



MODULE 2 | DRAWING YOUR ATTENTION

WELCOME BACK

Welcome back to *Managing Emotion!*

Last session we covered an introduction to the components which make up our experience of emotion. These included situation, attention, appraisal and response components, which influence each other in cycles over time. We also introduced the process model of emotion regulation which highlighted the five stages at which emotion may be up or down regulated, and had a closer look at situational modification.

In this module, we will be having a closer look at identifying different emotions and how the ways in which we direct our attention can influence our experience of emotion.

IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS IN THE BODY

Previously, we talked about how emotions are subjective states which occur in response to a situation or stimulus. These subjective states are often nuanced, and researchers have identified a broad range of different emotions we may experience in day-to-day life.

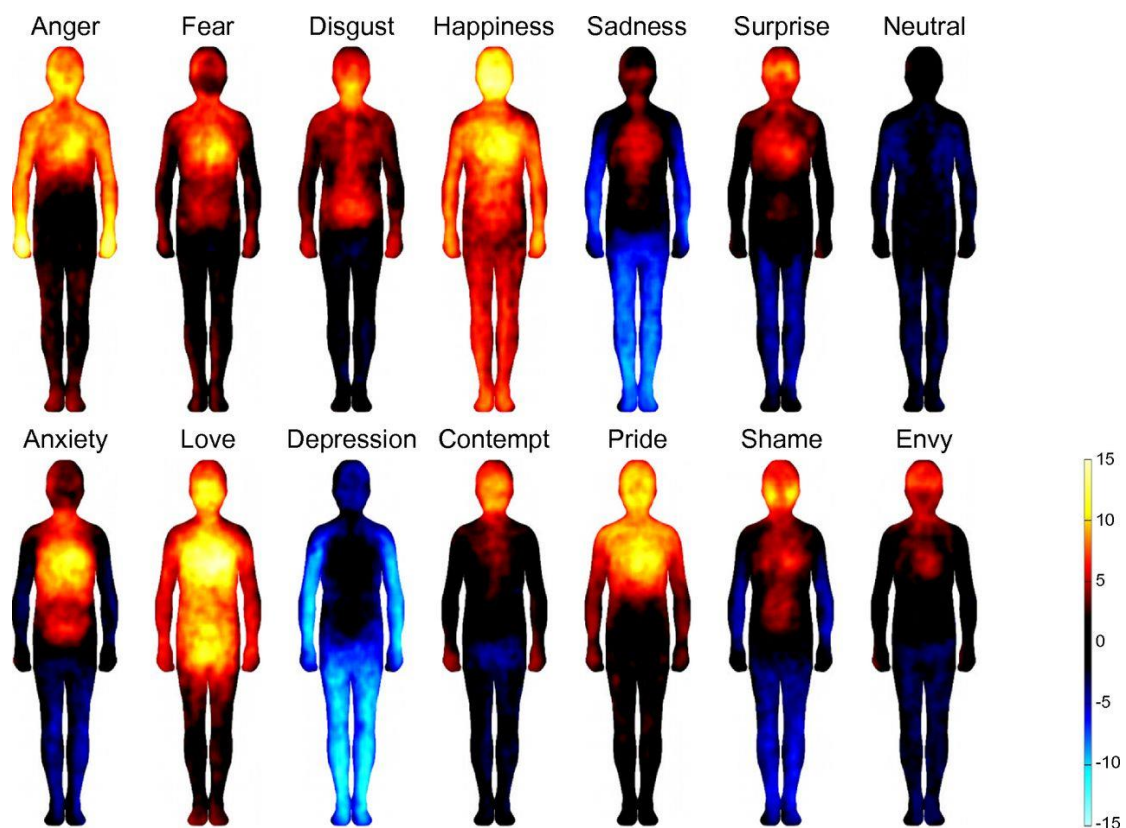
EMOTIONS ARE INTERNAL SUBJECTIVE STATES IN RESPONSE TO A STIMULUS





We experience emotions via sensations in our body. In turn, these bodily sensations can be thought of as indicators of the emotion that we are experiencing. Let's have a look at a couple of examples:

- While people differ in their experience of different emotions, people often report feeling joyful by laughing and smiling, feeling a flutter in your heart, and a comforting sense of warmth across your body and face. In contrast, people often report feeling worried with a racing heart, trembling, sweating and gastrointestinal upset (butterflies in your stomach).
- Research also suggests that different emotions tend to be felt across varied parts of our body. For instance, individuals often report feelings of depression to be associated with reduced sensation in the arms and legs, while anger is felt via increased sensation through the hands, head and chest, and happiness is felt across the entire body. Taken together, it is possible to identify our emotions based on our bodily sensations.



