and sad. Many people don't believe this because they say alcohol makes them feel more energized and social. However, alcohol actually makes them feel less self-conscious, so they're more willing to do or say things that they normally wouldn't. But with enough alcohol in anyone's body, he or she will start to feel sad and tired, and the less you weigh, the quicker the alcohol will start to take effect on your body and feelings.

The use of street drugs and certain prescription drugs can have similar effects. Certain drugs, such as cocaine and crack, can initially make a person feel "good" or "energized." But after the effects of the drug wear off, the person may also start to feel depressed, anxious, or paranoid. The same is also true of many other street drugs, such as marijuana, methamphetamines, and heroin. Certain prescription drugs can also make you feel depressed and anxious, so be sure to check with the medical professional who prescribed them if you're feeling any distressing side effects.

Nicotine from tobacco products and caffeine are also considered to be drugs, although they are legal and very prominent in our society. Nicotine is a stimulant that activates a person's muscles, regardless of the fact that some people say that smoking makes them feel more relaxed. In these cases, what the person is actually experiencing is a temporary sense of relief from his or her body, which has been craving more nicotine. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance that makes people want to smoke more cigarettes, and that craving can make a person feel very irritated until he or she smokes again.

Caffeine is also a stimulant that is found in coffee, tea, many sodas, sports drinks, and some painkillers. If you drink too much caffeine, you will start to feel jittery, shaky, and irritated. You can also become addicted to caffeine, and if you don't get enough of it in your body after you're addicted, you can become irritated and possibly develop headaches and other physical symptoms.

With the regular use of alcohol, street drugs, and many prescription drugs, you may crave more of the substance just to feel the same effect it once gave you or to feel "normal." This is called *tolerance*. If you notice you are having this experience with any substance, including prescribed drugs, you should speak with a medical professional. You should also speak with a medical professional if you have a history of alcohol or drug abuse and you want to stop. Withdrawal from alcohol and some other drugs can be potentially dangerous.

In the space below, identify what the temporary rewards might be for your behavior and identify possible long-term costs and dangers. Then record any thoughts you have about how your own alcohol and drug use affects how you feel, and write at least two ways you can improve your habits in order to feel better.

## LINDA'S EMOTION LOG

Date	Event	Emotion	Coping or Blocking Response
12/18	<i>My brother calls, wants to know if I'm going to Dad's house for Christmas. But I wasn't invited.</i>	<i>Hurt, rejected, angry</i>	<i>Said "No" in a very leave me alone voice. Changed the subject. Criticized him for being stupid and still trying to be part of the family. Told him Dad doesn't even like him.</i>
12/18	<i>Stuff I said to my brother.</i>	<i>Guilty</i>	<i>Turned it into anger. Sent my father an e-mail, telling him he was a jerk for not inviting me.</i>
12/19	<i>Called my mother, but she was too busy to talk.</i>	<i>Rejected, angry</i>	<i>Thought about what a lousy mother she was. Sent an e-mail not to bother "taking time from her busy schedule" to call me back.</i>
12/20	<i>Saw a beautiful castle in a toy store window. Remembered the crappy afterthought Christmas presents I used to get.</i>	<i>Rejected, sad</i>	<i>Got an ice cream and watched all the "stupid ants" running around, doing their Christmas shopping, slaves to the season.</i>
12/21	<i>Bought my father a leather briefcase.</i>	<i>Angry, guilty</i>	<i>Hoping he opens it at his party and feels crappy he didn't invite me. Wrote a phony note saying "Thanks for being a great dad," and apologizing for my e-mail.</i>
12/22	<i>My mother called back.</i>	<i>Rejected, angry</i>	<i>Very cold to her. Told her I was busy when she invited me for a pre-Christmas dinner.</i>

- Notice judgments (about self, others, or the emotion itself) and let them go. Use “leaves on a stream” or other image.
- Watch the emotion; emotions are like waves on the sea.
- Remind yourself that you have a right to your feelings.
- Continue to notice and let go of judgments.
- Finish with three minutes of mindful breathing.

---

## EMOTION EXPOSURE

Facing your emotions instead of avoiding them is a major goal of dialectical behavior therapy. Emotion exposure helps you develop the capacity to accept feelings and be less afraid of them.

Step 1 is to begin keeping an Emotion Log so you can become more aware of specific emotional events and how you cope with them. For the next week, keep a record in your Emotion Log for every significant emotion you experience. Under “Event,” write down what precipitated your feeling. Triggering events could be internal—a thought, memory, or another feeling—or they could be external, something you or someone else said or did. Under “Emotion,” write a word or phrase that sums up your feeling. Under “Coping or Blocking Response,” write what you did to try to push the emotion away. Did you try to suppress or hide it? Did you act on it by picking a fight or avoiding something scary? This record of your coping or blocking response will help you identify emotions for doing emotion exposure later in this chapter.

### *Example: Emotion Log*

Linda, who had been struggling with anger and feelings of rejection, kept the following Emotion Log during the week before Christmas. Neither of her divorced parents had invited her for the holiday.

