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Self-Regulating Our Emotions

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There is lots for us all to learn about our emotions and how to regulate them. So, I wrote this article to pass to my clients to help their recall of information from those conversations.

There is little more important to a healthy, happy, thriving life than mastering the regulation of our emotions. Dysregulated emotions are the primary cause of the depression and anxiety based mental health epidemic that is central to much of the adversity in our lives, now well-proven to be directly related to a huge number of life-damaging outcomes including poor health (eg sickness, fatigue, weak immune), conflict and disconnection in relationships (eg divorce, broken families), deteriorating brain function (eg poor memory, brain fog), poor role performance (eg work, education, parenting). It is also directly related to violence and misuse and addiction to mind-numbing substances – both which are frightenly skyrocketing in the community, and in our homes too.

Who, in their right mind, would choose any of these ghastly outcomes?

Yet many are stuck in this catastrophic life. Anxiety and depression disorders are now so prevalent in our society (anxiety effects over 2 million Australians, and depression affects over 1 million) that one-in-five Australian adults suffer from a mental health condition..... every year! And Australians are not alone, with the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring Depression now the leading cause of disability worldwide.

For too many, our world is not a happy place!

Life is obviously a very precious gift of great fortune given to us all, and we all hope to enjoy healthy, happy lives. But unfortunately, way too many of us struggle to achieve these outcomes because of poor mental health, along the way losing our hoped-for life dreams, with some, very sadly, giving in by choosing to take their own lives. What a tragedy! What a waste!

The solution that enables us to bounce back, and thrive? Improved emotion regulation!

Most mental health problems are now known to stem from dysregulated emotions, caused by our under-developed ability to handle and process our emotions in a helpful and constructive way, which sometimes leads us adults to say and do things not un-childlike.

Building skills in how to regulate emotions is a critical life-skill of this day and age. Harness it, and I believe it becomes your Super-Power, that will help deliver to you a great many dreamed of positive life outcomes.

The article is written for Adults. Kids don't have the same capacities for emotional self-regulation as adults and must rely on their carers to help them calm, until they learn these skills for themselves. And herein lies a big problem - unfortunately, most adults today do not know how to effectively handle their own emotions, (neither did their parents) with most incapable of teaching kids these skills. So, lots to learn here for us all, with much work for us to do in this area to grow this critical life skill in ourselves, in our families, and in our communities.

So, do you really want to create change in your life, to feel more joy and happiness in your life? Then let's get going! A secret to changing your life isn't knowing what to do - it's knowing how to make yourself do it. Start here. Commit to yourself right now to "study" and apply these skills to create life change. Now, inspire yourself. Keep moving right now by using Mel Robbin's 5 Second Rule. Here we go. Count down: Think "5 4 3 2 1" – then BLAST OFF and just do it!

A. Understanding Our Emotions

Emotions, both positive emotions (i.e. love, hope, pride, gratitude, joy, etc) and negative emotions (i.e. shame, anger, embarrassment, fear, self-doubt, guilt, sadness, etc), are visceral reactions to things happening in our environment that are important to us – meaning, we experience emotion as sensations in our body. Those body sensations can of course range from feeling very pleasant to very unpleasant.

Emotions are loaded with tell-tale data that reveal lots about us - our wants, our needs, our drives, our hopes. In fact, emotions are only felt, what we call 'triggered', when something is important to us. Emotions are like an internal GPS - positive emotions signal things in life that are important, and going well, feel good and we want more of, whilst negative emotions signal things in life that are also important, but are not going so well, which hurt and frustrate, and of which we want less.

The related body sensations we experience are simply a release of chemicals into the body by the brain. Positive sensations are fuelled by the "happy hormone" chemicals, mostly endorphins, oxytocin, serotonin

and dopamine – these chemicals make us feel pleasure, happy, euphoric, calm, motivated, loved, achieving, reward, etc. ¹

On the other hand, negative body sensations are fuelled by the “stress hormone” chemicals, namely cortisol and adrenaline – these chemicals make us feel physically and mentally distressed, with body sensations often leading to a racing heart, muscle tightness, and rapid breathing difficulty, that lead us to feel panic, moody, agitated, unable to think, and likely to over-react. These sensations sometimes are so distressing that some race to hospital ER in fear they are having a heart attack because the symptoms are very similar.

This idea that our emotions are simply a chemical reaction inside us is neatly described by Sentis in their 2-minute YouTube video, titled “Emotions and the Brain”, which is recommended viewing.

Shortly I will suggest how to use this information to calm feelings of depression and anxiety.

B. Facing Our Negative Emotions

Negative emotions are helpful in signalling to us something in life that needs addressing. But very often, we have been taught by well-intentioned but now known to be misguided parents and other carers, to suppress, avoid, distract, box-up, or mask uncomfortable negative emotions.

