

EMOTION AWARENESS TRAINING FOR EATING DISORDERS

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WHAT IS EMOTION SCIENCE?

- Why we experience emotions
- How we experience, express and respond to emotion
- How we regulate (or don't!) emotion



"DISORDERED"

EMOTIONS

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The emotion itself is not the problem. The way we experience it and respond to it is.



Problem of emotional regulation

WHAT DOES AN EMOTIONAL DISORDER LOOK LIKE?

experience
emotions
more
intensely

more
frequently

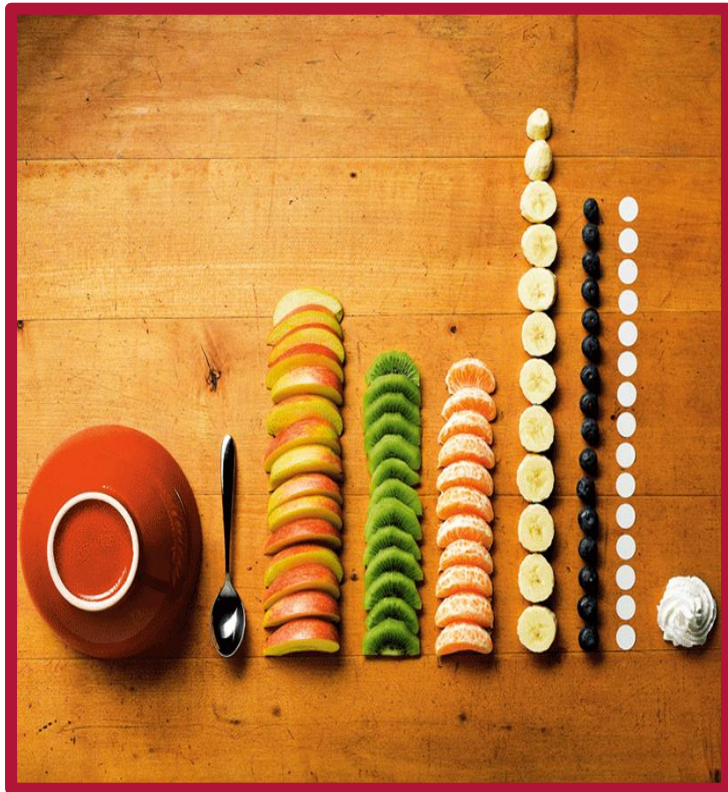
out of context
or
unpredictable





Struggles with eating & body management behaviors are not just about the food or “looking good”

EATING DISORDERS ARE EMOTIONAL DISORDERS



- ❖ Eating disorder symptoms
 - Behavioral ways to influence, change, or control painful emotions
- ❖ Self-report studies suggest:
 - worsening mood **BEFORE** a binge/purge episode
 - sharply improved mood **AFTER** binge/purge
- ❖ ED behaviors impact mood
 - These behaviors provide temporary relief from uncomfortable emotions

DISORDERED EMOTIONS → DISORDERED BEHAVIORS

View emotional experiences as **unwanted** and **intolerable**



Use symptoms to **avoid, control or suppress the intensity** of uncomfortable emotion



Our patients are **stuck in this short-term solution cycle** with their limited range of emotion regulation strategies

MAINTAINING FACTORS OF EATING DISORDERS⁸

Effects of
irregular
nutrition

Pro-ED
beliefs

Relational
response

Temperament: harm
avoidant, perfectionistic

anxiety
about
anxiety!

Emotional Avoidance

KEY ISSUE: EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE

- Key maintaining factor for many psychiatric illnesses:

**Drive to avoid negative
emotional experiences**

- Recovery requires doing things that have been habitually avoided

THE AVOIDANCE PROBLEM

Attempts to **avoid** uncomfortable and painful emotional experiences drives unsafe, threatening and dangerous behavior
(symptom use)



Certain emotions can remind us of a time when we felt unsafe or were unsafe, but **the emotion itself is not unsafe**

