

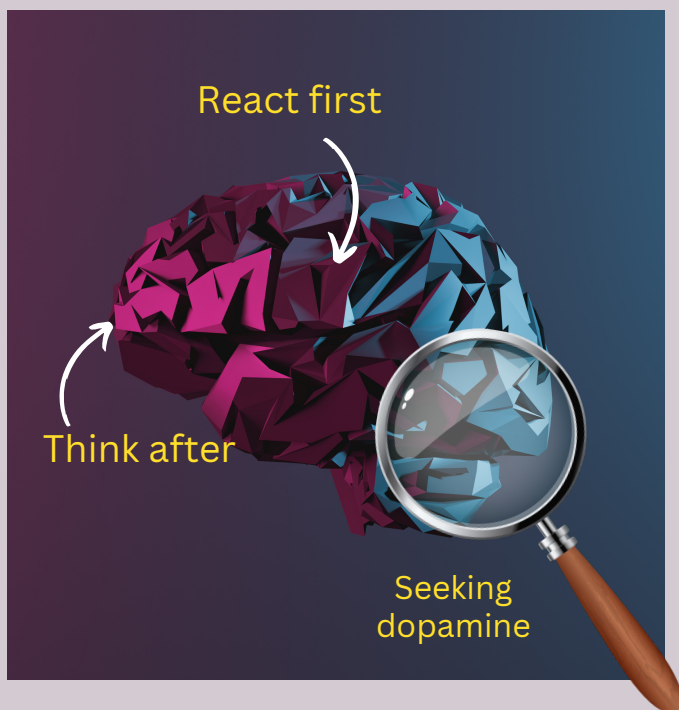
MANAGING EMOTIONS WITH ADHD

A SELF HELP GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE USE OF CBT FOR ADHD

Regulating emotions is difficult when you have ADHD. The brain is more reactive and this can lead to impulsive responses such as losing temper easily or having an emotional meltdown due to feeling overwhelmed in the moment. Often this feeling passes very quickly leaving you feeling regretful, ashamed or disappointed in yourself leading to further emotional distress. Not all emotional difficulties are visible. An ADHD brain is hyperactive and aroused most of the time which is normal for you and you might internalise this agitation by masking. This means that you do not understand what is causing the agitation and it can feel like a constant battle to control yourself which is exhausting.

It is not surprising then that over time this can lower mood and lead to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness like you are powerless to change. These emotional issues cause interpersonal difficulties that can impact on relationships. Often it is the people we love most who bear witness to this and it can make life difficult for the whole family.

Understanding your brain



The amygdala (threat centre) fires more readily and there is a lag before the frontal cortex (thinking part of the brain) assesses the threat more rationally. Sometimes the impulsive behaviour has already occurred (e.g. snapping at a family member for not responding quick enough to a request). This lag may be small but it can cause feelings of guilt and shame for upsetting people.

Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that produces feelings of pleasure and assists attentional focus. In ADHD there is a lack of it which causes a craving that leads to some of the attention seeking behaviours and tendency to be easily distracted.

Remember this - it is not your fault and there **are** things you can do to reduce the emotional distress



It's not always the 'negative' emotions that cause difficulty. With ADHD you can experience bursts of positive energy and hyperactivity that give immense feelings of pleasure and euphoria. These can be a natural antidote to the times we have felt unproductive, irritable or stuck. Hyperactivity can feel great to a point, but it can tip into **agitation** which is a nervous energy that can switch very quickly into intense anxiety or anger.

These extremes can be hard to predict and manage and creates a very all or nothing pattern which is typical of ADHD and why it can be misdiagnosed as Bipolar Disorder.

the problem with quick fixes

It makes sense that our brain is going to look for solutions for the lack of dopamine. One of the most commonly used is caffeine. Caffeine actually increases the amount of dopamine in the brain by reducing the reabsorption into our bodies. It doesn't increase the production of dopamine which makes it purely a quick fix only. A small amount of nicotine can have the same effect as it is also a stimulant. This is likely to be one of the reasons that so many young people are getting addicted to vaping as it can become a form of self-medication to regulate mood and other symptoms of ADHD.