We commonly avoid addressing negative emotions with unhelpful “fight, flight or freeze” actions, which are an automatic, deeply ingrained primeval reaction, activated by the brain’s release of cortisol and adrenaline, the discomfort of which alerts us to the need to take urgent, often immediate defensive actions to protect us from harm. This might lead us to hit out physically or verbally (fight), to leave the situation (flight), and/or to remain still (freeze).

These FFF actions are typically not only unhelpful but often make our problems worse. Yes, avoidance provides some relief from emotional pain, but rarely, if ever, has avoiding emotion fixed the human problem the negative motion is signalling.

It’s worth considering that none of us can turn off a negative emotion. Attempts to shut down a negative emotion results in depressing ALL emotion - flat-lining our emotions, putting a wet blanket over our life. And avoiding these negative emotions often leads to living lives so “depressed” they are frankly cataclysmic to us, and our kin, our friends, our workmates - and now with these mental health landmines laying inside of us just waiting to be triggered again, and again, for the rest of our lives, when not faced and exorcised.

So here is a human dilemma - negative emotions feel uncomfortable, and we have been taught to avoid them. But to enjoy life, we must face them and learn to calm them.

Resolving this dilemma is a choice we each make – a choice to either avoid the pain of a negative emotion, or feel it, face it and work through the human problem it is signalling.

¹Further information - www.eurekapsychology.com.au/links – Harvesting Our “Feel-Good” Chemicals

It can take lots of courage to face some painful emotions. A resource I believe will help muster such courage is Brene Brown's "Daring Greatly" (2012). I recommend the audio version of this book, impressively updated and narrated by Brene in 2023 (available on Audible). Brene also provides many free YouTube video clips that are recommended viewing.

C. Tuning Into Our Emotions

Emotions are packed full of valuable life information that we can benefit from noticing and understanding to help us navigate to happiness, including resolving the human problems that are causing us distress. Avoiding negative emotions blocks this path, often resulting in individuals taking actions that sabotage their ability to enjoy life.

So, how does one tune-in to their emotions?

To tune-in we need to study our emotions – take time to notice them, to better define them, and learn to address them effectively. This is the same process we do with physical injuries – we notice the pain, locate where the pain is, and then decide the best treatment to recovery (ranging from a rub to going to ER at hospital). Of course, the better the diagnosis, the more accurate the treatment.

A first step in accurately diagnosing emotions is understanding that every emotion has a specific built-in purpose.

Consider "Anger". Anger signals that something is frustrating us in achieving an important want or need, which needs fixing,

Another emotion is "Grief". It indicates loss and signals a need for human support, whilst "Fear" mostly prompts human actions to get away to stay safe. "Love" on the other hand fosters connections which supports our safety (i.e. safety in numbers), and human existence through procreation.

So a helpful step in handling the emotion effectively is to take a moment to first notice you are experiencing an emotion and then trying to name the emotion and define its purpose.

Take a moment now to consider what you think the purpose of each of these other common emotions – Guilt? Shame? Envy? Happiness? Jealousy?

Few of us have had sound education on noticing and naming emotions - many of us are quite poor at using words when describing our emotions, other than to say "I am feeling good" or "feeling bad" or "feeling down". But such language isn't sufficient to accurately diagnose the human problem that needs treatment to heal.

So, it is worthwhile studying this to become better at accurately defining your emotions. A valuable resource for helping with this is Brene Brown's "Atlas of the Heart" (2021) in which she defines 87 emotions. Others find the "Emotions Wheel" (freely available on the internet) a useful aid in diagnosing their emotions.

So, try to notice and name the emotion you are experiencing – not just that “I am feeling down” but try to be more specific in naming the emotion such as “I am feeling sad”.

Shortly I will share with you some very special extra benefits you will enjoy when you are able to do this.

D. Understanding Our Brain's Natural Bias

The Brain has a critical role in protecting us and keeping us safe and alive – possibly its main purpose. It is always on, scanning our environment to notice and alerting us to any threat that we might need to address to stay safe.

There are two bias I'd like you to notice as the brain tries to protect us.

The first was mentioned earlier - when the Brain notices a threat it sounds an alarm in us, by blasting a toxic chemical mix of cortisol and adrenaline through our body, at Tsunami-like nano speed. These chemicals cause much discomfort in our bodies (e.g. heart racing, shallow breathing, increased body temperature, tight muscles, nausea, clenched teeth, tunnel vision, etc) designed by nature to get us to take urgent, instant, instinctive, automatic actions - as if our life depended on it - to nullify the threat. This is the human “Fight, Flight, Freeze” (FFF) reaction.

The FFF stress cycle follows a distinct pattern: the brain senses threat; it generates a chemical alarm which activates the FFF reaction which causes us chaos, which we need to defuse so we can choose our response and restore calm.

