



# Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

BY ABIGAIL ROLSTON, BA &  
ELIZABETH LLOYD-RICHARDSON, PHD

## What is emotion regulation and how do we do it?

### Who is this for?

Individuals who  
self-injure

### What is included?

What is emotion  
dysregulation?

Breaking the Cycle

Emotion dysregulation,  
reducing high  
emotional arousal,  
and self-injury

Do women and men  
differ in their ability  
to regulate their  
emotions?

Tips for Regulation  
Emotions

**ALL OF US FEEL AND EXPERIENCE EMOTIONS** – negative and positive – each and every day. Emotions are a normal part of our everyday lives. Everyone experiences them. For some though, feeling these emotions can seem overwhelming, like an out-of-control roller coaster. It is common for one or more strong emotions to occur before an individual engages in self-injury. These often include: guilt, sadness, feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, anger, self-blame, and low self-worth. This feeling of being overwhelmed emotionally can lead to a deep need to *do* something that will stop the intensity. Self-injury can serve as a short-term fix to stop the overwhelming-ness of the feeling – at least for a little while.

The role of emotions and how they contribute to self-injury is discussed in greater detail on an *Information Brief* here on this website (see Prussien, Rosenblum & Whitlock). The purpose of our conversation here is to discuss how to help ourselves – and others – with managing or regulating strong emotions when they feel overwhelming.

“Emotion regulation” is a term generally used to describe a person’s ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience. People unconsciously use emotion regulation strategies to cope with difficult situations many times throughout each day. Most of us use a variety of emotion regulation strategies and are able to apply them to different situations in order to adapt to the demands of our environment. Some of these are healthy, some are not. Healthy coping strategies, such as managing stress with a walking program, do not cause harm. They can help to diffuse strong emotions, often allowing for a greater understanding of what led to the emotional experience.

Self-injury is considered an unhealthy coping strategy. Unhealthy strategies are those that may leave lasting damage (such as lifetime scars, chronic injuries or wounds), result in unanticipated damage (such as wounding too deeply), or lead to avoiding dealing with situations that will inevitably require a head on solution (drugs or alcohol are common here but self-injury can be used as a “distraction” for this reason too).

### Examples of Common Emotion Regulation Strategies

#### HEALTHY

- ▶ Talking with friends
- ▶ Exercising
- ▶ Writing in a journal
- ▶ Meditation
  - ▶ Therapy
  - ▶ Taking care of self when physically ill
  - ▶ Getting adequate sleep
  - ▶ Paying attention to negative thoughts that occur before or after strong emotions
  - ▶ Noticing when you need a break – and taking it!

#### UNHEALTHY

- ▶ Abusing alcohol or other substances
- ▶ Self-Injury
- ▶ Avoiding or withdrawing from difficult situations
- ▶ Physical or verbal aggression
- ▶ Excessive social media use, to the exclusion of other responsibilities

## What is emotion dysregulation?

“Emotion dysregulation” is the term used to describe an inability to regularly use healthy strategies to diffuse or moderate negative emotions. While all people occasionally use less than ideal emotion regulation strategies, individuals who regularly experience what feels like overwhelming, intense negative emotions are much more likely to rely on unhealthy strategies, like self-injury.

What causes emotions to feel so overwhelming? It is really important to note that the experience of an emotion per se is not what leads to difficulties. It is the *interpretation* of this emotion that tends to ratchet up feelings and a sense of not being able to tolerate them. We call this a “vicious emotional cycle.” Emotions, thoughts, and our behavior are all linked together. For instance, consider this common scenario: A friend walks right past you in the hallway without acknowledging you and you immediately have a rapid fire set of feelings, like confusion or disappointment or self-doubt or anger, that turns quickly into a series of thoughts about that event (e.g., “What did I do wrong?” “I’ll bet that she is mad at me for that thing that happened a few weeks ago...” “I am sure it was nothing, I am being oversensitive, she was

probably in a hurry somewhere. But still...”). This initial cascade can lead to intense or acute feelings (e.g., frustration, panic, insecurity) and you may have a strong desire to not be feeling the negative feelings coming up. This desire turns into action: you do something (e.g., go home and dwell on it; stop communicating with your friend; get a tasty treat to make you feel better or take your mind off it). Sounds familiar?