Emotions themselves are not unsafe, dangerous or threatening

Diverse Symptoms Function Similarly¹¹

Unpleasant Internal Experience



Emotional Avoidance



Avoidant, Symptomatic Behavior



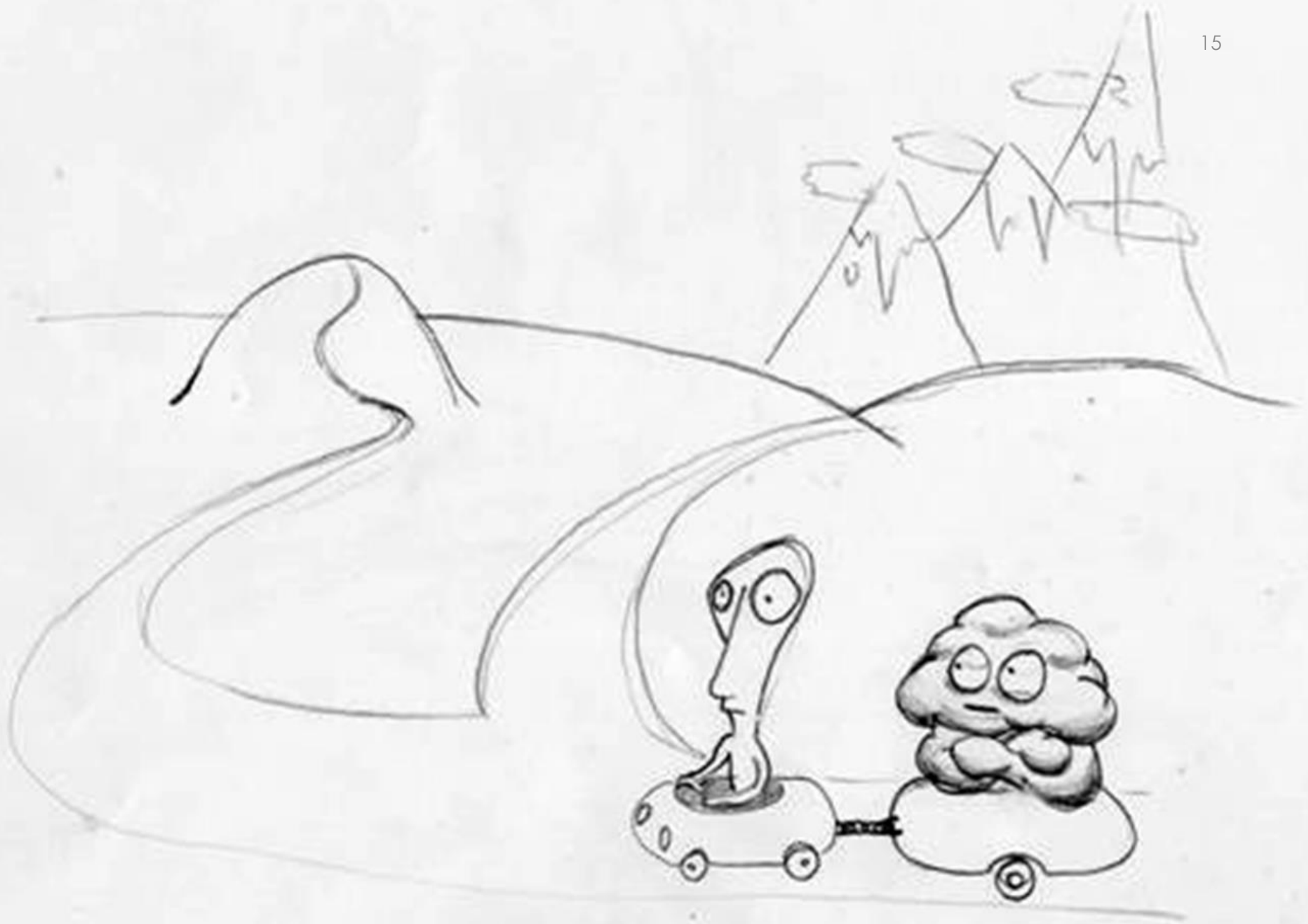
Temporary Relief from Unpleasant Internal Experience
Long Term Consequences



more







COMMON AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

- **Overt avoidance of feared situations (e.g., certain foods, mirrors, fitted clothing)**
- **Over-emphasis on physical appearance**
- **Exercise or diet in response to eating “bad food”**
- **Over-use of prescribed “as needed” benzodiazepines to dampen down the anxiety associated with uncomfortable situations**
- **Drinking alcohol to reduce inhibitions/reduce social anxiety**
- **Procrastination of difficult tasks**

THE AVOIDANCE PROBLEM¹⁷

Individuals with EDs are **experientially avoidant**

This means that they avoid people, places, situations and things that make them

FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE EMOTIONS

I won't go to that wedding

I won't eat at restaurants

I won't eat pancakes

I won't skip a day at the gym

I won't drink my calories

So its not specifically about the weddings, restaurants, pancakes, the workout or soda's...

its about the **EMOTION** I feel in those situations... that's what I'm avoiding... and I'll avoid **all kinds of things** that make me feel the same way

SO WHAT ARE FOOD RITUALS & FEAR FOODS?



