

THE EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PRACTITIONER:

Understanding and Responding to Heightened Emotions in and for Practice

Karen Healy, September 2018.

Overview

- About heightened emotions in practice
- The concept of emotional regulation
- Understanding the cycle of emotional arousal
- The CSCE model of responding to heightened emotions in practice.

Heightened Emotions

- We use the term “heightened emotions” to refer to emotional arousal that is of sufficient intensity to substantially impact on one’s feelings, physiological responses, cognitive processes and actions (see Fox, 2008).
- Negative emotions are emotions are usually associated with a threat to us and “makes us feel agitated or uncomfortable” (Howe, 2008, p. 26). Examples of “negative” heightened states include: sadness; despair; fear; anxiety; anger; shame and disgust.
- They are transient states

The survival value of heightened emotions

FIGHT



FLIGHT oohlala!



FREEZE



Examples of impact

- Emotions have a powerful influence on communication.
- * experienced as urgent (Winkielman, Berridge and Sher, 2011)
- “*embodied* and manifest in clearly recognizable and stereotyped, behaviour patterns and facial expression, comporment and autonomic arousal” (Dolan, 2002, cited in Fox, 2008, p. 25)

- Vocal cues
 - - heightened tone
 - - speeding up
 - - difficulty speaking
- Physiological responses:
 - - flushing/ becoming pale
 - - shaking
 - - flight type responses

Important message

Emotions are powerful (can have “global” effects), intense and transient.

Understanding and responding to heightened emotions are important

- Heightened emotional responses are inevitable.
- Emotions contain important information: survival value
- How we manage emotionally charged encounters can have a very strong impact on our relationship with the patient/ client.
- Some forms of heightened emotions can be associated with high risk/ danger.
- Note that sometimes emotional expression can be strategically used to distract from your professional purpose.

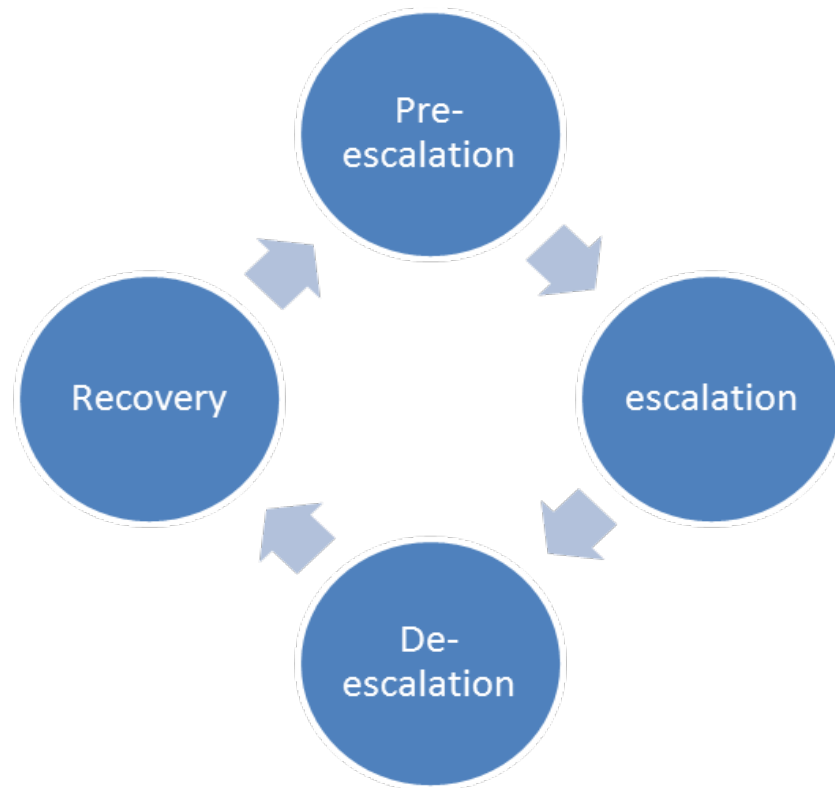
Over to you...

- What are some of the heightened emotions you have encountered or expect to encounter?
- How confident are you in managing these emotions in yourself and others?

