



## How hot or cold does your emotional “engine” run? *Emotional regulation*

There's a normal spectrum of how people experience their own feelings. At one end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” seems frequently revved up; if you are one of these people, you may feel your emotions (such as mad, sad, or worried) more powerfully than other people do. At times your emotions may get so intense that they cause you to react to things in ways you may later regret.

At the other end of the spectrum are those whose emotional “engine” frequently seems to be barely turned on; these are people who work really hard to not feel anything at all. If you are one of these people, you may appear tough and uncaring to others. If you're someone who usually tries to shut down your feelings, life may feel boring or empty without access to your emotions.

Some people are right in the middle of the feelings spectrum. They feel their emotions strongly when something warrants a strong reaction, but most of the time, their feelings are more moderate, in the middle. For most people, finding the right balance takes some effort. It's a good idea to check in with your feelings on a regular basis to make sure you know what you're feeling and why. (Sometimes it's easier to do this by talking about it with another person.)

- **When your emotional engine won't start**

Some people shut down their emotions in an effort to stay in control. They may sit through a violent horror film without flinching while their friends are terrified. Or they may act like they don't care when a teacher is mad at them. Or they may not show any sign of frustration when the coach makes the whole team do 100 push-ups because one kid was late to practice.

How do they do it? In order to get through a difficult situation without losing control or experiencing a lot of negative feelings, they may tell themselves that they don't care about the situation. This strategy can be useful to temporarily get control in a challenging situation—for example, to overcome anxiety about singing on stage during a performance, you might tell yourself that there's no need to be nervous because it's really just a dress rehearsal.

But sometimes – without your realizing it – the brain might take protective action as a way of keeping emotions in check. For example, if you lose an election for the Student Council, your brain might prevent you from feeling disappointment by telling you that you never were a serious candidate and that you entered the race only as a joke. The problem with trying to protect yourself too much from painful feelings is that if you aren't even aware that the emotions are there, the

feelings might stay hidden and not go away. They could surface unexpectedly in another situation and influence your behavior in ways that are not helpful.

- **When the engine overheats**

People who feel their emotions very intensely may sob at sad movies, for example, when everyone else is just a little sad. They may stay up all night worrying about an exam while others in the class simply study for the exam without missing any sleep. Or they may yell at a classmate for accidentally bumping into them in the hallway and later regret having acted that way.

When emotions are very intense, it is difficult to be reasonable and rational and to make wise decisions. Intense feelings often are triggered by other people's words or actions, or by disagreements with others. We often find ourselves experiencing the same conflicts, or reacting the same way to different situations, over and over again. It may seem as though the conflicts are always someone else's fault (for example: "she started it," or "my teacher's an idiot"). But, in fact, even if we're justified in our reactions, having a strong reaction to a situation (for example, yelling or complaining loudly) can often make the situation worse.

Sometimes—without your realizing it—intense feelings may cause you to say or do you things that you wish you could take back. For example, if you come home past your curfew on a Saturday night, instead of apologizing, you might yell at your mom because your brain is telling you that your mom is ridiculous for setting a curfew in the first place. The problem with letting unchecked, intense emotions drive your reactions is that these feelings might cause you to say or do things that get you into trouble unnecessarily.

- **Notice how others are reacting to you.**

Seeing how others are responding to you can help you gauge the level of your own emotions. (For example, are they looking relaxed? Turning away? Becoming agitated?) If people are reacting negatively to you, maybe your emotional engine is revved up too high, or shut down, and you are causing others to become uncomfortable. Or maybe the signals others are receiving about your state of mind are being misinterpreted. In that case, you can make sure to convey your feelings in another way that might get your message across better.

- **How can you monitor the intensity of your emotions?**

Think about how you react to different situations. Is your emotional engine usually revved up high? Is it usually shut down? When you're experiencing feelings such as anger, fear, or worry, try asking yourself, "How intense are my feelings right now? Are they helping me make the right decisions, or are they interfering?"

Notice your body sensations. (Is your heart racing? Are your muscles tense? Are you sweating?) Notice how you're speaking. (Are you swearing, yelling, ranting, or perhaps unusually quiet?) At a rally for the school football team, it makes sense and feels good to shout out your intense feelings of school pride, but it probably isn't very constructive to yell at a teacher for giving you a bad grade. Following are some examples of the range of intensities for different emotional reactions:

**Spectrum of Emotional Intensity**

| <b>Emotion</b>   | <b>Emotionally shut down</b>  | <b>Emotionally revved up</b>   | <b>Balanced</b>  |
|------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>Anxiety</b>   | Without some anxiety to motivate, may go into a situation unprepared or get caught off-guard. | Unable to distinguish between true danger and personal fears. May overreact and cause undue tension for self and others. | Able to evaluate situations and decide what steps are necessary to reduce risks.   |
| <b>Anger</b>     | Passive, may have difficulty getting needs met.   | May bully and alienate others. May say or do things that will be regretted later.  | Can consciously decide when to be assertive and when to "let things go."   |
| <b>Sadness</b>   | Unacknowledged feelings can build up and break through in unexpected ways.                    | May lead to loss of ability to carry out daily functions, leading to further sadness and withdrawal.                     | Can feel sadness when appropriate. Knows strategies for taking care of self, doing enjoyable things to make room for other emotions. |
| <b>Happiness</b> | Difficulty enjoying successes, feels they are temporary and/or not due to own efforts.        | May alienate others by denying/avoiding problems or failing to appreciate others' struggles and perspectives.            | Takes pleasure in own successes and successes of others, acknowledges and learns from challenges along the way.                      |

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