

P E R M I S S I O N

T O F E E L

## HEALTHY EMOTION REGULATION DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

Marc A. Brackett, Ph.D.  
Yale University

*Marc Brackett, Ph.D., is the founding director of the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#). Parts of this article were excerpted from the new book [Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive](#). Copyright © 2019 Marc Brackett. Reprinted with the permission of Celadon Books, a division of Macmillan Publishing, LLC.*

Every emotional response is a unique experience. What triggers an unpleasant emotion today may not even register tomorrow. Perhaps right now you are at home with your family for what seems like an eternity and you feel like losing it. Tomorrow, same home, but wake up in a calm state and you happily eat your breakfast and plan your day.

The strategies we can use to regulate emotions are limitless, depending on the situation and the emotions involved. The strategies that work for you today might not work for you tomorrow. And the strategies that work for you might not work for your partner or child.

Many of us were exposed to destructive reactions (not healthy strategies) to “manage” stress and anxiety early in our lives. We heard our parents and peers use negative talk, scream, blame others and so on. These reactions often work at getting rid of negative feelings and providing temporary gratification. But we fail to realize that these are mostly destructive habits that ruin our relationships, decrease our well-being, and derail us from achieving our goals in life.

When we are overly stressed and worried, like many of us have felt lately with threats like COVID-19, it becomes even more difficult to regulate our emotions with effective strategies. We ruminate, worry, and often drive ourselves into a frenzy.

So, what exactly is healthy emotion regulation?

Put simply, healthy emotion regulation involves monitoring, tempering, and modifying emotional reactions in *helpful* ways in order to reach personal and professional goals. When we’re feeling disappointed or joyful or anxious, what do we do to feel more or less of that feeling, to hang onto that feeling, or shift to feeling something different?

Importantly, emotion regulation doesn’t mean ignoring inconvenient emotions – rather, it’s learning to accept and deal with them – both your own and others’ emotions. When we accept all of our feelings we become less attached, reactive, and overwhelmed by them.

It’s helpful to think about emotion regulation in two parts: goals and strategies.

The first part is our goal. Goals we have for our emotions are like goals in many sports: we look at the net or goal posts, and we decide where we want the ball or puck to go. When we set a goal for regulating our emotions, we are deciding where we want our emotions to go. Do we want them to go up – like feeling even more joyful about a party we’re planning? Or, do we want our emotions to go down – like feeling less anxious about our ability to control what’s happening in with the coronavirus. In sports, we have a goal that includes where the ball or puck is now and where we want it to be. With our emotions, we do the same – we set a goal by asking ourselves “what am I feeling now, and how do I want to feel?”

The second part of managing emotions is the strategy we decide to use. We know where we want the ball or puck to go, but how will we get it there? Will we hit it straight in? Or will we pass it to another player

first? That is our strategy. Strategies are how we will achieve our goals. If we're feeling anxious or worried about what's happening around us, and we really want to feel less nervous...or calmer, what would our strategy be? Maybe we could take some deep breaths?

Mindful breathing is perhaps the ultimate prevention strategy. Daily practice enhances our ability to be present, accept feelings as they come and go, and not be overly reactive or overwhelmed by them.

### **Mindful Breathing**

Let's try it. You don't need to sit in a fancy pose. Just get comfortable in your seat and take two minutes to pause and breathe naturally. If it will help, you can time yourself. Begin now.

How'd it go? Did you even do it? Or did you just keep reading? If you did try it, how did it feel? Did you get impatient, anxious, bored? Did your mind wander? Maybe it was the first time you've taken a minute for yourself all day, and you feel calm or centered.

Allowing our minds to be idle is a major challenge for many of us given our busy lives and lack of control over the future right now. And it's especially hard when we're faced with strong emotions such as anxiety and fear.

Our brain responds to intense emotions by activating the sympathetic nervous system: our heart rate goes up, stress hormones and/or endorphins are released depending on the emotion, and (when pressured) we prepare to flee or freeze. Mindful breathing helps us to hit the brake on the activation of our stress response system by decreasing our heart rate. Breathing through the nose is helpful because mouth breathing tends to be faster and shallower (think of a panting dog), which can reactivate the stress response system. And when we count our breaths or repeat a calming phrase while breathing, we regain balance and control because the area of the brain in charge shifts from the brain stem to the motor cortex.

Breathing also helps us to reset the autonomic nervous system by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and inhibiting the sympathetic (excitatory) one.

Mindful breathing can be practiced anywhere: at home, school, work, or even while trying to fall asleep. It's best to build a practice of mindful breathing in small steps over time. Start by taking a few minutes a couple of times a week to sit and breathe mindfully. Over time you can build up to a five-, ten- fifteen- or even thirty-minute practice each day. That way, when you are in the situation where you'll need to deactivate, you'll be prepared.

Do your best to:

- Remove distractions such as your cell phone.
- Get comfortable.
- Close your eyes or lower your eyelids.
- Be aware of your posture and body. You can place your hand on a spot where you feel the breath, but it's not necessary.
- Breathe naturally.
  - You can count to 10: inhale 1/exhale 1, inhale 2/exhale 2, and so on until you get to 10. Then repeat.
  - Or you can breathe while repeating a phrase. I learned my favorite more than twenty years ago from Thich Nhat Hanh, a leader in the mindfulness community. It's simple: On the inhale you say "in" and on the exhale you say "out." Then "deep/slow," "calm/ease," "smile/release." Repeat. This particular one helps me at night when my mind is racing, and I have a hard time falling asleep.
  - Bring your attention back to your breath if you notice your mind wandering.