The alcohol or drug-using behaviors that I engage in are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The temporary rewards for my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The long-term costs and dangers of my behaviors are \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My alcohol and drug use affects how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I can improve my alcohol and drug habits by

1) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### *Physical Exercise*

The human body is designed for motion and activity. Because of this, it’s important that everyone engage in some amount of regular exercise in order to keep their bodies healthy and functioning properly. Without exercise, your body won’t burn up the extra energy it stores from the food you eat. As a result, you might start to feel sluggish, you might start to gain weight, and you may even feel a little depressed. It’s recommended that everyone engage in approximately thirty minutes of moderate or vigorous exercise most days of the week. This can include walking, jogging, swimming, biking, weight training, or any other activity that makes your body work harder than it usually does. Regular exercise is especially important to keep your heart healthy.

Even if your movement is limited or if you’ve never exercised before, there’s always something that you can do that’s within your safety limits. Be sure to check with a medical professional or a

physical fitness trainer before engaging in any type of strenuous activity, like weight lifting. And talk with your medical professional if you experience any abnormal pain when you exercise.

In the space below, record any thoughts you have about how your own exercise habits (or lack of exercise) affect how you feel, and then write at least two ways you can improve your habits in order to feel better.

My exercise habits affect how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I can improve my exercise habits by

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

## Sleep

Getting enough sleep is one of the most important things you can do to feel healthy. The average adult needs approximately seven or eight hours of sleep each night. Children and some adults need slightly more. If you're not getting enough sleep each night, you probably feel sluggish and tired all day and you probably also find it hard to think clearly. It's no wonder that a lack of sleep is often the cause of accidents and poor decision-making ability.

No amount of caffeine can make up for the sleep you missed the night before. In fact, caffeine, alcohol, and other drugs can all interfere with your ability to sleep at night. Your body needs a proper amount of rest because it uses the time when you are asleep to repair itself. If you're not sleeping, your body can't heal itself properly.

If you wake up many times throughout the night, if you snore excessively, or if you wake up gasping for breath, these can all be signs of sleep disorders, and you should talk to a medical professional.

Do your best to develop proper sleep habits in order to get the rest that you need. Refer to the Guide to Sleep Hygiene on page 142 to develop healthy sleep habits if you need help. Then, in the space below, record any thoughts you have about how your own sleep habits affect how you feel, and write at least two ways you can improve your sleep habits in order to feel better.

My sleep (or lack of sleep) affects how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now try to notice your thoughts. Do you have thoughts about the emotion? Does the emotion trigger judgments about others or about yourself? Just keep watching your emotion and keep observing your judgments.

Now imagine that each judgment is one of the following:

- A leaf floating down a stream, around a bend, and out of sight
- A computer pop-up ad that briefly flashes on the screen and disappears
- One of a long string of boxcars passing in front of you at a railroad crossing
- A cloud cutting across a windy sky
- A message written on a billboard that you approach and pass at high speed
- One of a procession of trucks or cars approaching and passing you on a desert highway

Choose the image that works best for you. The key is to notice the judgment, place it on a billboard or leaf or boxcar, and let it go.

Just keep observing your emotion. When a judgment about yourself or others begins to manifest, turn it into a visualization (leaf, cloud, billboard, and so on) and watch while it moves away and out of sight.

Now it's time to remind yourself of the right to feel whatever you feel. Emotions come and go, like waves on the sea. They rise up and then recede. Whatever you feel, no matter how strong or painful, is legitimate and necessary. Take a slow breath and accept the emotion as something that lives in you for a little while—and then passes.

Notice your judgmental thoughts. Visualize them and then let them pass. Let your emotions be what they are, like waves on the sea that rise and fall. You ride your emotions for a little while, and then they leave. This is natural and normal. It's what it means to be human.

Finish the exercise with three minutes of mindful breathing, counting your out-breaths (1, 2, 3, 4 and then repeating 1, 2, 3, 4) and focusing on the experience of each moment as you breathe.

Looking back on this exercise, you may have found it to be hard work. Watching and letting go of judgments may feel very foreign, very strange. But you are doing something important—you are learning to observe rather than be controlled by judgmental thoughts. We encourage you to do this exercise three or four times before going on to the next step.

Remember, the key steps to the practice of observing your emotions without judging them are as follows:

- Focus on breath.
- Focus on emotion (current or past).
- Notice physical sensations connected to emotion.
- Name the emotion.

“Doing the opposite of your emotional urges” is a strategy that blocks ineffective, emotion-driven responses while often helping you to soften the feeling itself.

The next step will be learning key behavior analysis and problem-solving skills to deal more effectively with high-emotion situations. You’ll identify what prompts the emotion and learn how to develop alternative strategies to cope with emotion-triggering events.

The last thing we’ll do in this chapter is introduce you to an exercise regime called the Weekly Regulator. It will help you to keep practicing the key emotion regulation skills you’ve learned here. Learning to be mindful of your emotions without judging them decreases the chance that they will grow in intensity and become even more painful.

---

## BEING MINDFUL OF YOUR EMOTIONS WITHOUT JUDGMENT

Learning to be mindful of your emotions without judging them decreases the chance that they will grow in intensity and become even more overwhelming or painful.

