



Understanding Our Emotions

Sometimes we are hit with a wave of emotions and it can feel like all we can do is hide and wait until they go away. It feels like they come out of nowhere and we are left with few options to manage the intense thoughts and feelings. By bringing an awareness and understanding to the origin of our emotions, we are able to better manage how we respond to them. The fictional illustration below will provide a depiction of how we can go about doing this.

Ashley has Friday night dinner plans and receives a call from her friend saying that she needs to cancel. After hanging up the phone, Ashley experiences a thought, “Nobody wants to spend time with me, everybody hates me”. She then notices her face feeling flushed, her heart rate increasing, and experiences difficulty breathing. In an effort to escape these sensations, she gets into bed and turns on Netflix. While trying to avoid the sensations, Ashley thinks about other times where friends have cancelled plans with her and continues to have thoughts of “No one likes me”. The more Ashley experiences uncomfortable physical sensations, the more she tries to push them away. Ashley receives texts from friends throughout the night to meet them, but because of the discomfoting physical sensations, she stays in bed for the remainder of the night.

According to the Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) Model for Describing Emotions, a prompting event first occurs, which can then trigger an interpretation of the event. This interpretation can be either a thought or a belief that then leads to biological changes and experiences. These biological changes can then lead to adjustments in our expressions, including our facial and body language, what we say, and what we do. These behavioral changes then lead to the awareness of an emotion, which can then have aftereffects and lead to secondary emotions. This model illustrates that one can get caught in a cycle of biological changes, consequential thoughts and behavior that all influence one another. To illustrate this further, let’s apply this to the example above.

Prompting Event: Ashley receives a call from her friend saying that she needs to cancel dinner plans.

Interpretation: Nobody wants to spend time with me. Everybody hates me.

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HEALTHY LIVING CHICAGO

Biological Changes: Heart rate increasing, body temperature increasing, sensations of shortness of breath

Expressions: Getting into bed, isolating herself, not responding to friend's inquiries

Emotion: Sadness, Rejection

How does having an understanding of our emotions benefit us?

Being able to identify the prompting event and understand how our interpretations influence our physiology and behavior provides us with the opportunity to evaluate whether we are behaving in the most effective manner. How would Ashley's night have looked if she identified that she was feeling sad because of her interpretation that "Nobody wants to spend time with me"? Let's look at some techniques Ashley could have used after identifying the impact her interpretation was having on her mood and behavior.

Mindfulness: *Providing yourself with the opportunity to create emotional distance between yourself and your emotions. Do not see your emotions and thoughts as facts; rather, view them as an addition to your five senses. "I'm noticing that my heart rate is increasing. I'm having a thought that people don't want to spend time with me. I'm observing that it feels difficult to breathe. I'm having a thought that I want to crawl into bed and avoid everyone tonight."*

Engage in Opposite Action: *Change your emotion by engaging in an action opposite of what your current emotion is encouraging you to do. The urge attached to Ashley's sadness was to crawl into bed and isolate herself. An opposite action in this example would be to make plans with other friends and meet them out.*

If you have a difficult time identifying or managing emotions, there are many resources available to you. DBT is targeted to support individuals in building skills to manage emotions, tolerate distress, and maintain relationships. The Depression and Anxiety Specialty Clinic offers many services, including individual DBT therapy, as well as DBT groups for both teens and adults. You can find more information about these services at dascchicago.com.

