

MANAGING SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES WITH EMOTION – ‘TOO MUCH’ EMOTION

In *The Compassionate Mind Approach to Difficult Emotions*, we’ve explored what emotions are and why we experience them, learned how to develop our compassionate mind, and practised various emotion regulation skills. We’re now going to see how to turn towards a particular type of problem with emotions that many people struggle with – ‘too much’ emotion. Please read these online chapters after first working through and developing your skills in the main book. This is not a ploy to get more people to buy the book! Rather, I wanted to add these chapters as additional material to work with a particular type of difficulty we can have with emotions, but only once the skills are in place to do this work. Just like we wouldn’t try to run a marathon or climb a mountain without training and preparing first, the same principle holds with these chapters.

Many people who come to see me for therapy are, initially at least, seeking help for feeling *too much of something*. Too much anger, too much anxiety, too much low mood, too much shame. Although they have tried many ways to, my clients tell me how much of a struggle it is to regulate or modify the emotion ‘down’ in a helpful way. This is sometimes known as *emotion under-regulation*, or *under-controlled emotion*. For shorthand, we’ll use the term ‘too much emotion’ (Power, 2010) to describe a variety of related but separate difficulties. These include emotions that are:

1. Triggered too easily
2. Experienced too often
3. Last too long when triggered (duration)
4. Are too powerful (intense) when triggered
5. Are too difficult to control

6. Take too long to settle or recover from

When discussing experiencing ‘too much’ of a particular emotion, I’m not suggesting that this should be seen out of context – it might be very appropriate for someone to experience high levels of a particular emotion (e.g. sadness if they’ve just suffered a bereavement or anger at mistreatment by a friend or colleague). Neither is the suggestion that there is a ‘right’ amount of an emotion that one should experience. So, it’s not an ‘in this situation, you should feel 57 per cent angry, but in that situation, it should be 25 per cent anxious . . . ’ type of thing. As we discussed in Chapter 2 of the book, emotions evolved to provide helpful responses in specific situations, but they are shaped by many things, including our genes, life experiences and culture. So exactly the same situation (a person running towards someone on the street with a knife) could trigger very different emotional responses (e.g. fear or anger). Moreover, there will always be natural differences between individuals in how frequent, intense and long-lasting an emotional experience will be.

Instead, what we’re going to look at in the following three chapters is when certain emotions – anger, anxiety and sadness – show up ‘too much’ in life. If one (or more) of these emotions tend to turn up too often or powerfully in your life, or when it does, causes pain and distress to you and/or other people, click the link for that chapter. Take your time to read through the ideas, practices and exercises, and in combination with what you learned in the main book, use these to gain confidence in managing your emotions.