



Managing Emotions in a Healthy Relationship



This tip sheet is intended to help CAF families learn about emotional intelligence and emotion regulation skills to help build healthy patterns and strengthen healthy relationships.

- To learn about emotional abuse or coercive control, see our tip sheets “Exploring Emotional Abuse: Recognizing Signs and Resources Available” and “Exploring Coercive Control: Recognizing Signs and Resources Available.”

Exploring emotions

An emotion is a psychological and physical response to an internal or external event. Emotions often guide us to process experiences and help us make decisions to act.

Emotions have four components: thoughts, sensations, impulses, and behaviours.

Emotional intelligence and its role in relationships

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, label, and manage your own emotions and understand other people's emotions.

It involves self-awareness, empathy, communication and conflict-resolution skills. Emotion regulation is a component of emotional intelligence and involves recognizing and managing your own emotions. Building emotional intelligence skills in a relationship can make it easier to navigate disagreements, express your own emotions respectfully, and understand your partner's emotional needs.

Connecting emotions and the military journey

Emotional intelligence involves self-awareness – noting what you feel and being able to name it.

For example, your partner tells you they received notice that they will be going on a tasking in a location you would love to visit, and you feel upset. After noticing this, name the emotion, such as feeling envious or resentful. Try to accept the feeling without judgement. Shame may show up in thoughts like “I’m a bad partner”, and that’s okay. Simply name the emotion, sit with it, and ask why you feel that way. Keep in mind, you may feel multiple emotions at the same time.

Maybe you feel envious because you are comparing your own career growth to your partner’s, or maybe you had hoped to visit the location they are going to together. You may feel resentment because you will have to take on additional duties while your partner is away.

After exploring the emotion, try reflecting on the situation from different perspectives. You could let the emotion peak and pass or try reframing the situation in a more balanced way.

For example, you could say, “It makes sense that I feel disappointed by certain opportunities given to my partner. I can support my partner and still accept that I am hurt in this moment. Feeling this way does not make me a bad partner, nor does it define who I am.”

You can use the emotion you identified as a tool to understand your needs and guide your actions.

For example, you and your partner could consider planning a trip together, or perhaps you realized that you are unhappy in your career and want to change directions. While these steps are not always possible for the immediate future, emotions can offer us a valuable insight into our values and our desired goals over the long term.

Identifying and labelling emotions

Learning how to identify and label emotions is a critical skill to learn not only for yourself, but also for building and maintaining healthy relationships. By learning how to recognize and label your emotions, you can improve your self-awareness and help build strategies for emotion regulation.

Oftentimes, emotions are seen as “positive” (such as joy or calmness) or “negative” (such as anger or guilt). Despite how they may be labelled, emotions, by themselves, are not healthy or unhealthy. What ends up being healthy or unhealthy is how you respond to your emotions or how you act upon them.

Emotion regulation and its role in relationships

Emotion regulation is a skill used to better manage your own emotional state. The goal of mastering the skill of emotion regulation is to understand and respond to emotions, which ultimately helps reduce emotional distress, increase positive emotions, and better cope in daily life. This is often done by changing your thoughts or behaviours. By changing how you think about a situation/emotion, you are better able to respond to your emotions in adaptive and healthy ways. This approach is often used in therapeutic practices such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT).

Managing your emotions is a skill that can be built and improved upon. There are many techniques to help you do this, such as 'box breathing'. When you notice you are feeling stressed, try breathing in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for four, hold for four, and repeat until you feel calmer. Breathing deeply like this can help stop or dull the body's physical stress response. It also gives the mind something neutral to focus on instead of allowing it to get swept into a panic. Other ways to quickly reduce feeling overwhelmed are physical exercise or splashing your face with ice-water. Consider practicing these skills during times of emotional calmness, as it can help the technique feel more instinctual and easier to attempt during stressful events.

There are many other emotion regulation strategies you could try. Some helpful examples include; meditation, journaling, talking to a friend, immersing yourself in nature, and other soothing or meaningful hobbies. Coping strategies such as alcohol or drug use can become harmful over time, especially if they negatively impact relationships or wellbeing. Violence is never an acceptable way to express emotions.

Military life and managing emotions

The military lifestyle can come with unique challenges like absences, relocations, and transitions. This may cause couples and families to feel a rollercoaster of emotions. This is why it is important to build strong emotional intelligence and regulation skills. When each person can communicate their own emotions clearly, listen with empathy, and regulate their own reactions, they are better equipped to navigate difficult events together.

Operational absences can be especially tough, and families may experience a range of emotions. Before an operational absence, families may feel stress and anxiety, which can become numbness closer to departure. After departure, families can feel restless or overwhelmed, which may gradually grow into independence and confidence as they settle into new routines. Before reuniting, families may feel excitement but also apprehension. After reuniting, feelings of anxiety or frustration may appear, which eventually settle into feelings of closeness.

Communicating and managing emotions in a relationship

In a relationship, each partner should feel safe to discuss their emotions. Emotions should not be dismissed or undermined. Rather, they should be discussed respectfully. When discussing emotions, try using "I feel" statements, rather than "you" statements which may feel blaming or lead the other person to become defensive.

For example, "I feel stressed," rather than "you always make me stressed." When your partner shares their emotions with you, listen with empathy, remain open to their thoughts and feelings, and focus on the issue being discussed.

Many couples have partners with differing levels of emotional intelligence and regulations. Here are some tips for fostering emotion regulation in your relationship:

- Take a breath and check in with yourself before reacting to something your partner says or does.
- Listen to your partner when they are talking. Approach the conversation with curiosity and ask questions to better understand their view. Try to empathize with them and avoid acting defensively.
- Validate your partner's concerns. You don't have to agree – simply listen and try to understand.
- If a conversation becomes heated, take a break for at least 20 minutes. During this time, engage in your own self-soothing activities. This "cooling-off period" can help you both to calm down, collect your thoughts, and return to the conversation with clearer minds.

Seeking support

While emotional intelligence skills can support communication in relationships, you should always feel safe. If a relationship involves fear, intimidation, coercion, or abuse, reach out for support.

Remember – You aren't alone and there is a community of support to help you.

- Talk to Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) or Military Family Services (MFS) staff.
- Call the Family Information Line (FIL) for 24/7 confidential support.
- Reach out to a family member, friend, or your local Chaplain.
- Contact the Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program (CFMAP) for 24/7 telephone counselling.

To find resources and support available to you, check out our website through the QR code.



Learn more
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