

Children and Youth with Intense Emotions: Information for Family and Friends



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Summary: Everyone gets intense or strong emotions from time to time. Some people however, do tend to be more sensitive and feel emotions more strongly than others. There are definitely advantages to being a person who experiences strong feelings, especially in a modern world that seems to devalue feelings. The downside however, is that some people have such intense emotions that it can be overwhelming at times. The good news, is that there are many ways to support our loved ones with intense emotions.

Does My Loved One Have Intense Emotions?

Does your loved one have this set of traits?

- Troubles regulating his/her feelings, leading to mood swings? Such as being sad, angry, or upset one moment, whereas 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, alternating with 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.

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

Introduction

Human beings are a social species and thus, one of our deepest needs is to attach and feel connected to others. When young, our most important attachments are to parents and adult caregivers. As we get older, our attachments change to include friends and peers. In adulthood, it can change to include romantic partners and one's children.

Advantages

Some people are wired more sensitively than others, and thus feel emotions more intensely than others. When things are going well (i.e. when they feel safe and attached), their strengths include:

- Being very sensitive to others feelings;
- Being exciting and fun to be with;
- Being very appreciative of others, which can lead others to feel very important and valued;
- Being creative, often in areas such as art, music, dance and drama.

The Problem

Because our deepest need is safe relationships, it is natural then, that one of our deepest fears and stresses is lack of attachment, rejection, or abandonment.

When things are not going well, people with intense emotions may have fears of abandonment and rejection that become overwhelming such as:

- They may feel rejected or attacked by others, even when the other person did not intend to reject or hurt them, leading them to feel depressed, hopeless or angry at others.

Unfortunately, this can then cause problems in relationships. Their fears of abandonment can lead to challenging behaviours (such as excessive clinginess, anger and jealousy) that can make others find it hard to be with them, leading to actual rejection, thus making it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What Causes a Youth to Develop Intense Emotions?

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

- Genetics and temperament: Many youth with intense emotions seem to be born or “hard-wired” with an intense emotional system, or temperament. This tends to run in families.
- Stressful life events: Many youth 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 abandonment, etc. Due to their sensitivity, they may be more affected by future stresses and events.

Youth with Intense Emotions are Like Orchids

One way to think about youth with intense emotions is that they are like orchids. Orchids are an extremely sensitive flower 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.

Youth with intense emotions are like orchids. They are sensitive, and it can often be more 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 bloom spectacularly.

Do Intense Emotions Get Better?

With time, many children, youth (and adults) will mature and develop better emotional regulation. However, if intense emotions are causing problems with day-to-day life, then seeking help can be helpful.

When and Where to Find Help?

Ask yourself:

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

If so, then see a health professional such as:

- 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 counselor/therapist;
- Calling a crisis support line or visiting 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

There are many different treatments that professionals can offer to help those with intense emotions such as:

- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)
- Mentalization-based treatment
- Psychodynamic and interpersonal therapies

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) Skills

In DBT, youth learn to 'build a life worth living', by learning skills to help manage their emotions and working on accepting themselves without judgment. At the same time, they learn to find ways to change their behaviours in ways that bring them closer to their own ultimate goals. This therapy includes education and skills practice for parents and family members.

In DBT, there are 5 modules for youth to learn skills to help them handle their intense emotional system including:

- Mindfulness;
- Interpersonal effectiveness;
- Distress tolerance;
- Emotional regulation.
- Walking the middle path.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the core strategies in DBT that can help people get "unstuck" from intense and distressing emotions.

Youth (and parents) are encouraged to:

- Practice being in the present moment, instead of thinking or worrying about the past or future. Focusing on the body (sights, sounds, body sensations, breathing) while letting other thoughts go, can help a lot with worries.
- Learn to look at themselves and the world in a way that helps them to accept themselves and others without being too critical or judgmental.

Distress Tolerance

For youth with intense emotions, everyday conflicts and problems can feel like life or death situations. In these situations, these youth tend to react quickly in an attempt to reduce the emotional distress that their brains are experiencing. Unfortunately, these reactions don't usually help to solve these problems in the long run.

With support and practice, youth can learn to tolerate intense emotional responses without doing things that will make the situation worse.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional Regulation is about:

- Managing emotions so that youth are able to use them effectively.
- Being able to keep feelings in balance and not let them become overwhelming. This allows youth to stay fairly calm and rational, even when faced with emotionally difficult situations.

Emotional regulation includes:

a) Recognizing your feelings

E.g. "**I'm feeling ____**", e.g. "I'm feeling upset that sister didn't include me with her friends."

b) Validating and accepting your emotions

E.g. "**Its natural to feel ____**", e.g. "Its natural to feel upset in a situation like this."

c) Being able to calm down if you're too upset

E.g. "I'm too upset to deal with this right now. I'm going to go to the bathroom and calm down before I do anything rash."

d) Choosing how to respond appropriately

E.g. "Maybe she's upset with me? Or just too distracted? If I want her to include me, it won't help for me to get angry and jealous. I'll stay calm and talk to her later."

