

Coping Skills

Managing Emotions

It is normal to experience different emotional responses when coping with a loved one who uses alcohol or other drugs.

Emotions are real and powerful. Some can feel unpleasant or overwhelming. Emotions are important and are valuable signals that give us information about what we need and what is important to us.

The first step to manage our emotions is to learn to identify and tune into our feelings and the feelings of others. Recognising and understanding our own emotions helps us to learn more about how we're feeling and how to cope.

Thinking about our emotions rather than acting them out or avoiding them is healthy.

Considering someone else's emotions, needs and wishes as well as having awareness of our own, can open up communication and improve relationships.

Some emotional responses can be:

- **Guilt** can come in strong waves and you blame yourself for your loved one's choices, but feeling guilty does not mean you are to blame.
- **Shame** comes from the stigma around substances. You may feel you can't tell other people about what's going on and become isolated. Talking to other people in similar situations can help elevate the feelings of shame.
- **Fear and panic** can be paralysing feelings, fear can result from anticipating the worst-case scenarios and being overwhelmed with dread. People can panic when they feel overcome with anxiety and helplessness.
- **Anger and rage** are feelings that can surface when a crisis happens. Anger is often expressed by blaming others. Anger often masks deeper feelings of fear, hurt or loss. Whilst anger is understandable, it can affect your relationship with your loved one if not handled carefully.
- **Sadness or grief** may be experienced when it seems like there have been lost opportunities in your life – such as the loss of hopes and dreams for a loved one, the loss of a relationship, or the loss of security and sense of wellbeing. Talking about these feelings can truly help.



Emotions come and go. Strong emotions often pass relatively quickly and it can be helpful to breathe deeply and slowly, giving yourself time to reflect on them and the thoughts connected with them. However, emotions can feed on themselves. For example, it's natural to reflect on better times, but constantly revisiting past memories can lead to a low mood or progress to depression.

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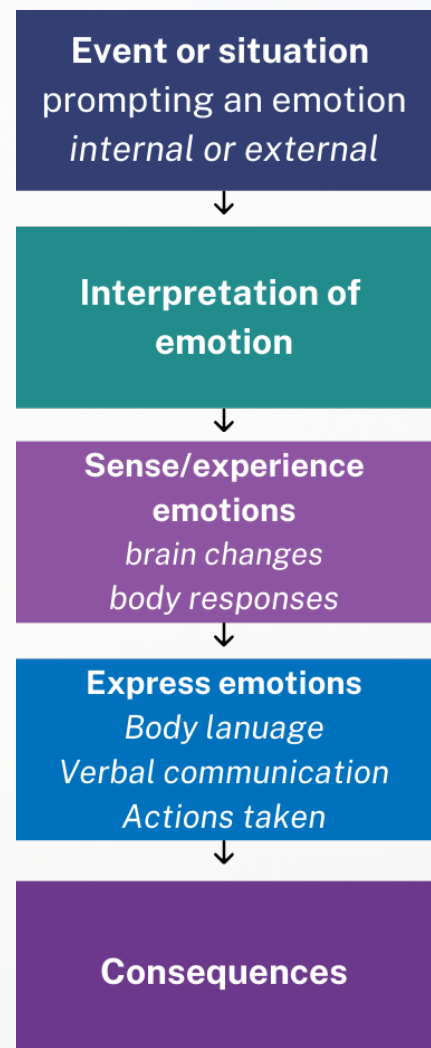
Managing Emotions

Understanding Your Emotions

By learning to understand your emotions, you learn to distance yourself from them so that you can think and use coping strategies rather than acting impulsively. Emotions are a form of communication. Knowing how to express your emotions allows you to communicate more effectively with other people.

Before you can learn to respond to emotions in a helpful way, you need to be able to recognise what you are feeling, why you may be feeling this way and how you express it. This can help you to act in a thoughtful way and avoid acting impulsively or acting without fully understanding why.

- Emotions rarely just happen out of the blue. Experiencing an emotion involves a sequence of events (see diagram to the right). Something internally (e.g. your own thoughts) or externally (e.g. what's happening around you) prompts you to feel something.
- Most events don't automatically prompt a feeling - the feeling happens by how you interpret the event or situation.
- When you sense or feel an emotion, you are generally feeling a reaction in your body (e.g. tensing or relaxing muscles or your heartrate increases) and in your brain.
- When you feel an emotion, not only can you vocalise it (e.g. I'm angry or I love you), but you can also express it through body language (e.g. facial expression), and actions (e.g. yelling or hugging).



Manging Your Emotions

Your feelings have to go somewhere. You can let them out, hold them in or ignore them. Letting them out is a healthier response. Holding them in or taking them out on someone else can result in stored up anger, resentment, and low mood.

Suppressing or denying feelings can be problematic. It is best to acknowledge them and deal with them in an honest way. Even if feelings are negative or painful, it's better to let them out. When communicating your feelings, use a neutral tone. Use 'I' statements, such as 'when you (their behaviour), I felt (your feeling)' rather than 'you made me angry because...' This allows you to express your feelings without accusing or attacking your loved one.

It's important to acknowledge other people's feelings as legitimate and valid. Although you may feel differently about a situation, the other person's feelings are real. If you invalidate their feelings, it can intensify or aggravate the situation.