CHAPTER 2

The Nature of Emotions

This chapter examines how emotions work and how they help us survive. It will also give you the tools to observe your emotions and identify the four components of an emotional response. This knowledge will help you recognize how emotions turn into behavior and give you a moment of choice in deciding whether to act on emotion-driven urges.

Unfortunately, the ability to observe and understand emotions isn't enough to achieve emotion regulation. You'll have to go one step further and learn to identify the seven dysfunctional coping strategies that fuel negative emotions and trap you in patterns of chronic anxiety, anger, or depression. As mentioned in the introduction, these seven ineffective coping responses are sometimes called transdiagnostic factors because they underlie—and, in fact, cause—emotional disorders.

How Emotions Work

In the course of human evolution, emotions developed for a specific purpose: to spur us toward actions that help us survive. Negative emotions are a signal that something is wrong or threatening and push us to cope. Anxiety pushes us to avoid dangerous situations. Anger drives us to fight

back against threats, damage, and hurt. Sadness encourages us to slow down and withdraw, to seek quiet time for processing a loss, or to recalibrate our efforts after a failure. Shame demands that we hide and stop doing what might result in disapproval.

The point is, emotions are useful. They help us change course as we face new problems or new circumstances. They help us adapt to curve balls that threaten to destabilize our lives—or even end them.

Here's another key point: Emotions, no matter how intense or upsetting, all have a natural life span. If you watch carefully, you'll observe that all feelings develop like a wave. They rise, crest, and finally recede, and they're time limited. Seeing an emotion as a wave can help you wait it out, rather than getting swept up in emotion-driven behavior.

When you're in the middle of an intense feeling, sometimes it seems as if it will go on forever. This is an illusion created by the strength of the emotion, and sometimes by efforts to resist or suppress the feeling. You have multiple emotions each day, and many thousands over the course of your life. Every emotion will end or morph into something else. Learning to be patient, to watch that process, is one of the key skills you'll gain from this book.

We humans can't control emotions, meaning we can't stop them or get rid of them with an act of will. An extraordinary wealth of scientific research has revealed that attempts to suppress, numb, or push away emotions usually fail. What we resist persists. Feelings we attempt to suppress simply go on longer, and often turn into chronic emotional disorders.

To understand how suppression exacerbates and intensifies an emotion, consider the case of a violinist in a volunteer community orchestra who had surges of anxiety during several performances. His response was to do everything possible to control the feeling, including constantly watching for the first signs of sweating or a rapid heartbeat. But the effort not to feel anxious only focused his attention on the symptoms of fear. If he detected any sensations that might indicate fear, he tried to control the experience through avoidance—to the point where he started to think he wouldn't be able to perform if he felt fear—and that was a really scary and upsetting thought. The more he paid attention to his body and watched for anxiety during a performance, the greater his fear became. So remember: You can't stop emotions, and some efforts to control them will only make them worse.

Components of an Emotional Response

An emotional response is a lot more than a mood state or a feeling. It has four components, and it's important to understand and recognize each of them: affect, emotion-driven thoughts, physical sensations, and emotion-driven behavior.

Affect

The most obvious part of an emotion is the *affect*: your conscious, subjective experience of the feeling itself, apart from bodily changes. The affect is what people commonly label as "sadness," "fear," "anger," and so on. Affect is generated in the limbic area of the brain and produces what psychologists call a drive state—an urge to some kind of action, such as withdrawal, flight, or aggression. Negative emotions create a sense of distress and disequilibrium—a sense that things aren't right and need to be fixed. The affect part of these emotions is designed to get our attention, to make us realize that there's a threat or an imbalance that requires action.

