



Recognizing and regulating emotions: A coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to:

- 1) Defining emotions, their functions and their regulation,
- 2) Debunking myths on regulating emotions,
- 3) Providing coaches with strategies to help identify, understand, label, express, and regulate both their own emotions and those of their athletes.

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What are emotions and what purpose do they serve?

Emotions represent spontaneous responses to challenges, events, or circumstances seen as significant for an individual.

There are **many emotions** (see the wheel of emotions below) and it is possible to experience many at once. They may even be contradictory (e.g., *I was disappointed in my team's performance, but I was happy because they worked hard until the end of the game*).

Understanding the function of emotions

Some emotions are more **pleasant** (e.g., joy, hope) while others are more **unpleasant** (e.g., sadness, guilt) to experience, but they are all **important and necessary** for the following reasons:

- Emotions are **signals**:

They help people **recognize** what matters most to them, which allows them to **make decisions and take actions that align with their values, beliefs or goals**.

Expressing emotions also serves as a way of **communicating messages** to others about how a person is feeling.

- Emotions are **adaptive**:

They are typically accompanied by physical sensations that help individuals **respond effectively to their environment**. These bodily cues can prepare a person to respond quickly. For example:

- **Anxiety** may cause physical signs that prepare the body to face or flee a perceived threat, such as a racing heart, muscle tension, shortness of breath, and dizziness.
- **Anger** may gear the body up for confrontation or assertive action, such as muscle tension, racing heart, a flushed face, and a sensation of heat or burning in the chest.
- **Sadness** may create responses that can encourage rest, reflection, or seeking social support, such as a sense of heaviness in the body, fatigue, and tearfulness.

