

# Maintaining a Healthy Mind

## Instructions

## Understanding the Purpose of Emotions

Emotions and feelings are closely linked - as shown in the iceberg model detailing a response to a trigger, emotions can be defined as *information* and *energy* with feelings being how that emotion is interpreted in the brain. For the purpose of this exercise we will refer to feelings and emotions as one and the same.

We have three core emotional systems that are designed to meet different objectives:

### **Threat and self-protection system:**

Objective: To identify and respond to anything that may threaten our survival

Basic feelings: Anger, anxiety, disgust

Activated response: Fight, flight, freeze

Features: Fastest response time, works on 'better safe than sorry' basis, easy to activate and difficult to soothe

### **Incentive and resource-seeking system:**

Objective: To provide the drive to achieve and gather resources to survive and thrive

Basic feelings: Driven, excited, motivated, desire, pleasure

Activated response: Guide, motivate, encourage

Features: Activating response to achieve and receive, can be addictive driving continuous thrill seeking behaviours, if desires/goals blocked can be seen as a threat which can trigger the threat system

### **Soothing and contentment system**

Objective: To show empathy for others and connect

Basic feelings: peace, content, connected, feeling safe & not threatened, not striving or wanting

Activated response: Soothe, affection, kindness, compassion

Features: Useful to balance the other systems as it counteracts their patterns

In addition, we create our own unique response patterns based on our own individual life experiences and how we interpreted those experiences at the time. Our perception of the situation will have triggered a blend of the emotional systems with a defined objective to survive, thrive or connect. As no two people have had the exact same experiences, triggers will not necessarily illicit the same response.

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Emotions focus our attention and emotions of others influence our own energy helping us connect.

With rational reflection we can observe our emotions and peel them back to reveal the objectives that underpin them and decide whether they are appropriate for the current situation. *There is logic behind emotions.*

**Step 1:** Pay attention to emotions:

- Embrace them as a useful tool for our survival
- Do not suppress them (it takes an equal amount of energy to oppose the energy on the original emotion so suppressing emotions can be exhausting!)
- Hold a space for them and observe them for what they are – information and energy

**Step 2:** Name the emotion and understand the information that underpins it, for example:

- Anger – implies there is threat that we want to approach and sort out
- Anxiety – defensive emotion identifying that there may be a threat requiring our focused attention such that we may want to run away and keep safe
- Disgust – makes us want to expel toxic substances and turn away from them
- Shame – makes us want to run away or close down to avoid rejection
- Guilt – makes us wary of harming others and prompts us to repair the relationship
- Excitement – helps us to look forward and plan
- Joy – reminds us what is important
- Contentment – allows us to rest and re-energise
- Love and affection – allows us to feel safe with others

**Step 3:** Recognise your usual response patterns by putting them into a sequence:

- Trigger
- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Actions

**Step 4:** Reflect on your patterns:

How is it working for you?

Do your patterns fulfill your aims?

**Step 5:** Consider alternative options

**Notes:**

- Our moods act as a filter and can influence our emotional reactions
- We are all more reactive when we are hungry, angry, lonely, tired (HALT)
- Emotions are contagious - are your patterns reinforcing the patterns of other people?
- There may be underlying beliefs that are driving the patterns