



EMOTION REGULATION

Emotions and childhood trauma

- For survivors of childhood trauma, feelings can sometimes feel dangerous, out of control, or confusing. Often survivors have difficulty naming or understanding their feelings, tolerating feelings that may feel overwhelming and frightening, and then managing those feelings in ways that would allow them to feel strong, capable, and safe.
- However, it is essential that survivors start to really understand that emotions serve an important purpose. Emotions give us information about situations, ourselves, and others, and they help us decide what to do in our lives and our relationships.
- Emotions can be uncomfortable, but they are always “healthy”. They do not last forever, and we ARE NOT our emotions. Emotions are simply information messages. We can control our behaviour regardless of the emotions we might be feeling. For instance, you might feel very anxious about asking your partner for a hug when you are feeling insecure. However, that anxiety is just a message from inside of you telling you that this is something you feel some worry about. Maybe, in the past, hugs were dangerous or led to abuse. Maybe, in the past, you were with a partner who rejected or refused you when you were having emotional needs. So your anxiety is just the message from inside of you telling you that something about your desire to ask for a hug is worrisome – new, different, and a little bit hard. That said, you can still ask for that hug! If you ask for that hug, you may still feel a little anxious or worried, yet you might get the hug and that would be information, or you might not get the hug, and that would be information too. No matter what you do in response to a feeling, you learn something, which you can use going forward into new situations.
- Sometimes, we fear that emotions are dangerous or a big problem. BUT what IS the problem are all of the things that we do to avoid or get rid of feelings that seem overwhelming or frightening. Things like pushing feelings away, going numb, dissociating, self-injury, eating behaviours – these things are problematic. Having feelings, understanding them, and learning to know how to use the information they provide is NOT dangerous or bad!
- It is possible to:
 - Be aware of our emotions and what they are trying to tell us
 - Express emotions in positive ways
 - Increase our ability to tolerate unpleasant emotions
 - Cope with stress effectively and in positive ways
 - Behave effectively to match our values and reach our goals in stressful situations.



What do we mean by emotion regulation?

- Affects, feelings, or emotions are three words that mean the same thing: how we feel, emotionally, in response to the world around us and the relationships in which we engage.
- Feelings exist in many ways, and different people might feel very different things in response to the same experience.
- For survivors of childhood trauma, feelings can sometimes feel dangerous, out of control, or confusing. Often survivors have difficulty naming or understanding their feelings, tolerating feelings that may feel overwhelming and frightening, and then managing those feelings in ways that allow them to feel strong, capable, and safe.
- When survivors face these difficulties, couple relationships can feel very difficult. If you find it hard to name, tolerate, and manage your emotions when experiencing conflicts or difficulties with your partner, the emotions that you feel about these conflicts or difficulties may quickly overwhelm you and make it really hard for you to work through the problem in a healthy and constructive way. In fact, the problem becomes the feelings instead of the original conflict. This can leave conflicts and difficulties unresolved and partners feeling angry, hurt, resentful, and even frightened of bringing their concerns to their partner for fear that things will get worse or explode.
- This same problem happens in couple therapy. Often couples come in to therapy to work through difficult conflicts that they have been unable to resolve on their own or they come in to therapy to work on the negative interaction cycles or dyadic traumatic reenactments that we explored in the last section. When they come in to work on these issues and the survivor finds it difficult to name, tolerate, and then manage their feelings, the therapy quickly becomes focused on helping them feel emotionally safe again and the couple does not get the opportunity to really engage in the process of resolving these important conflicts.

How do you see emotion regulation issues impacting in your life and relationship?

- What are your experiences with feeling, naming, and managing emotions?
- How do you deal with feelings that are strong and threaten to overwhelm you?
- How do you, as a couple, work together to support each other in emotion regulation?
- How have you, as a couple, struggled with the impacts of difficulties with emotion regulation on your ability to work together as a couple and support one another?