---

### Exercise: Being Mindful of Your Emotions Without Judgment

---

This technique begins with the mindful awareness of your breath. Focus on the feeling of the air moving across your throat, how your ribs expand and contract, and the sense of your diaphragm stretching and releasing. After four or five slow, deep breaths, you can do one of two things: (1) observe whatever current emotion you may be feeling, or if you can’t identify an emotion, (2) visualize a recent scene where you experienced an emotional reaction. If you visualize a scene, notice as many details as possible. Try to remember what was said and how you and others acted.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use an audio-recording device to record the directions in a slow, even voice, so that you can listen to them while practicing this technique.

#### Instructions

*While breathing slowly and evenly, bring your attention to where you are feeling the emotion in your body. Is it a feeling in your chest or stomach, in your shoulders, or in your face or head? Are you feeling it in your arms or legs? Notice any physical sensations connected with the emotion. Now be aware of the strength of the feeling. Is it growing or diminishing? Is the emotion pleasant or painful? Try to name the emotion or describe some of its qualities.*

I can improve my sleep habits by

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Illness and Physical Pain

Obviously, if you’re experiencing any illness or physical pain, this will affect how you feel emotionally. Your physical feelings and your emotional feelings are directly connected, and sometimes it’s hard or impossible to feel emotionally healthy if you aren’t also feeling physically healthy. Therefore, it’s critical that you get medical help for any illness or physical pain you might be experiencing. Furthermore, it’s also extremely important for you to follow the advice of the medical professional who is treating your illness and to follow the prescription plan for any medications you might be given.

To prevent possible illness and physical pain in the future, if you aren’t already experiencing them now, use the guidelines in this section to create a healthier life based upon proper nutrition, plenty of exercise, avoidance of alcohol and nonprescribed drugs, and plenty of necessary sleep.

In the space below, record any thoughts you have about how your own illness or physical pain affects how you feel, and then write at least two ways you can treat any illness or pain in order to feel better.

My illness or pain affects how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I can treat my illness or pain by

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Proper sleep habits are essential for any healthy lifestyle. Use the following suggestions if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

- Avoid caffeine for at least six hours before going to sleep.
- Avoid alcohol, nicotine, and street drugs before going to sleep and throughout the night.
- Avoid bright lights, including television, before going to sleep because they are stimulating.
- Don't exercise or eat a heavy meal shortly before going to sleep.
- Avoid napping during the day because it will make you less tired at night.
- Make your bedroom as comfortable as possible. Keep the temperature at a cool, comfortable level, keep your room as dark as possible (use a sleep mask if you need one), and minimize as much noise as possible (use earplugs if you need them).
- Only use your bed for sleeping and sexual activity, not for working, reading, or watching television. This way, your body will associate your bed with sleep, not with activity.
- If you have trouble falling asleep or if you wake up in the middle of the night and can't fall back to sleep, get out of bed and do something soothing until you feel tired enough to go back to sleep. Don't lie in bed thinking about other things; this will just make you feel more aggravated and make it harder to get back to sleep.
- Go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning. Create a regular pattern of sleeping and waking that your body can predict.
- Use some kind of relaxation method before going to sleep in order to calm your body and mind: take a bath, meditate, pray, write down your thoughts, use relaxation skills, and so on.
- If your sleep problems persist, if you can't stay awake during the day, or if you're feeling depressed, contact a medical professional for advice.

## Advanced Emotion Regulation Skills

In this chapter you will learn four advanced emotion regulation skills:

1. Being mindful of your emotions without judgment
2. Emotion exposure
3. Doing the opposite of your emotional urges
4. Problem solving

In chapter 3, *Basic Mindfulness Skills*, you learned how to recognize and describe your emotions. Now, in this chapter, emotion exposure will further help you practice two very important things. First, you will learn to observe the natural life cycle of your emotions, watching them rise and fall, shift and change as new emotions replace old ones. Second, you'll learn that you can endure—without avoidance or resistance—your strong feelings. You'll get practice staying “in” the emotion even though you want to run or turn the feeling into action (shouting, hitting, or breaking things). Emotion exposure is a crucial process for learning *not to fear your feelings*. And it will strengthen your emotion regulation skills. The more you practice this exposure work, the more confident you'll become as you face tough emotional challenges.

In addition to being mindful of your emotions without judgment and emotion exposure, you'll learn a behavioral technique called *doing the opposite of your emotional urges*. When you have a strong emotion, it affects behavior in two ways. First, you change your facial expression and body language to reflect your feeling. If you're angry, you may begin to scowl and tighten your fists. On the other hand, if you're scared, your eyes may open wide while you hunch your shoulders. The second behavioral change comes from action urges that accompany every emotion. Anger, for example, may produce urges to shout or hit, while fear might push you to cower or back away.

When?	What Did You Do?	How Did You Feel?	What Did You Think?

**Physical Tension and Stress**

If you experience physical tension on a regular basis, you also probably feel emotionally stressed-out, anxious, drained, or irritated. Muscle tension, like an illness, directly affects your emotions. Similarly, if you feel anxious, your emotions can often lead to muscle tension, especially in the neck and shoulders, as well as stomach ailments and skin problems.