Other temporary solutions include alcohol as it may induce excitement if part of a social activity. People with ADHD who have the hyperactive component are often viewed as the life and soul of the party. Initially alcohol will enhance these symptoms but will also increase the likelihood of other impulsive behaviours such as binge drinking, gambling or indiscriminate flirting. Alcohol can also take the edge off the hyperactive symptoms giving a temporary relief. Again, these may provide a quick fix for the lack of dopamine but once it wears off brain chemistry will be out of synch as alcohol depresses the nervous system.

Moderation is a challenge with ADHD but it can be achieved

Life long problems require life long solutions

We have already acknowledged that ADHD will drive you to seek quick fixes to manage symptoms. Being impulsive, getting bored and frustrated add to this constant desire to fix yourself quickly. However, it is a life long condition so it requires long term solutions. The constant fight, flight or freeze responses will maintain emotional distress. When our brains are calmer then our emotions settle too. This is achieved by adopting strategies as a **life style choice**. Viewing it as a journey will help you to accept the inevitable twists and turns without fighting it, giving up or seeking instant fixes that are not sustainable.

This guide will help you to:

- *understand your emotions*
- *forgive yourself for what has passed*
- *develop a compassionate approach to yourself*
- *learn some strategies to minimise distressing episodes*



EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

We have already established that an ADHD brain has lower dopamine and reacts quicker to threat leading to excessive production of adrenaline. The impaired executive functioning means that it is harder to rationalise when emotions are being activated. It is important to remember that **this is not your fault**.

All symptoms of ADHD can lead to distress and this distress can be confusing, misunderstood and cause shame. For example losing control of your emotions can cause unintended offence and lead to interpersonal problems. You can develop negative beliefs about yourself based on something you can not control. These difficulties are rooted in childhood and through repeated negative experiences the emotional reactions become reinforced as a means for regulating overwhelming emotions.

You can't control it completely, but you can learn to manage it

When experiencing strong emotions it can feel like there is an 'on/off' switch. This leads to all or nothing thinking and behaviours common in ADHD. We need to recognise that emotions are on a continuum or dial.



Emotional thermometers can help to gauge where you are in terms of 'control'. If feeling relatively calm then this is green, rising agitation and impulsivity is amber, and uncontrollable urge to snap is red. Learning to recognise triggers and resisting urges to respond will help to regulate strong emotions. Adapt for age of person.

Medication can reduce some of the emotional issues by balancing the chemicals in the brain. This can reduce the impulsivity associated with low dopamine and high adrenaline. However, the medication cannot break the cycle of distress associated with our negative thoughts about ourselves, or make us more organised. This takes additional work to maximise the effect.



SYNCHING YOUR BODY CLOCK

The circadian rhythm of our bodies is essential for regulating daily functioning. Mind and body are connected, so if our bodies are not performing effectively then this impacts our mental functioning and can lead to mood problems. This is even more important for people with ADHD as brain functioning is already compromised, and being out of synch with our body clock can add to the sense of chaos leading to further disorganisation and heightened symptoms.



Whether on medication or not, routines are vital for maximising daily functioning. Sleep, eating, hygiene, housework and home management need to be in their place to make daily life more manageable. It is definitely not easy when you have ADHD but repetition is the key to helping routines become automatic.

Routines help to combat disorganisation & the distress that goes with it!

Getting enough sleep, exercising, listening to music, meditating, and spending time in the sun can all boost dopamine levels helping your brain function at its best.

