LAKESHORE COUNSELING · DBT EMOTION REGULATION

The Anatomy of *an Emotion*

An emotion isn't just one feeling. It's a chain of events, from what sets it off, to what happens inside you, to what others can see. Breaking it into parts makes it easier to understand and to change.

1 WHAT SETS IT OFF

Vulnerability factors
What makes you more reactive before anything happens: poor sleep, hunger, illness, pain, stress, alcohol or drugs.

Prompting event
What happened right before the emotion. It can be outside you (a text, a comment) or inside you (a memory, a thought).

Interpretation
The meaning you give the event: your thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about it. Often this, more than the event, shapes the feeling.

2 WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE

Body changes
Automatic shifts like a racing heart, hot face, tight chest, clenched jaw, shaky hands, or a sinking stomach.

Action urges
The pull to do or say something: yell, hide, run, cry, text them, shut down, or fix it right now.

Internal: only you can feel these.

3 WHAT OTHERS CAN SEE

Face & body language
Expression, posture, tone of voice, and gestures.

Words
What you say, and how you say it.

Actions
What you actually do, which may or may not match the urge.

External: these send signals to others, and back to your own body.

Name the emotion
Putting all the pieces together helps you find the right word: anger, fear, shame, sadness, guilt, joy, love...

After-effects
How the emotion lingers: thoughts, memories, behaviors, body sensations, and even new emotions about the first one.

↺ **The cycle can repeat.** After-effects can become a new prompting event (for example, feeling ashamed about getting angry), so one emotion can set off the next.

Where you can step in

Vulnerabilities
Take care of sleep, food, movement, and health so emotions are less intense.

Interpretation
Check the facts: is there another way to see what happened?

Action urges
Pause before acting, or try the opposite of what the urge says when it won't help.

Body
Slow your breathing to help your body settle.

Based on the Model for Describing Emotions from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), developed by Marsha M. Linehan, PhD.

LAKESHORE COUNSELING, PLLC
Monica Cook, LCSW
lakeshorecounseling.net | (385) 240-1612
780 S 2000 W, Suite A105, Syracuse, UT 84075

THE ANATOMY OF AN EMOTION

Describe *an emotion*

Think of a recent moment when you felt a strong emotion. Walk through it one piece at a time.

1 Vulnerability factors
How was I doing beforehand? (sleep, food, stress, health)

2 Prompting event
What happened right before? Just the facts.

3 Interpretation
What did I tell myself about it?

4 Body changes
What did I notice in my body?

5 Action urges
What did I feel like doing or saying?

6 Face, body, and words
What did I show or say?

7 Actions
What did I actually do?

8 Emotion name(s)
What was I feeling? How strong, 0 to 10?

9 After-effects
How did it affect me afterward?

Next time, where could I step in?

Circle one: my vulnerabilities · my interpretation · my body · my action urge

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THE ANATOMY OF AN EMOTION

The DBT Model, *in Its Own Terms*

DBT describes emotions as full-system responses with several linked parts. Here is the model using DBT's own terms and sequence, so you can follow along with your skills group materials.

Vulnerability Factors

Conditions that increase emotional sensitivity before the event happens, such as physical illness, lack of sleep, poor eating, stress, or substance use. They affect how strongly you react at every step below.

↓ INFLUENCES EVERY STEP ↓

1 Prompting Event

What happens just before the emotion. It may be external (something in your environment) or internal (a thought, memory, or other emotion).

2 Interpretation of the Event

The thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions about the event. Many emotions are set off by interpretations rather than by the event itself.

3 Biological Changes

Automatic changes in the brain and body.

- Brain changes (nervous system activity)
- Body changes (heart rate, muscles, breathing, face)

4 Experiencing

What the emotion feels like from the inside.

- Body sensations
- Action urges: what the emotion pushes you to do

5 Expressing

How the emotion shows on the outside.

- Face and body language
- Words
- Actions

6 Emotion Name

Observing all the parts helps you identify and name the emotion accurately.

7 Aftereffects

What follows once the emotion has been expressed.

- Effects on thoughts, memory, body, and behavior
- Secondary emotions (emotions about emotions)

↺ Aftereffects can become the next prompting event

Feedback loops

Expressing feeds back

Facial expressions and body language send signals back to the brain and body, which can keep an emotion going or make it stronger.

Aftereffects can restart the cycle

An emotion's aftereffects, including secondary emotions, can become the prompting event for a new emotion.

Change one part, change the whole

Because the parts are linked, changing any one of them (an interpretation, an action, an expression) can change the emotion.

Source Linehan, M. M. (2015). *DBT Skills Training Handouts and Worksheets* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. Emotion Regulation Handout 5: Model for Describing Emotions. Summarized here in our own words; please refer to the original for the complete handout.

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