Emotion-Driven Thoughts

The second component of an emotional response is what happens cognitively: thoughts about a situation in which we find ourselves or about the emotion itself. Thoughts during an emotional response tend to fall into two categories: prediction and judgment. Prediction is an attempt to peer into the future and see what dangers might lie there. Predictive thoughts usually ask the question "What if?": "What if I lose my job?" "What if the pain in my stomach is a tumor?" "What if my son doesn't get into college?" Predictions prepare us for what might happen, but they also have the effect of triggering anxiety as we attempt to solve a problem that hasn't even occurred—and may not ever occur.

Judgments can be directed toward the self or others. When they're directed toward the self, judgmental thoughts produce sadness and depression. When they're directed toward others, they tend to trigger anger. Either way, a judgment conveys a belief that the object of that judgment is wrong, bad, mistaken, and somehow guilty of breaking the rules for reasonable living.

Emotion-based thoughts are part of a feedback loop that can both trigger and intensify affect. Predictions and judgments can literally create emotions, and then the surging feelings that result can produce a new flurry of negative thoughts that further escalate the emotion.

Physical Sensations

Every emotion has a physiological component. Emotions are felt in the body. Anxiety elevates your heart rate, speeds up your breathing, and can make you sweat, shake, and tense your muscles. Depression generates feelings of heaviness, torpor, and exhaustion. Anger produces sensations of heat, along with tension in your arms and legs as you get ready to fight. Shame produces a feeling of being flushed, weak, and sometimes almost paralyzed.

Like emotion-based thoughts, the physical sensations that accompany each emotion can contribute to a feedback loop that strengthens the affect. For example, the palpitations and sweating

that accompany anxiety seem to make feelings of fear worse. You say to yourself, "My heart's pounding like a trip-hammer. I must be scared as hell," and the fear intensifies.

Emotion-Driven Behavior

The last component of an emotional response is the action urge. Action urges always accompany feelings. Anxiety makes you want to avoid. Depression makes you want to withdraw. Anger makes you want to be aggressive. Shame and guilt make you want to hide.

When you let yourself act on emotion-driven urges, they fuel the emotion rather than regulate your feelings. While there is some survival value to these urges, engaging in emotion-driven behaviors frequently tends to convert episodic emotional experiences into chronic problems. There is abundant research showing the more you avoid anxiety, the more anxious you become (Eifert and Forsyth 2005), and withdrawing when you're sad makes depression worse (Zettle 2007). There are also studies showing that the more aggressive your response to anger is, the more easily you'll get angry (Tavris 1989). So emotion-driven behaviors may help you cope with difficult things in the short term, but if you engage in them habitually, they play a huge role in emotional disorders.

EXPLORING YOUR EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Now it's time to explore your own emotional responses. The following Emotional Response Worksheet will help you separate your feelings into the four components just discussed: affect (the emotion), emotion-driven thoughts, physical sensations, and emotion-driven behaviors. Over the next week we'd like you to use this worksheet to identify and clarify your emotions. Make copies of the worksheet and keep one with you at all times, leaving the version in the book blank so you can make more copies as needed (you'll use this worksheet in the next exercise too). Each time you feel an emotion during this period, name it in the left-hand column, under "Affect." In the next column, "Emotion-driven thoughts," write down any judgments or predictions that occurred as you experienced the emotion. In the "Physical sensations" column, record any feelings in your body that accompanied the emotion. And finally, under "Emotion-driven behaviors," write down any action urges (whether you actually did them or not) that you felt during the emotion. If you aren't sure how to fill out the form or need a little help getting started, we've provided a sample worksheet.