So what does FFF look like? Well, FIGHT means to hit out, physically and/or verbally, to protect ourselves – the chemical blast forces extra blood flow into our muscles which tighten up and we become momentarily stronger and can hit harder. FLIGHT means to protect ourselves by running to avoid the threat, with the extra blood in our muscles enabling us to run faster. FREEZE means to become less noticeable by stopping all movement, by hiding - what some call “going under the radar”.

The FFF reaction has been built into humans over many hundreds of thousands of years, and it has enabled our species to survive the many, every-minute, lethal dangers encountered by humans when living in primitive times, especially when life-threats lay in waiting behind every rock and tree, such as man-eating tigers.

FFF is actually an amazing in-built survival reaction to life-threatening situations. But of course, those primeval dangers are rare in today's modern society, yet our Brain, tasked with the ultimate job of protecting us, doesn't yet accept the world has changed, and continues to regularly activate this threat alarm - now a still booming, but unnecessary, over-reaction of FALSE ALARMS. So, we often get triggered and take unnecessary protective over-reactions to what are essentially false alarms – actions that too often cause us more problems, physical and psychological, and that we often regret. None of us are immune to such over reactions – it is simply human-bred.

Dr Russ Harris provides a good illustration of this heritage in his 3-minute video titled “How The Mind Evolved To Create Suffering” available free to watch at www.actmindfully.com.au/free-stuff/free-videos (Note: Whilst

in the 'Free Stuff' section of his website, stay awhile and check out his other astute personal growth videos and audios).

We all need to learn to take actions that defuse this automatic over-reaction, so we can instead consider and choose our response.

For further information on our Brain's automatic stress reaction consider examining the work of Dr Aditi Nerurkar from Harvard Medical School, and a good place to start is by reading Chapters 3 and 4 of Mel Robbin's book, 'The Let Them Theory" (2025).

The second bias is that the Brain is very naturally fixated on scanning for threats – it wants to spot them and protect us from them. And whilst this is an amazing in-built survival reaction, it is a very negative lens through which the Brain sees the world – the Brain is not so focused on looking for positives, like opportunities. This means we need to be vigilant and intentional in encouraging the Brain to also see positives too. This is the sound foundation of the movement into positive psychology.

Shortly I will share specific techniques you can apply to help overcome these natural biases.

E. Understanding Our Brain's Structure

Our brain has three distinct regions:

1. **The THINKING Brain** (the pre-frontal cortex), located at the top of the brain, is responsible for information processing, like thinking, problem solving, planning, imagining, memory and judgement.
2. **The EMOTIONAL/FEELING Brain** (the amygdala), located mid-brain, is responsible for memory and emotions (including pleasure and fear), and
3. **THE PRIMITIVE or LIFE-SUPPORT Brain** (the brain stem) located at the base of the brain, keeps us alive by automatically regulating vital, survival functions, such as breathing, heart rate, respiration, moving, feeding and attention.

These regions of our Brain are neatly described in a 2-minute Sentis YouTube video titled "Areas of the brain" which is recommended viewing.

Whilst all three regions are necessary and vital to human survival, I believe our greatest human asset is our pre-frontal cortex - our Thinking Brain. It's an amazing internal super-computer, with more processing capabilities than any computer known to man, differentiating our intelligence from all other living creatures on our planet – an intelligence that enables us humans to solve our human problems.

BUT, when emotions are triggered, the Emotional Brain gets switched on and takes over, and our intelligent Thinking Brain gets switched off, during which many of us report being unable to think clearly, as if in a brain fog, and now much less able to effectively handle and solve our human problems.

So, in our time of great need, as life throws us its challenges, our greatest problem-solving asset is unable to help us handle our human problems. Instead, many of us over-react, taking actions that not only take us off our track but which also cause further harm, to ourselves and often to those we love.

To this point, I hope I have introduced you successfully to the need to regulate our emotions and some of the challenges we face in doing so. Here's a summary so far:

- Regulating our emotions is critical to our health and life happiness,
- Emotions are our internal GPS to what is important to us,
- Negative emotions signal things in our life that need fixing,
- Facing not avoiding negative emotions, is beneficial to improving the quality and quantity of life.
- Addressing negative emotions improves the quality and longevity of life.
- Noticing and accurately naming negative emotion we are feeling will inform appropriate treatment,
- The Brain has a natural bias to scan for negatives, and release a mostly unhelpful FFF threat reaction, and
- When negative emotions are triggered, our Thinking Brain is turned off and our Emotional Brain takes over, which hampers our ability to problem-solve the life problem we are experiencing.

F. Techniques To Regulate Our Emotions

Once we sense our rising negative emotion, it is helpful to calm these emotions. This enables us to re-engage our Thinking Brain to approach problem-solving effectively and avoid taking instinctive FFF reactions that often result in regrettable consequences for ourselves and others.

