

NHS Fife Department of Psychology

A photograph of green tree foliage against a clear blue sky, positioned on the left side of the page.

# Emotion Regulation: Managing Emotions

Help Yourself @ moodcafe



Emotions are a big part of life for us all. In any day we can experience many different emotions that come with their highs and lows. Some of these are easy to deal with, while others are more intense and difficult to manage. It's normal to struggle with your emotions at times, and everyone has this experience. However, if you have difficulties managing your emotions for a long period of time, it can lead to mental health problems.

If someone has a lot of problems managing their emotions, over a long period of time, this is called **emotional dysregulation**. This is a psychological difficulty. Emotional dysregulation is thought to be a big part of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, personality disorders, psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder. Fortunately, **we can learn to manage our emotions in healthy ways, at any stage in our lives**. To start with, it can be helpful to learn more about the basics – what are emotions?

## Understanding Emotions: Emotion Messages and The Emotion

### Triangle

The most important thing to understand about emotions is that they all have a purpose – they are designed to give us information, what we call **emotion messages**. These messages are supposed to bring our attention to important things that are happening in our lives; whether it is a big event (e.g. the birth of a child), or something smaller and more day-to-day (e.g. getting a parking ticket). For example, intense feelings of love tell us we need to care for our child. Anger about a parking ticket tells us to avoid that situation in the future. Imagine what would happen without these messages! It's common for people to think of emotions as “good” or

“bad”, or “positive” and “negative”, but that just isn’t the case. **All emotions have a helpful role to play**, though they can be pleasant or unpleasant.

Over thousands of years human beings have evolved to experience a wide range of emotions. Each emotion has a different message. These are designed to make us respond in particular ways. Often, these responses are automatic and subconscious. This is because they want us to react quickly to what is happening in the moment. A typical example is fear - we have evolved to automatically feel fear when we detect danger, and fear usually encourages us to try and escape that situation. The table below shows some of the messages behind some of our most basic emotions, and the way they influence us.

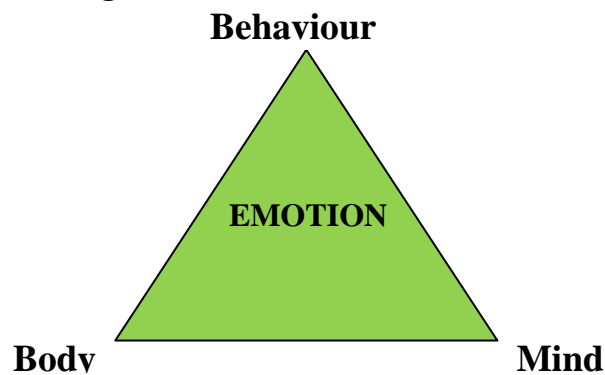
Basic Emotion	Emotion Message	Example
Fear	“You are in danger!”	Walking through a dark park in the middle of the night. Start to worry about getting hurt, heart starts racing and get an urge to avoid the park.
Anger	“You are being treated unfairly!”	Someone jumps the queue in front of you at the supermarket. Start thinking how annoying and unfair it is, feel hot and tense, feel an urge to confront them.
Sadness	“You have lost/missed something important!”	Failed a test. Start thinking about self as a failure and worthless, feel tired, get an urge to be alone.
Guilt	“You have done something wrong!”	Think about shouting at someone when you were angry. Replay what happened in your mind, criticize yourself, feel agitated and heart racing,

Basic Emotion	Emotion Message	Example
		want to hide away.
Joy /Happiness	“You have found something important to you!”	Make a new friend that you have a lot in common with. Think about doing things together, feel motivated, an urge to make plans.
Contentment	“Everything is okay!”	Lying in a sunny garden. Reflecting on how good life seems right now, feel calm and content to stay where you are for a while longer.

These emotion messages get through to us in three different ways, through –

- our body (physical sensations),
- our minds (thoughts, memories, imagination)
- our behaviour (urges and actions).

We call this **the emotion triangle**.



