

SURFING THE WAVES – PRACTICING THE ART OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION

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If you have MS, you may find that you experience greater difficulty in managing your emotions than before the onset of your illness. You may particularly find that, during a relapse, strong waves of anxiety, anger, and sadness sweep over you, leaving you feeling pessimistic, and at the mercy of your MS symptoms. Many MS sufferers report a sense of helplessness, and sometimes hopelessness, and feel that they simply have to 'wait out' the relapse until things improve. The unknowns, such as the length of the relapse and the course that it will take, can undermine your sense of control over everyday variations in mood. As a result, you may feel there is little point in planning or engaging in activities. At worst, it can be hard just getting out of bed in the morning to face a day strewn with physical and emotional challenges.

Fortunately, it can be possible to manage your feelings in a constructive way, by thinking ahead, modifying your physical and emotional response, and dealing with the situation in a problem-solving way, rather than in a highly charged, emotional manner.

Emotional regulation is a process of managing emotions so that they do not overwhelm you and lead to this negative cycle. In particular, it can help you avoid reacting impulsively to others, in an angry or fearful way, which leaves you feeling regretful or damages your relationships. Or you may try to suppress your thoughts, thinking that you shouldn't be thinking or feeling in a certain way, only to later burst out with anger at those around you. If this pattern sounds familiar, the following strategies may turn out to be useful for 'surfing the waves' of emotional distress.

- **Think ahead.** Anger, anxiety, or low mood never arise out of the blue. There is always a trigger, which is usually your own state of mind or physical state at the time of the event. Fatigue, stress, anxiety, drugs and alcohol are common triggers to emotional outbursts.

- **Drop the 'shoulds'.** Setting rules for your own or others' behaviour is not only unfair, it is also unrealistic. If you set goals for your own behaviour, consider whether you are being fair to yourself or others. When physical illness worsens, it may be more adaptive to slacken the rules for a while and accept that 'okay' rather than 'ideal' is good enough.
- **Talk to yourself in a soothing way.** Replace the 'shoulds' with self-statements such as 'these things happen', that's just the way he/she is sometimes' or 'this will pass'. Coach yourself by thinking, 'I can handle this calmly', 'I'm just going to take a few breaths and let this go' or 'this isn't the right time to demand so much of myself (or others)'. A brief and simple thought along these lines can be very effective in pre-empting an outburst.
- **Take some time out.** It's actually okay to leave the situation if you feel like you are not able to handle it calmly. Step away, do some calming breathing, go for a walk or make a cup of tea. Instead of brooding (which maintains the anger), do something that distracts you from the trigger and gives you some time to think about it differently.
- **Self-reflection is key.** If you didn't manage to put this into practice, then consider how you would handle it differently next time. Check out with others as to how they viewed the situation, and if their perspective is more rational than your emotional reaction.
- **Confidence brings control.** If you feel confident about handling your emotions, you will find it much easier to 'let it pass' or deal with it in a constructive way. We tend to react emotionally when we feel that our integrity is threatened in some way, and that the other person is being unfair or neglectful. Think about how often you say to yourself, 'how dare they?' and then consider how tyrannical this sounds!

Emotional control takes practice – you are teaching your mind to react in a different way to its usual pattern. Changing a 'thought habit' requires repeated effort and self-reflection, and learning to alter your own behaviour rather than focussing on that of others. The more often you respond calmly, the easier it gets. By learning to manage emotional responses, you can gain a greater sense of self-control and subsequently a boost in your self-esteem and mood. This can reduce the stress of chronic illness, and

make the ups and downs of a relapse less disruptive to day to day life.