

Understanding Emotions

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What Are Emotions?

Emotions are dynamic and deeply human. They are like a built-in technology that helps us experience the world through our cultural, social, and relational lives.

- Emotions act as **time machines**, transporting us to past experiences or projecting us into future anticipations.
 - They serve as **clues and artifacts**, offering insight into the origins of when, where, who, and how.
 - Emotions are **both individual and shared**; they live within us and between us.
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Power and Paradox of Emotions

- Emotions help us understand our **limits, capacities, truths, possibilities, and values**.
- Developing **interoception** (awareness of internal sensations) and emotional self-trust is a **lifelong journey**.
- Emotions can guide us and they can also be **misinterpreted or mislabeled**, leading to confusion or disconnection.
- Emotional patterns are influenced by:
 - Personal beliefs and stories (our **internal scripts**)
 - Cultural, community, and familial environments
 - Psychological and physical safety or trauma

Paradox: Emotions are temporary and ever-changing, yet they can feel overwhelming and long-lasting.

Durability bias is the tendency to overestimate how long our emotional reactions, positive or negative will last. When anticipating a future event, we often believe that its emotional impact will be more enduring than it actually is.

This happens because we underestimate how adaptable we are and how quickly everyday life, shifting attention, and other experiences dilute strong feelings.

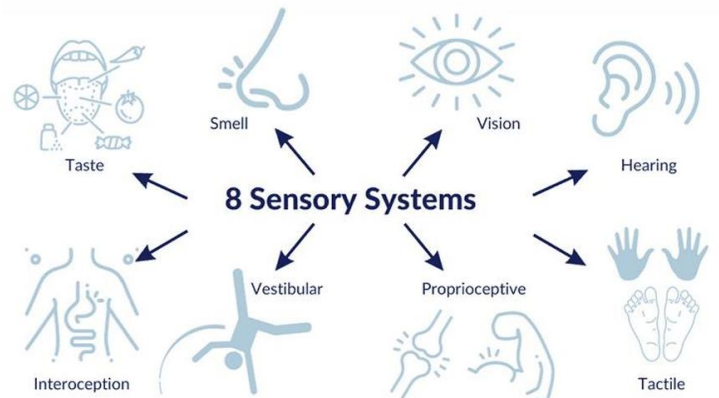
Emotional forecasting, or affective forecasting, refers more broadly to our attempts to predict how we will feel in the future. While this ability helps guide decision-making, it is often inaccurate because we focus too narrowly on the event itself and overlook the many factors context changes, coping skills, competing demands that influence real emotional outcomes.

Together, durability bias and emotional forecasting reveal how our minds can misjudge the intensity and persistence of our emotions, shaping choices that don't always align with how we'll actually feel later.

Nervous System

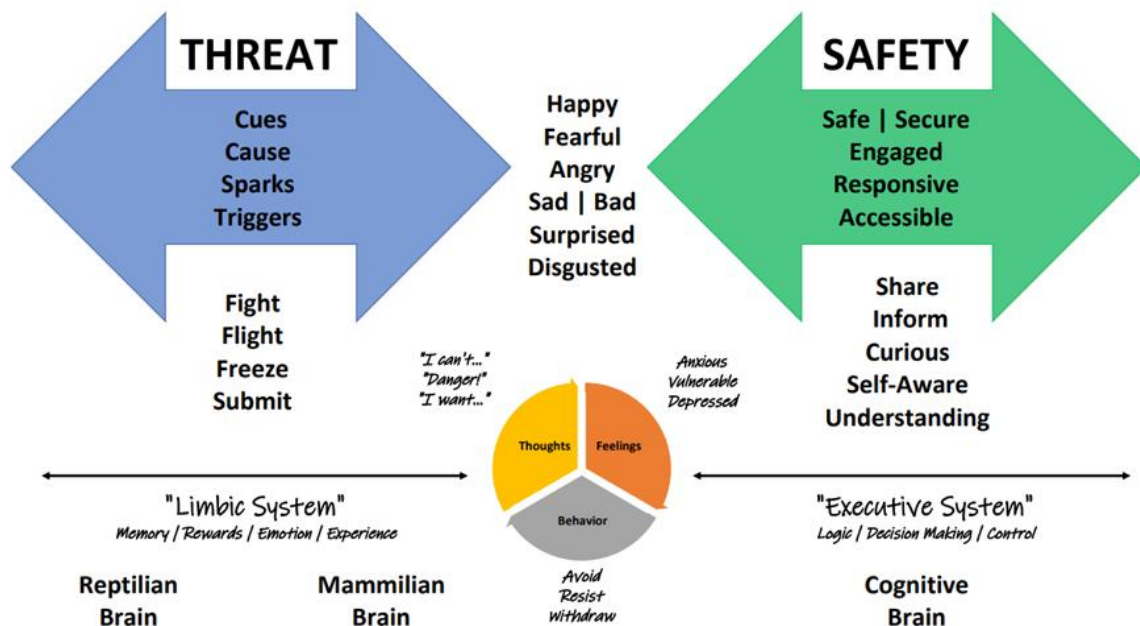
The nervous system and emotions are **deeply interconnected** because the nervous system serves as the body's communication network for sensing, interpreting, and responding to emotional experiences.