Most of the emotion calming techniques work in basically the same way – by encouraging the Brain to naturally produce four chemicals that are the antidote to the stress hormones of cortisol and adrenaline. These antidote chemicals are referred to around the world as the “Feel-Good” chemicals (aka “happy hormones”), which play a key role in promoting happiness, pleasure and well-being, whilst reducing depression and anxiety.

Following are many of the more common emotion calming techniques recommended by psychologists across the world to help clients regulate their emotions.

It's important to know that you don't need to use all of these techniques. You will only ever need a couple of techniques that work for you, and to find out which ones are best for you, I encourage you to try them all.

The emotion calming techniques are provided in three sections:

- A. Self-Care Calming Techniques
- B. Physical Body-Calming Techniques
- C. Thinking Brain-Calming Techniques

In this section, I will highlight how we can strengthen our ability to tolerate difficult emotions and also share with you the more common physical body and cognitive brain techniques to calm in those moments when you get emotionally dysregulated.

All techniques can also be tried together (concurrently), which is likely to enhance calming.

A. Self-Care Calming Techniques

Self-care is crucial for mental well-being, helping to reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance resilience. It's about consciously taking time for yourself and engaging in activities that promote a sense of calm and well-being to maintain good mental health and prevent burnout.

Self-care involves taking deliberate actions to prioritise your overall well-being, including physical, emotional, and mental health. It's about recognizing your needs and engaging in activities that help you feel better and more balanced.

It's not selfish. To the contrary, as the "oxygen mask" analogy highlights when on a plane, if the cabin depressurizes, and oxygen masks deploy. Do you recall the seemingly counter-intuitive instruction you are given if you have a child next to you? We're all instructed to put your own mask on first. Why? Because if you pass out, you can't help the child. Prioritising self-care is securing your ability to care for others.

Also, self-care increases our ability to tolerate difficult emotions. Just as regular exercise strengthens physical muscles, so to with self-care that helps us strengthen our emotional muscle developing a greater capacity to cope with challenges and setbacks without being overwhelmed.

There are three aspects of self-care that I would especially like to highlight here: self-compassion, emotionally hardy lifestyle, and maintaining your Brain's health.

Self-Compassion:

We all have very good inbuilt natural ability to recover from emotional pain, and SELF-COMPASSION is known as one ingredient that promotes and accelerates this recovery.

Dr Kristen Neff has done considerable research on the benefits of self-compassion, and provides the following three suggestions on how to grow self-compassion:

- TREAT YOURSELF KINDLY, as you would others who are suffering – "be a good friend, Mum/Dad to yourself". Soothe yourself as you would a friend.
- Recognise that suffering and feeling inadequate is what we ALL go through (i.e. it's not just you) – this is actually our deep shared connection to all others (i.e. it's not just you that judges ourselves harshly). Yes, it's painful, but it is the COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE - it is normal. Acknowledge and validate with yourself how difficult the situation is – "phew, this is really hard, I need some care, some compassion to get through this". Then give yourself a break.
- Be aware of (i.e. notice) the suffering you are experiencing – both the physical and emotional pain. Be with the suffering by turning toward the pain (i.e. don't bury or avoid it); try to dissipate it's buzzing (i.e. release it, don't let it fester), by using MINDFULNESS TOOLS mentioned later in this article (e.g. box-breathing). Taking these actions IS prioritising SELF-CARE. Then, as the brain fog starts lifting and your thinking brain turns back on, move into problem solving mode.

To learn more about self-compassion and how to grow it, I recommend checking out the self-compassion principles of Dr. Kristen Neff's by surfing her website at www.self-compassion.org. See what you can learn too by completing the website's brief and free 'self-compassion survey', and by reading Dr. Neff's article in the

'ABOUT/What is self-compassion'. Dr Neff also has some good free online YouTube videos well worth watching too, including a 20-minute TEDx Talk on 'The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion'.

Emotionally Hardy Lifestyle:

In the table below are five specific well-researched lifestyle domains that will strengthen our ability to tolerate difficult emotions by growing our emotional hardiness and thereby reducing our emotional sensitivity. To illustrate "hardiness", everyone understands that when we don't get enough sleep, we will be more sensitive to all things the next day.

So, strengthening each domain is important to building our emotional hardiness, and I have noted a "minimum" standard for each domain to maintain good emotional hardiness:

Life-Domain	Mentally Hardy Minimum Standard	My Score (0 to 10)
Sleep	Sleep is a key and natural restorative process, both physically and mentally. Most adults function best when they consistently get 6 to 8 hours sleep. For information on good sleep habits refer www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/looking-after-yourself/sleep	
Exercise	Physical exercise is essential for maintaining optimal blood flow to the brain which helps with thinking, learning, and problem-solving. Keep active with any movement being beneficial. 20+ minutes of cardio exercise (ie that causes some panting, sweating), 5 to 6 days per week, is ideal	
Diet	Diet plays a key role in promoting and maintaining physical and mental health. The standard is 3 home-cooked meals a day, low in sugars, with little or no alcohol (or other substances). Try Mediterranean and Keto diets. Research and try fasting.	
Sunshine	Sunshine lights up the brain and lifts mood and is the best natural source of Vitamin D which promotes reduced inflammation and modulates cell growth. 15 to 20 minutes of sunlight each day is recommended, whilst remembering to use sunscreen.	
Talk	Spend time with family & friends, but especially share with 2 to 3 mates with whom you feel trust, to open-up (vent) regularly about your inevitable life challenges and frustrations (i.e. vent)	