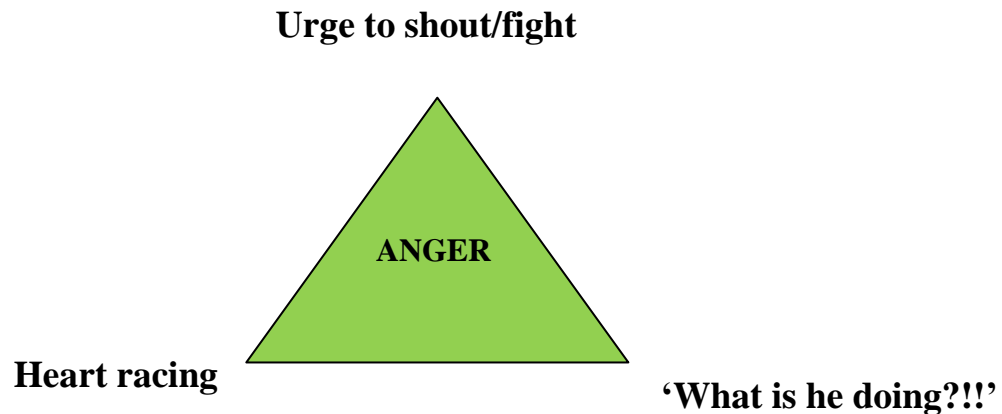
The Emotion Triangle

By learning to tune-in to these three sets of clues, we can better understand our emotions.

Different emotions influence our body, mind and behaviour in specific ways.

For example, when we feel angry at someone –

- our thoughts may get stuck on what the person is doing (mind)
- we feel our heart rate increase (body) and
- we feel an urge to confront the situation (behaviour).



An Emotion Triangle for anger

Or when we feel sad about a friend moving away -

- we are drawn to think about what we have lost (mind)
- our bodies slow down (body)
- and we feel an urge to withdraw (behaviour).



An Emotion Triangle for sadness

This is very useful to know because we can **learn to tune-in** to our emotions better by focusing on these three areas. Think of it as a bit like being a detective – looking for clues in these three areas to figure out what we are feeling. It isn't always easy to learn how to tune-in and identify the specific emotion(s) we are feeling, but it is something we can learn to do and get better at with practice. The table below shows how some of our emotions affect us in the three areas.

### How emotions affect us in mind, body and behaviour.

Emotion	Mind	Body	Behaviour
Fear	Thoughts race, imagine the worst, mind goes blank	Sweating, heart races, muscles tense, breathing rapid.	Avoid
Anger	Thoughts race, imagine the worst, mind goes blank	Sweating, heart races, muscles tense, breathing rapid.	Confront
Sadness	Thoughts slowed, think in circles, focused on the negative	Heavy, empty, numb, tired	Withdraw
Guilt	Critical focus on self and others' opinion of self	Sweating, heart races, muscles tense, breathing rapid, heavy, empty, numb, tired	Hide
Joy/Happiness	Thinking fast, focused on the positive	Energised	Approach
Contentment	Focused on the moment	Calm and relaxed	Stay.

Learning to become more aware of our emotions is important. After all, they are trying to give us messages to help us survive or get-by in life. If we don't recognise and respond to our emotions well, they can get more intense over time. This is because the emotion is still trying to get the right message through to us. Emotional awareness can go wrong when –

- We ignore our emotions when they happen
- We try to bury them (suppression)
- We mis-identify them (e.g. we think we are angry when we are really frightened)

One big part of emotional awareness is being able to name your emotions and tell them apart. This is a skill called labelling and it is an important first step in managing your emotions effectively. The moodcafé handout on **labelling emotions**, on the managing emotions page has more information about how to do this.