When we encounter something meaningful or threatening, the brain rapidly appraises the situation and activates neural circuits that trigger emotional states such as fear, joy, anger, or calm.



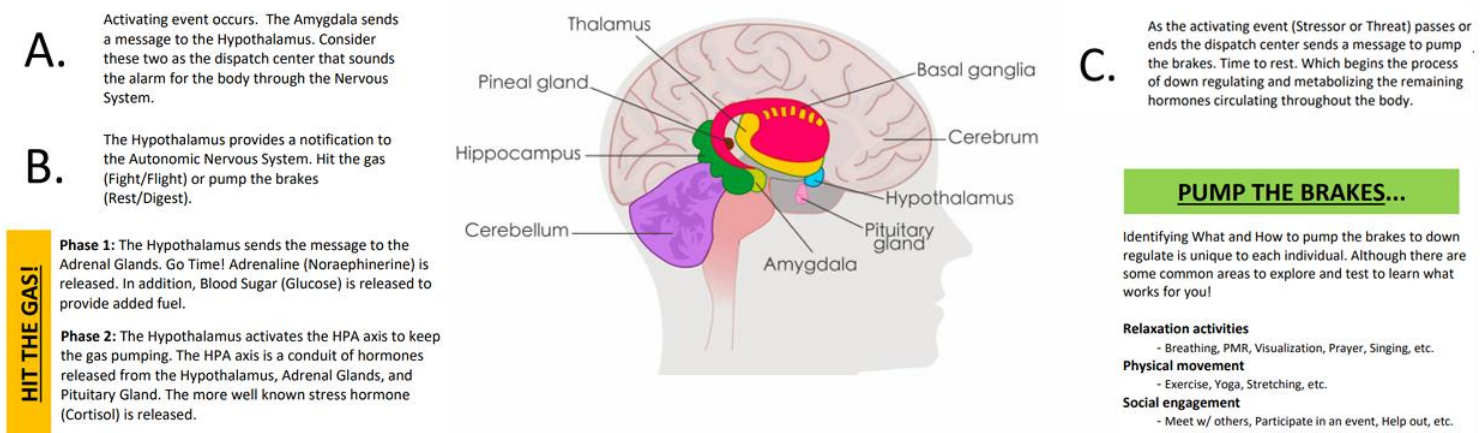
These signals cascade through the autonomic nervous system, creating physical shifts like increased heart rate, muscle tension, or relaxation, which we then interpret as part of our emotional experience.

In this way, emotions are not just “felt” in the mind; they are embodied responses shaped by the constant interplay between brain, body, and environment.



Limbic System: The Emotional Cycle

1. A **stimulus** activates an emotional response.
2. **Beliefs and narratives** shape the way we interpret that stimulus to Fight/Flight or Rest/Digest.
3. Emotions become:
 - **Visible** to others (signals)
 - **Felt** internally (symptoms)
 - **Expressed** outwardly (behaviors)



Think of it as: **Energy flows in → flows through → flows out.** Unless... a **stuck point** or **knot** forms.

What Are Stuck Points or Emotional Knots?

When emotions become **stuck**, they can create emotional, cognitive, or physical **knots**.

Emotional **stuck points**, sometimes called emotional **knots**, refer to moments where a person becomes psychologically or emotionally “caught” in a particular belief, memory, or feeling that limits their ability to move forward.

These stuck points often arise from unresolved experiences such as trauma, loss, betrayal, or significant stress that the nervous system has not fully processed. Instead of integrating the experience, the mind holds on to rigid interpretations like “I’m not safe,” “I’m unlovable,” or “It was my fault,” which continue to drive emotional reactions long after the event has passed.

