LEARN TO MANAGE UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)
Sometimes our world doesn’t go to plan and we find ourselves struggling with feelings of being overwhelmed and overloaded. When we are swamped by strong emotions they usually hinder us from operating with a clear mind and we often end up making poor decisions. Learning how to make room for distressing emotions without them sidelining our progress is a critical life skill to develop.

These pages can help you learn skills to surf your feelings rather than to be drowned by them. Surfing skills involve learning how to observe your own experience with curiosity, holding back from judging feelings and instead using them as signals to remind you to choose the skilful actions that will help you reach your life goals.

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust
IDENTIFY YOUR EMOTIONS

One of the first skills to learn is to identify how you are feeling: being clear about what emotions you are feeling may make it easier to figure out how to cope with the feeling. Different management strategies work for different feelings. If you notice anger you might find a run helpful. If you notice sadness you might listen to music or talk to a friend. Learning how to identify your emotions and label how you feel involves knowing the three different components of emotions.

Thinking: the thoughts that go with the emotion

Sensations: the way your body responds when you experience an emotion

Action: the urges you have to act when you experience an emotion

Because we are not trained to notice what we are experiencing we often find ourselves in a situation and end up with a feeling without being aware of the accompanying body sensations, thoughts and action urges. So for example if we paid attention to common feelings we might notice:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Bodily Sensation</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Action Urges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anger</td>
<td>shortness of breath</td>
<td>“this is not fair”</td>
<td>argue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear</td>
<td>trembling</td>
<td>“I’m under threat”</td>
<td>run, fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sadness</td>
<td>heavy in chest</td>
<td>“It’s hopeless”</td>
<td>give up, cry</td>
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</table>

It is important for us to learn to spot these processes that appear to operate automatically and see them clearly for what they are so that we have choices about what we do. Try to identify the components of emotions that you experience.
Close your eyes for a few minutes. While your eyes are closed, notice when a thought enters your mind. After you notice the thought, open your eyes. Who noticed the thought?

There appears to be a thought and an observer of the thought - the observer mind. You may also have noticed a judgment of the thought. However, the observer mind just observes without judgment whatever is around, and merely notes what thoughts are there. Training yourself to step into your observer mind enables you to become increasingly capable of seeing your thoughts in an unbiased way rather than automatically buying into them. Stepping back from your thoughts in this way will help you feel less distressed.

Using the observer mind doesn’t rid you of all distressing feelings. However, it does help you reduce the stranglehold those feelings have on you by allowing you to accept what is just there rather than making things worse by getting caught up in judgments of your experiences.

We can get stuck in painful emotional states because we judge them to be permanent and an inherent part of who we are. It is helpful to see emotions as rising and falling with each moment of experience like a wave ebbing and flowing.

Use your breath as an anchor to keep your focus grounded rather than getting carried away with the imagination of the emotional state.

Here is an exercise that may help you to learn to mindfully notice where your attention has wandered and how to step back from turmoil.

**TAKE TEN BREATHS**

- Throughout the day, pause for a moment and take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible, until the lungs are completely empty, and breathing in using your diaphragm.
- Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying and your ribcage falling as you breathe out. Notice the rising and falling of your abdomen.
- Notice what thoughts are passing through your mind. Notice what feelings are present. Notice what physical sensations are in your body and what action urges you are experiencing.
- Observe your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and action urges without judging them as good or bad, and without trying to change them, avoid them or hold onto them. Simply observe them.
- Notice what it’s like to observe thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and action urges with an attitude of acceptance rather than reacting and going into automatic pilot with your usual habits and patterns.

Find above another guided mindfulness exercise. For further information on mindfulness you can go to the Centre for Clinical Interventions or ThinkMindfully websites. For a further, interesting article about mindfulness see *The Art Of Now: Six Steps to Living in the Moment*. 
FINDING YOUR PERSONAL PRIORITIES

Taking time to step back and think about what your life is about and how you intend to live it can help you put day-to-day struggles into perspective. If you feel you are moving in the direction of your values much can be tolerated. You can use your personal values to become less reactive. When find yourself in the middle of being busy or occupied, deliberately stop and ask yourself “what is my intention and what is called for now” rather than falling back on habitual patterns and habits. For example, when you find yourself feeling anxious or distressed about starting an assignment, stop and remind yourself of your study goals, and rather than procrastinating, choose to start your project!

WISE LIFE CHOICES

What we actually do with our time from moment to moment, from hour to hour, from year to year, can be a very powerful influence affecting our general well being and our ability to deal skilfully with unpleasant feelings and moods. Try asking yourself these questions:

1. Of the things that I do, what nourishes me, what increases my sense of actually being alive and present rather than merely existing? (up activities)
2. Of the things that I do, what drains me, what decreases my sense of actually being present and alive, what makes me feel that I am merely existing, or worse? (down activities).
3. Accepting that there are some aspects to my life that I simply cannot change, am I consciously choosing to increase the time and effort I give to “up activities” and to decrease the time and effort I give to “down activities”?

By making mindful decisions about what we need, we can actually be more present in life’s moments and regulate our moods more skilfully. If we can prioritise our day-to-day activity in a way that supports coping then we might be better prepared for difficult times.

For instance, one of the simplest ways to take care of your physical and mental wellbeing is to take daily physical exercise. It’s also important to train yourself to have a smorgasbord of healthy “pick me ups” for when you need to balance some down life experiences with some up experiences. Intentionally train yourself to gain enjoyment from simple treats like crosswords, music, books, animals etc.
## PRACTICAL CHOICES FOR MANAGING DIFFICULT FEELINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings</th>
<th>How to Cope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed</td>
<td>Break tasks into smallest components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Tackle least frightening steps first and move up the steps to the progressively scarier steps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bored</td>
<td>Make situation more stimulating externally ie. play music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Reward yourself frequently during tiring boring task “breaks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Relax and concentrate on something you are not as frustrated with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Allow yourself to feel the sadness for awhile. When you feel sad all the time however try to let it go. Crying can be a good release - listen to a sad song or watch a sad movie. Once you have cried it out try to do something constructive. Talk to someone else, focus conversation on something other than your sadness.</td>
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### INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

If after accessing this information you feel you would like individual assistance, please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at the Counselling Service or see your doctor who can provide assessment and referral to resources in your local area.