Now try this brief exercise: For each of the 5 Life-Domains, score yourself against the minimum standard on a scale from 0 (low) to 10 (high), where 5 is the minimum standard. Then record your scores in the right-hand column. Now use the lowest scoring life-domains to write on a separate sheet of paper 2 to 4 improvement actions you now intend taking to improve your emotional hardiness.

Maintaining Brain Health

To work effectively our Brain needs to stay healthy. But many of us take our brain for granted, despite it being arguably the single most vital organ to our health and happiness.

The brain is the control centre for everything we do and experience, and its health directly impacts our ability to function effectively in the world. By prioritising brain health, we can potentially unlock our full potential and achieve greater success and fulfillment in life.

When the brain is functioning well, we are more likely to experience positive outcomes in lots of life domains, while a troubled brain can lead to difficulties in our daily life. We have lots to learn about how to look after and get the best out of this vital organ.

Psychiatrist, Dr. Daniel Amen, a leading figure in brain health, emphasizes that a healthy brain is fundamental to functioning effectively in all aspects of life, from relationships and work to personal well-being.

Brain scan (SPECT imaging) research conducted over the last decade or so by Dr. Amen has provided lots of information on how to maintain Brain-healthy living. A good place to start learning about these key principles is on Dr. Amen's website (www.amenclinics.com) where he offers the following 12 key prescriptions:

1. Stop taking your brain for granted – start treating it with the love and care it deserves
2. Increase the Brain's reserve to enable resilience in troubled times
3. The brain is soft – protect it (e.g., use seat belts, avoid contact sports)
4. Stop poisoning your brain with toxic substances (eg alcohol, drugs, smoking, caffeine, etc)
5. Protect memory with ageing
6. Overcome sleep problems to protect its restorative benefits (e.g. better concentration)
7. Learn about the negative impact of pain meds (e.g. opioids) on brain functioning
8. Adopt a brain healthy diet, including hydration
9. Increase physical exercise
10. Increase mental exercise, especially stimulating brain cells by learning something new
11. Focus brain on positive thoughts, especially appreciation and gratitude
12. As social animals we need to connect - don't withdraw from family and friends

One of Dr Amen's most important findings from his brain scan-research is the realisation of the damaging impact on our Brain functioning by restricted blood flow, mostly caused by our poor lifestyle choices such as consuming caffeine, nicotine, marijuana, alcohol, and having an inactive lifestyle and being overweight.

Dr Amen's scan-research has also demonstrated the plasticity of the brain to recover from brain injuries caused by various factors like accidents (eg concussion), stroke, substance abuse, tumours neurological disease, and infection, by applying these principles - even slowing the progression of Dementia-disorders.

To find out more on this, I recommend watching Dr. Amen's various free YouTube Ted Talks.

B. Physical Body-Calming Techniques

As noted, when the brain uses chemicals to activate our FFF reaction, this makes us feel very uncomfortable in our bodies (e.g. heart racing, shallow breathing, increased body temperature, tight muscles, nausea, clenched teeth, tunnel vision, etc). During this chemical-rush, we are less able to think straight nor continue to be our best selves, sometimes behaving in ways we later regret. Calming this physical over-reaction is one way of calming our Brain too. Following is some of the more common techniques used to calm the Brain by calming the body. Whilst each is simple and practical to apply, these are skills which you will improve the more you practice them – as the old saying goes “practice makes perfect”.

In time, you will only need to use one or two of these techniques. For the moment though, I encourage you to try them all at least a few times, to find out which seem to work best for you and then go to school on learning as much as you can about those techniques and then practice the skill over and over until you have embedded these as new coping habits.

Which technique you choose to use to calm might also differ on the situation you are in when you feel triggered. Different techniques might be better suited to use in a public space, like when at work or out shopping, than when in a private space, like when at home or in your car. So, it's good to learn a few different techniques to apply for different situations.

When you apply these techniques, strong positive signals are sent to your Brain - that you have heard its alarm about a threat, that you are now taking action to handle the threat, and, given some immediate positive physical improvements from those actions, that your actions seem to be working. This calms the Brain with some "feel-good" chemicals, and it stops producing its toxic chemical mix of cortisol and adrenalineat least until it notices the next threat.