“Fear foods make me feel anxious & think scary thoughts”

- because of what I **believe** they will do, or what I **think** will happen, or
- because of what I **perceive** happened in the past

“I use food rituals to help me feel more in control /less upset”

FUNCTION OF EMOTION

ALL Emotions have
a function

- Emotions are good and adaptive
- Even “bad” emotions aren’t bad
- Emotions are your body’s way of saying “hey, something’s going on here”

Negative reactions
to emotions and
avoidance of
emotions **maintains**
your symptoms

- Symptoms are ways of avoiding emotions
- Avoiding emotions in the short-term produces problems in the long-term
- Behaviors become “emotionally driven”

WHY DO WE FOCUS ON EMOTIONS SO MUCH IN TREATMENT?

The symptoms of eating disorders, anxiety & depression are caused by difficulties with coping with uncomfortable or distressing emotions or experiences.

ADAPTIVE FUNCTION OF EMOTIONS

Fear	→	escape, fight
Joy	→	continue behavior
Sadness	→	slow down, withdraw, submit
Anxiety	→	vigilant, focused
Guilt	→	learn from mistakes
Anger	→	defend, attack
Disgust	→	back away



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

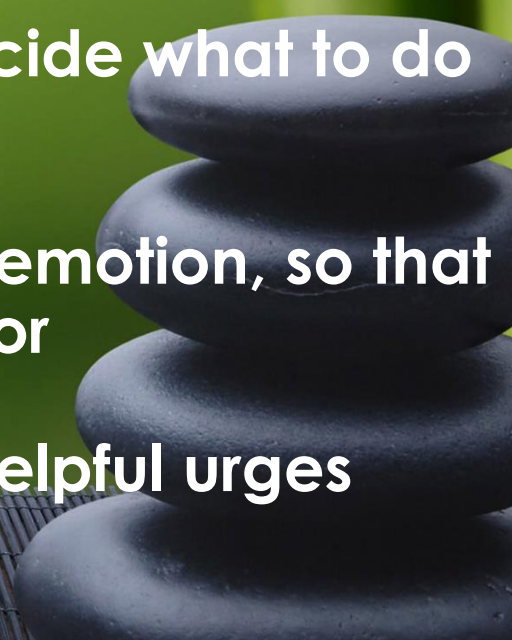
Primary emotional response

- “first” emotional reactions to a situation or memory
- Often functional
- Directly related to the cues in the situation or memory

