

# Supporting Our Loved Ones with Intense Emotions



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**Summary:** One of the things which makes human beings unique is our ability to have emotions. Emotions help our species make sense of the many situations and experiences we face, and help us communicate and connect with others. We are wired to seek out experiences (including people) that give us positive emotions and feelings. When this happens, life is good. When we encounter stressful experiences however, it is normal that we experience negative and unpleasant feelings. This has survival value as it encourages the human organism to avoid unpleasant experiences. Typical stresses include expectations, conflicts with others, rejection, loneliness. Some people have physical triggers such as sensory triggers (e.g. too loud, too bright, etc.), lack of sleep, and overstimulation. In some people, negative emotions can be overwhelming. The good news is that many things can be done to help those with intense emotions.

## Wondering about Intense Emotions?

Do you (or your loved one) have this set of traits?

- Troubles regulating their feelings, leading to mood swings? Such as being sad, angry, or upset one moment, then becoming euphoric and happy the next moment?
- Impulsive and harmful behaviour? Youth with intense emotions may turn to behaviours like self-harm or self-medicating with drugs and alcohol to try to control their intense emotions. But in the long run, these behaviours end up causing more problems instead of being solutions.
- Relationships that go from one extreme to the other? Such as loving someone or being friends one moment, then hating them the next?
- Significant fears of being alone, rejected or abandoned? Are these fears so strong that it causes problems in life, e.g. such as needing constant reassurance, being clingy, or leading to frantic efforts to avoid being alone, rejected or abandoned?
- Problematic anger?

If so, then read on to learn more about people with intense emotions.

## Introduction

One of the things which makes human beings unique is our ability to have emotions. Human beings have emotions, because having them has survival value.

Emotions help our species make sense of the many situations and experiences we face. When the human organism has had a positive experience, our brain labels it with a pleasant emotion, in order to encourage more of that behaviour. When our emotions are mainly positive, life is good.

Emotions also help us communicate and connect with others, which is crucial as we are a social species.

When we encounter stressful experiences, our brain processes these experiences and we experience negative or unpleasant feelings. This has survival value as it encourages the human organism to avoid unpleasant experiences.

Typical stressors (sometimes called “triggers”) include:

- Physical stress
  - Lack of sleep, fatigue, lack of physical activity, lack of time in nature;
  - Sensory overstimulation (e.g. too loud, too bright; spending too much time in front of a screen)
  - Medical illnesses
- Social stresses
  - Humans are a social species, and one of our deepest needs is to attach, or feel connected to others. This includes feeling accepted, validated and empathized by others.
  - Because one of our deepest needs is to attach, it makes sense that one of our deepest fears is criticism, invalidation, rejection, abandonment or loneliness.
- School / work
  - Academic pressures from school; achievement pressures from work.

Faced with a stress, we are wired to have unpleasant feelings such as becoming upset, sad, or anxious from time to time. The purpose of these feelings is to help us react appropriately. However, sometimes these feelings can become overwhelming and prevent us from reacting appropriately.

## Upside of Being Sensitive

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Some people are wired more sensitively.

Positives of being sensitive

- They may be very aware of other’s feelings such that others feel heard and understood;
- They may be artistic and creative, and fun to be around.

## Downside of Being Sensitive

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For sensitive people, unpleasant feelings can become distressing and overwhelming.

Negatives of being very sensitive

- Feelings may be felt so intensely that they are hard to manage (‘self-regulate’).
- Examples:
  - They may be easily triggered and react with anger; sadness; fear.
- In order to cope with their feelings, they may try to cope:
  - Positive strategies include distraction, reaching out to others, physical activity.
  - Less positive strategies such as anger towards others, self-cutting, using drugs or alcohol.
- Friends and family may feel like they are ‘walking on eggshells’ trying not to upset their loved one.

The good news is that there are many things that can help those with intense emotions with their overwhelming feelings.

## Orchids and Super-Feelers

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Many terms have been used to describe sensitive people, such as “orchids”, “super-feelers”, and “the highly sensitive person.”

Studies confirm that about 30% of the population are 'orchids', and are more sensitive emotionally.

