

## Understanding emotions and distress: When knowledge is power

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Emotions are a natural, safe, and normal part of the human experience. Every day, people experience a variety of emotions, ranging from some of the happiest and most euphoric feelings to some of the greatest anxieties and deepest sorrows. For some people, the intensity of their emotions varies within a small range. For others, it can feel like their emotions take them on a wild rollercoaster ride, where they are left holding on for dear life and just wishing for the ride to end. The way we experience emotions is at least in part driven by the temperament we are born with. However, the way we think about our emotions can have a major impact on our experience and our ability to tolerate unpleasant and distressing feelings. By having a better understanding of emotions and their roles in our lives, we can really begin to positively transform our relationship with emotions and increase our ability to sit with distress.

### What are emotions and why do we have them?

Emotions are not just “psychological” or “all in your head”. They actually have a strong physical component and for good reason too. Emotions are adaptive and protective, and serve several important purposes:

- They tell us that something important is happening that is worth paying attention
- They protect and keep us from harm
- They guide and direct social behaviour

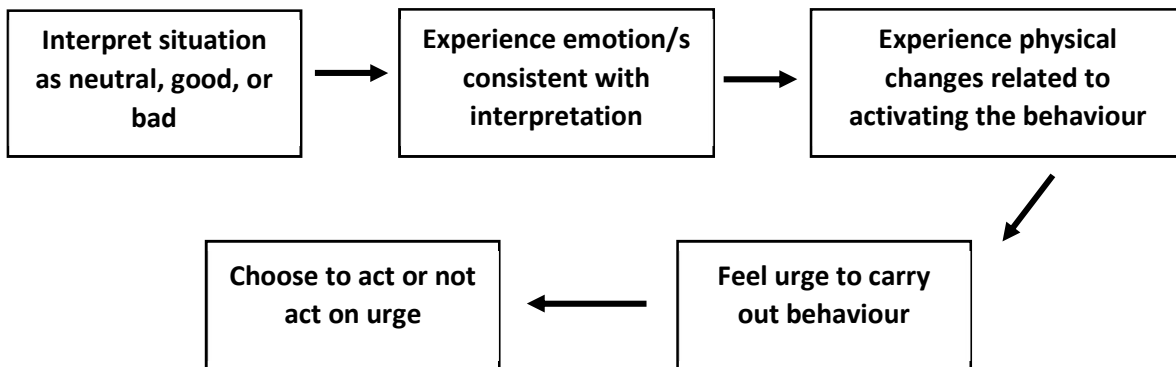
### When an emotion is triggered for the purpose of guiding behaviour, the relevant physical processes needed to engage in that behaviour become activated too.

Take anxiety for example. When a person experiences anxiety, this emotion is signalling to them that they are in danger and need to get ready to either flee or fight the threat. A person feeling anxiety will begin to experience the physical sensations associated with preparing the body for this action (e.g. increasing heart rate and breathing, tension in the muscles, tunnel vision).

In addition to the physical preparation of the action, the emotion tries to get you to carry out a behaviour in the form of urges. An urge is when one feels a strong desire to carry out a particular action (e.g. run, fight, argue, laugh, talk, etc).

Emotion	Urge	Why	Examples of physical changes
Anxiety	Fight or escape	To escape or fight the danger or threat, which requires significant physical exertion.	Increased heart rate, increased respiration, muscle tension, tunnel vision, shakiness.
Sadness	Withdraw	To remove self or disengage from a bad or negative situation. To reflect or focus on something bad to understand it.	Slowing down, loss of energy and motivation, turning inwards mentally.
Anger	Attack	To defend something important to us or to forcefully make others see or attend to a need we have.	Similar sensations to the fight-or-flight, but the overall experience is one of feeling powerful and strong.
Joy	Approach and engage	To signal to us that this is good and to keep engaged with the activity. To reinforce current behaviour.	Relaxation and comfort.

The important thing here is that although you have the urge to carry out the action, you still have a choice as to whether you do carry out the action or not. Sometimes it will make sense to act on urges, if for example you need to escape a real physical danger right in front of you. However, at other times, acting on urges can lead to us to disengage from life, withdraw from activities we enjoy, and can even cause us to hurt ourselves in ways we may later regret.



