

Relationship With Self

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What Are Feelings?

Although we often think of our emotions and feelings as being purely psychological – the mind and body are very closely connected. Feelings are our body's way of communicating to us how we are experiencing the external and internal world. Often, in childhood, we are taught that our feelings are 'wrong' in some way and we learn to ignore or deny them. But our body can literally feel emotions. For example in times of stress or fear we may get headaches, gastro-intestinal upsets etc.

Feelings are guides. Feelings are not necessarily fact but can give us useful information about what is going on for us.

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What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is how we restore and maintain our emotional and physiological balance. Self-regulation is the ability to identify an emotion and manage our internal response to that emotion. People who can regulate their emotions are more confident, have healthier relationships and higher levels of self-trust.

The goal of self-regulation is to stay within what is called the 'Window of Tolerance'. Your 'Window of Tolerance' is your safe place that is inside you (rather than outside of you). We can learn to find this safe space inside us even when things are not going as we would like them to. When we are in our window we can communicate more effectively and thus manage both our emotions and external circumstances much better.

When we are dysregulated, our emotional and physiological state is out of balance. We may feel scared, anxious, angry, frantic or threatened if we are above our Window of Tolerance because we perceive a threat. The threat may not be real but our nervous system's response will feel real.

If we are below our Window of Tolerance we may feel checked out, shut down, numb, frozen or unsafe – this is when our nervous system is trying to block out the ‘threat’ and pretend it doesn’t exist. We need some mechanism to restore that balance again. When we are not in our Window of Tolerance we are not feeling safe.

The practice of emotional regulation allows us to actively choose how we respond to our emotions rather than letting our emotions control our behaviour. It is essential to our wellbeing to learn how to self regulate. Learning to find our window of tolerance takes effort and consistent practice. It doesn’t happen overnight.

How to self-regulate and find your Window of Tolerance

Allowing space for uncomfortable feelings is the single most effective way to self-regulate. This can also include therapy, yoga or meditation.

Our 'Noticing Brain'

One of the most powerful parts of the adult brain is the medial pre-frontal cortex, which Janina Fisher refers to as the ‘noticing brain’. The ‘noticing brain’ can notice our emotions or physical sensations without letting our mind sink into our difficult emotions in that moment.

The noticing brain is responsible for awareness of our thoughts, emotions and sensations. It observes with curiosity instead of judgement. Because it is directly connected to the amygdala, activating the ‘noticing brain’ calms the body and restores a sense of safety.

Noticing is the first step in self-regulation. Often we do not take the time to notice we just react. Noticing helps us take a pause before responding but also is a way of self-validating – giving our feeling the validation of actively noticing it (rather than reacting on auto-pilot). This can support us in restoring a sense of safety.

Exercise One: Regulating Emotions

1. Breathe to create safety e.g., slow deep breaths making the exhale longer, slow breathing helps stabilize the nervous system
2. Notice sensation in the body e.g. I feel heat in my chest, heart racing, sweaty.
3. Name the emotion e.g. I am feeling anxious, I am feeling numb, sad.
4. Sit with the sensations in your body. Try not to escape into thoughts. If you do start to escape into thoughts, redirect yourself back into your body. Allow your body to experience the sensation.
5. As you sit in the discomfort soothe yourself in ways a parent would soothe a child. Be your own parent. Be kind and gentle to yourself.
6. Continue to let the sensation flow through your body without fighting it or getting stuck in your head and thoughts. The energy needs to flow. The only way out is through.

7. Let your nervous system settle.
8. Self-soothe e.g. journal, talk to a friend, cuddle pet, take a walk, speak kindly to self, sit in the sun...
9. Later, when you are settled explore your feelings. Ie what was it about, deeper meaning, what was your body communicating to you, are the feelings triggered by a past loss, did something hurtful just happen, how can I self-care right now etc.
10. Later still, start to learn to validate your own feelings, learn to be self-compassionate, learn how past experiences have impacted you and takes steps to heal (this can be quite long term work).

Window of Tolerance

When we are able to regulate ourselves, we are within our Window of Tolerance. We feel relaxed, present, and grounded, we are able to work through life's difficulties. For example, we are able to:

- look after ourselves.
- 'engage'
- able to access a deeper self within us.
- wonder about why others reacted or responded in the way they did without feeling threatened.
- know what we are feeling, and what's happening in our body.

Further techniques for staying in the Window of Tolerance include breathing exercises to feel grounded, noticing, mindful walking, yoga, therapy and meditation.

Exercise Two: Five Senses

A five-minute exercise to engage all of your senses to help you feel more grounded and reduce anxiety. Sit in a comfortable upright position with your feet planted on the ground. Gentle breaths in through the nose, slowly out through the mouth. One minute noticing for each sense.

See five things: notice the colours, shapes, and textures of your surroundings. Look for the colour variation and texture that may have gone unnoticed.

Touch four things: notice the sensation of where your hands meet something solid like the fabric of your clothes, objects, your skin

Hear three sounds: notice and listen carefully for the different sounds around you

Smell two things: Now shift your concentration to noticing the smells. Try closing your eyes to pick up the subtlest of scents.

Taste one thing: notice your tongue in your mouth, run your tongue over your teeth and cheeks.