- Orchids are sensitive flowers that require special care -- they require just the right amount of light and moisture, just the right type of soil, and have trouble growing if their needs are not met. But when their needs are met, they are beautiful and bloom spectacularly.
- People with intense emotions are like orchids. They are sensitive, and it can often be challenging to meet their emotional needs. But their very sensitivity is a strength at the same time. They tend to be empathetic and compassionate towards others. When their needs are met, they can bloom spectacularly.

## Why Are Some People So Sensitive?

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Intense emotions are likely caused by several things working together, like:

- Genetics and temperament: Many people with intense emotions seem to be born or "hard-wired" with an intense emotional system or temperament. It tends to run in families.
- Stressful life events: Many people with intense emotions have experienced extremely stressful life situations (e.g. abuse, neglect, parental separation or divorce, family stresses), or even abuse and/or trauma. These life events have taught them that you cannot trust others, or that you are at risk of being abandoned, etc. Due to their sensitivity, they may be more affected by future stresses and events. Events in very early childhood can be especially impactful.

## Do Intense Emotions Get Better?

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With time, many children, youth (and adults) will mature and develop better emotional regulation. This happens easier if we can support them to be calmer most of the time, as opposed to stressed and overwhelmed.

## Supporting the Sensitive People In Your Life

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Here are some basic self-regulation concepts that may be helpful for helping those with intense emotions.

### **Is Your Loved One in a Calm, Logical, Rational State? (aka Green Zone)**

When people are in the "green zone", they are able to reason, talk about things, and be rational (at least more than in other states). To help get into and stay in this state, you can try some of the following things:

Do's

- Do try to understand what helps your loved one be in a good place.
  - Physical needs include having regular routines and getting enough sleep, healthy nutrition, physical activity, outdoor time.
  - Higher needs include having people and activities in our routines that give purpose, belonging, hope and meaning, e.g. having fun, relaxing, and feeling a sense of control over some things.
- Do schedule regular, one on one time alone with your loved one. Go for a walk, take in a movie, play a board game, bake or build something together. When you make a plan for regular 'special time' or 'bonding time' with just you and your loved one, you are showing that person that you value them. Special time or bonding is the time to build relationships, not to have difficult conversations.
- Do you find that your loved one is expecting too much of others?
  - If so, gently set clear expectations with your loved one about what others (including you) can and cannot do, to avoid you from becoming overwhelmed yourself.
  - Example
    - You may need to make it clear that you need a little time to yourself to recharge. Your loved one might see this as rejection. You can be reassuring without compromising your limits.
    - Start with loved one's perspective

- You: "I know that you want me to spend time with you on Wednesday evenings. I enjoy those times very much."
- You: "I'm starting on yoga class Wednesday evenings. I'll be away 6-8 PM. We can make sure we spend special time together before or after. What do you think?"
- Do try to understand what "pushes the buttons" of your loved one.
  - Typical triggers include times when our loved one might be wanting validation / acceptance, but we happen to give them invalidation, criticism, or non-acceptance.
    - Your loved one tries to do something nice for you (e.g. vacuum, make you dinner), and you start criticizing it.
    - Your loved one tells you something, and they want validation of their feelings, but you start by giving them advice or criticizing them. (That annoys everyone, even people who aren't particularly sensitive!)
- Are there problems or stress? In this zone, you can talk to them and try to problem-solve -- at least more easily than in other zones.
- Do support your loved one's treatment. If your loved one is getting help, support them in getting help such as accompanying them to appointments, taking part in family education and group sessions, etc.

## Is Your Loved One Emotionally Upset? (aka "Yellow Zone")

Life is stressful, and sensitive people can easily get into a "yellow zone." During these times, they may be upset, and need emotional support -- they need "support not solutions" (aka "connection before direction").