These knots show up as recurring patterns of distress, avoidance, or overreaction, and they can block growth, connection, or healing. Working through emotional stuck points involves gently untangling these

beliefs, reconnecting with the underlying emotions, and allowing the nervous system to complete unfinished processing so new, more flexible perspectives can emerge.

Causes:

- Lack of emotional modeling or mirroring during development
- Absence of emotional safety and secure attachment
- Trauma or harm
- Reinforcing messages from culture, society, or family that suppress emotion

Signals:

- **Emotional:** Crying, shame, self-blame, grief
- **Cognitive:** Over-explaining, intellectualizing, dissociation
- **Physical:** Muscle tension, migraines, facial expressions
- **Behavioral:** Avoidance, substance use, over-control, self-harm

Wait! What are Feelings?

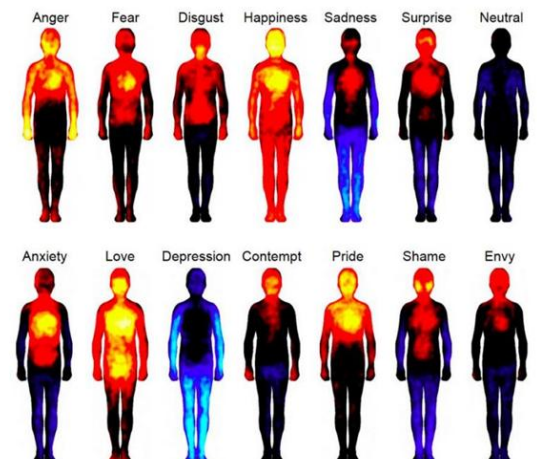
Emotions and feelings are **closely related but distinct**. Emotions are fast, automatic physiological and neurological reactions triggered by internal or external events your body's immediate response to something meaningful or threatening.

Feelings, on the other hand, are the conscious interpretations of those emotional reactions; they emerge when the brain assigns meaning to the physiological shifts happening inside you.

This distinction helps explain why people may have strong physical reactions without fully understanding what they feel, or why naming a feeling can help regulate the underlying emotional response.

In other words, emotions happen first in the body, and feelings are the mind's reflective experience of those emotions.

The
“F”
word

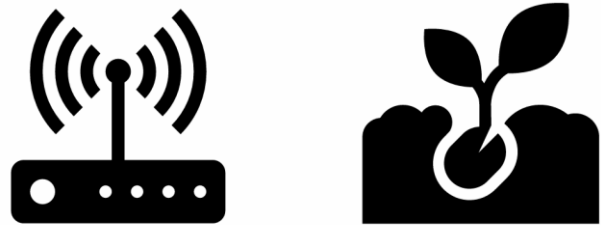


Caution: Signal vs. Source

The concept of emotional **“signal” vs. “source”** highlights the difference between what an emotion is telling you and where it actually comes from.

The **signal is the immediate feeling** like irritation, fear, or sadness that alerts you something needs attention.

The **source is the deeper underlying cause**, which may be stress, unmet needs, past experiences, or internal narratives. Understanding both helps you respond more accurately instead of reacting to the surface emotion alone.



SIGNAL vs. SOURCE

Misattribution of emotions occurs when we incorrectly identify the true source of our feelings, often assigning them to the wrong cause or situation. Because emotions can be subtle, layered, or triggered by multiple factors, the brain sometimes takes a mental shortcut and links the feeling to whatever is most immediate or obvious even if that isn't the real trigger.

- Example, someone might think they're irritated with their partner, when in reality they're overwhelmed from work or anxious about an upcoming event.

Misattribution can also happen when physiological arousal (like a racing heart) is mistaken for an emotion unrelated to the real source. This mismatch can lead to misunderstandings, misplaced conflict, or ineffective coping strategies.

Becoming more aware of internal cues, context, and patterns helps people correctly identify emotional origins, respond more skillfully, and reduce unnecessary tension in relationships or everyday life.