So, if there is a good reason to act on the urge and you feel that acting on this urge will help you live a more meaningful life in the short and long-term, go right ahead. However, sometimes the mind can misinterpret the situation, causing us to feel urges that may be inappropriate or unnecessary in that situation.

When it comes to perceptions of threat and distress, there are two main ways the mind can get it wrong:

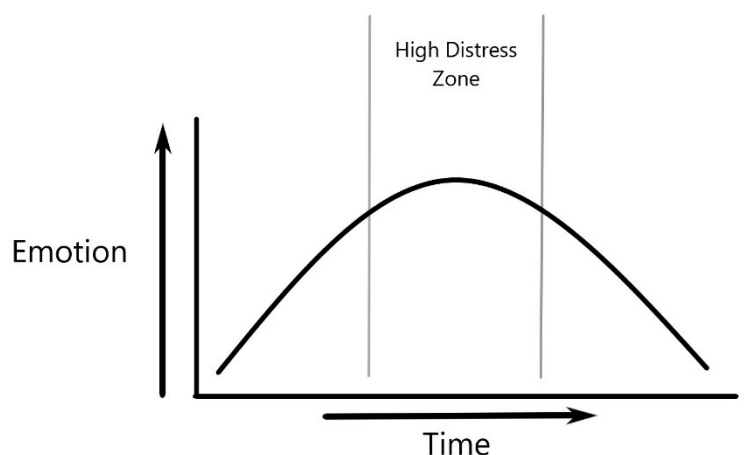
- The mind misinterprets a safe situation as dangerous – this happens when a person has beliefs about particular safe events as being dangerous.
- The mind interprets its own emotions and accompanying physical sensations as the danger – this happens when a person has negative and inaccurate beliefs about emotions and the physical experience of emotion.

In these cases, it may be more valuable in the long-term to sit through the wave of emotion or distress, without acting on it in maladaptive or unhealthy ways. This is where knowledge and understanding of emotion, distress, and urges, can be very beneficial in learning to tolerate distress and re-engage with the world in a way that brings you long-term rewards.

### Emotions as waves

One of the most important things to know about emotions is that they have a beginning, middle, and end. Emotions come in waves, and the purpose of that wave is to try to create an urge to act on the emotion. First, the emotion and urge intensifies. Then, the urge slowly reduces.

The most critical point in the wave is the middle, labelled as the “high distress zone”.



The high distress zone is the point at which:

- You will feel the urge the strongest.
- You will be most likely to experience racing thoughts or have difficulty making sense of your thoughts.
- The thoughts you do have tend to be extreme and feel absolutely true.
- There may be some loss of perception of time, where it might feel like you have always felt this way and always will feel this way.
- You may have catastrophic fears that you might die, lose control, or go mad.
- You may feel very disconnected from the present moment and be lost in your mind or in the past or future.
- You may feel strong and uncomfortable physical sensations.

The main aim is to get through the wave and to “sit with” and “tolerate” distress. If you did absolutely nothing, the wave would pass in time. Nothing lasts forever. However, there are ways in which you can speed up the process and reduce the duration and intensity of distress. These strategies can be found in the following document: Distress Tolerance Strategies.

However, simply even knowing these key points about emotion can help reduce your overall distress:

#### **SUMMARY**

- You are safe and will not die from your emotions.
- Emotions are adaptive and are there to protect you.
- Emotions have both a psychological and physical component. The physical component is to prepare you for the behaviour related to that emotion.
- Emotions come in waves, with a beginning, middle, and an end.
- The hardest part of the emotion wave is in the middle, but it will pass.
- The thoughts you have at the peak of the emotion are often untrue and unhelpful

To continue reading about distress tolerance, please see document titled “Distress Tolerance Strategies”.

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This article was written by Dr Liza Chervonsky. She is a clinical psychologist and director of Inlight Psychology, in Bondi Junction. Liza works with adults and children/adolescents. She has a passion for working with people who have difficulties regulating emotions and who have relationship difficulties that often arise due to these emotional problems. She treats anxiety, panic, mood disorders, anger and emotion dysregulation, relationship issues, low self-esteem and confidence, and work and academic problems. She works from a number of therapeutic modalities, including CBT, DBT, Schema, ACT, and mindfulness.

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