**Remember that the emotion is trying to get your attention – if you don't listen, it will keep trying! However, if you recognise the emotion you are feeling then the intensity of the emotion can actually reduce by itself.**

## Learning to Manage Emotions: Understanding the Zone of Tolerance

We are not born knowing how to manage our emotions; this means that we have to learn. We learn from all kinds of experiences and people, including parents, friends, teachers, and society in general. Childhood is an important time for developing an understanding of emotion. If we have repeated, overwhelming emotional experiences as children this can cause us to look for 'quick fixes' to manage our emotions. This can be anything that will work in the short-term (e.g. suppressing emotions, self-harm, avoidance). While this might help at the time, it can develop into an automatic way of coping that doesn't work so well later down the line.

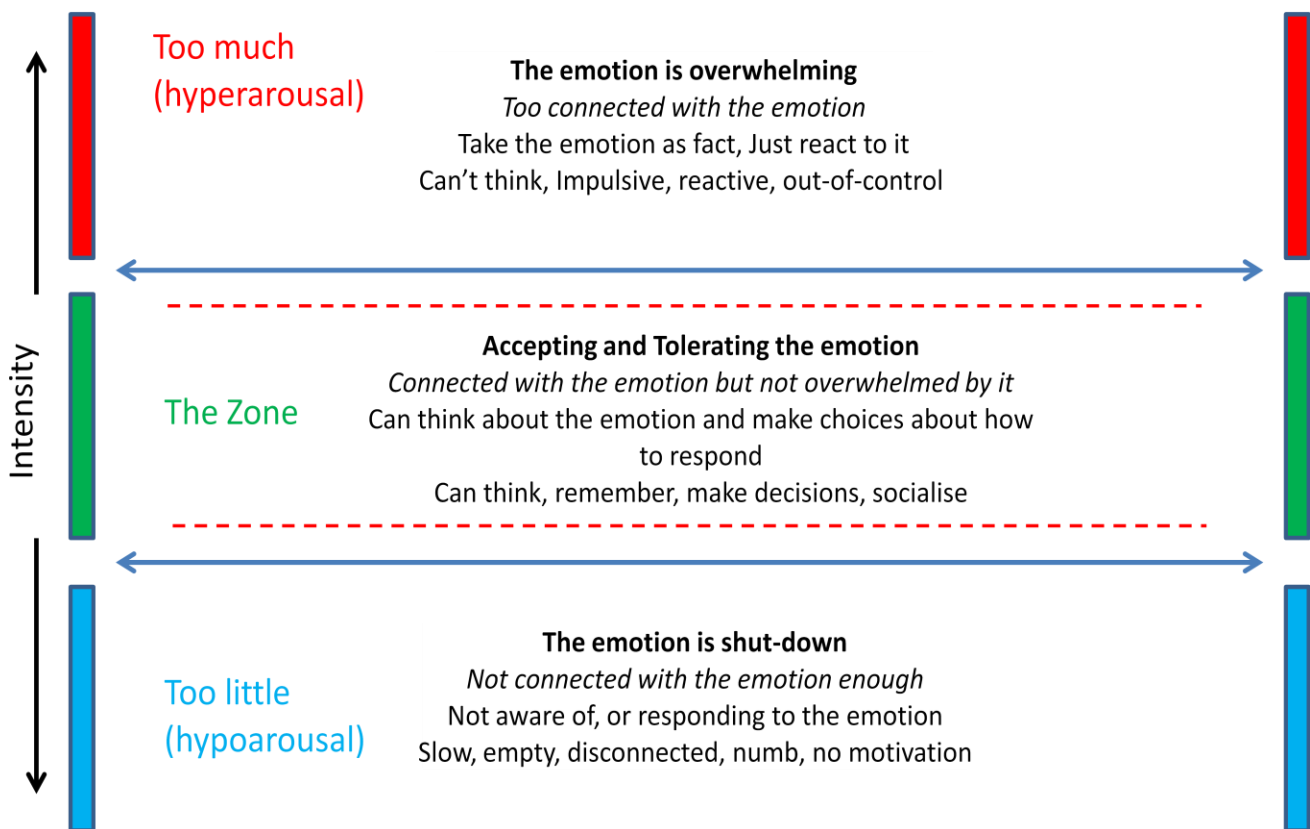
Especially in the early years of life, children need parents or other adults to manage their emotions for them. This doesn't have to be perfect, but if it isn't 'good enough' it can lead to problems. In some family or social settings certain emotions aren't accepted or managed well. This means we can learn to bury them. In other families or situations, there can be too much emotion expressed without it being properly managed. This means people have difficulty calming themselves. Some people who experience neglect or abuse in childhood may even have been encouraged to develop unhealthy ways of managing emotions (such as drinking too much).