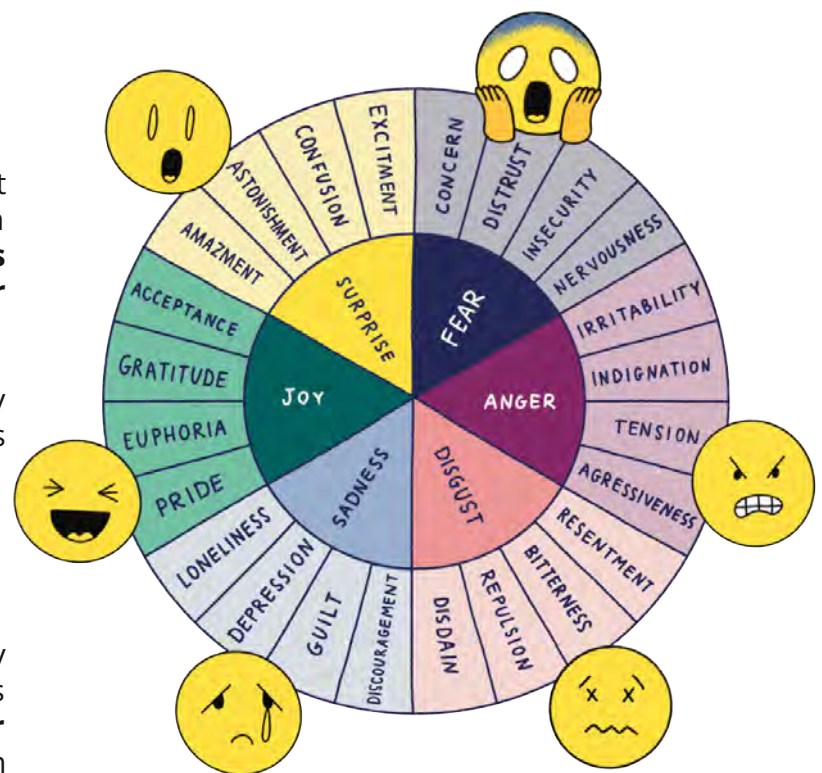


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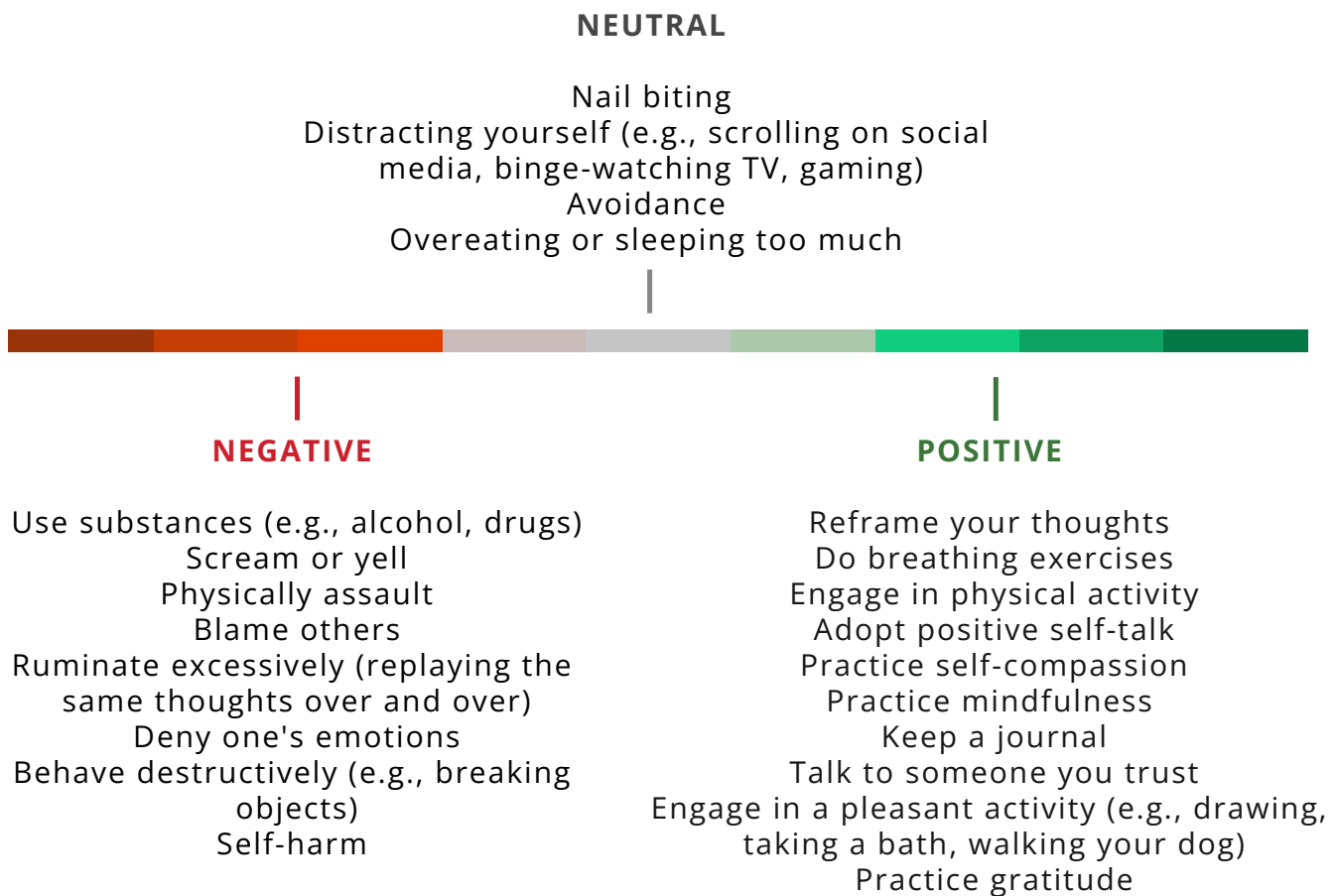
What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation involves using various strategies either intentionally or automatically to influence **which emotions arise, when they occur, and how they are experienced and expressed**, to effectively pursue one's goals within a given context.

We can regulate emotions for personal pleasure, to avoid discomfort, or to achieve specific goals or outcomes (e.g., improving performance).

Emotions can be regulated in many ways. Some strategies are clearly **negative, some are neutral, and others are more positive.**

Various emotional regulation strategies



It's important to reflect on **how these strategies impact your well-being and daily functioning**. For example, using exercise to manage stress can be healthy, but if taken to an extreme, it may start to negatively affect other areas of your life.

Neutral strategies can be helpful in the moment, especially for short-term relief. What matters most is having a **healthy balance**—ideally leaning toward more positive strategies while using neutral ones mindfully and in moderation.