Sara's Emotional Response Worksheet			
Affect	**Emotion-driven thoughts**	**Physical sensations**	**Emotion-driven behaviors**
Sadness and loss	*My relationship is going to fall apart.* *Nothing ever works for me.*	*Heavy, weighted-down feeling.*	*Tell my boyfriend I don't feel like seeing him tonight. Shutting down.*
Anger and sadness	*My boss is an ass.* *I can't stand working for him.* *He's unfair.*	*Stomach tight, agitated, pressure in my face.*	*Want to tell him off, throw things, trash his office, quit.*
Sadness and regret	*Why did I drop out of school? I was so stupid.* *I always make stupid decisions. Now I'm stuck.*	*Heavy, numb, collapsed, can barely move.*	*Want to give up. Want to go home to my parents and collapse in my room.*
Anxious	*My boyfriend's angry.* *I'm pissing him off.* *He doesn't want to see me.*	*Out of breath, weird electric feeling in stomach, need to pace.*	*Want to call and get reassurance.*

Emotional Response Worksheet			
Affect	**Emotion-driven thoughts**	**Physical sensations**	**Emotion-driven behaviors**

USING MUSIC TO EXPLORE YOUR EMOTIONS

This exercise will help you gain familiarity with your emotional responses, and perhaps feel more comfortable with them. The exercise calls for listening to emotionally evocative songs, so the first step is to identify six or eight songs that have an emotional impact on you. Think of music that really moves you and seems to open something emotional within you. Ideally, the various songs shouldn't trigger the same feeling. Some of them might evoke sadness, some might make you feel hopeful or excited, and some might even make you feel angry.

Over the next week, play each of these songs at least once. Then, on the Emotional Response Worksheet in the preceding exercise, explore this music-generated affect alongside any other emotions you're recording during the week. As you listen to each song, turn your attention fully to whatever emotions you feel and try to keep them at the center of your awareness. Whether an emotion is painful or pleasant, look for words that really capture the essence of the feeling. Name the emotion, perhaps also describing some of the nuances or subtleties of the experience. In the appropriate columns, write down any thoughts, sensations, or action impulses that arose while you were listening. Again, here's a sample to give you an idea of how to fill out the form.

Sara's Emotional Response Worksheet			
Affect	**Emotion-driven thoughts**	**Physical sensations**	**Emotion-driven behaviors**
Song: "The Rose" by Bette Midler *Affect: Sadness and a tinge of anger*	*I'm never going to have anything. I'll be alone. I can't hold on to anything.*	*Heavy, tired, collapsed feeling.*	*Want to go to bed and watch a bunch of television.*
Song: "Salt of the Earth" by the Rolling Stones *Affect: Sadness and bitterness and also kind of happy*	*I'm somebody the rich, smart people climb on; they climb on my back. I just have to work; that's all I get to do.*	*Spaced-out, hot, flushed.*	*Want to quit or sabotage things—like write notes against my boss on the bulletin board.*
Song: "American Idiot" by Green Day *Affect: Anger*	*We're stupid. We're being manipulated.*	*Agitated, body feels tense, jaw tight.*	*Want to hit something. Want to shout.*

BUILDING EMOTION AWARENESS

In this exercise you'll visualize events from the past to intentionally and temporarily bring on stronger emotions so you can learn about them. Right now, look back over the past six months to a year and identify three different events: one that triggered anger, one that triggered sadness, and one that caused anxiety. On a separate piece of paper, write a description of each situation, including where you were, whom you were with, and the basics of what happened.

Decide which one you'd like to start with, then visualize the scene. Notice everything about the physical environment. If things are being said, listen to the tone of voice as well as the words. Notice any feelings in your body, and try to remember what you actually did (emotion-driven behaviors) in response to the situation. Now carefully watch the emotion that builds inside of you. Stay with your image of the scene until the emotion is strong and clear and you begin to have words for it. Record this experience on your Emotional Response Worksheet, including the thoughts, sensations, and emotion-driven urges. After you've finished writing about the first scene, set time aside to tackle the next two images.

This exercise and the previous two have given you a lot of practice in observing and naming aspects of your emotional life and the parts of your emotional responses. This practice is essential in learning to recognize how emotions affect you and drive your behavior.

How Emotional Problems Arise

Emotional problems are often blamed on stress, trauma, early upbringing, interpersonal conflicts, hormones, and genetics. But surprisingly, research shows that another factor is much more responsible for emotional disorders: our coping behaviors (Hayes 2005). We each learn to deal with the stress of life using a repertoire of coping strategies designed to reduce pain. The trouble is, some coping strategies work better than others, and some are absolutely catastrophic in terms of their long-term impact on well-being.

