

LADDER OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Everyone has endured feeling upset, frustrated, angry or anxious. These emotions are a part of being human, a sign we are reacting to our environments and living our lives. The experience is a personal one; it feels different for everyone, and we all cope with intense emotions in distinct ways. It can be tempting to label feelings as either good or bad, depending on how they feel, how we react or how they are viewed in our culture or society. It is common as well to see what we think of as “negative” emotions as problems that need to be “fixed” or “cured,” which can backfire and lead us away from what that emotion may be telling us.

We are learning more these days about ourselves and our emotions, commonly understood as similar to feedback: They give us information about how we are doing and what we need.

Our emotions are experienced on a continuum from minor irritation to full rage and panic. They are important, and the information they provide is valuable, even if they do not make sense to us at the time.



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We have a variety of strategies and skills available to manage and/or “regulate” ourselves when we feel overwhelmed. Their effectiveness depends on the person as well as the type and intensity of the distress they are experiencing in that particular moment.

Several types of tools address the different aspects of the emotional experience, and we can address our needs from all sides. We can manage unhelpful thinking, employ sensory strategies to calm our bodies, use social support to validate our feelings and get help when we need it.

The “ladder” of emotion below breaks down the types of distress we may feel, the levels of intensity and some strategies to manage them and “bring down” your levels of distress. Use these skills when you need them OR (even better) practice them daily, so they’re easy to employ when you need them.

Tikkun hanefesh — Jewish thought sees tikkun hanefesh as a necessary and effective way to ultimately accomplish tikkun olam — repair of the world. Before we are responsible for others, we must be responsible for ourselves, and as we heal ourselves, we heal the world.

A major part of the work of self-growth is knowing yourself, and to the extent you are familiar with your emotional rhythms, patterns and triggers, you will be able to find a way to care for yourself, your body and your spirit.



People are accustomed to looking at the heavens and wondering what happens there. It would be better if they would look within themselves to see what happens there.

- 18th century Hasidic Rebbe, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

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 Emotional Scale 	Emotional Regulation Tool 	Calming Reminder 
<p>1. Mild distress: Experiencing a minor annoyance from something not going according to plan, losing something, etc., but still feeling in control.</p>	<p>Dialectic thinking: Shift your thoughts from something that is “always/never” to something that is “more true.”</p>	<p>This is normal; you are reacting in a reasonable way, and it will pass.</p>
<p>2. Intensifying mild distress: Feeling of nervousness or frustration; dealing with small interpersonal conflict; something is lost or broken.</p>	<p>Affirmation/validation: What is one thing you can say about yourself or your situation that is positive? What would you say to a good friend who was in your situation?</p>	<p>You’ve handled things like this before, and you can get through this too. (Add examples.)</p>
<p>3. Irritability, anxiety: Worrying about something like an exam, a presentation, etc.; having noticeable physical symptoms such as rapid breathing, sweatiness, etc.</p>	<p>Check in with your body. Are you tired, hungry or thirsty? If so, take a nap or have a snack or hydrating drink.</p>	<p>It makes sense to feel this way. You need to take a step back and take care of yourself.</p>
<p>4. Anger, sadness, agitation: Thoughts are becoming overwhelming, physical symptoms are starting to intensify.</p>	<p>Create a mantra. Is there a phrase, a song lyric or a spiritual teaching that is meaningful and comforting to you? Say it out loud.</p>	<p>These feelings are real and valid. You have tools to handle your feelings, and you won’t feel like this forever.</p>
<p>5. Significant levels of distress: Feeling anxious, angry, not within your “usual” range of moods; becoming increasingly frustrated; finding it impossible to focus on a task or hold a conversation.</p>	<p>Name three things in your environment you see, then three things you hear, then three things you feel. Choose one sensory observation to focus on while you count to 10.</p>	<p>Are your thoughts focusing on what’s happened in the past or what will happen in the future? Stay in the present.</p>

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<p>6. Overwhelming anguish: Starting to feel significant physical distress and a loss of control.</p>	<p>Try "square" breathing: Breathe in for four counts, hold for four counts, breathe out for four counts, and hold for four counts.</p>	<p>This feels really overwhelming, but the intensity will not last.</p>
<p>7. Intense distress, anger or anxiety: Cannot stay focused or still, unable to think "rationally."</p>	<p>Shift your senses: Take a hot bath/shower, go on a brisk walk, pet an animal or find a soothing repetitive motion, e.g., pace, hum, swing, fidget.</p>	<p>You don't need to handle this on your own. Who can be with you right now?</p> <p>You're OK, and your body is responding to the distress you feel. What sensory tool has helped before?</p>
<p>8. Severe distress, rage or panic: May begin to experience panic attack symptoms or feelings of depersonalization.</p>	<p>Wrap yourself in a weighted blanket; give yourself a tight hug; or tense, hold and release your body three times.</p>	<p>You don't need to handle this on your own. Who can be with you right now?</p> <p>You are safe, even with these overwhelming feelings.</p>
<p>9. Full loss of control: May not have a sense of time or place or be able to process information from others or the environment.</p>	<p>Tip your temperature: Place an ice pack on your face or arms, or run cold water over your wrists and hands.</p>	<p>You don't need to handle this on your own. Who can be with you right now?</p>
<p>10. Emergency or crisis: There is a threat to someone's safety. Need immediate support from an external source.</p>	<p>Call helpline: (988, 911)</p>	<p>There are resources available to support you. You are not alone.</p>