People are also born with different temperaments. This means that we are different in how sensitive we are to emotions. And different in how we tend to react (e.g. being shy or outgoing). This balance between the temperament we are born with, and the environment we are raised in, deeply affects how we learn to manage our emotions as adults. Sometimes, a simple mis-match between how a person is, and how others are, can be enough to cause problems (e.g. an emotionally sensitive person, in an emotionally insensitive family). Even as



adults without previous emotional problems, experiences like bullying and harassment, or illness and work-stress can overwhelm our ability to cope. This can cause us to turn to unhealthy ways of managing emotions later in life too.

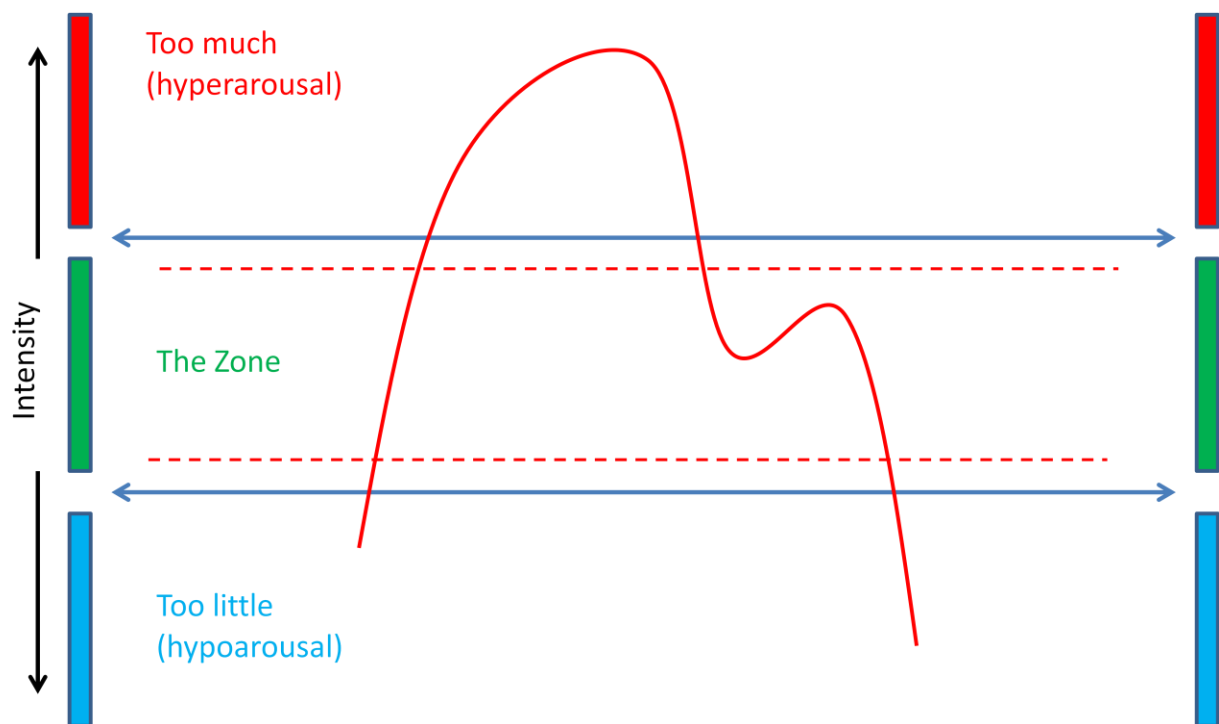
A useful way to think about how we experience and manage our emotions is through the **Zone of Tolerance** (sometimes called the window of tolerance). The Zone of Tolerance is a simple idea that says we all have a comfort zone where we can manage our emotions productively, based on how intense the emotion is.