Nummenmaa, L., Glerean, E., Hari, R., & Hietanen, J. K. (2014). Bodily maps of emotions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(2), 646. doi:10.1073/pnas.1321664111



ATTENDING INTERNALLY

The ability to recognize our emotions based on bodily sensations can be very useful. For instance, let's say you are having a heated disagreement with a colleague which is very quickly turning into an argument. Sometimes we get caught up in the moment. In this case, the argument may escalate very quickly, we become angry, and we may say offensive things or act out aggressively... things we may regret in hindsight. At times like these, it can be helpful to attend to what our body is trying to tell us. Identifying that we are angry early can help us to pause and consider whether we need to cool off before we say or do something we'll regret.

RECOGNISING HOW WE FEEL BY ATTENDING TO OUR BODILY SENSATIONS CAN BE VERY USEFUL



BUT...



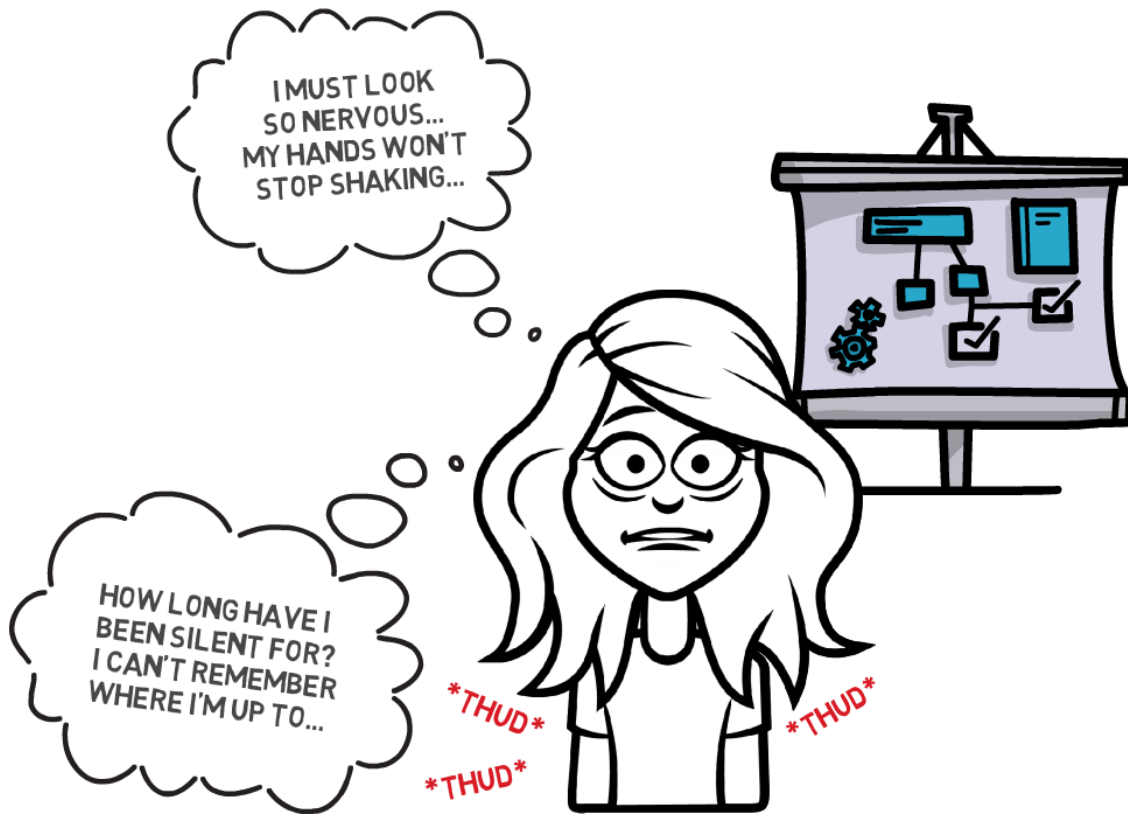
IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE TO ATTEND TOO MUCH TO OUR BODILY SENSATIONS



There is a flipside to this, however. It is also possible to fixate too much to our emotion-related bodily sensations. Let's have a look at Lauren's uni presentation again:

Lauren had noticed that she was feeling anxious. Her hands were shaky, her face felt flushed and her heart was racing. As Lauren focused on these body signals, she thought to herself that she must be appearing really nervous and started trying to hide her shaky hands by clasping them together.