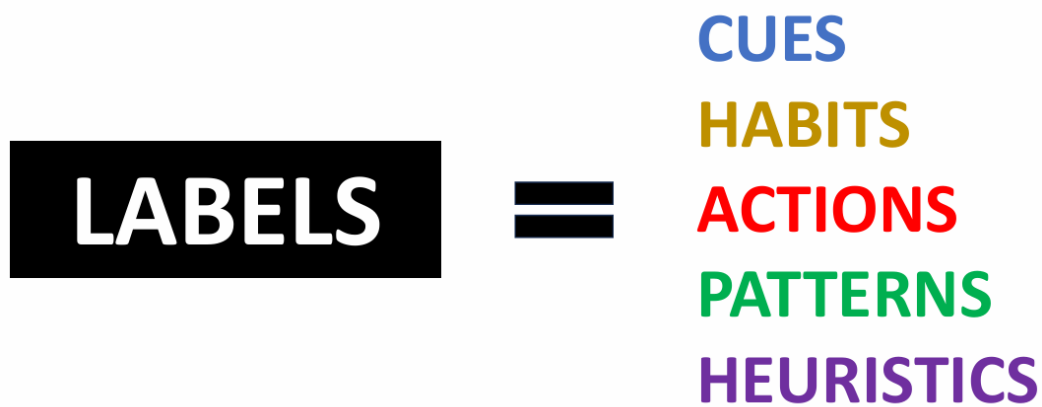
Emotional contagion is the natural tendency for people to “catch” the emotions of others through facial expressions, tone, body language, and shared nervous system cues. This process can quickly amplify stress or negativity in groups, but it can also spread calm, optimism, and connection, making emotional awareness and regulation essential for shaping healthy environments.

Words & Labels: Self-Talk

Words and labels **shape emotions** because they act as mental frames that influence how we interpret our experiences. When we name a feeling whether we call it “stress,” “pressure,” “fear,” or “excitement” we give the brain a specific meaning to organize around, which can intensify, soften, or redirect the emotional experience.

Labels can either expand our understanding (“I’m actually feeling overwhelmed, not angry”) or limit it (“I’m just being dramatic”). They also **affect nervous system** responses: a harsh or negative label can heighten threat and reactivity, while a more accurate or compassionate label can create clarity and calm.

In this way, the language we use becomes part of our emotional regulation, shaping both how we feel and how we respond.



Environment: People, Place, and Things...

Environment and external variables significantly influence emotions because they shape the cues your nervous system constantly scans for safety, comfort, and meaning.

Factors such as noise, clutter, lighting, nature, social dynamics, and even weather can subtly shift mood and reactivity by signaling either threat or ease. Supportive environments tend to promote calm, focus, and positive affect, while chaotic or stressful surroundings can heighten vigilance and emotional intensity.

In this way, the external world continually interacts with your internal state, influencing how emotions arise and how easily they can be regulated.

“MY” vs. “OUR” Emotions:

A distinction exists between “my” emotions and “our” emotions reflects the difference between individualistic and collectivistic emotional frameworks.

In more **individualistic cultures**, emotions are viewed as personal experiences something you own, manage, and are responsible for. This can empower autonomy and self-awareness but may also create pressure to handle feelings alone.

In **collectivistic cultures**, emotions are understood as shared states that arise within relationships and groups, meaning that how you feel is influenced by and influences the people around you. This can create a stronger sense of connection and mutual support, but it may also shape emotions based on group expectations or harmony.

Together, these mindsets show that emotions are not only internal experiences but also social processes, shaped by how much we see ourselves as independent individuals or interconnected members of a community.

| <u>Individualism</u> | <u>Collectivism</u> |
|--|---|
| Focus on Individual | Focus on Groups |
| Self Determined by Personal Traits & Independent of Groups | Self Defined by In-Group Norms |
| Private Self is More Important | Public Self is Most Important |
| Personal Achievement, Competition, & Power are Priority | Achievement is for the Benefit of the Group |
| Emotions are Self-Focused | Emotions are Relationship Based |
| People Who are the Most Liked are Self-Assured | People Who are the Most Liked are Modest, Self-Effacing |
| Values Pleasure and Freedom | Values Security, Obedience, In-Group Harmony |
| Many Casual Relationships | Close Relationships |
| Save Own Face | Save Other's |
| Independent Behaviors | Interdependent Behaviors |

Managing Emotions:

Cultivate **Awareness**

- Expand your **emotional vocabulary**
- Learn **when, where, and why** emotions arise
- Identify **who or what triggers** your emotions

- Recognize the **beliefs and stories** tied to those feelings
- Observe how **culture and environment** influence your emotions