Techniques To Try	What to Do
1. Time Out	Dysregulated emotions naturally subside quickly if you give it a little time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step back from the problem temporarily whilst you take sufficient time (often as little as 2 minutes, sometimes as much as 30 minutes, occasionally longer) to regain calm and then return to face the problem. • And return you must or using this strategy simply becomes avoidance.
2. Box Breathing	Slow down the rush caused by the FFF chemicals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you want. • Inhale slow and deep until you feel you have filled your lungs. • Now, hold your breath for a slow count of say three or four. • Then, exhale very very slowly, and until nearly all the air is out • Then, hold your breath for another slow count of say three or four. • Repeat this cycle, with another slow deep inhale, for about 2 minutes.
3. Body Temperature	Reduce your increasing body temperature with these ideas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst holding your breath, put face in bowl of iced water for 10 seconds • Drink a glass of cold water • Put both wrists under cold running tap • Take some clothes off • Stand in front of cold cycle air conditioner • Stand barefoot on cold concrete • Can you think of other ways you can reduce your body temperature?
4. Muscle Relaxation	Reduce muscle tightness with this technique: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squeeze then release and relax pairs of muscles • Lets start with the toes on your left and right feet • Squeeze tight for 5 seconds the toes on each foot, then release to relax • Now do the same with the calf muscles on your left and right legs • Now progress up through your body with other muscle pairs

C. Thinking Brain-Calming Techniques

In addition to Body calming techniques, there are many well researched Thinking Brain-calming techniques, that you can also apply on their own or together with physical techniques, to calm emotions.

These techniques work on the premise that difficult emotions are triggered by our thoughts, and uncomfortable emotions can therefore be changed by changing our thoughts (i.e. changing attitudes and beliefs) and/or by changing the focus of the Brain's attention away from its worries. In doing so, this will disengage our Emotional Brain and re-engage our Thinking Brain, enabling us to re-establish calmness and become more present.

Often my professional colleagues talk about the need to re-wire the Brain. What they mean by this is that habits die hard, including old thinking habits. And "re-wiring" will occur when new thinking techniques are well understood, practiced regularly, and deeply embedded as new daily habits, which in time will change old thinking habits.

Re-wiring our brain is key to making personal change stick. To appreciate how we re-wire our brain. I recommend viewing of the Sentis 2-minute YouTube video titled "What is Neuroplasticity", noting Sentis has other short Brain videos worth viewing at www.youtube.com/sentisglobal/videos.

So following below are descriptions of the more common Brain-calming techniques for you to try:

1. Notice and Name the Emotion

When your FFF-reaction is triggered ask your Brain to notice and name the negative emotion, perhaps by asking it to answer some questions like:

- What is my brain telling me right now (notice what you are thinking)? What triggered it?
- What is the name of the emotion I am feeling?
- How hot is my emotion (on a scale from 0 to 10) and where do I feel it in my body?

When first trying to do this, don't worry too much how accurate are the answers the Brain generates. At this moment, the key point of this exercise is to throw the Brain a problem to be solved, which will help unhook from your Emotional Brain and engage and activate your Thinking Brain.

2. Five Senses

This exercise also encourages activation of our Thinking Brain. The exercise is to use your five senses to turn your worrying Brain's attention back onto what's in the present, simply asking it to solve these questions:

- what are 5 things I can see
- what are 4 things I can touch
- what are 3 things I can hear
- what are 2 things I can smell
- what is 1 thing I can taste

This exercise turns the Brain's attention away from worrying (often worrying about what's happened in the PAST or what might happen in the FUTURE) and refocus its attention on the PRESENT - the here and now, what's in front of you.

3. Dropping Anchor

Australian psychologist, Dr Russ Harris has linked the previous two exercises together into a neat brain problem solving activity also designed to unhook from the Emotional Brain and activate the Thinking Brain. The Dropping Anchor metaphor suggests that when we are in an emotional storm, we might use this technique to drop anchor to ensure we are not swept away by it, and when the storm has passed, which inevitably it will.

There are three steps to this technique:

1. Name & Notice the Emotion (see above) and analyse why triggered,
2. Connect and move your body to signal to the Brain that you are not frozen, and
3. Use a grounding technique, like Five Senses, to re-engage the Mind back into the present

To learn this technique, I recommend you go online to the link below where Dr Harris demonstrates how to use it in top 5 listed audios: www.actmindfully.com.au/free-stuff/free-audio/

4. Choosing Our Thoughts

Emotions highlight what matters to us - we only feel emotion about things we "think" important. That's a critical clue - both positive and negative emotions are triggered by our thoughts. It's our thoughts about an event, not the event itself, that determine our emotions. So, to change our emotions (to feel more positives, and less negatives), we need to get inside and change our thinking.