There are seven maladaptive coping strategies that drive most of our emotional distress and turn painful moments into chronic disorders. These coping strategies are called transdiagnostic factors because they are the underlying cause of symptoms across many diagnostic categories: anxiety, depression, chronic anger, borderline personality disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, to name a few. Let's take a look at the transdiagnostic factors, or maladaptive coping strategies, that lie at the root of chronic emotional pain.

Experiential avoidance. People who use this strategy automatically try to avoid painful emotions and thoughts. As soon as they feel something uncomfortable, they try to suppress, numb, or push away the experience. They attempt to put a lid on things so the pain is somehow muted. This coping strategy often backfires because avoidance not only fails to suppress painful feelings, it also makes the pain worse. An example is Harold, who withdrew socially and began drinking in an effort to avoid the sadness of losing his job. But his sadness just turned to depression as he sank into alcoholism and isolation.

Rumination. In this strategy, people use obsessive thoughts to blunt the fear of uncertainty, and use judgments in the hope of forcing themselves or others to do better. In the form of worry, rumination tries to prepare you for every bad thing that might happen. In the form of good-bad evaluations, it tries to perfect a flawed self and a flawed world. But these efforts never work. Ultimately, rumination keeps you focused on what's bothering you, so its net effect is that you feel more anxious, more angry, or a greater sense of loss and disappointment.

Emotional masking. The aim of this coping strategy is to make sure no one ever sees your pain. It arises from a fear that if others saw your emotions, they might be contemptuous or judge you as weak, foolish, or crazy. So the mask must stay on and the feelings that burn in you must stay hidden. The price for this maladaptive strategy is that the real you remains invisible, lost in the effort to look good. You can't show what you need or feel, so you remain helpless and possibly unfulfilled in your relationships. No one knows what hurts or what needs to change.

Short-term focus. The motto of this coping strategy is "Why do it right when I can do it now?" When faced with emotional pain, many people focus on what can give them relief in the moment. They want to stop or suppress the emotion and will do whatever it will take to build a wall between themselves and their feelings. But while short-term focus may provide a brief moment when the pain diminishes, in an hour or a day or a week it's back—and it's worse than ever. That's because short-term relief strategies often harm people in the long run. For example, drugs or alcohol can numb the pain in the moment but create long-term job, relationship, and health problems that eclipse the original distress. Another example is avoiding an upcoming social event because it makes you anxious. The short-term solution of avoidance temporarily reduces anxiety, but in the long term each choice to avoid increases the level of social fear, while also leading to isolation and risk of depression.

Response persistence. In this transdiagnostic factor, you continue responding to similar situations in the same way, even when it doesn't work. Sometimes this happens because you're afraid to try other responses. Or maybe you have inner rules that prevent you from seeking a new

solution. Either way, the result is that you become inflexible and always cope with problems the same old way. You've heard the adage that every problem looks like a nail when all you have is a hammer. Likewise, every conflict turns into a fight when all you know how to do is get angry, and every little mistake turns into a catastrophe when all you know how to do is brood and castigate yourself about it.

Hostility or aggression. This coping solution helps mask stress, fear, loss, guilt, shame, confusion, a sense that you're wrong or bad, the feeling of being engulfed or overwhelmed, and a host of other painful emotions. Anger is a big lid that covers a lot of pain and keeps it out of your awareness. This solution is often effective in the short term, but research shows that the more you use anger to cope, the angrier you get (Tavris 1989). Hostility begets even more hostility in a vicious circle that poisons lives.