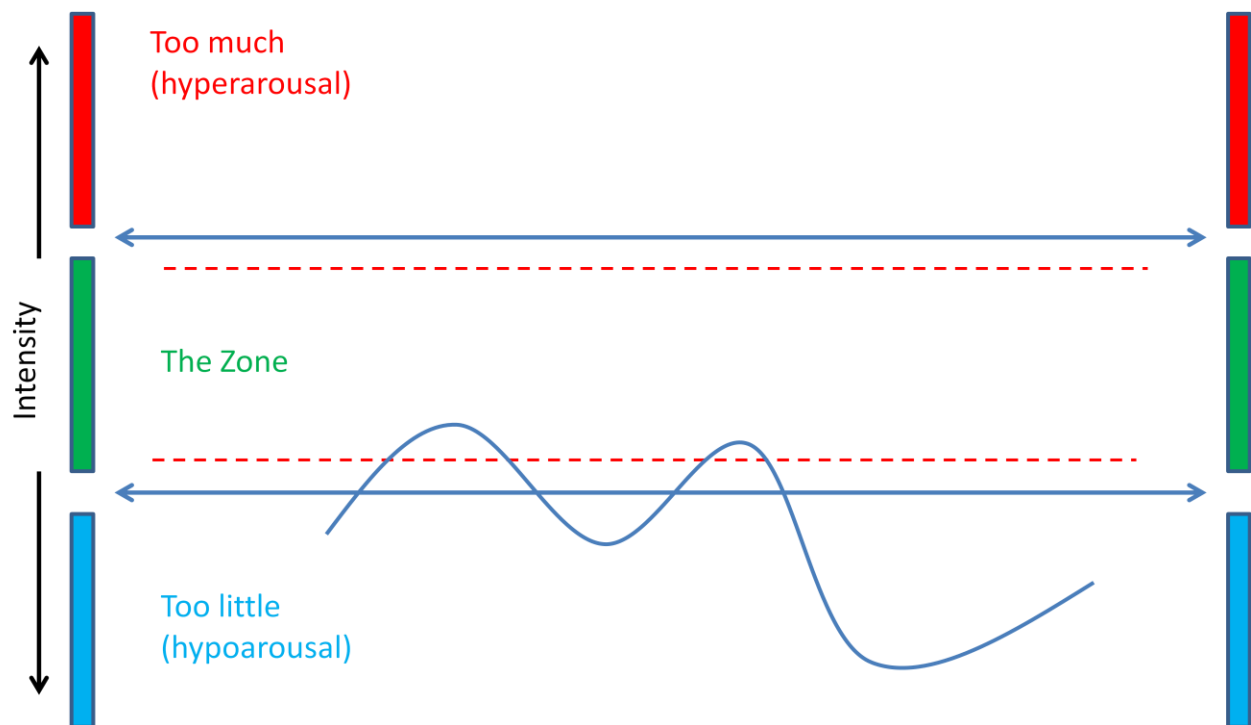
Think of it like a Goldilocks' zone where emotional intensity is "just right"- not too high and not too low. Being in the zone allows us to become aware of emotions and make thoughtful

decisions about how to respond to them. Being in the zone also helps us to think clearly, make decisions, remember things, and interact well with others. It is where we tend to feel most like our true selves. When we are at the edge of our zone, we are **emotionally vulnerable** (the red dotted line on the diagram above) and very slight things can put us out. If we have trouble staying in the zone, then managing simple things in life can become very difficult.

When our emotions are too intense (sometimes called hyperarousal; the red area on the diagram above) then we may feel anxious, panicked, distraught, “hyper” or overwhelmed. When our emotions are too intense it is very difficult to slow down, take stock of what we are feeling, and to act on those emotions in healthy ways. So we tend to react impulsively, without thinking about the consequences. When we experience emotional highs like this, it can be common for an emotional low to follow (shown by the red line in the diagram below).