Debunking myths on emotional regulation as a coach

Myth: I need to bury and hide my emotions to be a good leader.

Suppressing emotions or acting in ways that do not match how one truly feels can **drain emotional energy**. This emotional dissonance (the gap between felt and expressed emotions) can lead to **exhaustion** and, over time, **burnout**. Emotions act as a kind of **compass**: if we ignore them, we might end up overlooking things that are important to us.

Consistently suppressing emotions can have the opposite effect — not only does it take a toll on the coach's well-being, but it can also **create emotional distance**. Athletes may **perceive the coach as inauthentic or emotionally unavailable**, which can weaken the coach-athlete relationship.

A coach's ability to accurately identify, respectfully and calmly express, and regulate both their own emotions and those of others in an adaptive way is a **critical part of effective leadership**. Coaches who demonstrate emotional awareness and authenticity **are more likely to be seen by athletes as competent and better at communicating**.



Acknowledging and accepting one's emotions is not about giving up or staying stuck in negative feelings. It's about **acknowledging what you feel without judgment, so you can respond more effectively in line with your values**. True acceptance builds self-awareness and resilience, and it often creates the foundation needed for effective leadership.

Myth: Avoiding emotionally intense situations is an effective emotional regulation strategy.

In the short term, avoidance can indeed reduce the intensity of an emotion. However, as soon as we encounter the same or a similar situation again, the emotion is likely to resurface and even be more intense. In essence, **avoidance merely postpones the emotional challenge rather than resolving it**.



The more you **gradually expose yourself** to difficult or emotionally intense situations, the more skilled you become at regulating your emotional responses.

Myth: Emotional regulation is something you are born with and cannot be improved.

While everyone is born with a unique temperament — such as being more sensitive, reactive, or calm — emotional regulation is not a fixed trait.



It's a **learned skill** that develops over time. Life experiences, environment, and brain development all shape where someone starts, but **emotional regulation is like a muscle**: with consistent practice, awareness, and effort, it can grow stronger at any age.

Myth: Emotional regulation means no longer experiencing unpleasant emotions—like sadness, stress, or anger.

The goal of emotional regulation isn't to eliminate unpleasant emotions, but **to learn how to recognize and respond to them in a healthy and adaptive way.**



Emotions, pleasant or not, are **natural and meaningful signals**. The aim is not to stop feeling, but be **less overwhelmed and controlled by these emotions**.

Myth: How I express my emotions does not impact my team or athletes' performance.



A **coach's emotions do influence athletes and team performance**. For instance, athletes who perceive their coach's anger, often associate it with poor team performance and experience anger themselves, while those who perceive coach happiness tend to feel more pleasant emotions and believe the team performed well.

The authentic expression of **moderate unpleasant emotions** (e.g., in response to frustration felt toward their team, a coach might be more animated and passionate during a halftime speech) can boost athletes' effort, motivation and enhance team performance. When expressed within a supportive context without the use of violence (e.g., excessive criticism, yelling), such emotional expression can help athletes recognize and process what is being conveyed without feeling threatened.

Coaches' explicit emotional expression influences **athletes' emotions and behaviours**. When athletes understand and interpret a coach's emotions, they often respond with similar emotions (e.g., coach anger → athlete anger) and constructively adjust their behaviour (e.g., changing their technique after a coach expresses their dissatisfaction).



It is crucial to note that using emotions like guilt or shame to manipulate athletes' behaviour (e.g., boosting performance or motivation) can be harmful and should be avoided.

In a group, emotions are **contagious** and can amplify individual experiences. Pleasant group emotions enhance performance and social cohesion, while unpleasant collective emotions (e.g., anger) can harm performance and cause team collapse. Coaches **play a pivotal role in shaping these emotional dynamics**, as their emotional regulation sets the tone for the team's energy and cooperation.

Myth: Emotional regulation is all about talking about feelings.



Talking about feelings is an emotional regulation strategy, but coaches can use a variety of other strategies to manage team emotions. This includes **speeches, adapting workouts, setting goals, and team slogans.**

Coaches' emotional expression, particularly through sharing (e.g., talking openly about emotions), can **increase motivation**, boost **confidence**, and improve **team focus**. Sharing helps athletes **connect emotionally** with their coach, increasing **team cohesion** and **effort** through empathy and mutual understanding.