If you are like me and get easily distracted during the practice, you might start thinking: I can't do this. It's hopeless. Try to be an emotion scientist, not a judge about it. Even have a little self-compassion and try it again. You're exercising a new muscle. Once you're comfortable with these two basic exercises, you can try others, but it's not necessary. I've stuck with the basic ones for years.

## Shifting our Thoughts

An additional and very effective strategy is to simply adjust our thinking. It's convenient because our thoughts happen in our head, so we can change them pretty much anytime and anyplace. When we want to feel less anxious, we can ask ourselves, "Is there another way to think about this situation? Or we can say something supportive to ourselves in our heads. One way to help you get better at this is to consider what you might tell a close friend or loved one who is feeling anxious.

Recently, a mom shared with me that her son was feeling anxious about being home, missing his friends and not going to school. Instead of telling her son what to think or do, she asked him what he would say to his best friend who was feeling that way. Immediately, the boy came up with ideas like: You'll get to play more, we can facetime each other, this won't be forever. The mom was taken aback by how many ideas her son had. She then said, "honey, maybe you could say these things to yourself." After a minute, the boy said, "Mommy, you're a genius!" So, if a 7-year old boy can do it, we all can as long as we try!

Try it. List out 3-5 things you might tell a friend who is feeling worried or anxious about the coronavirus. Can you apply those same strategies to yourself?

It's often helpful to refer to yourself in the third person when using self-talk strategies. Research shows that when we do this, it leads us to think about ourselves similarly to how we would think about others. Essentially, third-person self-talk is a way of being empathetic to ourselves.

I find myself making use of self-talk to regulate my own moods all the time. I have found it very useful to have go-to phrases for different purposes. When I start catastrophizing, I say, "Marc, you are making this up." When I'm overwhelmed before bed, I say, "Marc, you know this feeling is temporary, you've had this feeling a 1000 times before. You need rest. You'll be fine in the morning." And with that I'm more relaxed and ready to go to sleep.

So how do we get good at it?

Just like in sports, managing our emotions takes time and practice. The very first time Serena Williams stepped onto the court or Wayne Gretzky entered the rink, they probably weren't really sure what to do. They may have known that they wanted to aim for the net but little else. They probably messed up plenty and tried a lot of strategies before they became pros. In fact, Wayne Gretzky is known for his famous quote, "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take." That's his strategy--what he says to himself when he wants to feel less discouraged.

## Self-Care

Because emotion regulation requires brainpower – it depends on seemingly unrelated factors such as diet, exercise, and sleep. When we eat poorly, our minds don't function properly. Too much sugar causes our blood glucose to spike and then plummet, which affects cognitive functioning and self-control, especially around healthy eating. So make sure you have some healthy snacks in your desk at work or set a reminder on your phone to ensure you nibble every three hours or so. Also, watch caffeine and alcohol intake.

Too little physical activity also has a negative effect on our mental capacity and moods. In one study, subjects were exposed to a stressor, and then half of the participants did aerobic exercise while the others did not. The exercisers reported feeling significantly less negative than the other group. Even anxiety and depression can be reduced by exercise. So make sure you are getting in some movement!

Poor quality or insufficient sleep has similar effects on our emotions – when we're tired, our defenses are down and our ability to function mentally is low. Sleep serves a restorative function. When we don't get enough, or we get too much, we show more symptoms of anxiety and depression, greater fatigue, and hostility. Inadequate sleep is associated with reduced connections between brain regions responsible for cognitive control and behavior and the use of effective emotion regulation strategies.

There are a few more measures we can take to safeguard our overall well-being. The first is by doing things we love. Spend time with family and friends, pursue passions and pastimes, get in touch with your spiritual side, immerse yourself in nature, read a good book, watch a funny movie. We build up cognitive reserves that way, which can help us during these emotionally challenging times. We are hardwired to seek social contact and support – people who lack it are prone to anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease. Social distance (I prefer to use the term physical distance), which we know will help to stop spread the coronavirus does not mean we have to be socially disconnected. The mere presence of a caring person (face-to-face or online) helps us to regulate our nervous system and feel calmer.

Finally, in these trying times there are a few additional things you can do. First, control the amount of information you take in. Take breaks from reading the news and social media. Second, don't be afraid to say no. It's okay not to hug, kiss, or shake hands right now. If you're at a loss for words, you can bow gracefully or even use the namaste symbol if that makes sense to you. Third, have compassion for yourself and for others, especially those who are ill or whose lives have been disrupted by the virus or society's response to it. And finally, try your best to be supportive of friends, family members, and co-workers who are feeling anxious or worried. You don't necessarily have to say anything. Just be there for them. When we support others, we not only help them feel better, but we feel better ourselves.

**Stay connected:**

Join my blog, *The Emotion Scientist* at [www.marcbrackett.com](http://www.marcbrackett.com)

Social media: *Twitter* @marcbrackett - *Instagram* @marc.brackett - *Facebook* @drmarcbrackett