

How to handle emotions?

All emotions have a natural tendency to express themselves in certain ways. For example, when you feel sad, you feel like crying; and when you are afraid, you feel like running away. We also learn how to express and handle our emotions through our experiences. Our family experiences and culture play an important part in shaping the way we do so. Think about how often you are told that "It's no use crying", "Fear is for cowards", "Being angry is wrong and dangerous", and so on. Our society seems to be teaching us to dismiss, or even disapprove emotions, especially the negative ones. Many people then get used to covering up their real emotions with other emotions. In some cases, people may even fake emotions to get what they want. All these obstruct the emotions to be processed and handled properly, and leaving people to suffer from emotional turmoil.

As emotions are natural and serve important roles in our lives, handling them wisely will allow you to benefit from them. You can better handle emotions by.....

1. Accepting and allowing emotions instead of ignoring and covering them up - Emotions are more unpleasant when we fight against them, but they become more manageable when we accept them.
2. Be patient and curious to understand your emotions - People usually feel and function better when they can express and make sense of their real feelings. Try to pay attention to the bodily sensations that cue emotions, stay with your experience and ask yourself what you miss and need, and what it means to you.
3. Use emotional information effectively to reduce distress and attain your goals and needs.
4. Explore and engage in activities that can bring you positive feelings in times of excessive distress - the activities can just be small and easy things, for example your hobbies. You can develop your own self-care and self-soothing exercises.

5. Learn to put emotions into words; talk with your trusted friends and family – emotions are easier to handle when we can name them and receive support and empathy from others. You will find that a trouble shared is really a trouble halved.



References:

1. Elliot, R., Watson, J.C., Goldman, R.N., & Greenberg, L.S. (2004). *Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy: The Process-Experiential Approach to Change*. Washington: APA.
2. Pos, A. (2006). *Components of Primary Adaptive Emotions*. (Unpublished material). Toronto: York University.

Seeking Professional Help

The University provides counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out our Counselors' profiles on our webpage and make an appointment with them online. Two weeks' advance booking is allowed. Please be reassured that all information shared and anything discussed during counseling sessions will be strictly confidential.

Counseling and Wellness Center

Room 5003 (via lift 3) <http://counsel.ust.hk>
Email: counsel@ust.hk Tel: (852) 2358-6696

24/7 HEARING: (852) 8208-2688

This is a helpline exclusively for all HKUST students.
Counselors are from Christian Family Service Centre.



Meet Our Counselors

Emotion Awareness & Management

How are you feeling today?

Feeling good?

Feeling awful?

Or

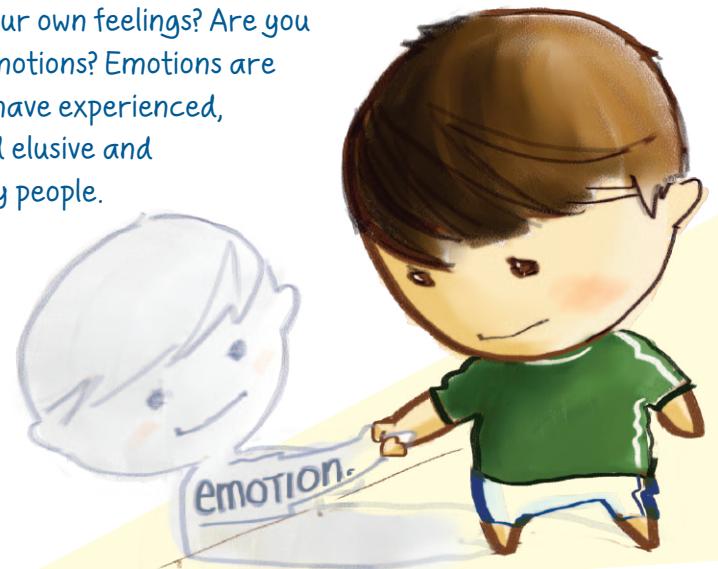
Feeling bored?

I'm not sure how I'm feeling.

It's hard to tell how I feel.

I don't know why I feel this way.

Do you understand your own feelings? Are you sensitive to others' emotions? Emotions are something we must have experienced, yet it can still sound elusive and unfamiliar to many people.



Why talk about emotions?

In many ways emotions virtually rule our lives. Emotions set us in motion, for example:

- Happiness and hope motivate us to reach out and do more
- Sadness and shame make us hold back and reflect on ourselves
- Fear prompts us to fight against or flee from threats
- Anger calls us to stand up and assert our rights

Emotions tell us what we need and want from others, which can improve our chances of survival and success. Emotions also allow us to understand others, which helps us to communicate effectively in different social situations. Emotions actually exist with a purpose and even negative emotions can have adaptive functions for us.