Myth: Sport and social norms do not impact emotional regulation.

Many sports and social norms encourage athletes and coaches to display only emotions associated with strength, determination, toughness, and positivity. In many sporting contexts, **expressing negative emotions** (e.g., disappointment, stress, sadness) is often perceived as a **sign of weakness**, which can lead individuals to **process these emotions quickly and in private.**



However, this culture of emotional suppression is far from optimal. Over time, ignoring or minimizing difficult emotions can **harm both mental health and performance.** Recognizing and validating the full range of emotional experiences is essential for long-term well-being and emotional growth, both for coaches and athletes.

Myth: All athletes' need the same help with emotional regulation.



Athletes use **different strategies to manage their emotions**, which are shaped by **personal preferences, experiences, cultural and social-relational factors (e.g., family).** For example, one athlete might believe they perform better when they feel fired up or angry, while another might need to feel calm and centered to succeed.

Maintaining a **good coach-athlete relationship** is integral to ensure clear **communication, understanding and support** of athletes' needs to help them regulate their emotions effectively.

Athletes don't always know what they are feeling or how to clearly express their emotions. They often manage their emotions based on social circumstances. For example, athletes might get angry or exhibit disciplinary problems as a more "socially acceptable" way of expressing anxiety.

Sometimes, athletes **suppress emotions to fit in with team norms**, especially in environments where vulnerability is discouraged.

In some sports, athletes may even **exaggerate emotions** (e.g., excitement or confidence) to impress judges, engage the audience, or be accepted by peers (e.g., pretending to have fun during team initiations).

Steps to improve emotional regulation as a coach

Emotional regulation consists of five essential steps:

Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate emotions.

1 **Recognize:** Notice and identify sensations and thoughts

Take a moment to pause, breathe, and allow yourself to **fully experience the emotion(s)**. We often push emotions aside or let them build until they explode—but simply **sitting with the feeling** can help you recognize and process it more effectively.

Taking a moment to recognize emotions in ourselves and others can help us to **become more aware of emotions**. One helpful way to recognize an emotion is to **pay attention to changes in our thoughts and physical sensations**. For example, signs of anger include an increased heart rate, feeling hot, and having more negative thoughts.

2 **Understand:** Explore the causes and consequences of the emotion(s)

Many **situations and experiences can trigger emotions** as a coach — for example, dealing with something new or unexpected, facing rejection or perceived injustice, making a mistake, experiencing a lack of control or power, feeling attacked or threatened, being told no, or encountering a perceived blow to the ego.



Journaling or using an app (e.g., How We Feel, AppSanteMentale) can be good and accessible ways to keep track of your emotions, to better understand them and determine how they are connected to your actions.

Reflective practices including written and verbal expression of emotions has been shown to be very beneficial for developing emotional regulation. It can help individuals **better integrate and understand their emotions**. This provides you with a learning opportunity to better understand yourself and to be able to use this information in future situations.

3 **Label:** Put a precise word to the emotion(s)



Use tools like the **wheel of emotions** to name the emotion(s) you are experiencing, explore why it might be showing up, and what thoughts are associated with it. Ask yourself: *"What does this emotion tell me about what I'm experiencing—about whether my priorities or needs are being met, whether my values are being respected, etc.?"*

Taking the time to identify your emotions can reveal patterns and help you notice emotions you might usually overlook.



Emotions: *"We lost in the playoffs. I feel disappointed, helpless, and frustrated."*

Thoughts: *"I should have made better decisions. I didn't prepare them well enough. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a coach."*



Having a better understanding and awareness of your emotions can help you to **express** them in a way that allows you to meet your needs and goals.

4 **Express:** Communicate the emotion(s) in healthy and constructive ways

Once you've identified the emotion(s) and what information it is giving you, consider **what action you can take**. This might mean expressing gratitude, setting a boundary, asking for support, changing your perspective, or simply acknowledging what you feel and choosing to move forward with intention.

- **Anger** can help you realize you were wronged in some way, and you may need to assert yourself for a boundary that was crossed.
- **Sadness** can signify a loss and you may need comfort. Asking for help or reassurance can help you get through the loss.
- **Joy** can indicate that a situation aligns with your goals, values, and fulfills a specific need.