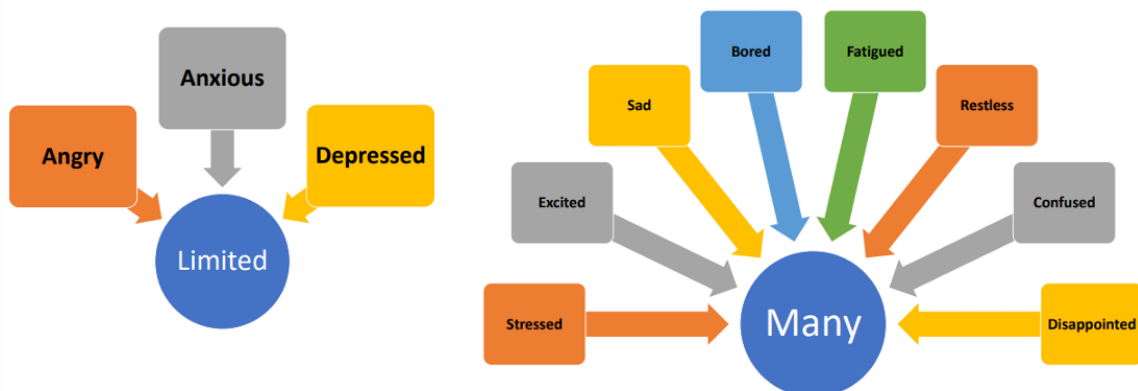
Important Distinction: Someone may trigger your emotion, but **they are not the cause** of it just like no single stick starts a fire when two are rubbed together.

Diversify the Emotional Range

Practice expanding emotional range vs. experiencing emotional foreclosure. Foreclosure occurs when a person habitually limits their emotional experiences, often avoiding certain feelings or narrowly defining what is “acceptable” to feel.

This can result from early conditioning, fear of vulnerability, or rigid self-concepts, and it tends to reduce emotional awareness, flexibility, and resilience.

Emotional diversity, in contrast, refers to the capacity to experience and recognize a wide range of emotions, both positive and negative, with nuance and acceptance. People with high emotional diversity can respond more adaptively to challenges, navigate relationships more effectively, and recover more quickly from stress because they can identify, process, and regulate multiple emotional states rather than being stuck in a narrow emotional repertoire.



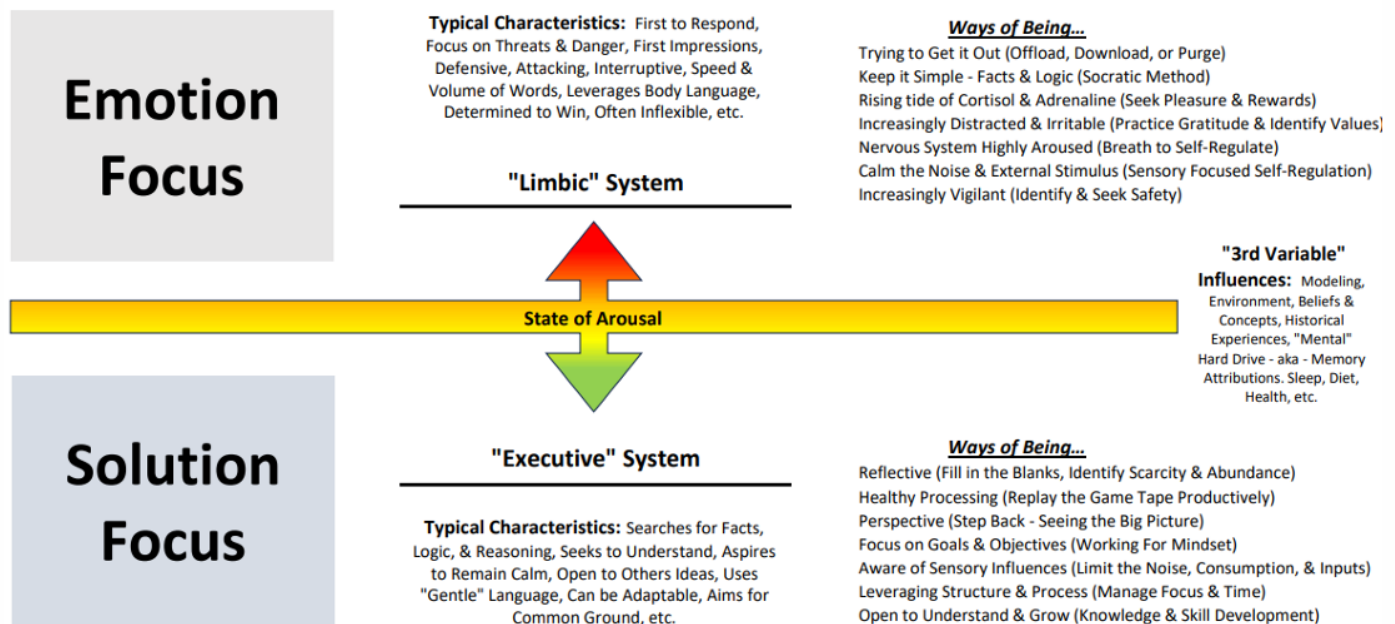
Identify What **Safety** Looks and Feels Like