There are many situations in modern life that can make you feel physically tensed and stressed: long working hours, a job you don't like, commuting to work, difficult relationships, a demanding family schedule, what's happening in the world news, politics, and so on. As a result, it's very important that you find healthy ways to cope with tension and stress so that they don't lead to further illness.

Many good coping skills are found in this book in the mindfulness and distress tolerance chapters. The mindful breathing exercise is very effective for helping you relax, as are many of the self-soothing exercises. Go back to those chapters, if you need to, to find exercises that work for you.

In the space below, record any thoughts you have about how your physical tension and stress affect how you feel, and then write at least two ways you can cope with your stress and tension in order to feel better.

My tension and stress affect how I feel because \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

I can treat my tension and stress by  
 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 2) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise: Recognizing Your Self-Destructive Behaviors**

Now that you've learned about different forms of self-destructive behaviors and physical vulnerabilities, make photocopies of the following Recognizing Your Self-Destructive Behaviors Worksheet to observe your own self-harming actions for the next two weeks. This worksheet is very similar to the Recognizing Your Emotions Worksheet found earlier in this chapter. However, this exercise asks you to observe your self-destructive behaviors and then to identify what the emotional rewards were for your behavior and why those rewards were only temporary. Use the following example worksheet to help you.

## EXAMPLE: RECOGNIZING YOUR SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS WORKSHEET

Questions	Your Responses
When did the situation happen?	Tonight
What happened? (Describe the event.)	My girlfriend and I got into a fight. I asked her to come over, but she said she was too busy. Then I told her I didn't know what I would do to myself if she didn't come over, so she did.
Why do you think that situation happened? (Identify the causes.)	She's selfish sometimes. But I also know she's tired when she gets home from work. She's also studying for some classes she's taking. We were both in bad moods.
How did that situation make you feel, both emotionally and physically? (Try to identify both the <i>primary</i> emotions and the <i>secondary</i> emotions.)	Primary emotions: Anger Secondary emotions: Hopeless, annoyed, afraid that she might leave me Physical sensations: My face became hot, my hands clenched.
What did you want to do as a result of how you felt? (What were your urges?)	I wanted to scream at her and tell her how selfish she is. I also thought about scarring my arm, like I've done in the past.
What did you do and say? (What self-destructive behaviors did you engage in as a result of how you felt?)	I told her she had to come over if she really loved me, or I didn't know what I would do. Then I hung up the phone without waiting for her reply. I went in the kitchen and ate a half-gallon of ice cream while I waited for her to come over. I didn't sleep all night.
What was the emotional reward for your self-destructive behavior? (Identify how the emotional reward was temporary.)	By manipulating her, I got her to come over, which made me feel good. But when she came over, we fought. The ice cream also made me feel good for a little while, but I've been putting on too much weight lately, which makes me feel guilty. Not sleeping another night just made me feel worse the next morning.

## EXAMPLE: PLEASURABLE ACTIVITIES LOG

When?	What Did You Do?	How Did You Feel?	What Did You Think?
Wednesday night	I took a hot bath.	Very relaxed and calm	"I should do this more often."
Thursday afternoon	I treated myself to a delicious lunch at work.	Satisfied and happy	"I enjoy good food even if I can't always afford it."
Thursday night	I turned off my phone and watched a movie.	Very good; laughed a lot	"I don't watch enough comedies."
Friday night	I went to dinner with my boyfriend.	Excited, nervous, happy	"I wish we went out like that more often."
Saturday morning	I went to temple for religious services	Holy, special, calm	"I should come more often."
Saturday afternoon	I went for a walk at the lake.	Calm and peaceful	"The lake was beautiful."
Saturday afternoon	I went out for ice cream after the walk.	Happy, like I used to when I was younger	"I miss being this happy."
Saturday night	I stayed at home and read.	Relaxed and quiet	"Sometimes it's nice to do quiet things."
Sunday morning	I slept late.	Very rested	"I don't get enough sleep during the week."
Sunday night	I took another bubble bath.	Very relaxed	"I should do this every night."

## INCREASING YOUR POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Before you picked up this workbook for the first time, you were probably an expert on distressing emotions and you understood what a life filled with them could feel like. Now, however, you understand that many people with overwhelming emotions discount their pleasurable emotions, filter them out, or never take the opportunity to experience them in the first place. As a result, they focus only on their distressing emotions, such as anger, fear, and sadness, and they rarely notice their pleasurable emotions, such as happiness, surprise, and love.

Maybe that's what you did before, but now you know that it's very important for you to begin noticing your pleasurable emotions. As you continue to use dialectical behavior therapy to improve your life, you'll want to find more ways of experiencing pleasurable emotions, if you don't have enough of them in your life already. This doesn't mean that you'll never experience another distressing feeling. That's impossible. We all have distressing emotions at different points in our lives. But your life doesn't have to be dominated by them.

