Regulating your emotions

Emotion regulation, which involves knowing how to respond to feelings rather than letting them affect actions and relationships, is key to achieving daily well-being.

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HAVE you ever stayed upset long after an argument was over, replaying it in your mind hours later?



How we respond to emotions is part of what psychologists call emotion regulation. The term may sound like a complicated psychological skill or worse, like a polite way of telling people to hide how they feel.

But emotion regulation is not about suppressing emotion. It is about how you respond to what you feel, recover after distress and continue functioning when life becomes difficult. This is far more important than we realise.

Every day, you may face situations that test your ability to manage your emotions.

Perhaps it is a harsh comment from a colleague, traffic congestion, an argument at home, exam stress, financial pressure or even a disappointing message that catches you off guard.

Feeling upset in these situations is not the problem. The more important question is what happens next.

Does the emotion settle in a healthy way, or does it continue to dominate your thoughts, behaviour and relationships long after the moment has passed? That difference can shape your daily life.

The answer often lies in how you respond after that first emotional reaction. Some may become overwhelmed, react impulsively, say things that damage relationships or remain affected for hours or even days.

Others may experience the same initial distress but gradually regain their balance, think more clearly and respond in a more constructive way.

This does not necessarily mean one person is emotionally “strong” while the other is “weak”.

It means that we differ in how we recover from emotional experiences, and those differences can affect mental health, work, learning and relationships.

We sometimes think of emotion regulation as simply trying to “stay calm”.

It is much broader than that. It involves recognising what you are feeling, understanding what may have triggered it, managing the intensity of the emotion and deciding how to respond in a way that is helpful rather than harmful.

Sometimes this means calming yourself down. At other times, it may mean pausing before responding, stepping away from an argument or allowing yourself to feel sadness without letting that feeling take over everything else.

In that sense, emotion regulation is not about having fewer emotions. It is about developing a healthier relationship with them.

The effects of difficult emotions often extend far beyond how we feel in the moment.

They can affect concentration, decision-making, sleep, productivity and communication. A small setback can begin to feel larger when frustration or anxiety continues to build.

We see this in many areas of everyday life. A student who cannot recover from frustration after performing poorly may struggle to concentrate on the next task.

At work, stress that remains unchecked can affect judgment, communication and relationships with colleagues. At home, repeated emotional escalation can turn relatively small disagreements into ongoing tension.

Mental health is also closely connected to this process. Some psychological difficulties involve not only experiencing intense emotions but also having difficulty returning to emotional balance once those emotions have been activated.

In other words, the difficulty may not only be how strongly you react, but how long that reaction stays with you.

What can we do to strengthen emotion regulation in everyday life?

A useful first step is simply to notice what you are feeling before reacting to it.

When emotions become intense, people often respond quickly, sometimes before they have the time to understand what is happening.

Pausing for a moment, naming the emotion and asking what triggered it can create enough space to choose a better response.

It also helps to pay attention to what keeps an emotion going.

Sometimes the original situation has already passed, but we continue replaying it in our minds, imagining what we should have said or anticipating what might happen next.

Recognising this pattern can make it easier to shift attention, take a short break, move your body, slow your breathing or speak to someone you trust.

None of these strategies means ignoring the emotion.

The aim is not to get rid of anger, sadness or anxiety as quickly as possible. Sometimes emotions need to be felt and understood.

What matters is learning how you experience them without allowing them to completely take over your thoughts and actions.

Like any other skill, emotion regulation improves with practice.

The more often you pause, reflect and choose how to respond, the easier it can become to recover from difficult emotional moments.

But developing these skills should not be left to adults alone. Children need them too.

Children are often told to stop crying or calm down without being shown how to understand frustration, disappointment or anger. Adults, too, are frequently told to be resilient without being given the tools to manage pressure, uncertainty or emotional exhaustion.

Parents and caregivers can help by modelling healthy responses to difficult emotions rather than simply demanding that children control them.

Schools can help students recognise and name emotions, understand how emotions influence behaviour and learn constructive ways of responding to setbacks.

Additionally, workplaces can acknowledge that emotional strain affects concentration, judgment, communication and relationships, not only personal well-being.

Public conversations about mental health can also move beyond awareness alone and pay greater attention to the everyday skills that help people cope before distress becomes overwhelming.

Difficult emotions are part of being human. We all experience anger, fear, disappointment, shame, sadness and stress.

No one remains emotionally
steady all the time.

The goal is not emotional perfection. It is to develop the capacity to regain balance when life becomes difficult.

We must remember that emotion regulation is not a luxury skill or something relevant only to psychologists.

It is part of your everyday functioning. It influences how we work, learn, communicate, maintain relationships and recover from difficult experiences.

In a world that often feels fast, uncertain and emotionally demanding, perhaps it is time to recognise emotion regulation for what it really is: one of the foundations of everyday well-being.

Dr Hiran Shanake Perera is a researcher and senior psychology lecturer at Sunway University whose work focuses on understanding how brain structures and neural pathways contribute to emotion processing, attentional processes and behavioural responses. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only, and should not be considered as medical advice. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this article. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.