Safety is fundamental to emotional well-being because the nervous system can only regulate effectively when it perceives the environment as secure. Without a sense of safety, emotions like fear, anxiety, or hypervigilance dominate, making it difficult to process experiences, form connections, or engage in growth and self-reflection.

- Understand what **emotional safety** looks and feels like for you
- Listen to your body’s internal smoke detector those **“chirps”** are subtle signals that something doesn’t feel right – trust yourself.
- Cultivate a safe internal and external environment for emotions to be expressed

Approach

Use both **Solution Focus** and **Emotion Focus** strategies.



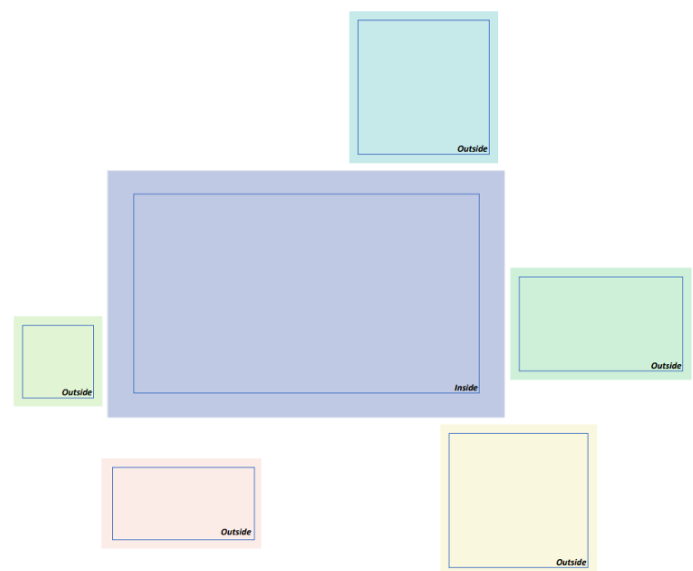
Identify your **Window of Tolerance**.

The concept of the "window of tolerance" refers to the optimal zone in which a person can experience, process, and respond to emotions without becoming overwhelmed or shut down.

Within this window, the nervous system can regulate arousal, allowing emotions to be felt, understood, and expressed adaptively.

When emotions push someone outside this window either into hyperarousal (anxiety, panic, anger) or hypoarousal (numbness, disconnection, depression) thinking and self-regulation become more difficult.

Understanding and expanding one's window of tolerance helps improve emotional resilience, self-awareness, and the ability to respond effectively in challenging situations.

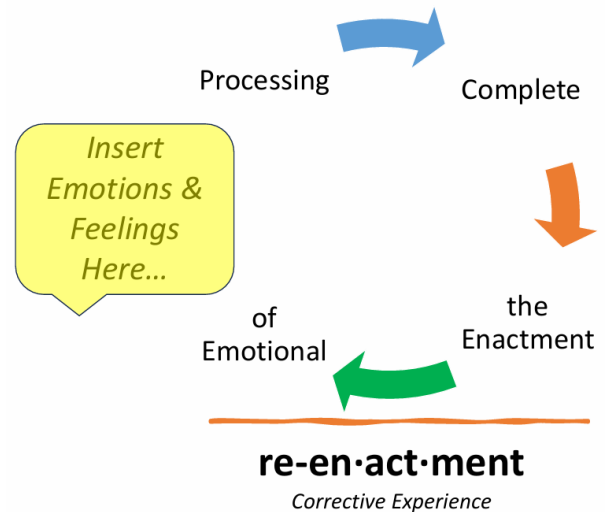


Identify the **Corrective Experience**

Knowing what type of corrective experience is needed helps regulate emotions by either interrupting maladaptive cycles or reinforcing adaptive, corrective experiences, ultimately expanding emotional resilience and flexibility.