Using calendar &
task systems
Routines for
sleep & eating
Resting

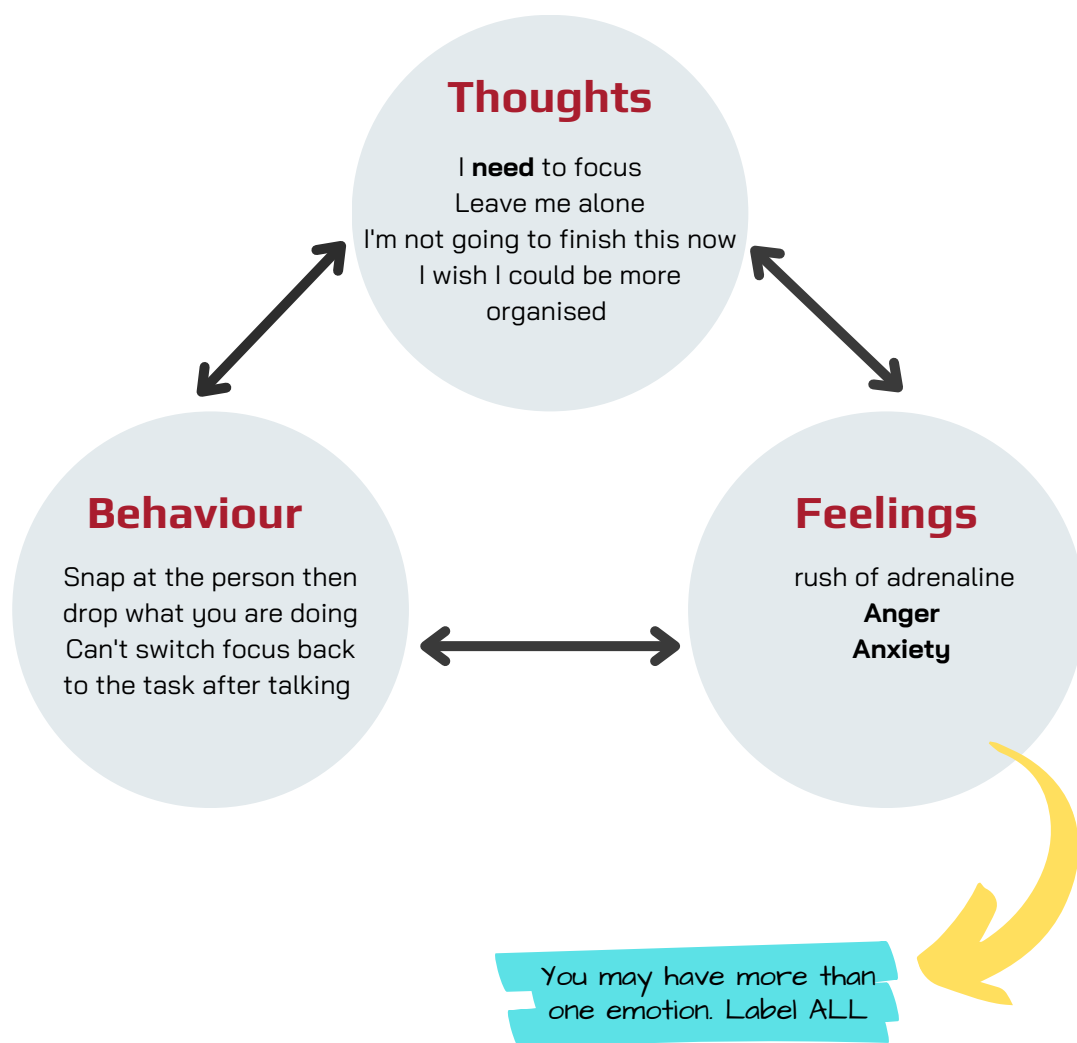


Not having a plan
Relying on impulses
Getting tired

RECOGNISING PATTERNS: VICIOUS CYCLES

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a psychological therapy that recognises a connection between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours in different situations. It aims to make sense of what is keeping a difficult emotion going such as anxiety, sadness, anger or guilt by recognising vicious cycles.

Situation/trigger: someone talking to you when you are trying to complete a task



In this cycle the demand of someone talking when trying to focus presents as a **THREAT**. The brain will go on threat alert and your fight/flight/freeze response will kick in. In this example the response was a mixture of losing control of emotion by snapping at the person, but also the break in focus on the task that needs doing resulting in abandonment leaving it unfinished. This will then add to the emotional overwhelm when returning to the task.