Our interest in emotional regulation

- Our goals are to respond to heightened emotional states in ways that build and maintain the working alliance and to assist people to regulate their emotions so as to build their capacity to respond thoughtfully to their situation, to reduce the risk of harm to self and others.
- Werner and Gross (2008, p. 17) define emotional regulation as “processes that serve to decrease, maintain or increase one or more aspects of emotion.”
- Understanding the cycle of emotional arousal
- Promoting emotional regulation in ourselves and others

Cycle of emotional arousal



Pre-escalation and Prevention

- By being attuned to signs of emotional distress at this stage we can intervene to prevent further escalation of emotions. Signs of emotional distress can include:
 - Physiological
 - Vocal and Verbal expressions, such as expressions of frustration
 - Actions that a fight or flight state

What can you do?

- Provide distraction or distance from the trigger event or experiences.
- Sharing your observations that they appear to becoming distressed and ask what support they need.
- Provide genuine reassurance of emotional and physical safety
- Engage in activities that help to reduce the heightened physical arousal.
- Empower the person to recognise their strengths and capacities to manage the emotions they are experiencing.
- ***Your views – do you use any of these strategies, or anything else?***

Signs of escalation

Heightened emotional states are often expressed in way that are instantly recognisable such as:

- crying or wailing;
- verbal defensiveness;
- heightening or increased pitch of vocal tone;
- physiological changes such as: heart palpitations; increased breathing rate; and hypersensitivity to stimuli such as sound, light or colours.

Reasoning and emotions

Heightened emotional states can negatively impact on the person's capacity:

- to listen, to store or to retrieve information
- to reason
- to manage aggression
(eg. May “hit out” verbally or physically).

Preparing and adapting the self

- Before the worker can be in touch with the feelings of the client, she must first be able to acknowledge and understand her own emotional states and the power they have to affect her, particularly as she relates to others in need, distress, anger and despair (Shulman, 1999, p. 156). The reference point for an understanding of others is oneself. (Howe, 2008, p. 185)
- The demonstration of emotional insight and skills involves not only identifying our emotions but also understanding their impact and being able to alter our responses to meet our professional purpose.

Strategies for Achieving Emotion Regulation

The five strategies for emotional regulation as outlined by Gross and his colleagues (see Gross and Thompson, 2007; Werner and Gross, 2010) are:

- Situation selection
- Situation modification
- Attentional deployment
- Cognitive change
- Response modulation

Practice Exercise

Imagine you have been given a referral to attend a situation that you are likely to find emotionally challenging. The emotion you might experience could be: anger, fear, sadness.

- Refer back to the situation that would be likely to evoke at least one of these emotions for you.
- Now consider how you would use the five strategies of emotional regulation discussed here to regulate your emotions.
- Consider what impact your emotional regulation would have on your capacity to build and maintain a working alliance with the service user.

Responding to HE in practice



The importance of understanding and practice

Eva Skolnik-Acker (ND, p. 3), NASW, observes:

“There is nothing magical about talking someone down. You are transferring your sense of genuine interest in what the client wants to tell you, of calmness, and of respectful, clear limit setting in the hope that the client actually wishes to respond positively to your respectful attention.”

It is vital you practice de-escalation techniques so that they become second nature to you.

The CSCE model for responding to heightened emotions

- **Communicating Confidence, calmness and non-reactivity**
- **Achieving physical and emotional Safety**
- **Promoting Collaborative communication**
- **Prioritising Empowerment**

Communicating Confidence, calmness and non-reactivity

- We can reduce the emotional arousal of the other (and ourselves) by communicating in ways that express confidence in ourselves and others, calmness and non-reactivity.
- The notion of “response modulation” refers to containing our own emotional responses for a purpose, the purpose here is to achieve de-escalation. Response modulation has both **thinking** and **behavioural** elements.
- Thinking elements involve monitoring and adjusting how we think about a situation. When faced with a strong emotional state in others we can enhance our capacity to maintain our own emotional equilibrium though self-talk that builds our confidence in responding to the situation.
- Behavioural elements include acting in ways that do not reflect a fight or flight response but rather a capacity to remain present in the face of strong emotions.

