How to Cope With Emotions When You Have ADHD

by ERIC PATTERSON

Learning to Control ADHD Emotions

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) carries with it many burdens. As the name describes, the condition that affects children and adults alike imposes its unwanted influence on two separate factors: attention and hyperactivity.

There might be more to the disorder than the symptoms we all know. There might be elements and commonalities of people with ADHD that extend beyond the hyperactivity and poor attention. The forgotten element is emotional regulation.

ADHD Emotional Regulation

It is a widely accepted understanding that people with ADHD struggle to control, manage, recognize and process their emotions in typical ways. As a result, they may have emotional reactions that change quickly by type or intensity.

One minute they will be in a volatile rage as they spout verbal aggression to others. The next moment, they are quietly engaged in their video game.

Their response may seem extreme to others but will make perfect sense to the person with ADHD in the moment. These qualities mark a level of ADHD emotional sensitivity.

Poor emotional regulation can result in a number of unwanted consequences including:

- Poor relationships due to others not tolerating the emotional extremes
- Financial and legal hardships
- Reduced levels of self-worth and self-esteem
- Lack of interest in trying new activities or being around new people
- Increase in other mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and anger
- Change in personality and motivations

Luckily, it seems standard treatments for ADHD, like therapy and stimulant medications, do well to improve these emotional aspects of the condition for many. Others may benefit from a more targeted approach towards emotional dysregulation.

Understand Emotions

Many emotions differ slightly in duration, intensity, and essence. Some frequently lead to poor results while others lead to wanted consequences.

As a result, people tend to label emotions as “good emotions” — like happiness, excitement and contentment — and “bad emotions” — like anger, jealousy and worry. In actuality, emotions are neither “good” nor “bad.” They are only emotions. It is up to you how you respond to them when they present.

By labeling emotions like anger as “bad,” people do the emotion a disservice. People try to avoid, minimize and ignore these “bad” feelings.

These behaviors do not limit the emotion, though. They only leave the anger to grow, fester and change. Over time, the emotion of anger will need to be released, and it will choose the most inopportune time or place to do so as it leaves a trail of sadness and pain in its wake.

Anger can be associated with positive experiences for those who choose not to avoid it. Anger can be used in positive ways, including:

- Fueling motivation to complete a mental task.
- Channeling the feeling to accomplish a physical goal during a workout or athletic competition.
- A learning experience to show that the trigger of anger, not anger itself, should be minimized or avoided.

To understand emotions, you must realize emotions are not the problem. The problem is how you express your feelings. By exploring and utilizing healthy outlets for emotions, you can reduce the unhealthy results.

Know Your Trends

Some people with ADHD are more likely to express every emotion that they experience at high levels. Other people will stuff every feeling deep down until it seems they are not affected by anything. Which one are you?

Knowing your tendencies is important in your quest to have more regulated emotions. If you do not know where you are, how can you arrive at your destination?

To accumulate information, seek out the people that know you best and gather their impressions and perceptions. Ask how they would rate your range of emotions — do you switch back and forth between angry and annoyed, or is there a diverse scope of feelings?

Since some people shift towards a very limited window of emotional reactions, track every emotion you feeling during a day or a week. Consider seeking out a list of emotions online to increase your feeling vocabulary.

Connect the Dots

Once you have a better understanding of your patterns, you can begin to modify your feelings. Too many people try to change their feelings directly, but this is a challenging situation.

Once a feeling is established, you can only change it through indirect measures like revising your thoughts and beliefs. This process is based on the idea that situations do not create your feelings — rather, your thoughts and beliefs about the situation create your feelings.

So if you have an unwanted feeling that frequently presents, you can look back at the situation and your beliefs about the situation.

If you are angry because your boss reprimanded you, you can realize that your boss is not responsible for your feelings. Your belief that your boss is unfair is the actual culprit — that belief is what should be targeted.

Warn Others

Many negative reactions of your problems with emotional regulation will involve your friends and loved ones. They may tire of your mood instability and worry about your erratic behaviors.

Because of this, communicating your situation to them will be imperative. This step is not meant to be an excuse — it is only in place to make them aware of your struggles in an attempt to foster added amounts of love, patience, and understanding.

Their support and analysis of your patterns will be helpful in your mission to achieve emotional regulation. A team can accomplish more than an individual.