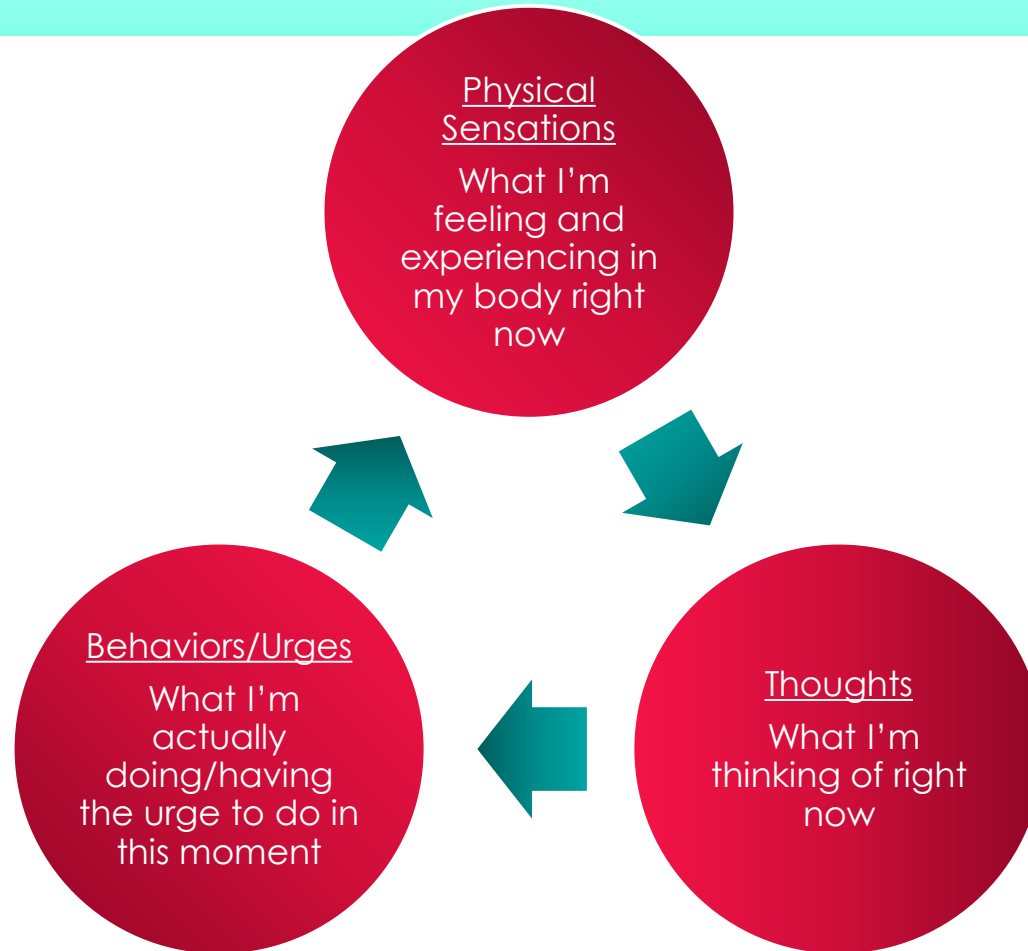
Secondary emotional response

- “Emotions about emotions”
- Tend to be judgmental
- Not based upon information from the present moment
- Often result in disordered emotions

MINDFULNESS

- Allows space for the emotion to begin to arise, free of immediate avoidance, resistance, or impulsive behavioral reaction
 - Allows you to pause, think, and decide what to do (or NOT do) next.
 - Reduces your urgency to act from emotion, so that you can selectively control behavior
 - Capacity to NOT act on less than helpful urges
 - Requires practice
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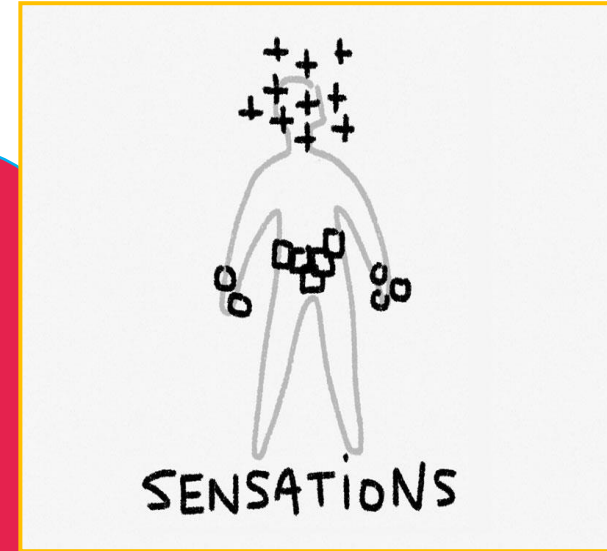
MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: 3-POINT CHECK



THE SKILL THAT IS LEARNED



Help patients learn how to break down an emotional experience into its component parts