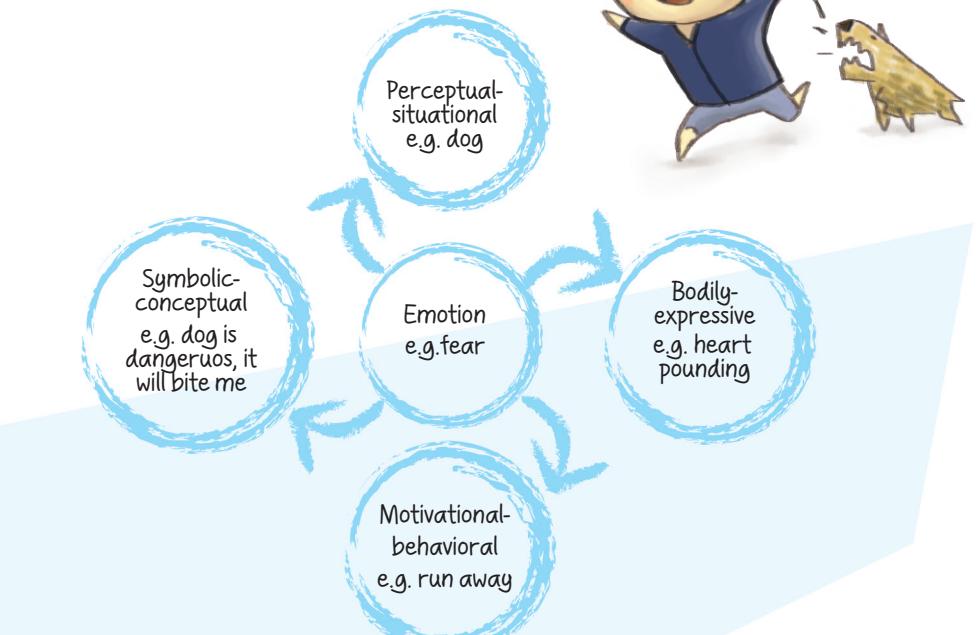
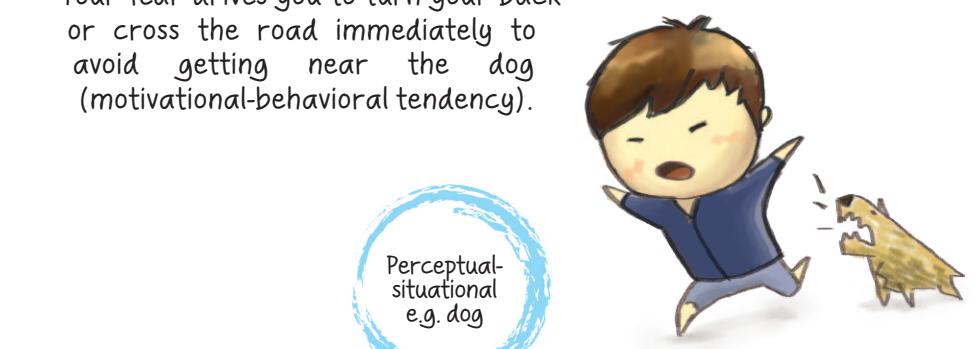
However, emotions can sometimes become maladaptive and problematic. Think about the situations where some people's anger has become rage and causes harm to themselves and others; or when worries become too excessive that you have sleepless nights and difficulties concentrating and performing during the day. When emotions are not properly expressed and managed, they can aversively impact our health, our performances, and our social relationships.



What exactly is an emotion?

An emotion is a complicated psychological process that involves different components (see the diagram below). Let's use an example of a dog-phobic to illustrate these components.

Imagine you had cynophobia (the fear of dogs), and you see a dog as you go down the street. You cannot help recalling an experience of being bitten by a dog when you were small (perceptual-situational). You feel frightened. You can feel your heart pounding and you are sweating (bodily-expressions and sensations). You think that dogs are really dangerous and will bite you all of a sudden (symbolic-conceptual understanding). Your fear drives you to turn your back or cross the road immediately to avoid getting near the dog (motivational-behavioral tendency).



Combining the emotion components together gives us information about our basic needs and hence facilitates us to attain those needs. When our emotions are adaptive, the emotion components are coherent and make sense to us. Some of the major information implicated in some common emotions, the associated needs, and adaptive actions that help to regulate the emotions are listed below:

Emotions	Information	Needs	Adaptive actions (not exhaustive)
Joy	This is good for me.	To thrive.	Set reachable goals; work towards goals; communicate and share with loved ones.
Fear	This is dangerous.	To be safe; secure.	Get familiar with strange situations; be better prepared; gain more control; get safety.
Anger	This is not right. This is not fair.	To have rights; to be respected.	Set appropriate boundaries to prevent violation; assert feelings and opinions; work to obtain justice and freedom.
Sadness	Something important is lost.	To have attachment; to maintain the experiences that are important to us.	Regain access to or find new contact with things that can be important to you; e.g. dreams, abilities, relationships.
Shame	I have done something that threatens my worth in the eyes of the others or myself.	To have self-worth; to belong to and have value in the group.	Regain value by apologizing for and amending mistakes; set reasonable standards and prepare to improve next time.
Guilt	I have caused harm to or deprived some others.	To feel trustworthy, moral and deserved.	Express remorse and take responsible action to correct the harm and deprivation that is caused.