

ISSUE

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May 3-9 is CMHA Mental Health Week

On the 70th anniversary of the Canadian Mental Health Association's Mental Health Week, the theme is **Emotional Literacy**. This includes the skills of naming, expressing, and coping with our emotions (the ones we like and the ones we don't), and their importance for our overall mental health.

Heavy feelings lighten when you put them into words. When we voice our emotions, the pain gives way. So, let's understand and name how we feel. We have to name it if we want to tame it. Angry? Glad? Frustrated? Sad? Lonely? Relieved? Even in times of extreme anxiety and stress, mental health is something we can protect, not just something we can lose. Emotional literacy is one way to help do just that.

This Mental Health Week, don't be uncomfortably numb. #GetReal about how you feel. And name it, don't numb it. For information and articles offering practical advice to help you #GetReal, visit www.mentalhealthweek.ca and click on "Info & Articles" at the top of the page.

#GetReal

CMHA Mental Health Week

May 3-9, 2021

Emotional Literacy & Mental Health

The theme of this year's Mental Health Week is "understanding our emotions" so let's explore the importance of emotional literacy as a factor for protecting and promoting mental health. Humans are inherently emotional beings. We are all born with the capacity to feel a broad and complex spectrum of emotions. Interestingly, we tend to regard some of these emotions as "positive" such as happiness and excitement, and others as "negative" such as fear, anger, or sadness. We might try to hold onto the positive emotions and avoid the negative ones, but this rarely works out the way we want it to!

The reason for this is that we tend to treat physical pain and emotional pain in the same way – avoidance! For physical pain, this usually makes good sense – fire burns, so don't put your hand in a fire. There are two main reasons why avoidance doesn't work very well when it comes to emotional pain. First, some emotional pain is unavoidable. Second, unlike physical pain, our bodies hold onto emotional pain until it is given the attention it needs.

Trying to avoid emotional pain is sometimes called "suppression." When we suppress our emotions, we might like to imagine that burying the pain in a hole in the ground will get it out of our life forever. Instead, it's more accurate to think of emotional suppression like throwing the pain in a backpack that we can't put down. We aren't looking at it anymore, but it's still weighing us down and impacting our life.

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Emotional Literacy & Mental Health (cont'd)

The truth of the matter is that being mentally healthy does not mean being happy all the time. Rather, good mental health involves experiencing the full spectrum of emotions, including difficult ones like fear, anger and sadness. However, in addition to feeling all these emotions when they arise, it is also helpful to know what to do with them. Being “emotionally literate” means having the necessary skills to manage difficult emotions. Here are four components of emotional literacy: recognizing, labelling, accepting and expressing.

1) **Recognizing** our emotional experiences when they arise is the first step in being emotionally literate. With this step, we want to be aware that a change has occurred in our emotions and acknowledge that this change is significant and deserves our attention. Without this first crucial step, it is impossible to access the other components of emotional literacy. One way to get better at recognizing our emotional experiences is to practice “checking in” every now and then with our emotional state as it shows up in our body. This can be done by taking a minute or two, closing our eyes, becoming silent and simply feeling and paying attention to the emotional cues in our body.

2) **Labelling** emotions, or “affect labelling,” involves having a vocabulary of names for different emotions and applying them to one’s emotional experience in the moment. The act of affect labelling helps us to make meaning of our feelings, which, in turn, helps us better understand our experience and feel less overwhelmed by it. An emotional vocabulary includes names for basic emotions such as, “happy,” “sad” and “angry,” but can also include names for more complex emotions such as “embarrassed,” “resentful” and “lonely.” Generally speaking, the larger one’s emotional vocabulary, the more success one will have with labelling emotions.

3) **Accepting** our emotions is an important, and possibly counter-intuitive aspect of emotional literacy. From a certain perspective, it makes sense that we don’t want to dwell in painful emotions, so then, why would we want to “accept” them? A useful way to understand this step is to begin by recognizing that emotional states don’t last forever, and they don’t damage us in the same way as physical injuries. However, if we forget these truths about our emotions, then we are apt to try to control them by sheer force of will. Unfortunately, when we try this, what typically happens is the “good” feelings evaporate and the “bad” feelings intensify. If we keep pushing, this can turn into suppression (into the backpack it goes!) Alternatively, accepting our emotional states allows them to run their course unimpeded and saves us from the distress of trying to control them.

4) **Expressing** The final component of emotional literacy is expressing our emotions. Emotions can be understood as having an energetic charge that wants to move and be released - not trapped in the body (or the backpack!) Emotional expression is so important to release that energetic charge. Expressing our emotions can be done in a variety of ways that depend on the person, the emotion, and the situation. Some examples of *healthy emotional expression* include crying, screaming at no one, talking with a supportive person, writing about our emotions in a journal, or engaging in artistic expression. *Unhealthy emotional expression* might include different forms of verbal aggression directed at a person, passive-aggression, or violence.

Emotional literacy can be understood as a skill that we all have access to, and also one that often takes time and effort to develop. Recognizing, labelling, accepting and expressing our emotions can be a very effective way for all of us to promote and protect our mental health. Instead of carrying our painful emotions around in our “backpacks” (trying to ignore them while they slowly wear us down), we can take the emotions out, look at them for what they are, understand them, accept them, and then let them go.