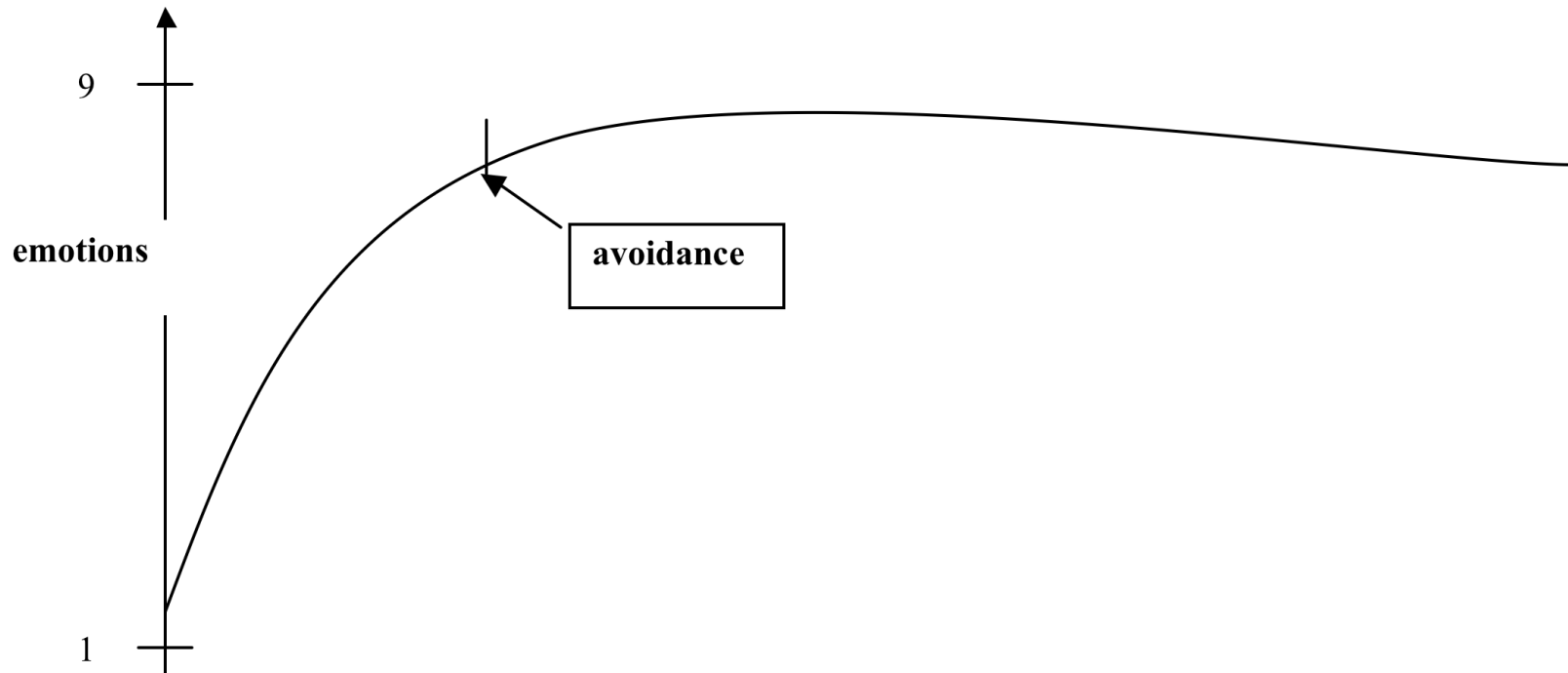


FLEXIBILITY IN THINKING

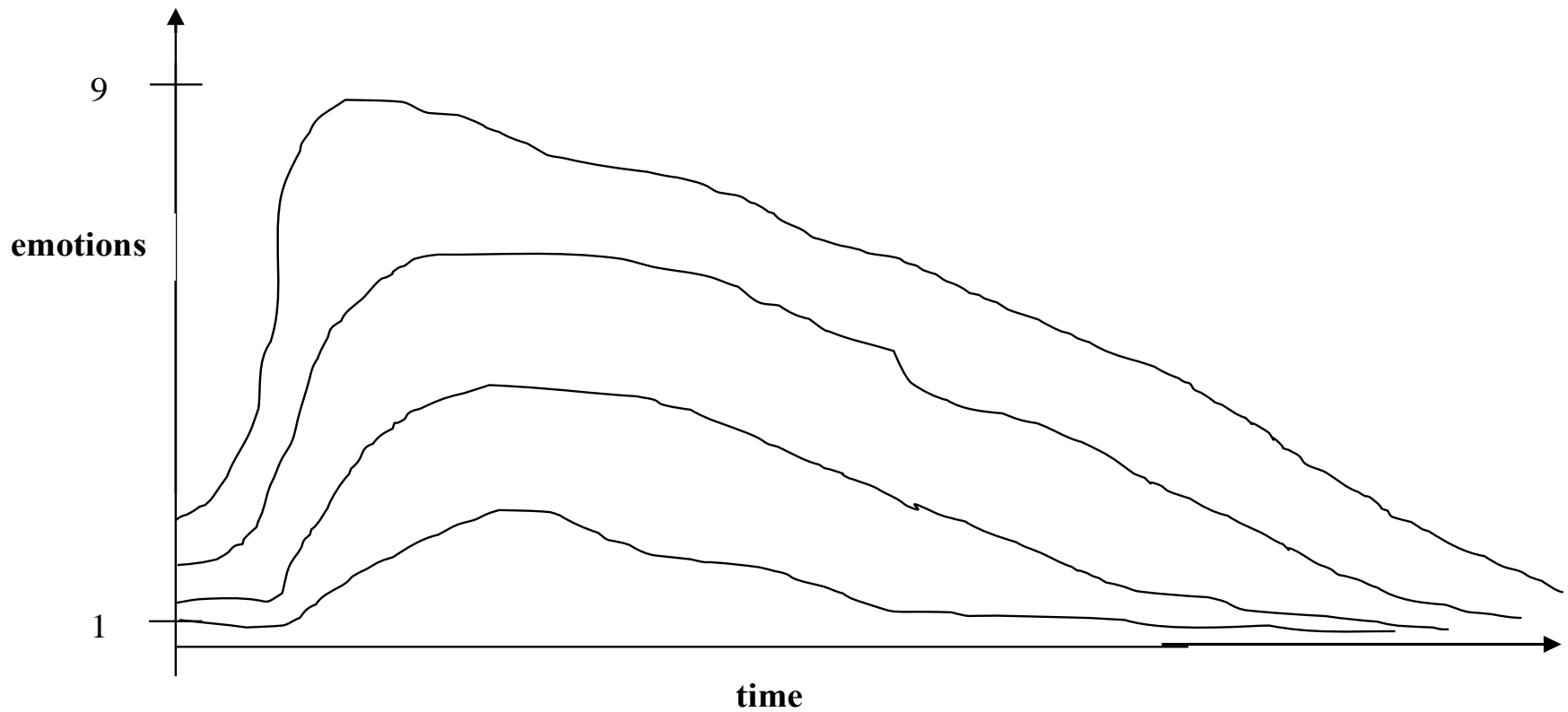
- Thinking that interferes with experiencing or regulating emotion
 - “I can’t stand this feeling”
 - “This feeling will just get worse and worse”
 - “There must be something wrong with me if I feel like this”

You can be flexible in how you evaluate and respond to unhelpful thoughts

NATURAL COURSE OF EMOTION



NATURAL COURSE OF EMOTION OVER TIME, WITH REPEATED PRACTICE



EMOTION AWARENESS TRAINING

Help create an increased awareness to emotional experiences intentionally & in a non-judgmental way:

Build awareness of emotional experiences in context, *as they are happening right now*