When our emotions are not intense enough (sometimes called hypoarousal) then we may feel depressed, numb, disconnected or empty. We may get stuck in circular thinking, or we may find it difficult to think of anything at all. We may feel mentally exhausted and want to withdraw from the world. We may also experience a kind of zoning-out, or detachment from ourselves and the world (dissociation). When our emotional energy is too low it becomes very difficult to motivate ourselves, and at the extreme we may be unable to feel anything (shown by the blue line in the diagram below).

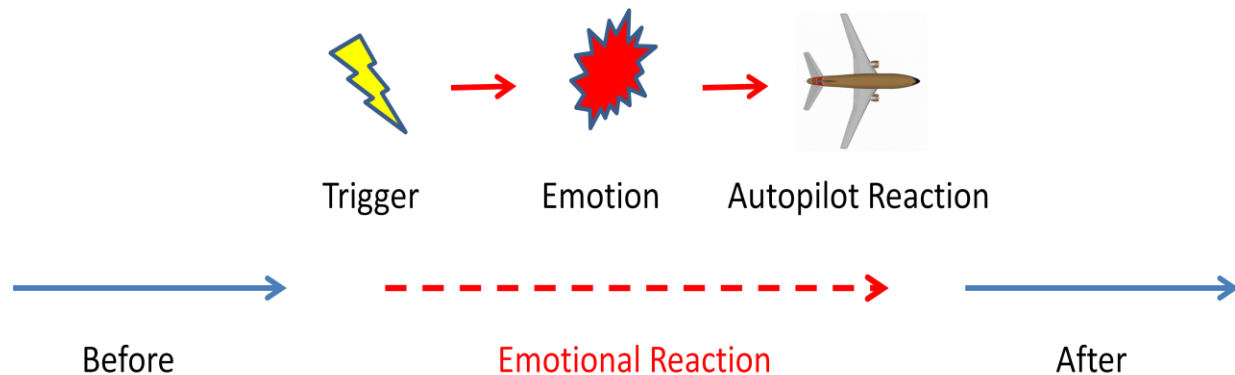


Depending on our own temperament and emotional learning, our ability to tolerate difficult emotions will be different. However, everyone comes out of the zone from time-to-time! Some people will have learned very effective ways to stay in the zone and avoid the extremes of feeling too much, or too little. Others will have more difficulty with this, and tend to fall out of the zone, and react with unhealthy strategies, more often. Trying to keep track of how often

you find you are in the zone, and the things that tend to take you out of the zone, can be extremely helpful. One way to do this is to try and keep track of your emotional reactions.

## Emotional Reactions

Basically, emotional reactions are the things that trigger the emotions we feel, the emotion itself, and our usual ways of responding. The figure below shows the different parts of an emotional reaction.



You can use a **Trigger Log** (see the moodcafé page on **managing emotions**) to monitor all the important parts of an emotional reaction. These are:

- (1) The trigger: which is always there (even if it is hard to recognise) and can be just about anything.
- (2) The emotion: It is good to be as specific as you can about what emotions you feel, and to work on only one emotion (usually the strongest one) at a time.
- (3) The Autopilot Reaction: This is whatever you usually do (often automatically or subconsciously) when you feel this emotion.

We call them autopilot reactions because they are usually automatic, subconscious ways of reacting that are difficult to control. They tend to work in the short term but can cause their own problems in the long term. For example, many people use self-harm (when they feel too much or not enough of an emotion) as a way of getting back in the zone. Other people can become impulsive and react without thinking it through (e.g. getting aggressive when angered, or over-spending to manage sadness). In both cases, this might work at the time, but in the long term it may not help us to improve how we feel or improve the situations that made us feel that way. In fact, it may make the problem worse. It is important to recognise that most people only get stuck in emotional reactions that have worked for them in some way, at some point, in the past. Learning to recognise the emotional reactions that don't work well for you *now*, is very important. Once we have a better awareness of our emotional reactions then we can start to think about changing them.