Strategies for Emotional Regulation

Emotions are something that we all experience, but for many of us they can be overwhelming, and for some of us they can be downright scary. Although our emotions serve many purposes, and can be really helpful in navigating the world, when they become very intense we can feel out of control. This is why emotional regulation skills are so important. Adopting strategies to regulate emotions can alter their intensity and duration, making them more tolerable. This allows us to have a healthy emotional landscape and better control over our reactions and behavior. Win, win!

Before we try to regulate emotions, it's helpful to understand why they're there in the first place. One of the primary functions of emotions is to communicate with and influence others. For example, facial expressions are hardwired to reflect our emotional experiences and are the same in all cultures. When we are angry, a furrowed brow and pursed lips can let others know to back off; or when we are sad, those “puppy-dog eyes” can elicit sympathy from those around us. Emotions also organize and motivate action. In fact, some of these action urges are also hardwired, and can be incredibly powerful, and fast! Fear, for example, can start your feet running before your pre-frontal cortex, or “executive brain”, has even had the chance to identify the danger. Just remember, emotions and the action urges they initiate are separate. For example, we can feel anger, without acting aggressively. While our emotions can be misleading, or seem inconvenient at times, when we use them in partnership with our “thinking brain”, they offer valuable insight with which to interpret the world around us. So now that we understand why our emotions are there, let's talk more about how we can regulate them. Here are a few strategies that can make this feat less daunting:

Reduce Vulnerability to Negative Emotions

Although we can't prevent negative emotions from happening, we can make changes to better equip us to manage these emotions, ultimately making us less vulnerable to their negative impact. It may come as no surprise that eating well, or not eating well, can have a big impact on our ability to manage emotions – ever heard the term hangry? So it makes sense that eating regular, healthful meals allows a solid foundation for emotional regulation. Also, proper sleep and regular exercise can give a powerful boost to our emotional resilience. When we are in good health, and our stress is kept to a minimum, we're simply in a better state of mind (and body) to handle what life throws us.

Increase Opportunities for Positive Emotions

We often get bogged down by negative emotions – irritability, depression, frustration and disappointment – to name a few. It's incredibly hard to regulate these emotions if they are monopolizing the lion's share of our time. In order to tip the scales in our favour, we want to increase our opportunities for positive emotions. This can be achieved by adding more enjoyable things into our day, and also by becoming mindful of the positive experiences that we have. It's easy to be distracted by intense negative emotion, and forget to notice the kind gesture of a friend, or how nice the warm sunlight feels, or the dozens of other micropleasures we experience in a day. Remember, these opportunities don't have to be big events. They can be as simple as a warm bath, a walk in the forest, or a friendly chat with the cashier. The possibilities are endless, so treat yourself to a few more and notice how good it feels.

Online Resources



For additional resources:

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness>

<https://thunderbirdpf.org/first-nations-mental-wellness-continuum-framework/>

<https://mindyourmind.ca/help/where-call>

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-the-support-you-need-when-you-need-it-most/>

<https://wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA>

<https://headsupguys.org/>

<https://cmha.ca/mental-health-meter>

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/screening/online/>

Strategies for Emotional Regulation (cont'd)

Pay Attention to Your Thoughts

Remember that old adage, perception is nine-tenths of reality? Well, turns out they may have been on to something. Our thoughts are incredibly powerful, and have a big impact on our emotions, for better or for worse. Let's break it down – emotions are caused by prompting events; and while events sometimes prompt emotions without any conscious thought (think fight or flight response), usually it is our interpretation of events that creates emotion. For example, you get passed by for a job promotion you really wanted; likely, you will feel disappointment. However, let's look at how our thoughts and perceptions can change that emotion. If we think, "I'm never going to get the job I wanted. I'm a total failure", that disappointment will not only be more intense, but could spiral into depression over time. Alternatively, if we think, "Perhaps this is for the best. Something better is probably right around the corner", the feeling of disappointment will likely be fleeting, and may even be tempered with hopefulness and confidence. See how that works? And here's the good news – it's easier to change thoughts than emotions! The power is in your hands... er... heads.

Slow it Down

You may have heard the term "name it to tame it" – it implies that labelling an emotion has the power to reduce or regulate that emotion. Research has found that labelling an emotion decreases activity in the emotional centres of the brain. To do this we need to slow down and practice mindfulness: "a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations". Turns out, the more we can slow down the moment, the more space we create between an emotion and our reaction. In fact, according to Harvard brain scientist Dr. Jill Taylor, 90 seconds is all it takes to identify an emotion and allow it to dissipate while you simply notice it.

One technique you can try to help slow down and pay attention to your thoughts is called "box breath". Here's how it works:



So, while emotions can feel big, it's important to remember that emotions move through us like waves – they rise, crest, and recede, all day long. By becoming more mindful and slowing things down, you may just find it easier to ride those waves. And just remember, emotions start in the body. If you take good care of that, and you're laughing. Literally.

Each moment is a choice. No matter how frustrating or boring or constraining or painful or oppressive our experience, we can always choose how we respond. – Marc Brackett
