



EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

THRIVING INDICATORS

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Emotional Competence

Framing: What is Emotional Competence?

Emotional Competence is the ability to identify and manage one's emotions. This includes knowing how to nourish your emotional state, take turns, delay gratification, and cope with failure and loss. It also involves knowing how to control impulses, use good judgement and adapt emotions in response to others' emotions and reactions. ¹

Delayed Gratification Correlates with Life Success

Research shows that the ability to delay personal gratification, or wait to obtain something desired, significantly influences life success, extending from academic achievement to healthy relationships. The better an individual resists temptation, the more likely that individual is to have higher test scores, do well in school, and interact well with others. Why, you ask? When an individual delays gratification, that individual employs a specific area of the brain, the anterior prefrontal cortex, to imagine a future event clearly. This farsightedness, in effect, dampens the emotional draw of the distracting temptation. The prefrontal cortex connects this future event with reasoning about effective strategies to achieve more long-term goals. In this way, the ability to resist temptation clears the path ahead for youth to fulfill their potential.

How do you help youth develop or strengthen the skill of delayed gratification?

- Encourage the youth to “see”, or vividly imagine, the long-term consequences or rewards of decisions and actions.² This suggestion matches the goal management technique of a “Destination Postcard”,

when youth are encouraged to create a vivid image of goal success—explicitly painting the full look and feel of it. (See Goal Management anchor paper.)

- Simultaneously, encourage the youth to decrease the temptation of an immediate reward by visualizing the temptation (i.e. Marshmallow) as something less tempting—such as a cotton ball that won't taste good—or something very inaccessible—such as a cloud in the sky. ³

In a landmark, longitudinal study by Michael Mischel, at Stanford University, hungry 4-year-olds were left in a room, with marshmallows on the table. They were presented with a challenge: “Wait to eat it until the adult returns to the room, and you’ll get two marshmallows. If you cannot wait, you’ll only get one.”

One-third of the children snatched the marshmallows up right away, one-third waited awhile, and one-third refrained for the full 15 minutes until the adult returned. The study followed these children through high school graduation, and found astounding differences based on their actions at age 4. The “Resisters” had those habits seen in successful people and congruently, experienced happier marriages, career satisfaction and better health. The “Tempted” experienced just the opposite, in terms of low success and frustrating lives.

Profound results of follow-up studies showed that self-regulation—that ability to resist temptation—is a skill that is teachable!

Emotional Regulation: Impact on Memory, Relationships & Well-Being

Stanford University psychology professor, Dr. James Gross, conducts research on emotional regulation. His research shows that we have significant influence over our emotions, including when we have them, how we experience them, and how we express them. Dr. Gross has identified two common emotion regulation strategies, Reappraisal and

Suppression, and they each result in dramatically different outcomes.

"Reappraisers negotiate stressful situations by taking an optimistic attitude, reinterpreting what they find stressful, and making active efforts to repair bad moods." - Gross & John

What's the difference between Reappraisal and Suppression strategies? Reappraisal involves changing how you think about a situation in order to decrease its emotional impact. It occurs before responses to an emotional event have been activated, thus modifying feelings and emotional expression. Conversely, Suppression involves inhibiting outward signs of emotion. Suppression occurs after emotional responses have been generated; therefore, Suppression modifies expression, but not the personal experience.

So what? Is the impact all that significant? In fact, the outcomes resulting from the two strategies are drastically different. Research shows that reappraisal correlates with greater life satisfaction, higher levels of optimism, self-esteem, personal growth, positive relationships and a clearer purpose in life.⁵ Reappraisers feel and express fewer negative emotions, and they have greater confidence in their ability to control their moods and their environment.⁶

On the other hand, Suppression strategists experience higher levels of stress, due to feeling unauthentic when they inhibit their genuine feelings. The body reacts to this stress with physiological changes that can be picked up on lie detector tests. There is a prolonged experience of negative emotions that can trigger symptoms of depression. Furthermore, Suppression has a negative impact on social interaction, as Suppressors are more reluctant to share both positive and negative emotions with others, and they tend to avoid close relationships.

One of the interesting findings in the scientific research is the effect of an individual's emotional strategies on memory. Suppression requires constant self-monitoring of

What Does Reappraisal Look Like?

Imagine Rebecca, a Junior, has a big test tomorrow. Below are examples of how she uses Reappraisal strategies to change how she interprets a situation (the test), and to decrease its emotional impact (anxiety & stress).

