

Tools for Understanding and Managing Emotions

I read a chapter of "[In-Tandem](#)" by Mark Bird on understanding and managing emotions. I have summarized some of the concepts Dr. Bird teaches below. I encourage you to get his book to learn more details about emotional regulation.

Here are some reasons that we have emotions:

Emotions can Protect us— When in a dark alley or dangerous situation, our emotions prompt us of potential danger and warn us to be careful or leave a situation.

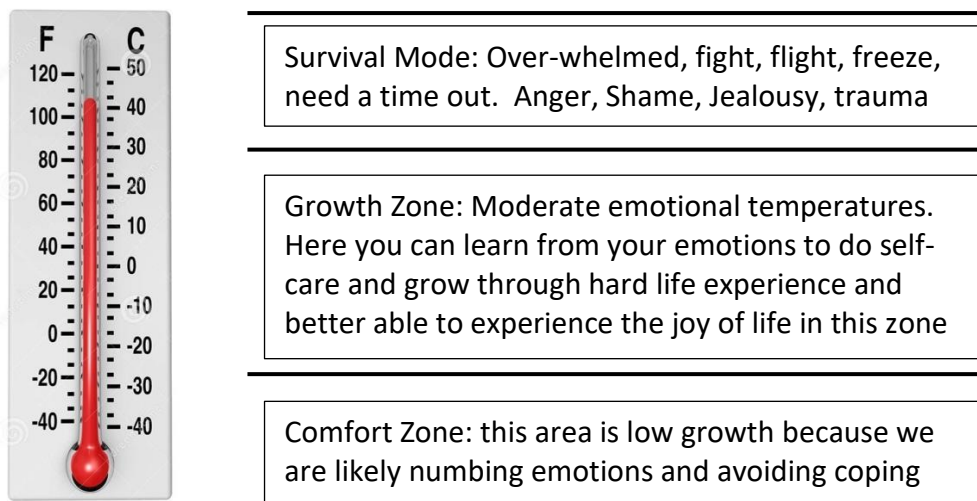
Emotions help us form our identity— (Emotions help us to learn what we like or dislike). Emotions help us prioritize our choices. As we experience different movies, music, foods, and a myriad of other life experiences our emotions give us feedback. We then take this feedback and make decisions of where and what we choose in our daily life.

Emotions can be like an internal GPS— GPS=global positioning system on our phones can help us find locations quickly. Our feelings, like a GPS, can guide us to self-care. Feeling bored prompts us to find more excitement; when anxious/stressed, our emotions tell us we need relaxation; when lonely, we long for connection with others.

Painful emotions are commonly ignored or stuffed. Emotions can trigger: **Fight, Flight,** and **Freeze** responses which can lead us to be aggressive or to withdraw or freeze in indecision or auto-pilot into caretaking others. Emotions are energy in motion. If we do not manage our emotions in relationships, we can hurt the ones we love. Pain, not transformed, will be transmitted to others.

Two tools that can help us manage our emotions are the **Thermometer** and the effective use of **Time-outs**. The **Thermometer** is a tool to help us be more self-aware of our emotional state so we can know when we need a time-out to regulate and get clarity on our emotions. Both tools together will increase self-awareness, emotional regulation, and equip us with tools to protect our relationships by navigating the high-conflict moments that typically cause deeper damage when things are said or done while in anger, shame, or overwhelmed.

The Emotional thermometer metaphor— 3 areas Survival Mode, Growth Zone, and Comfort Zone. See the Graphic below:



Imagine the top zone representing emotions above 95 degrees; it is so hot and unbearable. When shame, anger, jealousy, or a trauma triggers occurs, the intensity can overwhelm our mind/body. Unmanageability is prompting you to take a time-out.

The middle zone of growth represents 65-75 degrees temperature, our preferred place of not too hot or not too cold. We can adjust to life's challenges as we can put on clothing when cold or remove it when too warm. A Comfort zone is a low temperature representing we are numbing or avoiding our emotions and, therefore, not growing.