Preparing a plan for how to respond to strong emotions can be a valuable tool, especially in stressful situations. Using simple **"if-then"** statements helps you act in a more thought out way.



*"If I start feeling angry during the game, **then** I will take three deep breaths, clench and unclench my fists to release tension, and focus on giving athletes constructive feedback."*



Using non-violent language can be a powerful tool for expressing oneself clearly and respectfully. It involves focusing on personal experience through phrases such as **"I observe", "I feel", "I need", and "I would like"**, which help reduce conflict and encourage constructive dialogue.

5 Regulate: Manage the emotion(s) effectively so they support rather than hinder your goals

Acceptance involves **acknowledging all emotions as valid and temporary responses to a situation** rather than resisting or pushing them away. This approach reduces the struggle with emotions and creates space to respond thoughtfully, rather than react impulsively.

- What is most detrimental is getting stuck or struggling with our thoughts and having them impact our emotions and behaviours! It is important to also separate yourself from your thoughts which are not always a reflection of reality.
- Here are two interesting metaphors to help explain this concept:



- [The sushi train](#)

- [The Chessboard](#)

Breathing exercises can help calm emotions, ease physical tension, and bring more awareness to what is going on in both the mind and body.



- [Calm and relax](#): Long exhales (e.g., 4 seconds inhale, 6 seconds exhale)

- [Activate and energize](#): Long inhalation and rapid and/or short exhalation (e.g., 6 seconds inhale, 2 seconds exhale)

Meditation and mindfulness can help us pay attention to the present moment without judgement. Emotions and thoughts come and go. Attempting to suppress or get rid of them can make us more focused on them!



With mindfulness and breathing exercises, it should be noted that if you have ever experienced panic attacks or have a history of trauma, focusing on your internal state or breathing may be triggering. Using your senses can be an alternative form of mindfulness.



- [Progressive muscle relaxation](#): Clenching and releasing parts of the body to release tension

- **5 senses mindfulness exercise:**



- **Sight** : Look around you and name **five** things you can see,
- **Touch** : Focus on **four** things you can physically feel (texture of clothes, feet on the floor),
- **Hearing** : Close your eyes if you're comfortable and identify **three** distinct sounds you can hear (breath, fan, cars),
- **Smell** : Notice **two** things you can smell. If nothing comes to mind, take a deeper breath — maybe you notice your soap, a nearby plant, or even the general scent of the room. If you're in a neutral space, you can grab something nearby with a distinct smell (essential oil, coffee, etc.),
- **Taste** : Bring awareness to **one** thing you can taste. It might be a lingering taste, or you can take a small bite or sip of something.

- **Leaves on a stream** mediation allows you to visualize thoughts as they come and go without getting stuck on them.
- **Mindful walking** involves paying close attention to the sensations of walking— your steps, your breathing, and your surroundings (e.g., leaves blowing in the wind).
- **Mindful eating** includes eating slowly and with full awareness of the taste, texture, and smell of your food, as well as your body's hunger and fullness cues.

Social support is crucial as coaching can be a demanding and stressful role, so it is important to have a strong support system. Surround yourself with people you trust— whether colleagues, family, friends, or mentors—who you feel **comfortable talking to and who can offer perspective, encouragement, or simply a listening ear.**

Practicing gratitude can be helpful to take a moment to reflect on the positive aspects of your day as our minds often focus on the negative.



- **[Here is a description.](#)**

Self-compassion is the ability to be kind to oneself, recognize that challenges are part of being human, and stay aware of one's thoughts and feelings in a balanced way which, can help people better accept difficult emotions when things don't go as planned.



For more information on **self-compassion**, [view this guide.](#)



It is important to note that these strategies do not suppress emotions; rather, they allow you to **acknowledge**, take a **step back**, and **better understand** your emotions to act according to your values and goals.

How to help athlete better regulate their emotions

As presented in the *Deconstructing myths surrounding emotional regulation as a coach* section (pp. 6-8), coaches play an important role in **shaping how athletes manage their emotions**. By applying the strategies outlined above, you can guide athletes.

Help athletes **1 recognize, 2 understand and 3 label** their emotions.