Awareness of our signs of emotional escalation

- Monitoring and reducing those signs:
 - - slowing our breathing and our speaking pace
 - - encouraging a seated rather than a standing position

Achieving physical and emotional Safety

Heightened emotional states are usually triggered by a perception of threat to a person's physical or emotional safety and well-being.

We need to reduce the sense of threat in the environment

- Physical safety involves minimising actual or perceived physical threats in the environment:
- Reducing sensory arousal of the environment
- Addressing potentially threatening aspects of the environment

Creating emotional safety involves creating an environment in which the person perceives they are safe from further emotional trauma.

- Validating feelings and “normalising” emotions can be helpful here.

Collaborative communication

This involves engaging in ways that enable the person experiencing the heightened state to feel heard and their contribution is valued is important to building and maintaining the working alliance.

- encouraging the “open expression of emotions and thoughts”
- helping the person to focus their thoughts. France (2007, p. 37) notes that “individuals overwhelmed by a crisis sometimes displays muddled thinking. When that happens the worker may need to encourage the person to focus on one or two topics” (France, 2007, p. 37).
- demonstrating reflective listening.
- providing space to calm one’s emotions.

Prioritising Empowerment

- Situations in which heightened emotions are provoked create challenges and learning opportunities. Heightened emotions often emerge in situations of crisis and we can use these as opportunities to assist the person with whom we are communicating to develop skills in emotion regulation and problem solving.
- What have you tried so far to deal with the situation?
- What have you thought about trying?
- Right now, what other possibilities come to mind?

Practice exercise

- We are going to watch a 5 minute video and you are going to be asked to identify how the “worker” uses the CSCE model and how she might do it better.

Joe, Troy and a case of medical neglect?

- Joe is the father of a young boy, Troy, 8 years who is currently in hospital because of Diabetes 1. Joe is opposed to his son taking medication for Diabetes believing that his child should be treated naturally. Cassie, Troy's mother, appears to hospital staff to be intimidated by Joe and reluctant to go against his wishes.
- Troy fainted at School yesterday after complaining of blurred vision and a headache. The school called an ambulance. The medical team were concerned that Troy's parents had refused ongoing medical treatment to treat the diabetes. Nonetheless, the parents have agreed for Troy to be kept in hospital overnight because the medical staff were so concerned about the child's state.
- Today, the medical team have decided that they will involve Child Safety if they cannot convince Joe and Cassie to agree to ongoing treatment of the diabetes. They believe that Joe and Cassie are subjecting Troy to medical neglect and that his health is suffering, possibly irreversibly.
- Joe has arrived at the hospital to visit Joe. Cassie is taking their daughter to school and will visit Troy later.
- The visit is tense.

Practice exercise

What are the **emotions** the person appears to be experiencing?

How does the “social worker” convey the following? And what could she do better?

- **Communicating Confidence, Calmness and non-reactivity**
- **Achieving physical and emotional Safety**
- **Promoting Collaboration**
- **Prioritising Empowerment**

Practice reflection

- What elements of the CSCE model do you already use in your practice?
- What, if any, of the elements are most important in your practice?
- What, if anything else, do you think is important for understanding and responding to heightened emotions in practice?
- What other comments do you have to make about the model?

Self-care and resilience

- Experiencing or being exposed to heightened emotions can be exhausting and may have ongoing negative effects on health and well-being of those involved . (Savaya, Gardner and Stange, 2011).
- Alongside regular supportive supervision, adopting self-care strategies can assist workers to build resilience in managing the effects of heightened emotions (Gil and Weinberg, 2015). These strategies include:
 - Maintaining interests and supportive relationships outside of work will assist in keeping perspective.
 - Maintaining physical health, through healthy diet exercise and avoiding substance misuse.
 - Developing the capacity to contain the intrusion of thoughts and emotions associated with the experience of heightened emotions or exposure to them.

Concluding thoughts

- Heightened emotions are an important dimension of all human services work.
- Building our capacities in understanding and responding to these emotions in ourselves and others is important for achieving our professional purpose.
- With an adequate framework and practice we can build our capacities in this dimension of practice.
- It isn't easy, but with practice and support, we can develop our confidence and skills in responding to heightened emotions.