One very reliable way of focusing on pleasurable emotions is to create pleasurable experiences for yourself. Again, this is a skill that you've already learned in chapter 1, Basic Distress Tolerance Skills, but it deserves to be repeated here. To begin building a more balanced, healthier life for yourself, take some time out of each day to create a pleasurable experience for yourself, and make note of how you felt and what you thought as a result of that experience.

If you need help thinking of pleasurable experiences, use the Big List of Pleasurable Activities found in chapter 1 on pages 15-16. Then use the following Pleasurable Activities Log and the example to record what you did, how you felt, and what you thought about the experience. Remember, try to do something pleasurable for yourself every day. You deserve it.

## RECOGNIZING YOUR SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS WORKSHEET

Questions	Your Responses
When did the situation happen?	
What happened? (Describe the event.)	
Why do you think that situation happened? (Identify the causes.)	
How did that situation make you feel, both emotionally and physically? (Try to identify both the <i>primary</i> emotions and the <i>secondary</i> emotions.)	Primary emotions: Secondary emotions: Physical sensations:
What did you want to do as a result of how you felt? (What were your urges?)	
What did you do and say? (What self-destructive behaviors did you engage in as a result of how you felt?)	
What was the emotional reward for your self-destructive behavior? (Identify how the emotional reward was temporary.)	

## OBSERVING YOURSELF WITHOUT JUDGING YOURSELF

As you can see from the previous exercise, self-destructive behaviors can only offer you temporary relief. In the long term, they are all more damaging to yourself and others. For this reason, it's important that you begin to notice what the rewards are for all of your behaviors, but especially the self-destructive ones.

But at the same time, also remember that you shouldn't criticize or judge yourself if you discover unhealthy rewards reinforcing your behaviors. Remember that the principle on which dialectical behavior therapy is based states that two apparently contradictory things can both be true. The most important *dialectic* is accepting yourself without judgment while simultaneously changing destructive behaviors so you can live a healthier life (Linehan, 1993a). It's not wrong to admit that some of your behaviors need to be changed; you can still be a good, kind, and loving person. Your behaviors probably exist as they do because you were never taught how to deal with your overwhelming and distressing emotions in any other way. If you had been shown a healthier way to deal with your emotions, you'd probably do it, wouldn't you? That's what the skills in this workbook are all about—teaching you healthier ways to cope with your feelings.

## REDUCING YOUR COGNITIVE VULNERABILITY

You've already learned how your thoughts influence how you feel. Remember Jim who lost his watch? He originally thought, "I'm so absentminded; I'm an idiot," which just made him feel worse about what he had done. This type of thought is called a *trigger thought* (McKay, Rogers, & McKay, 2003) because it triggers, or causes, emotional pain and suffering. If you frequently dwell on trigger thoughts, you probably experience overwhelming emotions more frequently than other people. However, we all have trigger thoughts that pop up from time to time. The goal of developing emotion regulation skills is to learn what to do with those thoughts when they do come up. Some of these thoughts are criticisms that we were told when we were children by our parents, guardians, teachers, and others. But other trigger thoughts are self-criticisms that we use to insult ourselves or make our lives more difficult.

Below are several trigger thoughts that often cause a person to feel emotionally distressed. Check (✓) any of them that you use, and then write any additional trigger thoughts in the space provided. If you have trouble remembering a trigger thought that you use, think of the last time you felt upset, angry, sad, depressed, worried, or anxious, and then remember the thoughts you had that made you feel worse. These are your trigger thoughts. Here are some examples:

- \_\_\_\_\_ "I'm an idiot/jerk/moron/\_\_\_\_\_."
- \_\_\_\_\_ "I can't do anything right."
- \_\_\_\_\_ "I'm a failure."

### BIG-PICTURE EVIDENCE LOG

Questions	Your Responses
What happened?	
As a result, what did you think and feel? (Be specific.)	Thoughts: Feelings:
What evidence <i>supports</i> how you're thinking and feeling?	
What evidence <i>contradicts</i> how you're thinking and feeling?	
Considering all the evidence, what's a more <i>accurate and fair</i> way to think and feel about this situation?	
What can you do to cope with this situation in a healthier way?	

Questions	Your Responses
What happened?	I got a poor grade on my math test.
As a result, what did you think and feel? (Be specific.)	Thoughts: "I'm such a loser." Feelings: Overwhelmed, upset, and angry
What evidence supports how you're thinking and feeling?	I studied as hard as I could, like I usually do, and I still only got a poor grade. That's my lowest grade in class all year.
What evidence contradicts how you're thinking and feeling?	I'm a straight-A student. I'm on the honor roll. And I got a full scholarship to my first choice of colleges.
Considering all the evidence, what's a more accurate and fair way to think and feel about this situation?	It's okay to feel disappointed because I studied a lot and still didn't do well. But this is just one bad grade. I mostly get A's, and I'm doing well in general.
What can you do to cope with this situation in a healthier way?	Talk to my friends. Listen to music I like. Use thought defusion. Use mindful breathing. Use my coping thought: "Nobody's perfect; everybody makes mistakes."