Greek philosopher, Epictetus (presumed born around AD 50) is quoted as writing "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it", encouraging us to focus not on what we don't have control over but more on the power we have, to choose how we react to events. This echoes what Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, termed the "freedom of choice" – the ultimate freedom that no-one can ever take away from us, the freedom to choose our attitude in any given situation, even in a Nazi concentration camp.

Mel Robbins book "Let Them" is a superb addition to our techniques for positive thinking, and a great reminder that we will get best value from our thinking by focusing our attention not on what we can't control (such as other people's feelings and behaviours) and focus on what we can control (our feelings and behaviours). I highly recommend reading Mel's book.

I find it remarkably interesting that humans can react so differently to the same stimulus, simply because we have developed different thoughts (i.e. attitudes and beliefs) along our life journey to date.

Many thoughts arise from subconscious processes in the brain, which are influenced by our past, our genetics, and some patterns of thinking we have developed. These lead to automatic initial thoughts, feelings, and even some thinking biases that we may not be immediately aware of.

Whilst initial thoughts may be automatic, we can become aware of them and choose which ones to engage with. By becoming aware of our thoughts, we can identify negative or unhelpful thought patterns and consciously choose to focus on more positive or constructive ones.

Our thoughts do shape our reality, and influence our emotions, behaviours, and determine our thinking filters that can cause us all to have quite different understandings about the same situations.

By choosing which thoughts we focus on, we can influence our emotional state and create a more positive outlook. For example, instead of dwelling on a negative thought, we can choose to focus on the positive aspects of a situation or reframe the negative thought into a more constructive one.

Changing thought patterns takes effort and practice, but it is possible to rewire our brains to think more positively. This involves actively choosing to focus on positive thoughts, practicing mindfulness, and challenging negative self-talk. By consistently practicing more positive thinking, we create new neural pathways in the Brain, making positive thinking occur more automatically – that is, re-wiring the Brain.

Here are some examples of choosing our thoughts:

- Instead of thinking "I can't do this", you can choose to think "I can learn to do this" or "I can break this down into smaller steps",
- Instead of dwelling on a mistake, you can choose to learn from it and move forward.
- Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of a situation, you can choose to find the positive or the opportunity for growth.

By understanding the nature of our thoughts and practicing conscious choice, we can turn our thinking more positive, and this will lead us feeling more positive emotions.

5. Positive Self-Talk

There is significant research indicating the enormous benefits to health and well-being of maintaining positive self-talk - many people make sure they say positive things to themselves every day.

To be clear, I am referring here to our inner voice, our self-talk – the monologue of our thoughts. Every waking moment we all talk to ourselves. Much of it is naturally negative self-talk, amping up our distorted, negative, demeaning, toxic self-thoughts, such as "I'm not good enough...", "I'm a failure..." or "I'm worthless...". And our Brain is listening to this talk, and believing what you say,

Instead, we can learn to harness our self-talk as a friend - cheerful, supportive, calming, and bolstering our confidence. Some simple Brain techniques which many people use is using positive self-talk about negative emotions, like saying....

- My feelings won't last forever; I welcome them knowing they are ever changing
- Thoughts are not facts. I acknowledge my thoughts and allow them to pass
- My body is a safe place to exist
- I acknowledge challenges as a path to inner peace
- I am whole, complete and worthy of love as I am

And this is about controlling the positivity of our baseline thinking, but also how each of us reacts to setbacks when they inevitably experience across our lifetimes.

6. Reframing Our Thoughts

A significant human mental health challenge is emphasised in a Buddha mantra - "We are what we think. All that we are, arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we create the world".

And from these thoughts (i.e. our beliefs and attitudes) flow our feelings.

So, adopting the right thoughts, the right frame of mind, is key to unlocking happier feelings, with fewer overwhelming worries, and fewer negative emotions that lead to anxiety and depression. To do this we can reframe our thinking, to adopt new attitudes and new beliefs, so that you feel differently.

This is of course easier said than done.

Many of our thoughts are automatic, and often deeply ingrained in us during our childhood, then shaped through later life experiences. And some, perhaps many, of these thoughts are just downright toxic – especially the harsh judgements we sometimes hold about ourselves, that question our lovability, our value, our appearance, leaving us doubting ourselves, and feeling unworthy, shameful, embarrassed, and 'less than' what we really are leading us to horrible and unhelpful self-beliefs such as "I can't do anything right" or "I'm a complete failure".

BUT these thoughts are just thoughts – they are not facts, they are not the truth, and they can be changed.

You see, we all have choice, every day, about the attitudes we embrace that can lead to negative emotions. Like whether we choose to think of ourselves when say.....

- aged 70, as "old, over the hill, with little to offer others" or as "experienced, mature, with a wealth of life insight and lessons to offer others", or
- when we become divorced, as "unlovable, unattractive, unworthy," or as "free and now with experience to make better partner choices", or
- when we are over-weight, as "fat and ugly" or as "cuddly and lovable",
- etc

Of course we can't change the past. Nor can we change how others behave or change the inevitable – death.

