

Parenting *ideas*

INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

15 healthy ways to manage emotions

Here are 15 healthy ways to manage your emotions that you can pass on to your children.

What training did you get from your parents in managing emotions?

If you are like me, you didn't get much really constructive help in recognising or regulating feelings.

"Don't worry! It will all turn out right!" was about the extent of the emotional management in my house.

I guess that's why many people automatically default to ineffective ways to manage difficult emotions as adults.

Ineffective ways such as:

- 1 **Avoidance** "I'm okay, really!"
- 2 **Denial** "Nothing wrong with me!"
- 3 **Wishful thinking** "She'll be right!"
- 4 **Worry** "What if...."
- 5 **Self-denigration**
"What do you expect? I'm a loser!"
- 6 **Blaming others**
"She makes me feel so mad!"
- 7 **Acting out (also abusing alcohol and other drugs)** "Come here you! I'll show you"

And they pass those same ineffective methods on to their children. Anxiety (a legitimate feeling), anger (also legitimate) and apathy (not a recommended state) are now at epidemic proportions among children and young people, even though we live in affluent times.

Here are 15 healthy ways to manage your emotions that you can pass on to your children:

1 Breathe deeply

The trick here is to take deep breaths, rather than shallow breaths. The easiest way to breathe deeply is to sit up straight (or stand up straight) count to 3 quietly while breathing through your nose, and count to 5 while breathing out. Breathe slowly and deeply. You may even feel a little 'heady', which indicates deep (and low) breathing.

2 Find a favourite relaxation exercise

There are many instant relaxation exercises you can use to change your emotional state. My favourite way to manage nerves and tension is to tense my body for 3 seconds and then relax. Repeat this a number of times and you can't help but feel calmer. You can isolate part of your body such as your shoulders and arms to release the tension around your neck. There are plenty of quick techniques you can use to relax. Choose one or two and use them.

3 Use a positive reappraisal

Sometimes known as positive reframing, positive reappraisal is a simple technique you can use to help you look at a situation or event in a different light. Emotions are caused not by an event, but by the way we look at an event. A wedding speech to one person is a chance

to strut your stuff (so they feel excited), while someone else may see it as a nightmare (so they feel anxious). Change the way you view something and you'll better be able to manage your emotional response. "This is a challenge, not a problem" is a catch-all reappraisal. The more specific the reappraisal the more effective it will be.

4 Use positive, REALISTIC self-talk

Ever talked yourself out of doing something exciting, new or challenging before you've even started? Maybe you've said something like: "I'll never be able to do that." "This will stress me out big time." "I'm no good at...." "I know I have. I talk myself into feeling stressed out.

Next time you catch yourself talking yourself or something down replace the negative with something realistic but more positive. Something like "I've done it in the past and I survived. So I should be able to do it again."

Repeat this a few times and your emotional state will shift to a better one. You may not exactly be jumping over the moon with confidence but you will feel less stressed. That's what emotional management is about.

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5 Exercise

Exercise releases endorphins; nature's feel-good chemical, which will move your mood to a better state. The paradox is that we often don't feel like exercising, when we really need it. Let's face it, when you come home from work tired and stressed, exercise is the last thing on your mind. BUT going for a run, walking the dog or even a playing a game outside with the kids is the very thing you need to feel better.

6 Distract yourself

A healthy distraction such as phoning a friend, reading a novel or watching a comedy is a way many people use to manage difficult emotions. It's a highly recommended strategy for natural worriers! It's amazing how much better a situation will seem after a short break.

Longer term strategies

7 Have constructive habits and hobbies

One of the tenets of good emotional health is that a person needs hobbies and interests that lift them up, making life enjoyable. Single-tracked lives— all work and no play — are recipes for emotional disasters. If you can relate to this, then I suggest you take the time to find a hobby or interest that juices you up.

8 Make physical activity a habit

How much do you move during the day? 10,000 steps a day is related to good physical and mental health. This was relatively easy to do before modern transport made walking largely redundant as a mode of transport. Now we have to purposefully exercise if we are going to getting anywhere near to close to the amount we need for optimum mental and physical health. Daily walks, regular swims, playing team and individual sports are all great mood shifters we need to incorporate into our lives.

9 Meditate to stop those thoughts

If you struggle to close down the thoughts that race through your brain, then meditation will offer you the relief you need. Living with a brain that never seems to close down, or at least never stops ruminating and examining all sorts of scenarios can be exhausting robbing you of

huge amounts of emotional energy. Alcohol is one solution, but not necessarily healthy. Parentingideas recommends meditation as a life skill that will help you balance to your emotional state.

10 Let me entertain you!

Fun is an antidote to poor mental health. People who have no fun in their lives have no mechanism for pushing their moods into a positive direction. Music, television, and video games are all great forms of entertainment that help change moods. It's unhealthy though to use entertainment as a permanent escape from the situation that caused unpleasant feelings in the first place.

11 Find spirituality or something bigger than you

It's no coincidence that most sustainable cultures have an aspect of spirituality present—that is, there is something or someone bigger than us present. As Western cultures have become more prosperous the place of religion specifically, and spirituality in general, has diminished. We are the poorer for it as we've become insular as individuals. If religion whether organised or unorganised is not your bag, then find a cause that inspires you and makes you feel significant through your contribution. Adding meaning to your life will help you make sense of difficult feelings, and importantly, keep the blue moments in perspective.

12 Modify the situation

Ever lay in bed stewing over a problem or situation and worked your self into a real knot. Suddenly you feel overwhelmed. I've done this often. The best solution for me is to get to work on the problem, rather than stew over it. Plan that talk, make that difficult phone call, have that difficult conversation. Action is a great antidote to worry.

13 Change your goal

Sometimes our emotional state is giving us a message— that is, we are not on the right path. There are times when we set ourselves targets or aspire to goals that are unrealistic and unattainable. The result of our honest efforts

is that we continuously feel overwhelmed, swamped and stressed. If this is the case, then it maybe time to reassess what you are trying to achieve so that you can more easily manage your emotional state.

14 Get support from others

Asking for help takes many forms. It may be simply having someone at work you can offload your worries to when needed through to joining a specific support group (such as a parent group of children on the spectrum) so that you can share your experiences and get validation for the frustration, stress or anxiousness you maybe experiencing.

15 Seek professional counselling

We all get stuck from time to time by aspects of our lives, such as experiencing loss, transition or trauma. When this happens we need a professional who can help us take the steps needed to become 'unstuck'. A well-known song by US singer Kenny Roger song went, "You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em and know when to walk away." I'd like to add another line— "You've got to know when to get some help." Seeking help is something we are getting better at as a community, but we still have a long way to go until it accepted and normalised.

Check out how many of these healthy emotional management techniques you currently practice. My guess is that you do many of these intuitively, but you weren't aware that they are emotional management techniques.

What would you like your kids to say?

There are plenty of healthy ways to regulate our emotional states, but often we simply default to unhealthy, unhelpful ways out of habit or because we know no other ways.

If someone asked your children in thirty years time to articulate the lessons they learned from you, hopefully they'll be able to recount some of the right ways outlined above rather than pull out strategies from the 7 wrong ways list.



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