- \_\_\_ "I'm incompetent."
- \_\_\_ "No one's ever going to love me."
- \_\_\_ "I'm unlovable."
- \_\_\_ "There's something wrong with me."
- \_\_\_ "I'm broken."
- \_\_\_ "No one cares about me."
- \_\_\_ "Everyone always leaves me."
- \_\_\_ "People always hurt me."
- \_\_\_ "I can't trust anyone."
- \_\_\_ "I'm going to be alone forever."
- \_\_\_ "I can't make it in life without the help of \_\_\_\_\_."
- \_\_\_ "I don't deserve to be happy/successful/loved/ \_\_\_\_\_."
- \_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

Obviously a trigger thought can be a powerful negative force in your life if it constantly comes to your attention and leads to distressing emotions. But remember, in addition to trigger thoughts, Jim also used a coping thought, "Mistakes happen; nobody's perfect," and then he was able to feel more at ease. Coping thoughts can be an equally powerful force if you know how to use them. In this section, you'll learn three cognitive skills to help you deal with trigger thoughts and overwhelming emotions: thought and emotion defusing, coping thoughts, and balancing your thoughts and feelings.

### Exercise: Thought and Emotion Defusion

Thought defusion (Hayes et al., 1999) is a practice that was already taught in chapter 3, Basic Mindfulness Skills, but it's so important as an emotion regulation skill that it deserves to be repeated here too. Thought defusion is a skill that helps you "unhook" from your thoughts and overwhelming emotions. This is a skill that requires the use of your imagination. The purpose is to visualize your thoughts and emotions either as pictures or words, harmlessly floating away from you, and without obsessing about them, analyzing them, or getting stuck on them.

Typically, people find that imagining their thoughts and emotions floating away in one of the following ways is helpful. But if you've already been using a different means of visualization, or if you want to create something similar, do what works best for you. Here are some examples:

- Imagine sitting in a field watching your thoughts and emotions floating away on clouds.
- Picture yourself sitting near a stream watching your thoughts and emotions floating past on leaves.
- See your thoughts and emotions written in the sand, and then watch the waves wash them away.

Remember to continue using the concept of radical acceptance while doing this exercise. Let your thoughts and related emotions be whatever they are, and don't get distracted by fighting them or criticizing yourself for having them. Just let the thoughts and emotions come and go.

For the purposes of learning emotion regulation skills, you can use one of two variations of this thought- and emotion-defusion exercise. You can start the exercise without any preconceived thoughts and simply watch whatever thoughts and related emotions arise, and then let them come and go without getting stuck on any of them. Or you can begin this exercise by first focusing on one of your trigger thoughts. Recall a recent distressing memory in which your trigger thoughts arose. Notice how you feel emotionally and physically, and then begin the thought-defusion exercise. In this case, many memories from that event (and the trigger thought itself) will come to your thoughts automatically. As they do, continue as usual to watch those thoughts and emotions come and go without analyzing them or getting stuck on them.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use an audio-recording device to record the instructions in a slow, even voice so that you can listen to them while practicing this technique. When you are first using thought defusion, set a kitchen timer or an alarm clock for three to five minutes and practice letting go of your thoughts and related emotions until the alarm goes off. Then, as you get more accustomed to using this technique, you can set the alarm for longer periods of time like eight or ten minutes. But don't expect to be able to sit still that long when you first start.

Do this exercise as often as possible. Then, when you feel comfortable with the skill, you can begin letting go of trigger thoughts and distressing emotions in your daily life by briefly closing your eyes and imagining the thoughts and emotions floating past.

## Instructions

*To begin, find a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won't be disturbed for as long as you've set your timer. Turn off any distracting sounds. Take a few slow, long breaths, relax, and close your eyes.*

*Now, in your imagination, picture yourself in the scenario that you chose to watch your thoughts come and go, whether it's by the beach or a stream, in a field or a room, or wherever. Do your best to imagine yourself in that scene.*

Remember what Zeva filtered out? She's a straight-A student, she's on the honor roll, and she got a full scholarship to her first choice of colleges. Now consider how that information contradicts what she thought ("I'm a loser") and how she felt (overwhelmed, upset, and angry). Obviously, Zeva filtered out some very important pieces of her big picture.

Remember, since this question is new for you, it often takes some time to think of an answer. So give yourself a few minutes to think about the possible facts before saying, "There is no contradictory evidence." Be fair and kind to yourself. There's always evidence for and against any topic. And even if the contradictory evidence is minor, it still adds to your big picture. Consider Zeva's example. Even if her example was different and she was a B student or a hardworking student, these facts still could have changed the way she felt about the poor grade. No fact or contradictory piece of evidence is too small to be overlooked.

Next, keeping in mind the new evidence that contradicts the trigger thought, ask yourself if there is a more accurate and fair way to think and feel about this situation. This is a good time to be mindful of your emotions and to use radical acceptance. Remember, this exercise is designed to help you look at your emotional reactions in a new way; it is not designed to criticize you. Therefore, don't be critical of yourself. Try to be accepting of yourself and your emotions as you continue to see your emotions in a new way. In this step, add the new evidence to your big picture and try to create a more accurate and fair way to think and feel about this situation. In reality, this might not change how you feel right now, but it will help you to notice how you could feel about this situation in the future. Using these skills, Zeva's answer could have been something like, "It's okay to feel disappointed because I studied a lot and I didn't do well. But this is just one bad grade. I mostly get A's, and I'm doing well in general."

