

## **What is Emotion Regulation?**

Emotion regulation describes the mental and behavioural processes by which people influence their own feelings and the feelings of other people.

*Everyday examples of regulating your own emotions:*

- Cheering yourself up by doing something enjoyable;
- Making yourself anxious by worrying.

*Everyday examples of regulating someone else's emotions:*

- Making a colleague angry by criticising him or her;
- Calming down an over-excited child.

## **What sorts of feelings are regulated?**

Another word that psychologists use for feelings is affect, and affect includes both:

- emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, fear)
- and moods (e.g., calm, gloomy).

Emotions are usually briefer than moods and are directed at something specific. Some researchers organise feelings into discrete categories, others arrange them according to the extent to which they involve the underlying dimensions of pleasure and activation. For example, anxiety involves low pleasure but high activation.

## **How do people regulate feelings?**

- We have found that people have hundreds of different strategies for influencing how they feel and how others feel. These strategies can be aimed at making themselves or others feel better or worse than they currently feel. For example, a carer who is feeling very happy might try to make herself feel more neutral in order to break difficult news.
- Affect regulation strategies can involve thoughts e.g., thinking about a situation differently, or behaviours e.g., doing something nice as a distraction.
- Sometimes people regulate their emotional expressions (face, tone and posture), rather than their feelings. For example, they may fake a smile, or suppress their anger.

## **What are the best ways of regulating feelings?**

- This often depends on the context. However, reappraisal (i.e. thinking about things from a different perspective) and distraction (i.e. thinking about or doing something different) have been found to be generally most effective in producing a desired change in feeling.
- Venting feelings (e.g., shouting) and avoiding thinking about things are often ineffective and can be counterproductive. Likewise, regulating one's expressions (also known as surface acting) can be less effective than regulating one's feelings (also known as deep acting) because it can come across as inauthentic to others.

## **Is emotion regulation the same as coping?**

No. Coping is always done in response to negative events and involves more than affect, whereas emotion regulation is specifically directed at changing affect in a positive or negative direction. However, coping involves emotion regulation.

### **Are some people better at regulating feelings than others?**

- There do appear to be individual differences in people's ability to regulate their own emotions and other people's emotions. These abilities are components of emotional intelligence. They can be learned – but not easily, because ingrained habits can only be overcome with a lot of practice. And what works well in one context may not work well in another.
- People's belief in their own ability to overcome negative feelings has been found to relate to their actual ability to recover more quickly from negative events. Individuals who are more emotionally expressive or charismatic usually exert a greater influence on how others feel.

### **Why can't I control my feelings?**

- Regulating feelings is not straightforward. If we could simply change our feelings at the drop of a hat, then the feelings would serve no purpose. So feeling down for a period after an upsetting event, or feeling anxious before doing something difficult, is normal and healthy.
- Sometimes, however, people do experience disabling problems involving their emotions (e.g., chronic jealousy, anger problems, panic attacks), and these sometimes involve large and persistent swings in mood (e.g., bipolar disorder). There can be a number of reasons for this. For example, having incorrect conflicting beliefs about one's own emotions can lead to over-regulation. Psychological therapy may help in such cases and the advice of a medical doctor should be sought.

### **Can my feelings be regulated without my knowledge?**

Yes, in two ways.

- First, we often regulate how we feel without being aware of it i.e., it has become automatic.
- Second, research has shown that feelings are contagious. Just sitting facing someone can cause our moods to shift towards that of the other person. This occurs because we non-consciously mimic others and the feedback from our face and body shifts our mood. It seems that we can even be influenced by the feelings of people in our social network with whom we only have an indirect connection. But the impact may be small. People also have ways of deliberately resisting or colluding in what others feel (e.g. by using humour).

### **How does emotion regulation relate to other forms of self control?**

There is good evidence to suggest that emotion regulation relies on the same mental resources as other forms of self control (such as controlling a ball or resisting food). So doing one can deplete the resources used by the other. Like all forms of control, doing a lot of it can be exhausting. This is why doing a lot of emotion work (e.g., customer service) can be very tiring. There are

also occasions when self control is harder. For example, it can be harder to resist having a food treat as a quick mood enhancer at the end of a day.

### **Why is emotion regulation important?**

- Emotion regulation affects us all in our everyday lives. If we do it well, it can enhance our well-being, our performance, and our relationships. For example, the ability to regulate one's own feelings can influence sports performance, and the ability to regulate how others feel is vital to building good relationships with colleagues and customers.
- If we don't do it well, it can be detrimental to those same things. For example, the risks we take (e.g., gambling) and the behaviours we indulge in (e.g., smoking) can be forms of emotion regulation.
- Emotion regulation can affect our parenting, our friendships, our work, our health, and our leisure.