Reactions often rooted in **perceived past** failures & **future** threats and uncertainties

Distinction between **primary** and **secondary** emotional responses
“Emotions about emotions”

Teach the **consequences** of trying to avoid or escape our emotions

How to live your life fully & with
balance

Become your own
“emotional expert”

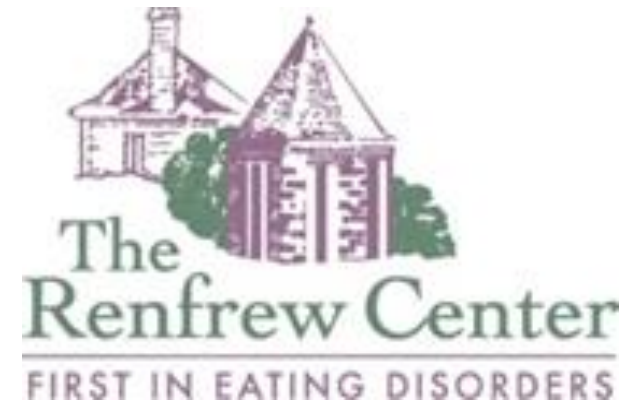
In order to create
SUSTAINABLE changes

In order to make the changes you
want

The goal is not always to feel better,
but rather to

Get Better at Feeling





THE RENFREW CENTER HAS 19 LOCATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

For questions or to schedule an assessment call 1-800-RENFREW

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