



# SELF-HELP EXERCISE: MANAGING EMOTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

Emotional distress happens when you feel challenged and there are demands you think you can't meet or are unfair. This can make you feel out of control. Sources of emotional distress are often the daily demands we face, relationship problems, physical illness, poor diet, and social isolation. This is why self-care is so important.

If you feel like your emotions have a life of their own and are not sure how to get them back under control, there are a few simple steps you can take.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### Learning to identify your emotions

This exercise will help you gain control of your reactions to emotional distress. As a veteran, you may be struggling with reactions to memories of combat or operational experiences while trying to cope with various daily demands and stressors.

You can't change your emotional reactions until you have a clear sense of what is causing them. Often, people don't spend a lot of time thinking about their emotions or think only in terms of how they are feeling and not why they are feeling a certain way. Oftentimes people think feelings are caused by a situation, but they fail to appreciate that the way a situation is interpreted greatly impacts their emotional response to it.

One reason why identifying emotions can be difficult is that people aren't usually aware of the thoughts causing the emotions. It often feels as though our emotions just come up.

Think about the last time someone asked you specific details about an upsetting combat or operational experience.



- ★ Did you get angry at their insensitivity?
- ★ Were you relieved they were bringing up the subject so you could talk about it?
- ★ Did you feel anxious as memories about what happened came to you?
- ★ Did you feel guilt or shame?
- ★ Maybe you felt a mixture of these emotions or something else entirely?

Can you imagine someone else who had similar experiences to yours but reacted differently in this situation? Why do you think that could happen? One reason is this: How you think about the situation determines how you emotionally react to it.

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## Examples of how feelings are caused by thoughts:



- ★ Thinking something is a threat (thoughts about danger) will produce feelings of fear, anxiety, and worry
- ★ Thinking about being violated and mistreated will produce feelings of anger
- ★ Thinking about loss produces feelings of sadness
- ★ Thinking that something is unjust produces feelings of anger or resentment
- ★ Thinking of past regrets produces feelings of guilt
- ★ Thinking you are bad for what you have done produces feelings of shame
- ★ Thinking of personal failures in the past produces feelings of shame and disgust

People often use the word “feelings” to describe what are actually thoughts. For example, is feeling disrespected a thought or a feeling? How about feeling overwhelmed or feeling abandoned? Although these may seem like feelings, they are actually thoughts or interpretations of a situation. Learning to distinguish between thoughts and feelings can be challenging, but it is very important.

## Here are some tips for distinguishing between thoughts and feelings.



### Thoughts are:

- ★ What go through your mind – mental pictures, words, or sentences
- ★ Self-talk (our inner dialogue)
- ★ Interpretations of the meaning of events or situations
- ★ Under your control



### Feelings are:

- ★ Reactions to thoughts that you can feel in your body – you can feel fear as a knot in your stomach, anxiety as a tightness in your chest, anger as burning in your eyes or tightness in your muscles, and happiness as lightness in your feet
- ★ Often described in a single word – anger, sadness, happiness, anxiety, disgust, jealousy, joy, loneliness, and peacefulness
- ★ Mostly under your indirect control (via controlling your thoughts or through stress management skills, such as muscle relaxation, deep breathing, exercise, etc.)
- ★ Feelings can make the thoughts that evoke them seem true. For example, the thought “No one cares about me” may evoke sad feelings that seem to confirm the thought is true. In actuality, even strong feelings tell nothing about the truthfulness of the thought, only that you are choosing to believe it!



## Emotions

Over the next week, practice identifying your emotions by completing the Identifying Emotions Worksheet below whenever you feel upset or stressed. The goal is to try to boil down how you feel about the situation into one- or two-word emotion labels.

### Examples of emotion labels:

- ★ **Sadness** (this includes depression and gloominess)
- ★ **Fear** (this includes worry, anxiety, terror, and panic)
- ★ **Anger** (this includes irritation, annoyance, fury, and resentment)
- ★ **Surprise** (this includes shock)
- ★ **Jealousy** (this includes envy)
- ★ **Shame** (this includes humiliation)
- ★ **Embarrassment**
- ★ **Guilt** (this includes remorse)
- ★ **Disgust** (this includes revulsion and loathing)
- ★ **Happiness** (this includes contentment, joy, pleasure, and cheerfulness)
- ★ **Pride** (this includes satisfaction)

Remember, more than one emotion can be triggered by the same situation. For example, some situations may lead you to feel both anger and sadness. You might find there are times when all you can come up with is a thought or interpretation about a situation. For example, even though you feel angry and sad, all you can think of is, "I feel disrespected." This is OK for now; write these thoughts or interpretations down when you become aware of them. Afterwards, perhaps with a bit more perspective, try to identify and label the emotion.

If you are having difficulty with emotions, set aside some time every day to go over the events of the day and do this activity.

If you can, try labeling your emotions by identifying the thoughts or interpretations that produced those emotions. Say, for example, someone asks you for specific details about your combat experience and you notice yourself feeling angry. Challenge yourself to think about this question and why it made you feel angry, because how you think about the situation determines how you emotionally react to it.

Writing out your thoughts can give you important information about why you are feeling the way you do and will give you a chance to look at your interpretation more objectively. You may want to ask yourself if these thoughts are 100% accurate or helpful, and whether there is a different way of interpreting things that might not cause the same emotions.

## Grief-related thoughts and feelings



Grief is not a single thought or emotion. It is a complex set of many responses, including thoughts and feelings that arise as you try to adjust to the loss of a significant person. Common grief-related thoughts include:

- ★ Remembering and reminiscing about the person
- ★ Thinking their death was unfair
- ★ Wondering what you are going to do without them in your life

Identifying your grief-related thoughts and feelings, as well as the things that evoke them, can help you to understand and anticipate them.



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## IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS WORKSHEET

Each time you are feeling upset or stressed, write the date, a sentence describing where you were and what you were doing, the specific emotions you experienced, and the thoughts and interpretations that caused you to feel that way. You can also print out this page if you would rather write out your responses.

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## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

You may notice that getting better at identifying your emotions helps you to gain distance and perspective. Learning to label emotions helps you become a passive observer of your experience (like a trained athlete or a Zen master) rather than being caught up as a participant (at the receiving end of your emotions). A good metaphor for this skill is that it's like *watching* a rollercoaster go up and down instead of *riding* the rollercoaster up and down.