A blank cycle diagram is available at the end of this guide

INCREASING DOWNTIME

With the constant mental activity and challenges of having ADHD relaxing and winding down can be difficult. Lying down can increase the sense of restlessness or boredom as the mind is thinking ahead to everything that needs doing or you wish you could do in that moment. Even positive and exciting thoughts are tiring and lead to exhaustion.

Start by monitoring patterns of activity before and during your attempts to relax. Rate how agitated you feel and notice the thoughts you are having while trying to wind down, and how do you respond to them? A copy of this monitoring sheet can be found at the end of the guide, but you can make your own in a notepad or on your phone.

ADHD downtime monitoring diary

Date/time/ where?	What was I doing just before?	Agitation 0-10 other feelings?	Thoughts/ worries/ images?	Behaviours What am I doing?	How long does it last?
8pm on sofa	Just back from work	8	Lots of things to do. Argument with colleague	TV on, scrolling on phone	2 hours

Being still is not the same as relaxing

It is easy to confuse sitting or lying down as being an act of relaxation. However, with ADHD the body may be still but the brain can be very hyperactive. In fact this hyperactivity often becomes more pronounced when we are physically still. An aroused brain is not compatible with relaxation. It is still important to rest the body, but we need to maximise the opportunities to rest our mind also.

***Once you understand your patterns you can try and change
some of your behaviours during downtime.***

SELF COMPASSION

Being kind to ourselves is often harder than being kind to others. When we are agitated or our brain feels scatty our thinking becomes very threat-focused and negative. We tend to be more self-critical and hard on ourselves. When we engage in negative self-talk our brain becomes more highly aroused and we are likely to experience an adrenaline rush leading to additional symptoms. We may not even be aware of the constant negative self-talk.

The opposite of being self-critical is self-compassion. This is when we respond with kindness to ourselves when we are struggling or suffering. Rather than telling ourselves off, we notice that we are feeling bad and try to **self-soothe**. We need to treat ourselves like we would a close friend who is struggling. When we reduce the self-critical chatter our brains are not so highly aroused so we feel physically calmer. Self compassion calms our brain by reducing the threat system activity.



CALMING THE BRAIN

When we reduce the self-critical talk there is more room in our mind to focus on things that make us calm, happy and present-focused. Mindfulness helps to keep our thinking balanced and less threat-focused. See guide below.

<http://www.moyacbt.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Mindfulness-Guide.pdf>

Ways to increase self-compassion

- Make yourself a fresh coffee instead of an instant
- Sit down to eat your meal rather than picking on the go
- Wear your best underwear rather than the plain ones
- Treat yourself to something even if you don't think you 'deserve' it
- If you are tired but a friend has asked you to go out say 'no'
- Have a bath with candles lit
- Use special toiletries and skincare products
- Keep a daily journal of things you are proud of
- Take some time every day to do at least two things you enjoy



OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS

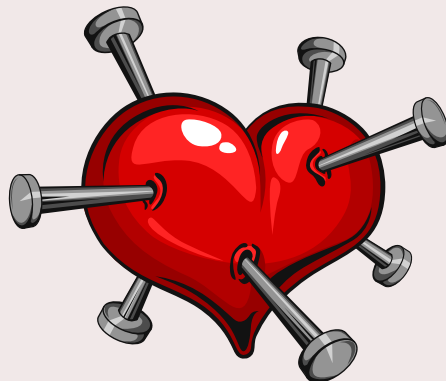
When we are distressed our brain is over aroused and it is harder to think clearly and express ourselves in a coherent manner. Sometimes we can't even explain why we are feeling like this which adds to the sense of being out of control. The fight, flight or freeze response will kick in and all of these can intensify the distress. At this point we are overwhelmed and feel powerless or helpless as to how to stop it. With each episode we will conclude something negative about ourselves and can feel alone and misunderstood. Even when we do try and mend a situation caused by these overwhelming emotions we may be told that we are selfish or uncaring which adds to our distress and shame.

With ADHD these emotional difficulties threaten our connections with other people which leads to an intense fear of rejection. Often this does happen so the fear seems justified and our beliefs reinforced. In some literature this has been given a name - rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD). When this happens you may have an image of what it feels like or where you experience this distress. Below are some examples.

what does this fear of rejection look like for you?