Negative appraisal. This coping response uses negative evaluations or judgments to help you prepare for failure and bad outcomes, control others, or beat yourself into being a better person. If you use this strategy habitually, you'll tend to expect things to go wrong and to focus on things that actually are wrong. This attention to the negative may seem to protect you from painful surprises, but you'll end up feeling more angry, anxious, and depressed because you filter out most positive experiences. An example is a man who stumbled in a speech at his daughter's wedding and could hardly think about anything else for the rest of the night. Meanwhile, he was missing the joy he could have been feeling.

ASSESSING YOUR PROBLEMATIC COPING STRATEGIES

The seven transdiagnostic factors listed above drive most of the emotional struggles people experience. But which maladaptive coping strategies affect you the most? It's worthwhile to figure this out because it has a bearing on which treatment approaches will be most effective for you. The following inventory will provide answers, giving you a score for each of the transdiagnostic factors.

The items in this inventory are different ways of dealing with problems. As you complete this inventory, think about difficult or stressful events in your life, including work challenges, family problems, conflicts, and frustrations. Do your best to rate each item in terms of how frequently you use it. There are no right or wrong answers, so choose the most accurate answer for you, not what you think is most acceptable or what most people would say or do. Rate each item on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means you don't use that strategy at all, and 4 means you use it a great deal.

Problematic Coping Strategies Inventory					
1.1	I try to keep an emotional distance from upsetting situations.	1	2	3	4
1.2	I think about all the bad things that could happen in a situation.	1	2	3	4
1.3	I control my emotions by not expressing them.	1	2	3	4
1.4	I tend to do what will make me feel better right away.	1	2	3	4
1.5	Once I get used to dealing with something a certain way, I keep doing it.	1	2	3	4
1.6	Sometimes I hit others or threaten to hit them.	1	2	3	4
1.7	I compare myself negatively to others.	1	2	3	4
2.1	I push bad feelings away.	1	2	3	4
2.2	I think about a situation over and over, and what bad things it might lead to.	1	2	3	4
2.3	I try not to let my feelings show.	1	2	3	4
2.4	I want to stop painful things right away, even if it costs me later.	1	2	3	4
2.5	I have my ways of coping with difficulties, and I don't tend to change how I do things.	1	2	3	4
2.6	I yell or shout to let off steam.	1	2	3	4
2.7	I find fault in myself.	1	2	3	4
3.1	When I experience bad feelings, I try to ignore them.	1	2	3	4
3.2	I dwell on problematic events.	1	2	3	4
3.3	When I'm feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them.	1	2	3	4
3.4	I go with short-term solutions and let the future take care of itself.	1	2	3	4
3.5	I tend to cope with problems the same way, regardless of what happens.	1	2	3	4
3.6	I let my feelings out by saying attacking things.	1	2	3	4
3.7	I judge the ways others handle things.	1	2	3	4
4.1	I try to numb my negative feelings.	1	2	3	4
4.2	I keep trying to understand or analyze difficult situations.	1	2	3	4
4.3	I make sure to show only my calm side.	1	2	3	4
4.4	I do what feels good in the moment.	1	2	3	4
4.5	I deal with problems the way I always have.	1	2	3	4
4.6	I get upset and say mean or blaming things.	1	2	3	4
4.7	I tend to focus on the faults and mistakes of others.	1	2	3	4
5.1	I stay away from problem situations.	1	2	3	4