This cycle can become vicious and/or a typical go-to pattern over time. Unless something is done to change the cycle, continued avoidance of the feelings associated with that friend or event may lead to additional negative thoughts and feelings about that person. This further supports one’s initial interpretation of the event and can then lead to even more negative thoughts and feelings (e.g. “Our friendship is ending; she never really liked me anyway. What will happen if she shares what she knows about me to others? Will I lose more friends?? Oh no, it is all happening again!”). It is easy to see how even a small event can cascade into something hugely triggering. This cycle can be even more intense when the events that occur are more serious or somehow tie into earlier negative experiences, like trauma or abuse.



Figure from: <http://www.online-therapy.com/cbt>



## Breaking the cycle

Changing any part of this cycle can interfere with the pattern and lead to more positive thoughts and feelings down the road (though it can feel like work to get there!). Learning how to understand and work with the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviors is the heart of popular therapy techniques, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy to managing difficult thoughts and emotions. What works for one person in a particular situation, may not work for someone else. The important point is that we all must learn what will work for each of us.

To do this, we need to learn to pay attention to the way the thought-emotion-behavior relationship works for each of us. Try asking yourself these questions:

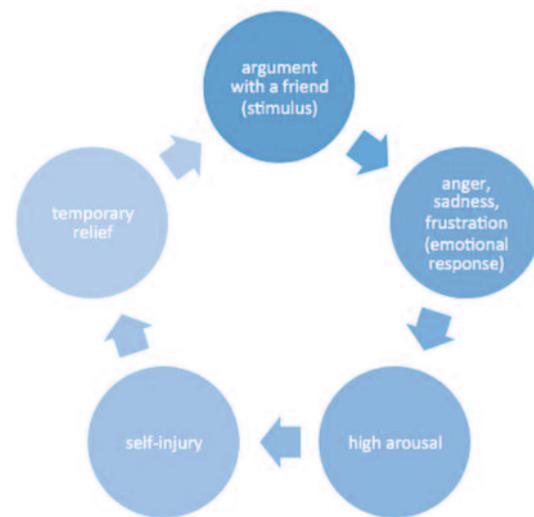
- What specific thoughts trigger the most negative emotions for me?
- Which emotions are hardest for me to tolerate?
- Which emotions are easiest for me to tolerate?
- What behaviors do I tend to use to calm down the feelings?
- How well do these work in the short and long term? Do I want to use these behaviors?
- What are the underlying beliefs about myself, others, or life in general that tend to most strongly perpetuate the negative cycles?
- Conversely, what thoughts and beliefs do I have that assist me most in generating positive feelings?

It is important to note that most of us have a variety of strategies we use to deal with emotion, even overwhelming emotion. What happens most often is that these strategies are not applied flexibly – they are not used in multiple situations. For example, a teen may leave the house and go for a walk to relieve stress when he is upset with a parent, but when he is angry about a bad test grade he goes out and gets high to avoid the feelings of failure that come up. Although going for a walk may have helped calm the volatile thoughts and feelings in both situations reasonably well, he may not have considered using it for both because the rapid fire (often unconscious) association with failure brought up by the second situation made it really intense and resulted in a need to reduce the intensity of the feeling and its associations. The desire to avoid these feelings of failure clouded his ability to see and address the underlying issues – something that may have occurred if he had just taken a walk.

## Emotion dysregulation, reducing high emotional arousal, and self-injury

The desire to reduce strong feelings is one of the most common motivations for self-injury. Interestingly, the desire to reduce strong feelings does not only apply to negative feelings, but can extend to strong feelings in general, even if not clearly negative. Recent research suggests that those who self-injure actually tend to use more active coping strategies than the average person, a finding that suggests that many people who self-injure simply *feel* strongly and have a desire to *do* something about what they are feeling to express or manage it in some way.

Wanting to minimize (or even avoid) strong, usually negative, emotions is part of what is often called the “cycle of shame” or the “distress cycle”. This pattern often looks like the one depicted below, and is based on work proposed by Chapman, Gratz & Brown (2006).