*like a knot of
despair in my
stomach*



*like my heart is
being wounded*



*like my head is
going to explode
with despair*

These images are likely to be rooted in life long experiences of emotional distress. When triggered it can feel like you are back as your childhood self, adding to a sense of vulnerability. It can lead to childlike tantrums and meltdowns which are frightening.

Over time this sensitivity to rejection can lead to unhelpful responses such as submitting to defeat and giving up trying. We may say things like 'what's the point?', 'I can't change', 'they obviously don't care about me so why should I bother?'. This is a position of helplessness and hopelessness and is a very dark and lonely place. The good news is that there is hope and you can learn to manage these strong emotions and break the cycle. It starts by understanding it and forgiving yourself. This is not easy when you have lived with shame over your lack of control of emotions and the hurt this may have caused others. Healing starts when you begin to accept yourself rather than fighting with yourself and seeking acceptance from others.

Stop punishing yourself & start to forgive yourself

Ho'oponopono

*The Hawaiian forgiveness prayer is very powerful.
Repeat several times*

*I am sorry
Forgive me
Thank you
I love you*

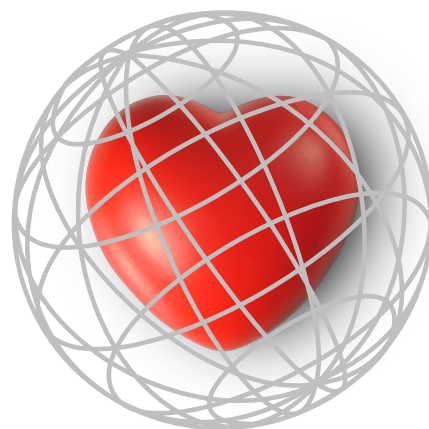
Developing new images

At times of intense emotional distress we need to nurture that inner child with some of our adult wisdom and compassion. We need to update these images with a more self-compassionate image that we can use to protect ourselves during these times.

Here are some suggestions for the examples above



*Imagine being hugged to feel connected and cared for.
This could be you hugging yourself or someone else*



Imagine a light cage around your heart to provide protection but still allow love and connection

EXPRESSING WHAT YOU NEED

When overwhelmed it is hard to know what it is we need at that moment. This confusion and the desire to feel better can lead to unhelpful strategies. For example, if you have experienced a disappointment at work and you want to tell your partner about it but they are busy, you may still charge in and tell them in a louder voice to be sure they hear your distress. If the partner does not drop what they are doing to listen to you at that moment you may conclude that they don't care which adds to your distress. In this case your strategy has not achieved the desired outcome - to be listened to and comforted.

There is a technique to help us develop more effective strategies to get our needs met, but in the first instance we need to understand what our needs are. This can be very difficult so it is useful to start monitoring. The table below comprises three columns to help you to observe what is currently happening. This will enable reflection and development of new strategies.

Need	Strategy	Outcome
To explain how I am feeling to my partner	Ring him at work and just talk fast to get everything out of my head	He cuts the conversation short with an angry tone and hangs up
To explain how I am feeling to my partner	Write my feelings down at the time and pick a quiet moment to tell partner	Felt more in control of emotions & partner noticed