5.2	Whenever there's a problem, I tend to dwell on the worst that could happen.	1	2	3	4
5.3	I keep my emotions to myself.	1	2	3	4
5.4	I'm focused on what will happen right away, not later.	1	2	3	4
5.5	I don't change the way I deal with things, even if sometimes it doesn't work out.	1	2	3	4
5.6	In difficult situations I tend to get angry.	1	2	3	4
5.7	I tend to see the negative in situations.	1	2	3	4
6.1	I disengage when things are difficult.	1	2	3	4
6.2	When something happens that upsets me, I keep thinking about it, reliving it, or trying to understand it.	1	2	3	4
6.3	I don't show distress or upset.	1	2	3	4
6.4	I think about what will help me in the moment, rather than in the long term.	1	2	3	4
6.5	I find myself approaching difficulties with the same basic strategies.	1	2	3	4
6.6	I get pissed off when something goes wrong.	1	2	3	4
6.7	I tend to judge others.	1	2	3	4
7.1	When something is upsetting, I tend to withdraw.	1	2	3	4
7.2	When I do something I wish I hadn't done, I think about it over and over.	1	2	3	4
7.3	I only let people know about my positive emotions.	1	2	3	4
7.4	I tend to seek a short-term fix, even if it falls apart later.	1	2	3	4
7.5	When I run into trouble, I redouble my efforts and keep doing what I've been doing.	1	2	3	4
7.6	I get angry when I'm frustrated by stress.	1	2	3	4
7.7	I often think things are being handled badly.	1	2	3	4
8.1	I shy away from upsetting conflicts.	1	2	3	4
8.2	I find that I tend to worry about things that might happen.	1	2	3	4
8.3	When I'm in emotional pain, I put on a good face.	1	2	3	4
8.4	How to feel good in the moment is mostly what I care about.	1	2	3	4
8.5	Sometimes I think I should change how I deal with a problem, but I end up doing what I usually do.	1	2	3	4
8.6	I fantasize about revenge.	1	2	3	4
8.7	Often I don't expect things to go well.	1	2	3	4

To score the inventory, add the scores for items 1.1, 2.1, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, and 8.1. This is your score for experiential avoidance; record it on line 1 below. Then add your scores for items 1.2 through 8.2. This is your score for rumination; record it on line 2 below. Continue in the same way to determine your scores for all seven transdiagnostic factors.

1. Experiential avoidance (1.1-8.1) _____
2. Rumination (1.2-8.2) _____
3. Emotional masking (1.3-8.3) _____
4. Short-term focus (1.4-8.4) _____
5. Response persistence (1.5-8.5) _____
6. Hostility or aggression (1.6-8.6) _____
7. Negative appraisal (1.7-8.7) _____

The higher your score for any of the seven transdiagnostic factors, the greater your tendency to use that coping strategy in response to problems or stress. A score above 16 for any of the factors suggests that this coping strategy is affecting you emotionally. A score above 24 indicates that this factor has a strong influence on your emotional life.

How the Universal Protocol Can Help You

Each of the ten treatment chapters in this book teaches a specific skill, and each of these skills is designed to target and change one or more of the transdiagnostic factors. The table below indicates which transdiagnostic factors are targeted by each chapter, to help you choose where to focus your efforts.

Chapter	**Transdiagnostic factors targeted**
4. Values in Action	Short-term focus
5. Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness	Rumination, experiential avoidance
6. Defusion	Rumination, negative appraisal
7. Cognitive Flexibility Training	Negative appraisal
8. Self-Soothing	Response persistence
9. Doing the Opposite	Experiential avoidance, response persistence
10. Interpersonal Effectiveness	Hostility or aggression, response persistence
11. Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure	Experiential avoidance, emotional masking
12. Interoceptive Emotion Exposure	Experiential avoidance
13. Situational Emotion Exposure	Experiential avoidance

A high score for a particular transdiagnostic factor indicates that you should make a strong commitment to learning the corresponding skills. On the other hand, a low score suggests that you might skip learning a particular skill (as long as you don't have another transdiagnostic factor that would benefit from developing that skill). So a low score on negative appraisal suggests that you might skip chapter 7, Cognitive Flexibility Training, and a low score on both response persistence and hostility or aggression indicates that you might skip chapter 10, Interpersonal Effectiveness. If you don't have the time or energy to work your way through the whole program, it's fine to skip skills you don't need as much. But if you do have the time and energy, we encourage you to work your way through all of the skills in this book. Each will strengthen you in your struggle with emotions. And the truth is, anyone can benefit from learning all of these skills.