## How to change emotional reactions and manage emotions in healthy ways

In order to think about *how* we can be better at managing emotions, we need to think about *why* we want to do that. It is important to be clear about which emotional reaction you want to focus on changing. To do this, it can be helpful to think about how easily these might be changed and the reasons for changing them (or consequences of not changing them). When you start to work on changing an emotional reaction, remember to focus on only one reaction at a time. Once this is clear, there are a few stages to think about that can help us to change emotional reactions.

## Stage 1: Increase awareness of emotional reactions and being in the Zone

The goal of stage 1 is to increase your awareness of emotional reactions and to learn when you are in or out of the zone.

- Learning about **emotional acceptance** and **emotional tolerance** and trying to practice this.
- Keeping a **Trigger Log** is very helpful - It's a bit like a diary that helps you to focus on important emotional reactions.
- The **Labelling Technique** is another essential part of managing emotional reactions. Just doing this alone can reduce the intensity of unpleasant emotions. The **Emotions Sheet** on the managing emotions moodcafé page can help you to figure out what you might be feeling.
- Finally, another important thing to consider in this stage is **reducing your emotional vulnerability** (the things that put you near the edge of the zone). This could be things like life stresses, not getting enough sleep, an unhealthy diet or not enough exercise. If these aren't dealt with then it can make it more likely that an emotional reaction will take us out of the zone.

At the end of stage 1 you should be able to recognise the trigger, emotions and autopilot reactions that are taking you out of the zone, and have an idea of how you would like them to change.

## Stage 2: Using different resources to help change reactions

Stage 2 is about trying out different ways of managing your reactions to different emotions. There are many different 'tools' you can try - some will work better for you than others. It is important to be proactive and have clear goals.

To learn new ways of responding to emotions, you have to trigger this emotion yourself, and then practice the new skill. It is usually not effective just to wait until something triggers an emotional reaction unexpectedly, and then hope that you'll remember to use a new skill! The **Trigger Experiment Sheet** on the managing emotions page of moodcafé can be a great help to plan this. Once you start to think about a trigger experiment, you will need to think about what new resources (response) might help in that situation. The list below directs you to different resources for body, mind and behaviour from the moodcafé managing emotions page. They are just suggestions, and you may find other resources that work better for you. It is useful to remember though, that you will need resources to help you when your emotions are too intense (hyperarousal) or cut-off (hypoarousal). The **My Zone of Tolerance Sheet** on the managing emotions page of moodcafé can be a way to record what works for you.

**Body: Deep Breathing, Grounding, Muscle Tensing**

**Mind: Distraction, Questioning Emotions, Safe Space Imagery**

**Behaviour: Trigger management, Opposite Action, Activity Planning**

At the end of stage 2 you should be having success with using alternative resources that help you to stay in the zone with your emotions, and respond in ways that work better for you.

### Stage 3: Strengthening Healthy Reactions and Expanding your Zone of Tolerance

Stage 3 is all about strengthening your new responses so they become new 'autopilot reactions'. Do this by continuing to use them until they feel as natural as your old ones did. This will take time and may also take some effort. However, remember that we are all '*works in progress*', nobody copes with their emotions perfectly! Everyone comes out of the zone sometimes! With experience, your practice will help to expand your Zone of Tolerance. This will mean that you will find yourself able to manage more challenging situations, and do things that you might never have thought possible before!

### Further Help:

If the above symptoms carry on for more than a few months or worsen, you may wish to contact your GP or your Occupational Health Department.

### Helplines:

**Breathing Space** – mental health helpline

(Daily: 6pm-2am) Tel: 0800 83 85 87

**Samaritans** – confidential support for anyone in a crisis

24 hours Tel: 08457 90 90 90

Textphone: 08457 909192

*This handout was developed by Dr. Thomas Bacon, Clinical Psychologist, for NHS Fife.*

*It is based on materials developed for The Resources Group: An Emotion Regulation Skills Group.*



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