

Targeting Emotion Dysregulation in the Treatment of Self-injury: An Acceptance-based Emotion Regulation Group Therapy

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Themes Emphasized Throughout ERGT

Everything you say should focus on one or more of these themes. If you rely on these, you will be fine:

- **Emotions are functional**
- **Self-harm serves important functions (often, emotion regulation)**
- **Emotional avoidance/unwillingness has paradoxical consequences**
- **Emotional acceptance/willingness has emotion-regulating consequences**
- **Emotion regulation involves controlling behaviors when emotions are present NOT controlling emotions themselves**
- **Willingness is a choice that can be made in any moment**

Therapeutic Stance

- **All human beings struggle – both patients and therapists**
- **Therapists must model emotional acceptance and willingness at all times (their own and group members' emotions)**
- **Therapists should model a nonjudgmental stance towards emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (their own and group members')**
- **Therapists should be able to discuss their own experiences using these skills (including obstacles to their use and examples when used)**
- **Therapists should model reframing judgmental statements**
- **Therapists are responsible for ensuring the group is safe and beneficial for all members**
- **Focus on balancing acceptance/validation and change**

Treatment Targets

- **Identifying the function of self-harm behavior**
- **Increasing emotional acceptance**
- **Increasing emotional awareness**
- **Increasing emotional understanding**
- **Decreasing unwillingness and increasing willingness**
- **Teaching effective (non-avoidant) emotion regulation strategies**
- **Teaching skills for controlling behaviors when distressed**
- **Identifying values and engaging in valued actions**

Session 5: Primary versus Secondary Emotions

Primary vs. Secondary Emotions

Primary emotions = initial emotional responses to a situation

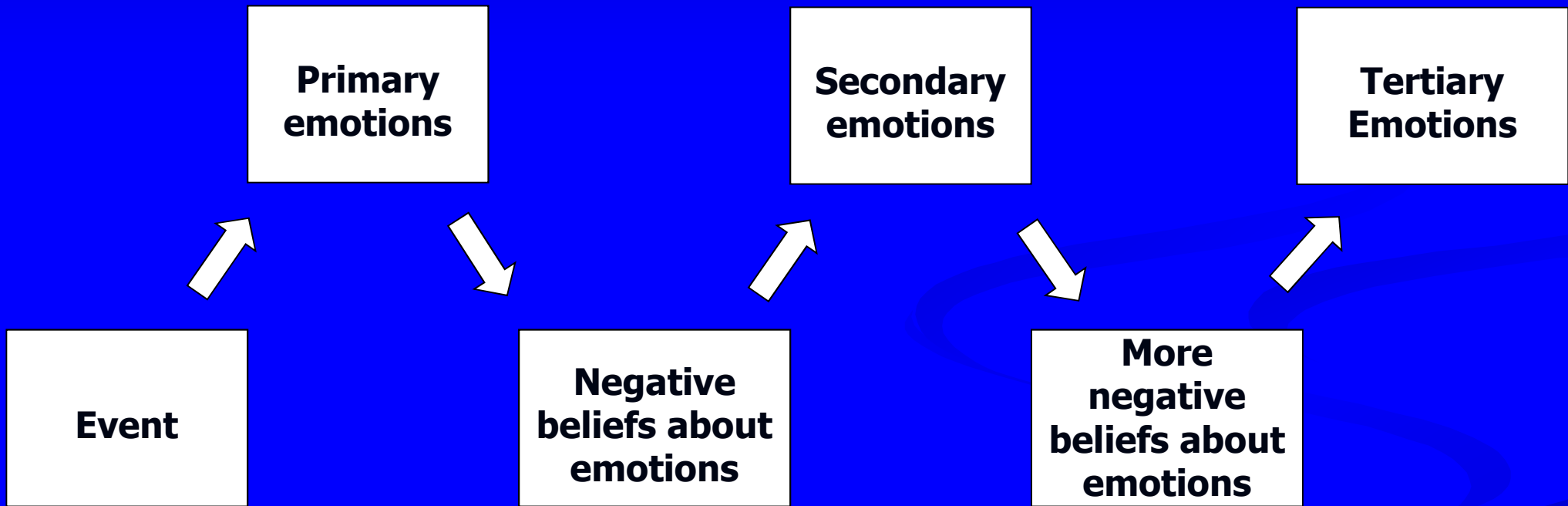
- **Functional/adaptive**
- **Motivate behavior**
- **Pass rather quickly**

Secondary emotions = emotional reactions to primary emotions

- **Mediated by negative beliefs about emotions**
- **Interfere with clarity and functionality of primary emotions**
- **Increase distress and emotional suffering**
- **Don't pass quickly**

Draw distinction between emotional pain and suffering

Identifying Secondary Emotions



Secondary Emotions

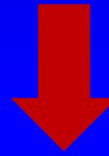
Secondary emotions are often more persistent and experienced more frequently than primary emotions

Secondary emotions can be difficult to identify

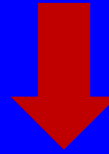
- **All emotions can be primary or secondary emotions**
- **Secondary emotions often occur automatically and within a split second of a primary emotion**
- **What distinguishes them from primary emotions is when they occur and in response to what**