Selecting the Situation: Rebecca plans to study in the afternoon so she feels prepared, and then she'll have dinner with a friend who makes her laugh and feel good.

Modifying the Situation: At dinner, when her friend asks her whether she's ready for the big test, Rebecca tells her she'd rather talk about something else. Here she changes the situation to decrease her anxiety.

Focusing Attention: When they're watching TV and see a commercial for a test preparation company, Rebecca distracts herself by counting the tiles on the floor.

Choosing Meaning: When reminded of the test, Rebecca tells herself that "it's only a test", rather than seeing it as a measure of her value as a human being. The personal meaning associated with a situation is crucial, as it determines experiential, behavioral and physiological responses.

expression, and this outlay of brain resources reduces the individual's ability to process events so they can be remembered well later. Memory is left intact with Reappraisal, because this effort occurs on the front-end of the emotional event, reducing the energy-cost of self-regulation.

In one study, reappraisal was compared to suppression as individuals observed slides of traumatic injuries. With each slide, the narrator presented the series of events that led to the injury. On a memory test, those who suppressed emotions were unable to recall the events as accurately as the reappraisal group.

Controlling Behavior is Exhausting!

Sometimes we ask youth to do a better job of controlling their behavior in opposition to the emotions they are feeling. For adolescents, controlling an aggressive outburst when they are angry is particularly difficult. This is because the skill depends on the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is undergoing development until age 25. The good news is that control of an aggressive outburst is a learnable self-regulation skill.

Research has demonstrated that self-regulation is an exhaustible resource. "When people control their responses with a great deal of effort, they are less able to control themselves in a close subsequent self-regulation challenge, even in a seemingly unrelated activity."⁷ Decreased control often gets expressed through maladaptive behaviors, including substance abuse or aggression.⁸ Fortunately, there are simple strategies for improving one's ability to control impulses despite depleted self-regulation resources.

Studies have shown that positive emotion or moods counteracts depletion and facilitates self-regulation. This is because positive emotion fosters creativity, which

empowers one to override routine or automatic (i.e., uncreative) thoughts and reactions. Positive moods can be instilled through very simple acts, such as watching a comedy or receiving a small gift. These minor mood boosters seem to have a remarkable power to restore one's capacity and willingness to exhibit control over impulsive behaviors.⁹ As a mentor, you can help a youth improve their self-regulation skills by:

- Developing an awareness of the youth's automatic emotional responses
- Brainstorming and using "mood booster" strategies to "refuel" after controlling emotions or behaviors.
- Considering the consequences of choices and thinking before acting
- Reflecting on and learning from previous choices and their consequences
- Distracting or removing oneself from temptations

Coping with Failure

The way in which we respond to failure profoundly impacts achievement of our personal goals, our recovery process, and ultimately, life success. Dr. Carol Dweck's research demonstrates that individuals with a "growth mindset", or the belief in one's potential to change behaviors and improve skills, perceive failures as opportunities to learn and grow. This mindset motivates people to persevere through challenges.

Another strategy for responding to failure is to set the expectation upfront that you might fail, and that it's okay to fail. It is not helpful to dwell on the prospect of failure, but it is helpful to visualize positive outcomes from the learning process and strategies for managing hiccups along the way. What can a mentor do?

- Help youth anticipate a few obvious challenges that might arise and develop action plans for responding. This will actually increase the youth's confidence in facing obstacles.

- When failure does occur, help the youth discover learning that can be applied to “next time”.

Coping with Loss

Individuals express grief, the natural suffering from a loss, in all sorts of emotionally competent ways. Sometimes grief may be expressed in shock, anger, guilt or loneliness. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and no “normal” timing of the roller-coaster “ups” and “downs”. However, in order for healing to occur, grief must be expressed in a tangible way. Help youth develop emotional competence in dealing with loss by encouraging them to:

Tip #1: Face the feelings

Tip #2: Seek support

Tip #3: Plan for grief “triggers” that will ignite the emotion. Ahead of time, develop strategies for dealing with emotions and honoring a loss.

Tip #4: Distinguish between grief and depression. Grief is a roller-coaster with good and bad days. Depression is a more pervasive inability to function, with personal feelings of unworthiness or hopelessness, and calls for more professional help.

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Footnotes

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