But one thing we can do is to choose our attitude, and this choice will play a significant role in the hue of our life – how we feel. An extraordinary number of research studies put in no doubt the physical and mental health benefits that positive optimistic "glass half-full" thinkers enjoy, including experiencing a much happier life, when compared to negative pessimistic "glass half-empty" thinkers.

7. Challenging Our Brain's Unhelpful Thinking Distortions

That said, our initial thoughts can lead us into a spiral of unhelpful negative thinking but its important to realise that these thoughts are often not so accurate.

Every day, our 5 senses send an extraordinary and overwhelming amount of data to our Brain which it miraculously processes. To cope with this information overload, the Brain has some special tricks it uses to cope. A YouTube video by Sentis titled "Limitations of the brain" provides a neat summary is worth viewing.

The Brain often copes with this information overload with tricks that lead to unhelpful initial thinking distortions (sometimes outright lies) that we need to look out for. Braive neatly summarises these thinking distortions in its 2-minute video "Common Errors in Our Thinking" which is recommended viewing. Braive then highlights 12 specific and common thinking distortions in two other short videos titled "12 Cognitive Biases in Our Thinking - Part 1 and Part 2", also recommended viewing, which can be seen online at www.youtube.com/@Braive/videos. The thinking distortions Braive highlights are:

- Catastrophising (blown out of proportion)
- All or Nothing (seeing only extremes)
- Fortune Telling
- Mind Reading (jumping to conclusions)
- Emotional Reasoning
- Over-Generalising ("Everyone does it")
- Labelling
- Mental Filtering (tunnel vision)
- Dismissing Bias
- Hurdle Measure Bias
- Personalisation (blame oneself)

Other thinking distortions have been noted, but the key point here is to recognise that thinking distortions naturally occur, so you are on guard for them ready to take action to reduce their impacts on your emotions.

"The Struggle Switch" when discussing how our inner voice struggles, our over-thinking, amps-up worry, and shares some ideas on how to quieten that inner voice at www.actmindfully.com.au/free-stuff/free-videos/. Whilst in the 'Free Stuff' section of his website, stay and check out his other astute videos and audios.

8. SafeCalmHappy Positive Image

Brain scan studies show that when someone imagines something, the same areas of the brain are activated as when they are sensing reality.

So, another very useful Brain calming technique is to generate your own image that is positive image (which I have called "SafeCalmHappy" Positive Image) that you might use to replace worrying negative thinking. The Brain really can't focus on two images at once, so replacing negative images with positive images (whether real or imagined) will see the Brain to stop generating the Cortisol and Adrenaline stress hormones and instead start generating some Feel-Good chemicals. So try this exercise:

Image a moment of time in your life, at any age, when you felt safe, calm and happy, and re-create an image of that scene in your mind. Now use The Five Senses exercise (see above) to help you more deeply immerse your Brain into that scene – what are 5 things you can see, 4 things... etc. Sit with that image in your Mind for just a few minutes, then check in with how you are now feeling.

And Finally

I hope this article has sparked your interest in honing your own emotion regulation skills. If so, please consider talking with a psychologist to gain more knowledge on applying emotion regulation skills. The small short-term cost of doing so will be far outweighed by the significant health and happiness benefits it will bring over one's lifetime as you master this critical life-skill.

And as you learn to grow these skills, please be patient with yourself. It will mean undoing deeply ingrained old habits, so this is a good time to remember that old habits (including our thinking habits) die hard and changing them will not only take you time and lots of practice, but also will take a toll on your energy – personal change is hard work, and very tiring. So, as you lean into making this change in your life, give yourself a break and read more on the research of Dr Kristen Neff on her site at www.self-compassion.org.

Much of what I have covered in this article are strategies to get more immediate short-term control over uncomfortable negative emotions to avoid its collateral damage. For some of us, that's sufficient. However not so for others – many of whom may need to see a professional to help heal deep psychological wounds.

Negative emotions often result from childhood, with some of our more troubling emotions resulting from traumatic experiences often in childhood, sometimes the result of neglect by carers, but also from traumatic incidents in later life too, often making these emotions very difficult and uncomfortable to face.

Unfortunately, many of us continue to be reluctant to seek professional help from psychologists. Despite willingly seeking guidance from a multitude of other professions (dietitians, personal trainers, even tennis coaches) as we strive to become our best selves, we balk when it comes to our psychological health. If I may say.....that's nuts!

Psychological therapies are proven to improve health and happiness. Don't wait—start regulating your emotions today.

The content in this article is for general and educational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your mental health professional or another qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a psychological condition. If you are in crisis or think you may have an emergency, call your doctor or emergency services immediately. The author does not endorse any specific tests, clinicians, products, procedures, opinions, or other information that may be mentioned. The author is not responsible for any reliance on the information provided.