Types of emotional regulation strategies that are taught in DBT:

1. Keeping a healthy 'emotional bank account' by doing things that make youth less susceptible to intense and negative emotions (for example, eating well, doing enjoyable activities, and getting enough sleep).
2. Thinking about whether or not feelings "make perfect sense" for the situation at hand. If they do, youth should act on these feelings if those actions won't make things worse for them.. But if the feelings aren't justified by the facts of the situation, youth can learn how to deal with the situation by using different skills to get them through.

Positive coping

Youth can learn many different ways to handle challenges and problems more positively.

Problem-Solving

- What's the problem?
- What would I like to see happen (goals)?
- What are possible solutions to reach that goal?
- What are the pros and cons of each possible solution?
- Did it work? Should I try something else?

Grounding exercises

Connecting to the present moment. For example:

- "What day is it? Its Saturday."
- "Where am I? I'm in the living room."
- "What's in the room? I see the couch, the coffee table, and my cup of coffee."

Keeping busy (behavioural activation)

Being passive and obsessing about stresses doesn't help. Keeping busy with an activity can be a really positive way to handle stress.

Relaxation exercises

- Deep breathing
- Progressive relaxation
- Mindfulness meditation.
- Yoga

Getting social support

- Spending meaningful time with family and friends.
- Reaching out to talk with people close to you during rough times.

Supporting People with Intense Emotions

- Accept that those with intense emotions experience emotions (especially anger and anxiety much more

strongly than most people. For these individuals, conflict with a loved one can feel like a life and death situation. Understand that even mild rejection, criticism or 'abandonment' (eg being left out) can 'trigger' these individuals.

- Reassure your loved one about your connection when there are breaks in your connection.
 - If you are close enough, then reassure your loved one often that you are and always will be 'there' for him/her.
 - Bridge any separations by talking about the reunion.
 - If you have a physical separation (i.e. you have to leave), talk about the next time that you'll be together ("I have to go now. But I'll be thinking about you, and I'll see you tomorrow.")
 - If you have an emotional separation (i.e. a disagreement, conflict, misunderstanding), talk about how you will get over this. ("I know you're upset at me now, and I'm sorry if I'm a bit upset too. But we'll get over this.")
 - Don't take it personally if your loved one has an outburst or tantrum. Understand that this is because of how their brain is wired. . Be patient, and stay calm. You might say things like: "I can see you're upset." "I'm right here". Empathize by saying things like, "Yeah, I'd be upset if that happened to me too... That's frustrating..." Empathy is one of the most powerful ways to support an individual with intense emotions. Avoid trying to problem solve until when and if they are ready.
 - Validate your loved one's feelings. This means recognizing the feelings, and not criticizing or ridiculing your loved one for having them. You don't have to agree with your loved one's feelings and response to a situation. You just need to show that you can see how they feel. For example, "I can see you are very worried about this".
 - Set clear expectations with your loved one about what you can and cannot do. It is important that you set limits to avoid burnout. For 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. Make sure that when you talk about the separation (the times when you're away), always talk about the reunion as well. You might say, "I'm starting a yoga class on Wednesday evenings. I need to take care of myself and stay healthy, so that I can be there for you. I'll be away from 7-9 pm. I'll be back home by 9:30 pm so we can spend time together then. How does that sound?"
 - Arrange 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' together with just you and your loved one, you are showing that person that you value them.
 - Don't give advice unless you're asked. All of us need to be accepted and validated, and this is especially true for those with intense emotions. When you give someone advice without being asked, they get the message that you don't accept them and 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?"
 - 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 a make a suggestion.
 - Keep regular routines as much as possible (like wake up times, mealtimes, bedtimes). Support sleep with bedtime routines that are calming. Try to avoid any screens or devices in the bedroom.
 - Support your loved one's treatment. Family and friends can play an essential role to effective treatment. Help your loved one get to appointments, and take part in family education and group sessions. If your loved one gets upset:
 - Be there for him/her. If you can't be there in person, connect by phone.
 - Let your loved one know that you can see that he's upset, "I can see you're having a tough time. It's hard to be upset."
 - Stay close, but don't try to problem solve until he or she has had the time to calm down.
 - Once he or she is settled down, find the 'kernel of truth' in his/her upset. Even though the other person's response was intense, it was likely not completely 'out of the blue'. There is probably an issue that needs to be worked out.
 - Remark on any positives (or improvements) you notice. It is good to praise positives that you notice. At the same time, note that praise is conditional acceptance. It is also important to show unconditional acceptance, by letting the other person know that even if some things are better, it doesn't mean that you expect everything will go well all the time.

- Remember that you are not your loved one's therapist. 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.

For More Information

Behavioural Tech is the website for Marsha Linehan, founder of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT).
www.behavioraltech.com/

Recommended Workbooks

Relationship Skills 101 for Teens: Your Guide to Dealing with Daily Drama, Stress and Difficult Emotions using DBT, by Sheri Van Dijk, Feb 2015.

Surviving the Emotional Roller Coaster: DBT Skills to Help Teens Manage Emotions by Sheri Van Dijk MSW, Dec 15 2015.

The Bipolar Workbook for Teens: DBT Skills to Help You Control Mood Swings by Sheri Van Dijk MSW, and Karma Guindon, Sep 21 2009.

About this Document

Written by the health professionals on CHEO's Mental Health Information Committee. Special thanks to Parents' Lifelines of Eastern Ontario (PLEO), and Dr. Marjorie Robb (psychiatrist, CHEO).

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