Finally, Zeva would have asked, "What can I do to cope with this situation in a healthy way?" Here is where you should draw from all the skills and techniques you've learned in this workbook to help you distract, relax, and cope. For example, Zeva could have used some of the distress tolerance and self-soothing skills to calm her emotions, like talking to a friend or listening to some relaxing music. She could also have used her mindfulness skills, like mindful breathing or thought defusion. Or she could have used a coping thought, like "Nobody's perfect; everyone makes mistakes."

Obviously, using the questions in this exercise isn't going to magically change the way you feel right away. But asking yourself these questions will help you recognize the facts that you've been filtering out, and it will also show you the possibilities of how you might react to a similar situation in the future. Then, with practice, you'll start reacting to those similar situations in a new, healthier way.

Seeing the big picture will also give you hope for your future. Many people who filter their experiences feel hopeless and desperate because they're only seeing the problems and the difficulties in their lives. But looking for contrary evidence opens up their perspectives and lets them see that their lives do include some positive experiences. Looking for evidence against overwhelming emotions is like taking off those dark sunglasses so that you can see the variety of colors in your life, and that's a hopeful experience.

Use the following evidence log to help you recognize the evidence for and against the ways you think and feel. Make photocopies of the log and keep one with you. Then, when you're in a situation in which you feel overwhelmed, use the log to help you see the big picture. Use the following example of Zeva's experience to help you.

- In general, evidence for the bad versus evidence for the good

Seeing the “big picture” is the opposite of filtering. This can be hard to do if you’ve spent your life narrowly focusing on just the negative evidence in your life. But you can learn to see the big picture by examining the evidence that goes against your distressing thoughts and feelings. These facts, which are often ignored by people with overwhelming emotions, fill out the rest of the big picture and can often change how you feel about a situation. Then, with practice, you’ll filter less of your experiences and become less overwhelmed by your emotions.

In order to see the big picture, use the following guidelines. Whenever you find yourself in a situation in which you feel overwhelmed by your emotions, ask yourself these questions:

1. What happened?
2. As a result, what did you think and feel? (Be specific.)
3. What evidence *supports* how you think and feel?
4. What evidence *contradicts* how you think and feel?
5. What’s a more accurate and fair way to think and feel about this situation?
6. What can you do to cope with this situation in a healthy way?

Naturally, when you start to feel overwhelmed by a situation, first ask yourself what happened. This is the best place to start. Identify what it is that’s making you feel upset. Using Zeva as an example, she would have noted that she got a poor grade on her math test.

Second, identify your thoughts and feelings. Remember, your thoughts greatly influence how you feel. But if your thoughts about a situation are being filtered and you’re not seeing the big picture, your thoughts are more likely to cause overwhelming, distressing emotions. In Zeva’s example, she thought, “I’m such a loser,” and then she felt overwhelmed, upset, and angry.

Third, ask yourself what evidence supports how you’re thinking and feeling about the situation. This is usually an easy question to answer. If you’ve spent your life filtering your experiences so that you only see the negative, distressing facts, it’s easy to think of lots of reasons why you feel so distressed and overwhelmed. After all, this is what you usually do. Zeva could easily identify why she was feeling so upset: she had studied hard, as she always did, but had gotten a poor grade on her test, which was her lowest score all year.

The fourth question, however, is usually new and challenging for people struggling with overwhelming emotions. Asking yourself to identify the evidence that contradicts how you think and feel about a situation requires that you view the situation in a new and deeper way. For instance, imagine how much different the world must look to a person standing on the street when compared to a person flying above in an airplane. They’re both looking at the same landscape, but the person in the plane has a better view of the whole landscape—the big picture.

Similarly, you need to examine more of the facts and evidence that affect your situation and make up your big picture. As you saw earlier in the examples, people often filter out the positive elements of their lives and ignore the facts that might change the way they feel about a situation. If you really want to stop being overwhelmed by your emotions, you’ll have to look at all those facts.

*After you do, also start to become aware of the thoughts that you’re having. Start to observe the thoughts that are coming up, whatever they are. Don’t try to stop your thoughts, and do your best not to criticize yourself for any of the thoughts. Just watch the thoughts arise, and then, using whatever technique you’ve chosen, watch the thoughts disappear.*

*If any of your thoughts is a trigger thought, just note to yourself that you’re having a trigger thought, observe any emotion that it brings up, and then let the thought and emotion go past, by whatever means you’ve chosen, without getting stuck on them and without analyzing them.*

*Whatever the thought or emotion is, big or small, important or unimportant, watch it arise in your mind and then let it float away or disappear by whichever means you’ve chosen.*

*Keep breathing slowly, in and out, as you watch your thoughts and emotions float away.*

*When you notice distressing emotions arising in you because of your thoughts, let them float past in your imagination.*

*Just continue to watch the thoughts and feelings arise and disappear. Use pictures or words to represent your thoughts and feelings, whatever works best for you. Do your best to watch the thoughts and related feelings arise and disappear without getting hooked into them and without criticizing yourself.*