Ways of Soothing emotions:

Time Out —When over-reactive, like a car that is over-heated, we need to pull off the road and cool down. Due to traumas, emotions can flare instantly, pushing us into a place of unmanageability very quickly. When relationship conflict or trauma triggers occur, and we experience high emotions, we need a place to calm down and soothe. This is the role of a time-out. As we take time to self-soothe and bring our emotional temperature down to a manageable level, we can better understand our emotional triggers and needs. We can reconnect and have a more helpful and meaningful conversation. If alone and triggered, the time out can help us increase self-awareness of why we were so triggered and what we need to regulate. Some of the rituals below can be done regularly more as maintenance of keeping yourself in a stable place emotionally

Self-Talk—Acknowledge the strong emotion, rather than numb or avoid feeling it, say something to yourself like "This is really hard... I need some time to reflect on this...I can make it through this."

Affirmations—Can come from inspiring quotes. Consider making personalized affirmations that are meaningful to you. Here are some of mine. "Mistakes are portals of self-discovery—I will learn and grow from this mistake. God knows me and understands me. I can do hard things. Consider writing a letter to yourself that you can go to when distressed or posting affirmations somewhere you can see or access easily.

Relaxation— Everyone has favorite ways to relax. Here are some examples: a hot bath, music, a quiet place, a short nap, TV, or the internet (in moderation—too much can lead to escapism).

Distractions— Make a list of activities that you can do for 20 min to 30 min that will take your mind off the stressful emotional situation. It could be making a snack, going for a walk, a hobby, TV, a game other

Hyper-focus—This works well for trauma triggers to ground you. Some of my clients create a personal first aid kit that includes meaningful memorabilia: Pictures, a pinecone or rock from a camping trip, a ribbon from a sport, money from places you have visited, affirmations, letter to self. Think of your 5 senses: smell, sight, touch, taste, and hearing. Include things that stimulate each of your senses.

Mindful Meditation— This practice is good for quieting and slowing your mind. Many people starting out with meditation prefer to use a guided meditation where a voice leads you for 5-10 minutes through slowing your breathing, visualizing, and topics vary from helping you to sleep or to reduce anxiety. Phone apps or YouTube are a great place to start. Once you deepen this practice, you can meditate without a guide

Journaling— Journaling is a great slow-down method to reflect on your experience of life events. I noticed the years, I had more trauma and stress, my journal had far more entries (one year over 100 pages). Think of journaling as therapeutic way to gain clarity and healing from hard life experiences as well as relive & record moments of joy.

Physical practices—The body can store stress, and you can experience pains, aches, and low energy. Wherever your current level of physical activity is, consider increasing that in small ways until you get a routine of physical activity. Stretching, walking, push-ups, sit-ups, weights or resistance bands, or riding a bike or a sport you enjoy.

Spiritual practices— Consider spirituality as a way to gain meaning and purpose in life. Many benefit from religion or church to deepen their spirituality. Others prefer to be in nature, meditation/prayer, or live by core values of love, service, and being kind. Consider some spiritual rituals you can do and set aside time to do that regularly.

Environmental changes—Consider making a special place for your relaxation practices. You may want to put certain pictures, ensure your favorite music is available, and make this place special and inviting. Other environmental help could be organizing a desk or closet. Cleaning your car. Consider this both relaxation and self-care.

Social Support Network—Most of the above are solitary relaxation methods. I would also include finding a circle of at least 3 people you can go to when overwhelmed. I have a friend who is spiritual and encouraging. A person who can get real with me and tell me the hard things I need to hear, and a safe person with that I can be really vulnerable within sharing my deeper fears and struggles. This person will not judge or shame.

Reflection

Which activities above do you already practice?

Is there a way for you to be more consistent or meaningful with this practice?

What emotional soothing practice do you feel you would like to try and develop into a ritual you do more regularly?