This cycle describes the typical “build up phase” where an individual experiences something that is upsetting (e.g., argument with best friend, parent or romantic partner) and immediately feels something uncomfortable (anger, shame, sadness, frustration). In an effort to reduce the unwanted feelings, the person self-injures. Engaging in self-injury effectively levels out the rollercoaster of feelings– until the next time. Moreover, the fact that the person used a strategy (self-injury), that she does not feel really good about using despite its short term effectiveness, tends to add to a larger sense of shame and/or failure (e.g. “why can’t I control myself?”, “Why do I always do this?”) – feelings that set the stage for the whole process to begin again. Over time, this can become a vicious cycle, with self-injury serving as a short-term safe haven that tends to weaken long-term sense of wellbeing and does not create space for deeper resolution of ideas.



## Do women and men differ in their ability to regulate their emotions?

Some research suggests that men and women experience emotions differently, which may ultimately lead to different reasons for self-injury. Women in general report experiencing both positive and negative emotions more intensely than men, which might explain why females report greater difficulties with emotion regulation skills compared to males (Robinson et al., 2014). Also, females tend to report more depressive symptoms, and have more difficulty controlling ruminating behaviors (e.g., thinking over and over again about something) than males. Compared to males who self-injure, females who self-injure repetitively think about negative thoughts, and have difficulty thinking in healthy ways (Macklem, 2008).

It is interesting to note that “rumination” is conceptualized on a continuum – rumination at one end, and reflection at the other end. With reflection, thoughts are considered over and over and effectively used to gain insight or to make change. The upside of the tendency to be more emotionally inclined is that while women are more prone than men to rumination, women are also more prone to reflection, meaning they are more likely to understand and deal with emotions in effective ways. Although men and women experience the same emotions, they may have different internal experiences of the intensity and different ways of regulating and expressing them. One source of this difference may be due to socialization, cultural norms, and learned behaviors. Men in many cultures are taught that they have to be tough, and not to express their emotions, while women learn that it is ok to talk about their feelings and express themselves.

The adolescent years may be particularly precarious. Men and women also experience different emotions at different times in their lives, specifically during adolescent years. Adolescence itself is often a difficult time, and emotion regulation during adolescence is even more difficult than it is at other times in life. Internal distress and sensitivity may be difficult for some females to cope with, and they may choose to cope by self-injuring, abusing alcohol or other substances, or other unhealthy strategies. Adolescent females seem to experience more interpersonal stress than males. Specifically, females tend to report more stress relating to friends, while males tend to report more stress related to school (Hilt et al., 2011).

## Tips for regulating emotions

- **Take Care of Your Physical Needs**
- **Engage in activities that build a sense of achievement**
- **Changing thoughts is easier than changing feelings**

### Tips for regulating emotions

- **Take Care of Your Physical Needs:** Getting a good night’s rest, eating healthfully, and exercising your body are all essential to being able to feel satisfaction in life. We’ve all noticed how much better we can feel after having a good night of restful sleep or after eating a diet of healthy foods. It can be as though we have an entirely fresh perspective on life and it is much easier to overlook the little things that might have annoyed or upset us otherwise.
- **Engage in activities that build a sense of achievement:** Doing one positive thing every day can lead to a sense of achievement and contentment. We can each benefit from paying more attention to the positive events in our lives. The things that bring us joy have been shown to decrease negative moods and increase positive moods.
- **Changing thoughts is easier than changing feelings:** Thoughts play a critical role in how we experience a situation. When you notice yourself first becoming upset, try to evaluate what you are *thinking* that is causing that emotion. Here are some questions to ask yourself:
  - What is it that’s really pushing my buttons here?
  - Why am I reacting so strongly?
  - What’s the worst (or best) that could happen?
  - How important will this be tomorrow? Next week? Next month?
- For information on positive coping techniques, see the Coping: Stress-Management Strategies factsheet on this website.

### Summary

Individuals who self-injure often use self-injury as a way to get relief from intense negative thoughts and emotions. Although using self-injury as a coping mechanism may be effective in the short-term, it is a poor long-term solution for dealing with negative thoughts and feelings and may result in actually worsening inner feelings of distress because of the “cycle of shame”. There are many healthy emotion regulation strategies that can be effective in helping to regulate emotions, though it can take time and practice to learn how to manage troublesome thoughts and feelings in different ways.



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**FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE: [www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)**

**This research was supported by the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station federal formula funds, received from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.**