Validate athletes' emotions and support them in **identifying** what they are feeling:



- *"I can see you're really upset right now. Getting injured is frustrating and can feel unfair. Sometimes when things like this happen, people feel angry, sad, scared, or even helpless. What are you feeling right now?"*
- You can validate the emotion without accepting the negative behaviour (e.g., *"It's okay to feel angry, but it's not okay to hit your teammate."*)

Help athletes **reappraise situations** such as:

Examples



Using **open-ended questions** to allow athletes to express themselves

"How could we look at this differently?"
"What would you tell a friend if they were going through the same situation?"

Finding a **positive** in the negative

"I know that didn't go as planned, but this is a great opportunity to learn."

Using **rationalization**

"I get that you're frustrated about losing the ball, but let's break it down. It wasn't about effort or focus—you read the play, and it didn't go our way this time. That's part of the game."

Putting things into perspective:

"I know this loss feels huge right now but think about the full season—we've made so much progress."

Normalization

"Every athlete has off days. It's just a part of the process."

Thinking about how **you'll feel later**

"I know this feels big right now but try to think about how you'll look back on it in a month. Will it still feel this big?"

Highlighting **what can still be controlled**

"We can't change the ref's call, but we can control how we respond."

4 Foster a safe and positive environment to allow athletes to **express** their emotions

- **Open communication:**

- Creates common ground and makes sure athletes feel safe expressing their emotions, even when those emotions are difficult or unpleasant.

- **Reinforcing the coach-athlete relationship:**

- **Building closeness and demonstrating commitment in the coach-athlete relationship fosters trust and respect.** This foundation encourages athletes to open up emotionally and allows coaches to pick up on changes in mood.
- Providing clear, constructive feedback and sharing your perspective on performance helps athletes gain confidence and better regulate their emotions.
- Creating a safe and supportive environment, by being patient, caring, responsive, and accepting of emotional experiences, enables athletes to express themselves openly and develop healthier emotional coping strategies.

5 Taking action to help athletes' better **regulate** their emotions

- It can be beneficial to educate and provide resources to athletes regarding the various positive emotional regulation strategies mentioned above (**mindfulness, breathing, gratitude, and self-compassion**).
- Using **positive reinforcement (e.g., high-five, words of affirmation)** during training sessions can also help maintain athletes' motivation and positivity.
- Setting challenging but realistic **process goals (e.g., technique, strategy, effort)** that are measurable, and clear prior to competitions can help ease athletes' anxiety, increase their sense of control, and manage their expectations. Avoid goals focused on results (e.g., winning or getting first place).
- Help athletes **accept unpleasant internal states and situations without judgement** as a part of the athletic experience to help them continue to be present and act in line with their values even in the presence of difficult emotions.



It is important to recognize that while you can support athletes in managing their emotions, **your role is not to act as their therapist.** If needed, you can suggest that they seek help from a health professional while fostering a judgment-free environment that encourages help-seeking and normalizes emotional support.



For more information on how to better **promote athletes' motivation**, [view this guide.](#)

Want to learn more?

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feel
emotions?**

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Tel-jeunes

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Putting it into practice

Reflective writing exercise: exploring an emotion you've felt

Over the next four days, your task is to reflect on a recent stressful experience by writing about it. Each day, you will explore the same experience with the goal of better understanding it and working through the emotions associated with it.

Here is a reminder of the steps of emotional regulation:

- 1 Recognize:** Notice and identify sensations and thoughts,
- 2 Understand:** Explore the causes and consequences of the emotion(s),
- 3 Label:** Put a precise word to the emotion(s),
- 4 Express:** Communicate the emotion(s) in healthy and constructive ways,
- 5 Regulate:** Manage the emotion(s) effectively so they support rather than hinder your goals.

1. What thoughts and physical sensations are present for me right now?

2. How has it affected me, my relationships, or my behaviours?

3. What emotions am I experiencing? (refer to the wheel of emotions, p. 4)

4. What actions could I take (e.g., expressing a need to someone else)?

5. What tools (e.g., mindfulness, acceptance, pp. 11-12) can I use right now?

Remember, this exercise is for you. There's no right or wrong way to write—just be open and honest.

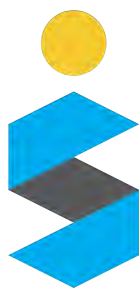
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