*If more than one thought or feeling comes up at the same time, see them both arise and disappear. If the thoughts and feelings come very quickly, do your best to watch them all disappear without getting hooked onto any of them.*

*Continue to breathe and watch the thoughts and feelings come and go until your timer goes off.*

*When you’ve finished, take a few slow, long breaths, and then slowly open your eyes and return your focus to the room.*

## Using Coping Thoughts

Coping thoughts are designed to soothe your emotions when you’re in a distressing situation. They are statements that remind you of your strength, your past successes, and some commonly held truths. Do you remember what happened to Jim when he lost his watch? Originally, he thought, “I’m so absentminded; I’m an idiot,” which made him feel depressed. But then he used the coping thought “Mistakes happen; nobody’s perfect,” and he was able to feel more at ease. You already learned about using self-encouraging coping thoughts in chapter 2, Advanced Distress Tolerance Skills, but they’re so important for helping you regulate your emotions that they need to be repeated here. In the following List of Coping Thoughts, you’ll find many coping thoughts that you can use to remind yourself of your strength and your past successes when you find yourself in a distressing situation.

Find a few coping thoughts that you consider powerful and motivating, or create your own. Then write them on a note card and keep them with you in your wallet to remind yourself of them when you’re in a distressing situation. Or put them on sticky notes and post them in spots where you can see them on a regular basis, like on your refrigerator or mirror. The more often you see these soothing and self-affirming thoughts, the quicker they’ll become an automatic part of your thought process.

Here's a list of some coping thoughts that many people have found to be helpful (McKay et al., 1997). Check (✓) the ones that might be helpful for you and then create your own.

#### LIST OF COPING THOUGHTS

- \_\_\_ "Mistakes happen; nobody's perfect."
- \_\_\_ "This situation won't last forever."
- \_\_\_ "I've already been through many other painful experiences, and I've survived."
- \_\_\_ "This too shall pass."
- \_\_\_ "My feelings are like a wave that comes and goes."
- \_\_\_ "My feelings make me uncomfortable right now, but I can accept them."
- \_\_\_ "I can be anxious and still deal with the situation."
- \_\_\_ "I'm strong enough to handle what's happening to me right now."
- \_\_\_ "This is an opportunity for me to learn how to cope with my fears."
- \_\_\_ "I can ride this out and not let it get to me."
- \_\_\_ "I can take all the time I need right now to let go and relax."
- \_\_\_ "I've survived other situations like this before, and I'll survive this one too."
- \_\_\_ "My anxiety/fear/sadness won't kill me; it just doesn't feel good right now."
- \_\_\_ "These are just my feelings, and eventually they'll go away."
- \_\_\_ "It's okay to feel sad/anxious/afraid sometimes."
- \_\_\_ "My thoughts don't control my life; I do."
- \_\_\_ "I can think different thoughts if I want to."
- \_\_\_ "I'm not in danger right now."
- \_\_\_ "So what?"
- \_\_\_ "This situation sucks, but it's only temporary."
- \_\_\_ "I'm strong and I can deal with this."
- \_\_\_ Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Balancing Your Thoughts and Feelings

As you've already learned, overwhelming emotions can be caused by many events. But you can also be overwhelmed by your emotions when you only pay attention to part of what's really happening. This type of thinking is called *filtering* (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Here are some examples:

- Zeva was a straight-A student, she always made the honor roll, and she had already received a full scholarship to her first choice of colleges. But when she got a poor grade on her math test she broke down. "I'm such a loser," she thought to herself, and, very quickly, she felt overwhelmed, upset, and angry.
- Antonio asked his girlfriend if she could come over at three o'clock. She said that she was busy until seven, and she'd come over then. Antonio immediately got angry and accused her of abandoning him.
- Jennifer grew up in a typical middle-class family in a fairly good neighborhood. Most often, her parents were kind and supportive, and they always tried to do their best for her. However, one day when Jennifer was five, her father punished her for talking back to him, and she was grounded for a week. Later, as an adult, whenever Jennifer thought about her young life, she only remembered that incident, and she got upset whenever she thought about it.

Do you see the filtering in each person's thought process? Zeva was devastated by one less-than-perfect grade because she filtered out all of her past successes. Antonio filtered out the fact that his girlfriend said she would come over at a different, more convenient time. And Jennifer filtered out all of her positive childhood experiences and only focused on the one hardship she'd experienced.

Imagine living your life with dark sunglasses on all the time so that it's impossible to see the colors of the world. Think about what a limited, dreary life you might have. Similarly, when you filter your experience and only focus on the distressing elements of your life, you're also choosing to live a limited, unfulfilling life.

In order to begin balancing your thoughts—and therefore your emotions as well—it's necessary to examine the evidence that supports both sides of an emotion-stimulating event:

- Evidence supporting your self-criticisms versus evidence that you're a good person
- Evidence that only bad things happen to you versus evidence that good things happen too
- Evidence that no one cares about you versus evidence that people do care about you
- Evidence that you never do anything right versus evidence of your past successes
- Evidence that the current situation is awful versus evidence that it's not as bad as you think