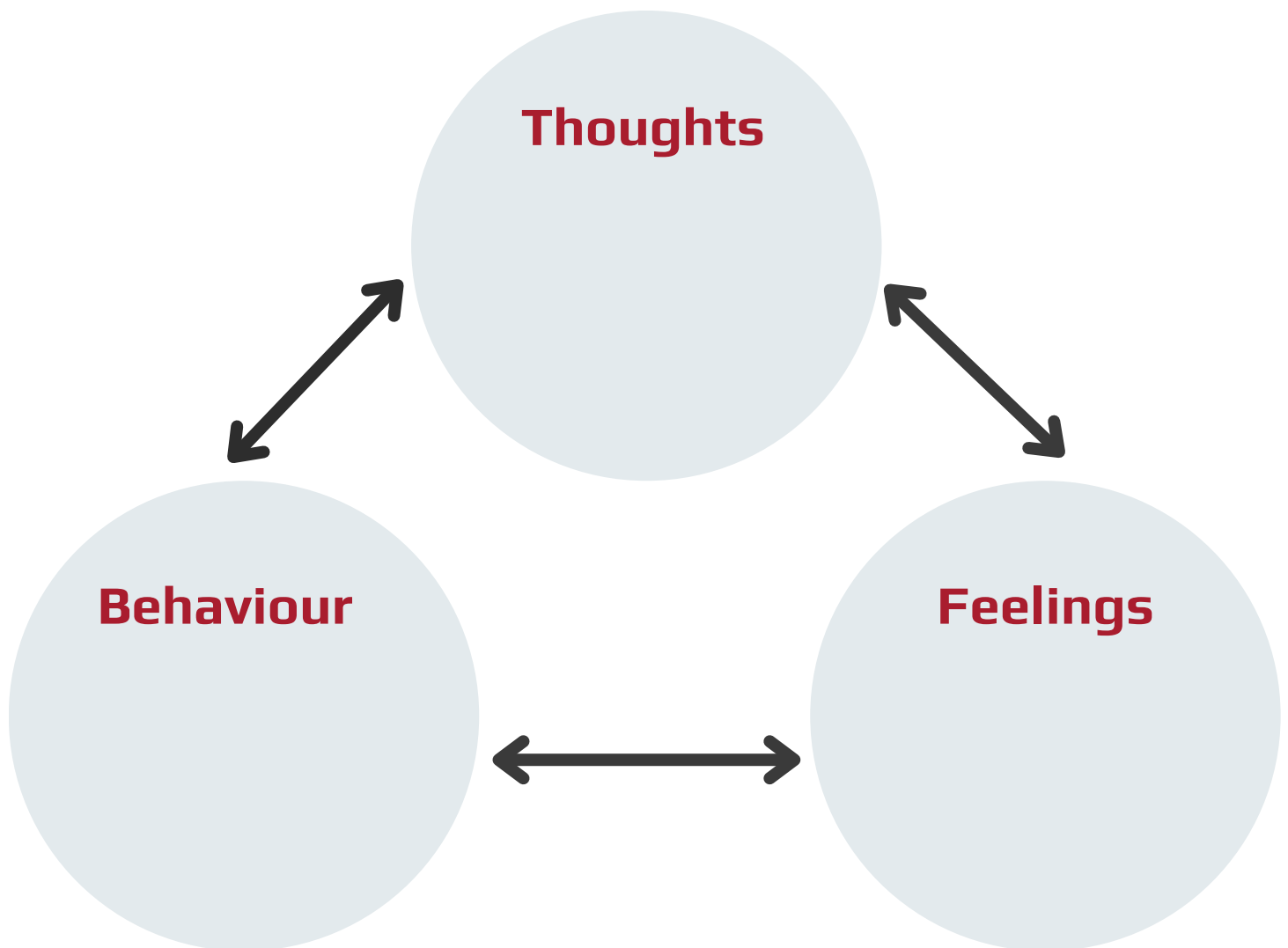
Next time

Remember - even after a poor outcome we can repair by trying a new strategy. **NEVER GIVE UP!**

Single vicious cycle

Use this to start recognising triggers to your strong emotions and the thoughts and reactions that occur.

Situation/trigger:



ADHD downtime monitoring diary

Date/time/
where?

What was I
doing just
before?

Agitation
0-10
*other
feelings?*

Thoughts/
worries/
images?

Behaviours
What am I
doing?

How long
does it
last?

Expressing needs monitoring diary

Need

Strategy

Outcome

Self-compassion monitoring diary

Showing yourself compassion is hard to do when you are in a cycle of self-critical thinking or worn down by shame for past behaviours or ongoing difficulties. This is why we need to start responding differently when we believe we have messed up or upset someone. By recognising patterns we can start to respond differently. This will eventually become a new strategy for regulating emotions.

S-C = self-compassionate