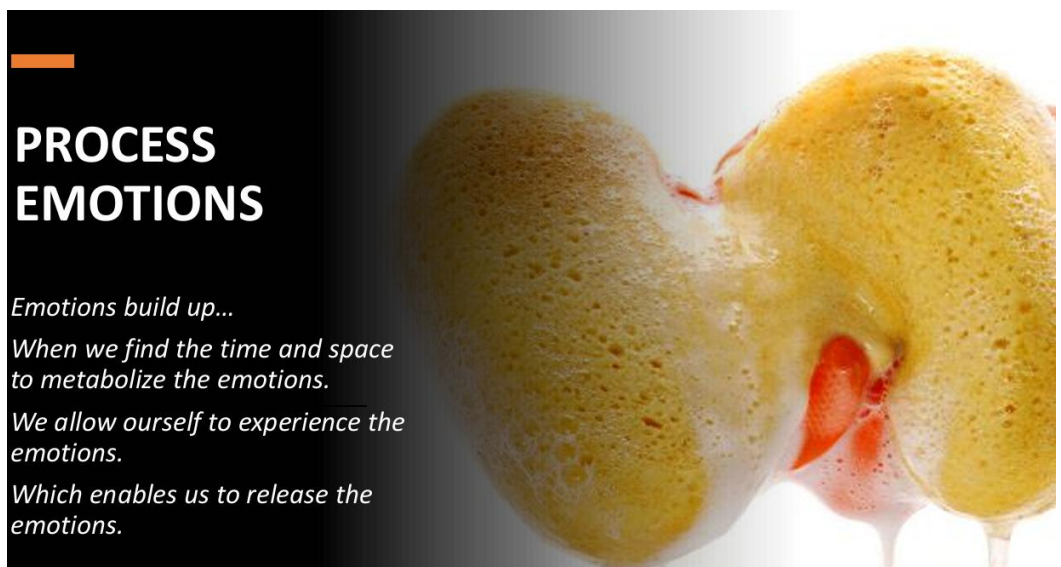
A **reenactment** occurs when a person unconsciously repeats past emotional experiences, often unresolved trauma or relational patterns triggering intense emotions in the present. Recognizing this allows one to respond with awareness rather than react impulsively.

An **emotional corrective experience**, on the other hand, provides a new, safe interaction or perspective that challenges old patterns and supports healing.



Permission to **Process**

Processing emotions is valuable because it allows the nervous system to integrate experiences, reducing lingering intensity and preventing unhelpful patterns from taking hold. It also enhances self-awareness, clarity, and emotional flexibility, enabling more thoughtful responses rather than reactive behaviors.



Seek to **Understand** the Role

Being curious about emotions and asking “**what for**” encourages a mindset of exploration rather than judgment, helping individuals uncover the purpose or message behind their feelings. This approach supports emotional health by promoting insight, reducing reactivity, and guiding adaptive responses instead of getting stuck in avoidance or suppression.

WHAT FOR...

Practice, WHAT FOR, as a means to discover what the role of the emotion is. Try repeating WHAT FOR until you arrive at the core experience that unfolds as you ask yourself repeatedly WHAT FOR..

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is integral to managing emotions because it creates a supportive internal environment that allows difficult feelings to be acknowledged without judgment or suppression.

By responding to oneself with kindness and understanding, rather than criticism, self-compassion reduces emotional reactivity, promotes resilience, and helps regulate stress, making it easier to process and navigate both challenging and positive emotions.

- Speak kindly to yourself
- Allow yourself to make mistakes
- Recognize that **emotions are waves**, not fixed states
- Let go of shame and practice **emotional forgiveness**