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Sadness



Thought: “This sadness is only going to get worse and I am going to fall into a deep depression”

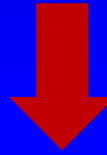


Emotion: Fear

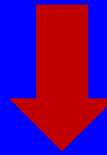
Is Fear a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Anxiety/Fear



Thought: “I am weak and everyone will think I am a loser for being anxious”

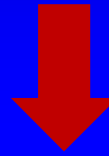


Emotion: Shame

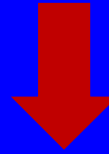
Is Shame a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Anger



Thought: “The world isn’t fair so why bother. Everyone is eventually going to leave me”

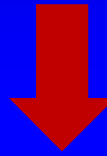


Emotion: Sadness

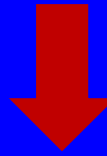
Is Sadness a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Anger



Thought: “I hate feeling this way. I can’t control this feeling”

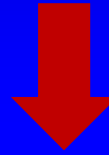


Emotion: Anger

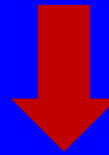
Is Anger a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Sadness



Thought: “My life is never going to get better. I don’t have any kind of future”

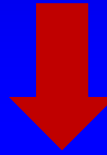


Emotion: Sadness

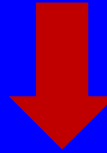
Is Sadness a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Happiness



Thought: “I wonder when this will end? This just means that I am going to have farther to fall.”

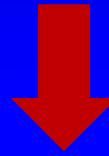


Emotion: Fear

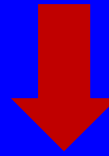
Is Fear a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Shame



Thought: “I’m worthless. I’m a terrible person”

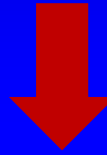


Emotion: Shame

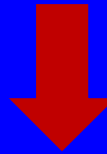
Is Shame a Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion or Secondary Emotion?

Primary Emotion: Guilt



Thought: “I really messed up. I’m going to get into trouble.”



Emotion: Fear

Is Fear a Secondary Emotion?

Responding to Primary vs. Secondary Emotions

Primary Emotions

- Focus on the emotion
- Notice and observe the emotion and its action tendencies
- Identify effective ways to act on and express the emotion

Secondary Emotions

- Focus on the thought – do not act on the emotion!
- Identify the thought that led to the emotion
- Change one's relationship to the thought (mindfulness, defusion, check the facts, alternative perspectives)

In-session Exercise

To identify and reduce secondary emotional responses

- **Identify a primary emotion**
- **Identify any negative beliefs or judgments about the primary emotion**
- **Identify feelings associated with these negative beliefs or judgments**
- **Identify alternative responses to these negative beliefs/judgments and alternative ways of approaching the primary emotions**

Session 8: Increasing Emotional Willingness

Introduction

- **Tug-of-War metaphor and discussion**

The Problem

Although it is natural to want to avoid emotional pain, emotional pain is part of a fulfilling life

Options:

1) Limit your life to avoid pain

➤ Costs are high; usually not effective

2) Engage in life and try to avoid pain

➤ Also usually not effective

➤ Paradoxical emotional consequences

The Solution

Although it is natural to want to avoid emotional pain, emotional pain is part of a fulfilling life

Options:

- 1) Limit your life to avoid pain
 - Costs are high; usually not effective
- 2) Engage in life and try to avoid pain
 - Also usually not effective
 - Paradoxical emotional consequences
- 3) Practice emotional willingness - Allow oneself to experience painful feelings/thoughts as they arise

Emotional Willingness

Openness to experiencing emotions as they arise

➤ **Without trying to avoid, escape, or change them**

Not about wanting

Not about giving up/resigning

➤ **Active choice**

Willingness is an action, not a feeling

Willingness decreases emotional suffering

Session 10: Impulse Control

Impulse Control Strategies

Distraction/Delay

- **“Ride out” the impulse until it lessens in intensity**
- **Engage in any healthy activity that distracts from the impulse**
- **Delay responding for brief periods of time (15-30 min)**

Behavioral substitution

- **Identify functions of the impulsive behavior**
- **Identify alternative behaviors that serve the same function and engage in these instead**

Impulse Control Strategies

Pros and cons of impulsive behaviors

- **Short-term consequences exert more influence over behavior than long-term consequences**
- **Increase awareness of long-term consequences**
 - **Identify these in advance and keep them available**
 - **Focus on these when urges are present (read list, use reminders)**

Impulse Control Strategies

Consequence modification

- **Behaviors maintained by short-term consequences**
- **Reduce impulsive behaviors by changing their consequences**
 - Provide rewards for resisting an urge/impulse
 - Remove positive consequences of impulsive behaviors

Tips for teaching this strategy:

- **Make sure to emphasize the distinction between removing positive consequences of a behavior and punishing oneself**
- **Goal is to return to baseline not to make oneself feel worse**
- **Be alert to any reference to self-punishment**

Comments and Questions

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