Do's

- Do start with "support not solutions"
  - Support is about giving empathy, validation and acceptance, as opposed to starting with "solutions", which is giving advice.
  - Empathy is one of the most powerful ways to support an individual who is emotionally sensitive.
    - Your loved one: "I can't believe my friend was so mean to me today."
    - You: "I'm so sorry to hear that!" "I'm here for you... Do you want to tell me more? Or we can do something together to get your mind off it."
    - Do ask your loved one how they would like to be supported. You might say: "I'm here for you. How can I support you?" Your teen might respond in many ways, for example, "I just need someone to listen to me", or "Let's go out for a walk" or "I need a hug..." or "I need your advice...". The key is to follow your loved one's lead. If your loved one can't tell you what support would help, then you might make suggestion.
- Is your loved one upset with you?
  - This might be hard, but try your best to see their perspective.
  - Example
    - You are busy with your work, and your loved one is upset that can't spend time with them.
    - Your loved one: "You just don't care!"
    - You: "I'm so sorry. You want to spend time with me, and it feels like I don't care because I'm busy with work right now..."
    - Don't get upset or critical when they are upset -- you may be absolutely correct in saying certain things, but if you do say something, better to say those things when your loved one is calmer in the "green zone".

Don'ts

- Don't start with advice, e.g. "Have you tried doing \_\_\_?"
- Don't start with criticism, e.g. "You shouldn't be upset about this, its such a little thing."
- Don't give advice unless your loved one is calm and ready for it, or until your loved one asks for advice. All of us need to be accepted and validated. When you give someone advice without being asked, they get the message that you don't accept them, or you don't think they are able to figure it out themselves, and you want them to change. If you really feel you need to give advice, then ask for permission: "I am worried about you. Can I give you some advice?" (Hint: if they say no, don't give advice.)

## Is Your Loved One Overwhelmed, in Fight/Flight/Freeze (aka "Red Zone")?

When people are emotionally overwhelmed, they are not able to access their logical brain, perhaps not even their emotional brain. They may be in a primitive "reptilian" brain. It's important to know that their rational, logical brain is "off line" and just not working, so there is no point at all in trying to have a "rational conversation" when someone is in this state.

Do's

- Do give them time and space, so that their brain can calm back down into an emotional zone ("yellow zone.") and they can start to think a bit better.
- Do provide a calm, soothing environment, and do reduce any sensory overload, e.g. reduce sound if its too loud; dim the lights if it's too bright.
- Do talk in a calm, reassuring voice.
- Do give eye contact which is gentle and calm, and try your best to not look aggressive or upset.
- Do focus on doing whatever you need to do to help the person calm down.

Dont's

- Don't talk too much when people are overwhelmed -- their brains can't process too much.
- Don't give consequences when your loved one is overwhelmed, as they may feel threatened by it.
- Are you upset with your loved one's behaviours?
  - Don't focus on punishment or consequences when your loved one is overwhelmed. Threatening punishment or consequences will lead their brain to feel threatened, which can worsen the situation. Focus on getting everyone calmed down. logical consequences can be discussed when everyone is calm.
- Don't be a therapist. Remembering that you are not the therapist (even if you happen to be a therapist, your role is to be a supportive family or friend in this situation). Avoid trying to 'analyze' your loved one. And if you're asked for advice, just share some suggestions. Don't be too forceful in telling your loved one what to do.

## Self-Help: Coping Plans

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Coping Plans

- When people are calm, it can be helpful to think about 1) what things help them stay calm, 2) what things stress or trigger them, and 3) what helps calm them when stressed. It is so much easier to do this when calm that upset.
- [Learn more about coping plans...](#)

Sensory Strategies

- Just like sensory overload can be a stress, having the right type of sensory stimulation can be very helpful for people with intense emotions.
- [Learn more about sensory strategies...](#)

## When and Where to Find Help?

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Are intense emotions causing problems with day-to-day life?

- Have the problems with intense emotions persisted for a long time?
- Are the problems significant enough to cause troubles at home, school or in relationships?

If so, consider seeking additional help such as from:

- Your primary care provider (e.g. family physician, nurse practitioner);
- A mental health agency;
- Professional in private practice such as a psychologist, social worker, psychiatrist or counsellor/therapist;

- Call a crisis support line or visit a mental health walk-in clinic if there are any more pressing concerns about your child's mental well-being.
- A health professional can explore other contributing issues such as:
  - Stress, anxiety, depression;
  - Learning issues such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
  - Sensory processing issues and self-regulation issues;
  - Emotional intensity disorder (a newer term proposed to replace the older term 'borderline personality disorder').

## Treatment

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There are many different ways that professionals help people with self-regulation and managing intense emotions. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a type of therapy that can be very helpful for people with intense emotions, as well as for the people that care about them.

## About this Document

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