

Strategies for Managing Emotions

The Process Model of Emotion Regulation

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PSYCHOLOGIST JAMES GROSS identifies five strategies for helping us manage our emotions. Collectively, they comprise his process model of emotion regulation. A pioneer in the field, Gross views his model as a framework that can be used to think about how emotions play out over time and how they can be effectively regulated and controlled.

The five emotion regulation strategies are:

- **SITUATION SELECTION**—the ability to select situations less likely to lead to emotion regulation problems
- **SITUATION MODIFICATION**—the ability to modify a situation known to trigger emotional regulation problems
- **ATTENTION DEPLOYMENT**—using attention strategically in ways that distract us from the source of hard-to-regulate emotions
- **COGNITIVE CHANGE OR REAPPRAISAL**—changing the way we view the situation, or the way we think about our ability to manage the demands that the situation poses; cognitive change can also involve changing the way we view our emotional reaction to a situation
- **RESPONSE MODULATION**—attempting to alter our actual emotional response

Evidence suggests that the more we employ these strategies effectively, the better we'll be able to control our behavior and regulate our emotions. This appears to be true both for children and for adults (Southam-Gerow, 2013). Gross's research also teaches us that if we can predict we can prevent. Effectively controlling our behavior and regulating our emotions is determined in large part by what we learn to do in advance (situation selection and situation modification).

An increasing number of experts are using this framework to help adults who have suffered greatly as a result of longstanding self-regulation problems, including those with ADHD. In recent years, an increasing number of experts have also applied it to help children and teens who have suffered in similar fashion.

Let's take a deeper look at these five strategies.

Situation Selection

Adults with ADHD who seek to be around those who legitimize rather than stigmatize ADHD are actively engaging in situation selection. So are those who seek out ADHD-friendly work environments.

School-age children are at an obvious disadvantage when it comes to situation selection, since it's typically not within their power to opt out of one situation and into another (move to a new classroom, for example, or to a new playground). It usually falls upon the adults in their lives to help seek out or create less emotionally provocative and more emotionally calming situations. For younger children, the PAX Good Behavior Game (goodbehaviorgame.org) seems to create a classroom setting that reduces exposure to triggers and increases self-control skills. In one of their first activities, children work together to define what a wonderful classroom feels, looks, and sounds like. They then work together to bring it about and to sustain it throughout the school year.

Situation Modification

What about times when situation selection isn't possible? The good news is that we can think ahead about how to modify the situation in ways that can keep us calm and prevent us from losing control.

Individuals with ADHD who successfully use tools and technologies to navigate around challenges at work or at school are modifying their environment in ways that reduce frustrating, negative, and in some instances hard-to-manage emotional reactions. Children and teens who seat themselves away from a classmate trying to recruit fellow classmates to engage in potentially harmful behaviors are also effectively executing situation modification. Other examples include helping a child transition from one activity at school to another; coaching a child beforehand about how to navigate around a potentially challenging situation in class or on the playground; or weaving in activities that replenish a child's "executive function fuel tank" by building in frequent brain breaks, providing more opportunities to move about, and so forth.

In a recent study, undergraduate students who were asked to make small physical changes in their environment to foster self-control chose strategies that generally



involved situation selection; for example, turning off their cell phones while studying or downloading smartphone apps that blocked access to websites for a certain period of time. The students who executed these strategies were also better than those in the study's control group at meeting a self-assigned study goal the following week (Duckworth et al, 2016).

Attention Deployment

Faced with an emotionally challenging situation, what we choose to attend to can determine how we respond emotionally. Our attention, in other words, can be deployed strategically.

This was brilliantly illustrated in Walter Mischel's marshmallow experiment. In the experiment, four-year olds who could refrain from eating a marshmallow for fifteen minutes could earn a second marshmallow. Children who successfully controlled themselves sang songs, walked around the room, covered their eyes—all examples of strategically allocating attention.

Mindfulness exercises such as those Lidia Zylowska describes in her book, *The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD*, are among the practices that clinicians and educators find helpful in teaching us how to deploy attention in ways that help us regulate our emotions. Some schools now actually incorporate mindfulness training within their curriculum. However, attention deployment can also work against us, as is the case when we ruminate or excessively worry.

Cognitive Change or Reappraisal

Faced again with an emotionally provocative situation, our ability to view the situation in a new light can potentially help us better regulate ourselves so that we don't over-react. Clinicians refer to this as reframing.

We also vary in the meaning we ascribe to our emotional reactions. Practices that help us accept emotions nonjudgmentally and not as shameful can also help us exercise better self-control. This is true both for children and for adults. Clinicians who specialize in dialectical behavior therapy (see *Attention*, February

2015) cognitive behavior therapy (see *Attention*, October 2011), mindfulness, and other related approaches can be particularly helpful in learning these practices.

Reinforced by a series of experiential learning activities and music, *WhyTry* (whytry.com) uses visual analogies to show students how to reframe and rise above ADHD, learning differences, and other challenges. All lessons and activities relate back to the central question: *Why try in life?* And more specifically: *Why try in life when challenges and pressures feel overwhelming and insurmountable?*

Response Modulation

Once emotions have been triggered, we call upon this fifth strategy to help us stay in control as best we can. It may come down to suppressing the emotion; not our first choice, perhaps, but the best we may feel we can do under the circumstances.

Some of the practices mentioned above (mindfulness, learning to accept emotions nonjudgmentally) can potentially help us here as well. Sensory strategies, such as those Leah Kuypers describes in her curriculum, *Zones of Regulation* (zonesofregulation.com), can also help, though children are encouraged to practice these strategies under calmer conditions so that they're easier to execute when emotions are running high.

To hear Dr. Gross describe his process model of self-regulation, visit [youtube.com/watch?v=xZ6zEwzi-iv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZ6zEwzi-iv). To read about how researchers are applying the model to help children learn greater self-control, see the 2014 article by Angela Duckworth. I also encourage you to watch Russell Barkley's 2010 CHADD keynote presentation, *The Role of Emotion in ADHD*, in which he speaks at some length about these five emotion regulation strategies with clear illustrations. **A**

ADDITIONAL READING

- Barkley, R. A. (2010, November). *The Role of Emotion in Understanding and Managing ADHD*. Presented at the 22nd Annual CHADD International Conference, Atlanta, GA.
- Duckworth, A.L., Szabo Gendler, T., & Gross, J.J. (2014). Self-control in school-age children. *Educational Psychologist*, 49:3, 199-217. DOI:10.1080/00461520.2014.926225
- Duckworth, A.L., White, R.E., Mattheucci, A.J., Shearer, A., & Gross, J. J. (2016). A stitch in time: Strategic self-control in high school and college students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 108(3), Apr 2016, 329-341. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000062>
- Southam-Genow, M. A. (2013). *Emotion Regulation in Children and Adolescents*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Zylowska, L. (2012). *The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD: An 8-Step Program for Strengthening Attention, Managing Emotions, and Achieving Your Goals*. Boston, MA: Trumpeter Books.
- White, R.E., Shearer, A., Gross, J.J., & Duckworth, A.L. (2014). *Situation Modification Strategies in College Students*. Manuscript in preparation.

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