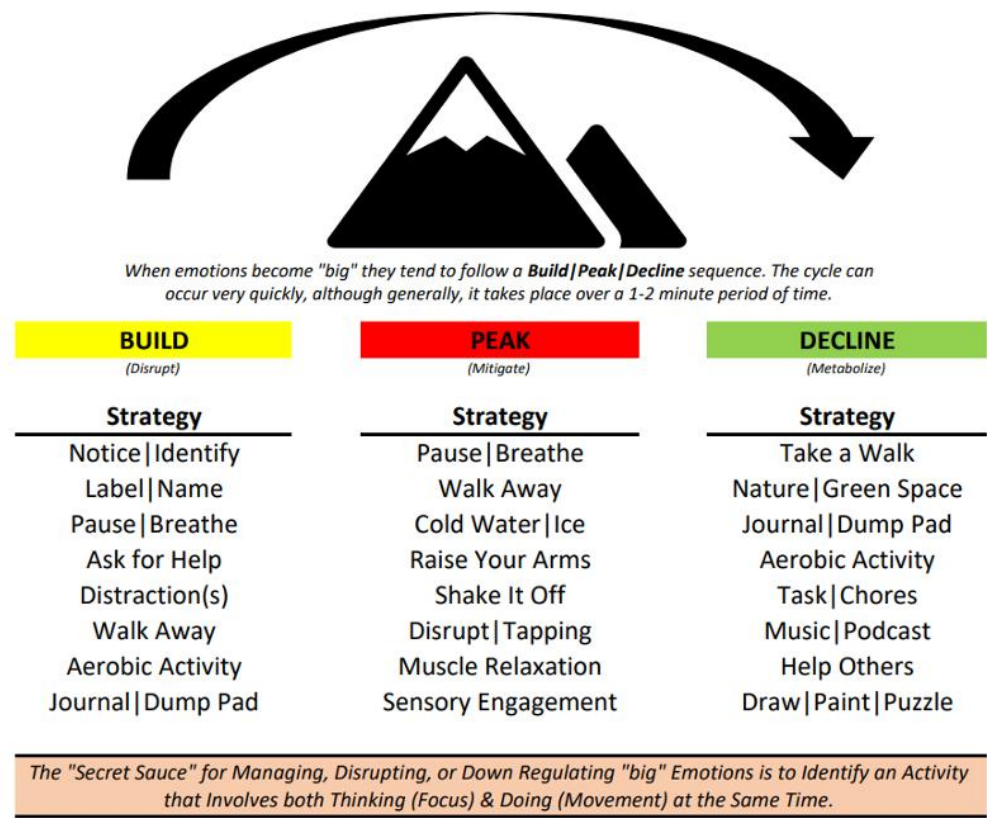
Where Do I Begin?

Start with awareness.

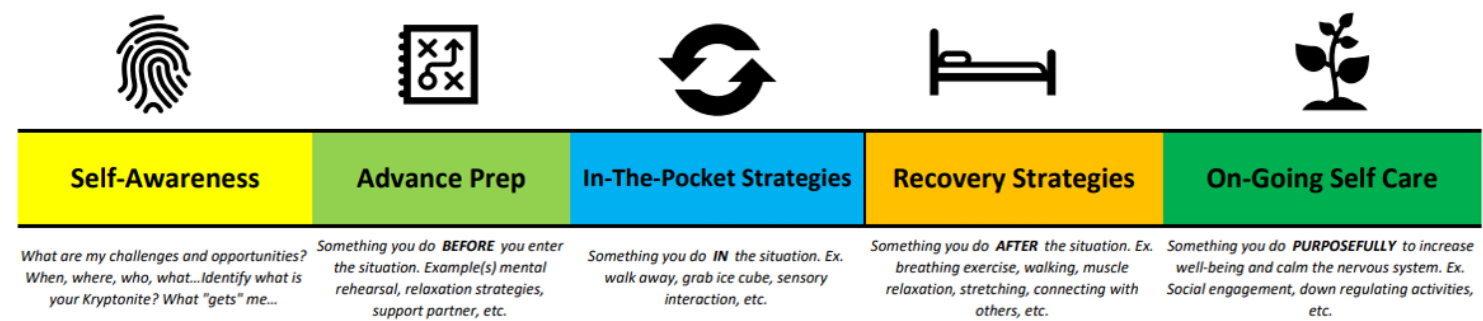
- Start by identifying **how you want to show up** emotionally
- Start by noticing your **scripts, stories, and beliefs**
- Start by observing **when you feel safe and when you don't**
- Start by reflecting on the **environments and systems** you're part of
- Start by noticing the “**chirps**” in your body
- Start by experimenting with **labeling and re-labeling** your emotions
- Start practicing **self-compassion** when emotions get messy
- Start **surfing the emotional waves**—they will come and go
- **Start by being open to your emotions**

Find your 90

Emotions naturally follow a dynamic cycle: they build in intensity as triggers accumulate, reach a peak when the nervous system is fully engaged, and then decline as the body and mind process and release the arousal. Recognizing this pattern helps people ride emotional waves without overreacting or getting stuck.



Build Your Blueprint



Your emotions are valid. They are meaningful. They are yours. Let them guide you not define you.