This kind of worked for a moment, but not really. Lauren could still hear the fluttering sound her notes were making despite having her hands clenched together tightly. She then noticed that her heart was racing even faster now. The more she focused on it, the louder each thud of her heart sounded to her. It resonated downward, and throughout her whole body, making her feel weak and shaky and light headed. At this point, Lauren realized that she wasn't sure how long she had been silent for now... nor where she was up to in her presentation.



Lauren has gotten herself stuck a bit of a vicious cycle here. The more she attends to her body's signs of anxiety, the more anxious she gets and the less attention she pays to her actual presentation. In this case, we can think of Lauren as getting caught in an unhelpful attention trap.

**INCREASED
ATTENTION TO BODY'S
SIGNS OF ANXIETY**



INCREASED ANXIETY



**UNHELPFUL
ATTENTION TRAP**

We can't stop our attention entirely. However, we can redirect it in more helpful ways, which is often the task at hand or the activity that we are trying to get done. In the context of giving a uni presentation, if you notice you are getting anxious, it's often best to acknowledge while refraining from further self-judgement or blame, and then gently guide your attention back towards your presentation.

Your attention may wander off again, and that's okay. You just have to gently guide it back again. It may be difficult at first, but the more you practice doing this, the better you will become.



ATTENDING TO THE WORLD AROUND YOU

We can also direct our attention externally to the world around us. Oddly enough, attention is a very selective process. We pick and choose what we focus on, but the way in which we do so can influence how we see the world around us, and in turn, how we feel.

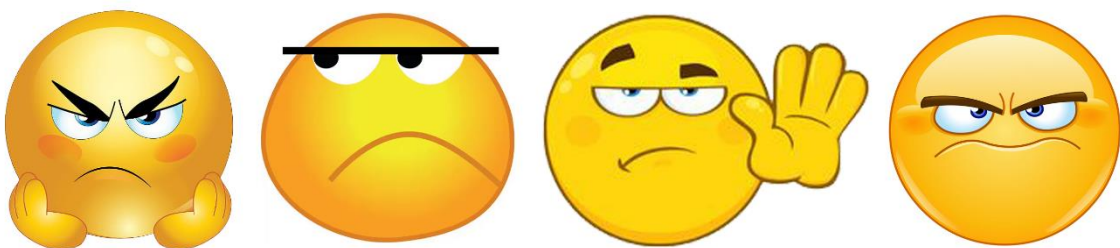
For this exercise, let's give poor Lauren a little break, and instead I want you to imagine that you are interviewing for a job in front of a panel made up of these four people:

INTERVIEW PANEL 1:



Sure, you may still feel a bit anxious (as it is a job interview after all), but speaking to people who appear friendly and supportive can often help soothe any nerves.

INTERVIEW PANEL 2:



Now imagine these were the people in your panel...

Pretty unnerving, yeah? For many people, a panel like this would make them feel increasing anxious, disheartened or overwhelmed.



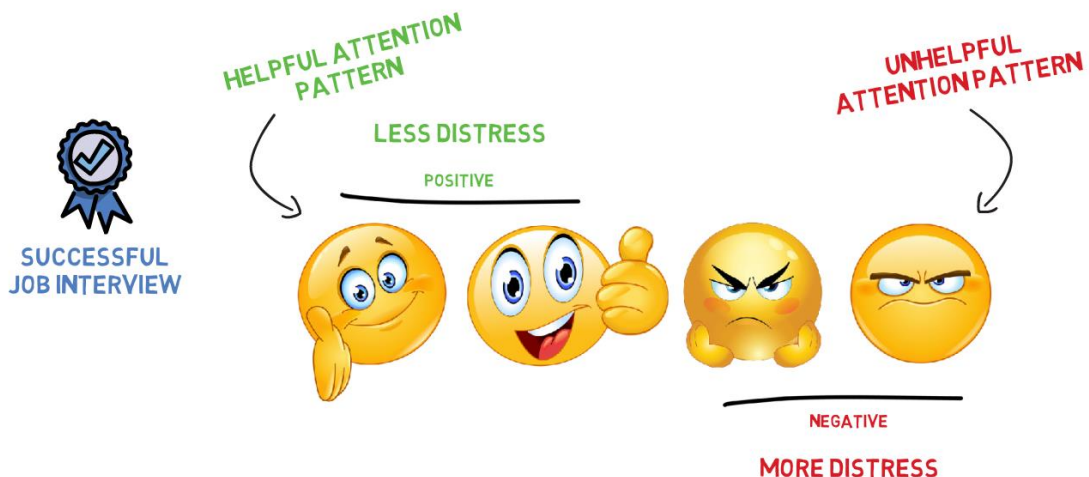
INTERVIEW PANEL 3:



But what if your panel looked like this?

Would you feel distressed? Or supported? The research suggests that it actually depends on where your attention is. If you focus on the negative, then you will likely feel more distressed. But if you redirect your attentional focus to the positive things around you, you will likely feel significantly less distressed.

For this example, we can think of the job interview as our goal, and we can think of a positive focus as being a helpful pattern of attention, as it would lead to a more composed emotional state conducive to achieving our goal. In contrast, we can consider dwelling on negative information as being an unhelpful pattern of attention, as it may likely increase negative emotional states which would then make it harder to achieve our goal.

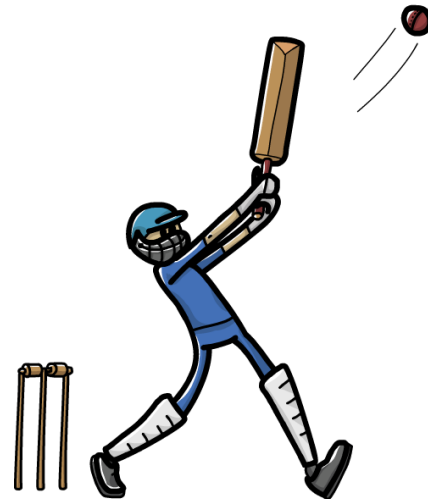


We all have biases in relation to the types of things we like to focus on, whether they be positive or negative, and sometimes these biases can get us a little stuck. Importantly though, we have the ability to change our attentional focus as well. The more we practice this, the better we get.



TAKING A MOMENT TO REFOCUS

So you may have noticed that we've mentioned how changing your attention takes practice. And it does. Changing your attention is like learning a new skill. Think about the last time you tried something new, whether it be a new sport or video game, maybe you signed up to a new dance class or started learning a new language. At first it most likely feels awkward or difficult, but with continued practice over time, it progressively gets easier.



**CHANGING ATTENTION
TAKES PRACTICE!**

One way we can train our attention is through simple relaxation or mindfulness activities. Here's a short four step approach that we often use:

- 1. Find a time a time in the day where you have a spare five minutes. You don't need to block out large chunks of time. A little bit, done often, is usually the most effective approach here. Find a place that is comfortable and free from distraction where you can either sit or lie down.*
- 2. Take a moment to orient yourself to here and now. What are you currently experiencing? What thoughts come to mind? What can you hear around you? Acknowledge these things that come to mind without trying to control or change them. Don't try to reason with your thoughts. Rather, just observe that it is present in your mind, whatever it is, and then gently let it float away. Spend a minute or so doing this.*
- 3. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Here, we want to draw air deep into our belly, without our shoulders and chest rising. This is called diaphragmatic breathing. Breathe into your belly for four seconds (through your nose if*



possible), hold your breath for one second, and then slowly release your breath over four second. Rest for one second and then repeat.

- 4. Now bring the focus of your attention to your breath. Notice the sensations that your breath creates throughout your body. Don't try to change or control anything, simply observe. If your mind wanders off to other thoughts, simply acknowledge this and gently redirect your focus to your breath again. You can think of breath as your anchor which centres you. Your mind may have a tendency to wander off but that's okay. Simply guide it back to your anchor as you let go of any other thoughts.*

And there you have it. Attention training in four simple steps. Give it a try if you like, and remember, new things can sometimes be awkward at first, but with continued practice over time, it will start to feel natural.



KEY MESSAGES

- ✓ The way we direct our attention affects how we feel.
- ✓ When distressed, gently redirecting your attention to the task at hand can often get you back on track.
- ✓ What we focus on in our surroundings influences how we see the world, and in turn, how we feel.